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IN THE ISSUE

*Vocalist Jie Weston on Style,
Culture, and the Power of Music*

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How does Lady Gaga manage to sing so iconically with her raspy yet lyrical voice? Famous soprano and vocal teacher Jie Weston addressed the question at the Village Church Hall on October 3, 2021. A small group of parents and teenagers had gathered together to attend Ms. Weston's masterclass-turned-discussion.

As an Asian soloist in Massachusetts, Weston has had rich experience in performing a variety of classical, modern, and ethnic Chinese songs. She taught at a music college in China for ten years and sang solo at the Massachusetts State house. In 2013, Weston also visited University of Massachusetts Amherst as their first foreign scholar of music.



When Weston first started teaching in America, she began with adults. Over time, she shifted her focus to teaching younger children. Her patience and passion for singing helped her gain abundant insight into the musical upbringing of young children. "I usually start with teaching seven-year-olds," Weston said in response to one of the parents who inquired about the optimal age for kids to begin their music education. In Weston's opinion, as children grow older, it might be difficult for them to open up emotionally to express themselves through singing. However, it is always helpful to surround children with music enrichment, such as Youtube videos, to start fostering their interest at a young age. In an interactive conversation with the audience, Weston came to an agreement that music is a very powerful tool. Not only does it develop confidence and encourage expression, but it also trains a person's ability to use their voice for different purposes. Music, to Weston, is all about the sensations that it brings to the world. Therefore, it is important to help kids develop an artistic taste.

At the event, Weston also touched on a number of specific techniques including two fundamental aspects of singing: relaxed vocal cords and control of air. Instead of accumulating one's breath in the chest area, Weston stressed the importance of moving it down towards the abdominal region to maintain a steady oxygen level. She also pointed out that many people often amass the air in the front, and that instead, they should have it around both sides of the waist as well. Weston demonstrated the movement of air and control of the throat as her brilliant vibrato resonated across the room. However, that was not all there is to singing, Weston said. To her, singing is 50% technique and 50% acting. Unlike instrumental musicians, Weston argued, singers are considerably more extroverted because of the amount of visible expression singing requires. A good vocalist makes the audience see them and feel them, and this is exactly why Lady Gaga is so iconic—she knows how to work with her own, unique voice to move the audience.

In addition, Weston discussed the impact of culture on singing. In contrast to the open vowels in Italian opera, Chinese music contains many more consonants and a greater variety of tones that should be enunciated. Different languages, cultures, and time periods all play an important role in the way that various styles and beats are appreciated, thus it is crucial that singers learn how to approach songs in accordance with their background.

Weston catered the discussion to the interests of each individual participant, and many gained a new perspective. Approaching the end of the event, some expressed interest in creating a WCLS chorus. Weston certainly reinvigorated their passion for music that hopefully, will spread to the rest of the community.
