Teaching, Artistry and Communication
A Conversation with Stephanie Blythe and Alan Smith
about their work with the Fall Island Vocal Arts Seminar

Transcribed and edited by Donald George and Carleen Graham

The following is a transcription of a Q&A session conducted on Saturday, May 23 during the 2015 Fall Island Vocal Arts Seminar at The Crane School of Music, SUNY Potsdam. The inaugural Program for Auditors class met with Artistic Director Stephanie Blythe and Music Director, Alan Smith at the end of the week to discuss a variety of topics related to the origins and development of the Seminar, teaching, personal artistry, text interpretation and 21st century art song repertoire for young singers.

The 2015 Fall Island Vocal Arts Seminar Auditors:
Dr. Nicole Asel, Assistant Professor of Voice, University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley

Dr. Mitra Sadeghpour, Associate Professor of Voice and Opera, University of Northern Iowa

Melanie Shank, Master of Music candidate in Vocal Performance at The Crane School of Music

Jie Zhou, Visiting Scholar in Voice, Nanjing Art University, China.

Developing The Fall Island Vocal Arts Seminar

Melanie Shank: How did you develop the idea and philosophy of the Fall Island Seminar?

Stephanie Blythe: When I graduated from SUNY Potsdam I went to the Tanglewood Music Center - at that time, an eight-week song program with no opera, and worked with the remarkable staff at the TMC for eight weeks. They included Alan Smith, Margot Garrett, Ken Griffiths and Phyllis Curtin, to name a few. It was heaven and I returned there for two summers. Afterwards, I kept going back to visit and working with Alan and then he started to compose songs for me. But then when I joined the Lindemann Young Artist Program I realized there were many singers who had no concept of song because they had not had the benefit of this kind of intensive song work. If I am a good opera singer, then it is because of song.

Carleen Graham, the Director of Opera at The Crane School of Music, knew that I wanted to do this program because of Alan Smith. He's been the greatest
influence on my teaching of anyone I have worked with because it's “heart first.” He is the kind of teacher I want to be. Carleen knew that I had this goal in mind and five years ago she asked me if I was ready to do it. We then proposed a specific plan to the Dean, Michael Sitton. Michael was enthusiastic about his support and he and his partner, Mark Martin, even host our first event each year in their home.

There have been some changes, early on, Alan and I did a recital early in the week, but that was a lot of pressure and he and I could not relax until that was over. Last year we decided instead to do a recital with all of the Fellows that features the music of a specific living composer. We featured Alan’s music in 2014 and this year, I interviewed Ricky Ian Gordon and we featured performances of his music throughout.

Melanie Shank: Which part of this program is the most satisfying?

Stephanie Blythe: The most satisfying part is the final concert, where I cry every time. I'm crying now just thinking about it. All of the repertoire that you hear on this program is chosen by the singers and pianists themselves. No one is assigned anything here. The participants give us a selection of things and we choose from that selection for inclusion in master classes and in the composer’s classes. The one rule is that the final concert may not include the piece you have worked on in any master class. The idea is to take what you have learned in the master classes and prepare the final piece, by yourself with the pianist. Every year this final concert is so gratifying because you can hear the performers making those choices all week, and then you hear the difference, immediately, in the final concert.

Alan Smith: Some of my most fulfilling moments are in the masterclasses themselves working with Stephanie, and the students with sleeves rolled up, nitty-gritty, getting in there. I just love that. For example, in the master classes I will be working with one singer and one pianist but we might tease or comment on another singer or pianist in the audience so that it becomes like a family, almost like the TV series, The Waltons.

Stephanie Blythe: Yes, the artists enjoy it because we try to make them feel safe. For instance, our initial meeting with them is a meet and greet at the Dean's house and everybody sings a song in a nonthreatening environment. So the very first day we all know what we sound like and the pressure is off. We also do a poetry reading, which we are going to keep because that is revelatory.

Jie Zhou: How do you choose the singers and the pianists for this program?

Alan Smith: We have a process whereby [two] videos...[are] submitted in addition to an [essay] about what they love about song. The essay gives us an insight into the thoughts and feelings of the singer or pianist. Additionally, we look
at their résumé and performance experience and then decide whether to invite them to the live audition in New York City.

At the audition, some of the things that I look for are honesty in meaning so that when they sing or when they play it is thoughtful and direct. The beauty of voice is important but it is less important to me than honesty; for pianists it's the same thing. The pianists also have to play the piano well so that they transcend their playing into meaning. You can get somebody who can wiggle their fingers really well in a Chopin étude but who is not able to paint a word of text.

Stephanie Blythe: I also look for those things, but I also look for the voice as well. We decided to keep the program small and focus on emerging professional singers and pianists. The artists, number one, would not have a lot of time with all the other wonderful programs offered in the summer, and number two, might use it as a warm-up for their other summer commitments. For example, one of our singers is also going to Glimmerglass this season. I can promise you he will have a different experience because of the time he spent here.

Mitra Sadeghpour: I have a two-part question. Why did you add the Program for Auditors and what did you envision for this part of the program? The second part of my question - this is such a small program are you pressured to make it larger?

Stephanie: We started with the paradigm: two singers per one pianist. We started out as a six-day program (six singers and three pianists) and now we are a seven-day program because we realized we needed that one extra day to decompress, because the six-day program was just simply too packed.

We added the Program for Auditors because we wanted an opportunity for people to experience the Seminar without making the [performing] group larger. The Crane School of Music is well known as a school of music education so we wanted to honor that aspect as well. Also, we provided undergraduates [from Crane] an opportunity to be interns so that those students can get something out of the program.

That said, we don't have pressure to make it bigger. Though, we are not expanding by singers, we are expanding in other ways. For example, we are looking at the student internship program, perhaps looking to students from other schools in addition to Crane as well as providing an artistic component. My dream is to get to a two-week festival and where we will have 12 singers and 6 pianists. Also we like keeping the Program for Auditors boutique-size because everyone gets more out of the time when there are fewer participants.

And then there's money. I have to raise nearly $40,000 each year for the Seminar and it takes people to work on it during the year. We are also moving to establish an endowment for the Seminar.
Jie Zhou: Could you explain autonomous to me? You state in your literature and marketing materials that the Seminar focuses on “autonomous artistry.”

Stephanie Blythe: This means being able to make musical decisions on your own. One of the reasons I wanted to do the Seminar is that we [singers] are always waiting because it takes so long for our voices to develop. We’re not like an 11-year-old piano or violin prodigy. Voices don’t mature until about age 35. So singers are constantly in a state of waiting. We wait for our teachers to tell us when which repertoire is good for us. Or we have a coach and the coach will tell us when we are ready for a role. Then we join the world of professionals and it’s a conductor or opera director who advises us. There’s always someone to tell you what to do.

Singers end up being trained not to make their own choices, and actually believing that they are not capable of making them. We wanted to create a situation where artists - singers and pianists, would become autonomous. Our job as teachers is to make ourselves obsolete. So we wanted young artists a place where they are allowed to make musical and interpretive choices on their own.

Alan Smith: Then we want to get out of the way so that any success is their own success. And, if not successful then, they can work to make it more effective the next time.

Stephanie Blythe: Today is the last bit of the puzzle for us because during the dress rehearsal, we asked the artists to give notes. Alan and I do not give the notes. We ask questions and expect self-directed answers. Of course there will be times where we make commentary, but for the most part it’s about them diagnosing their own musical issues and then addressing it themselves.

Nicole Asel: Is the idea of autonomous thinking good for an incoming freshman? They can get so many ideas that it can be confusing.

Stephanie Blythe: You have to remember that this program is for advanced artists and emerging professionals. We always say to our singers and pianists that we have opinions, but they are informed opinions. By “informed” I do not mean that it is my opinion but that I have read about it, I have researched it and I know that my opinion or my ideas are gleaned from study and experience. You need to know, when you work with younger singers, you have to be part of the process of research and finding information, so that when they are ready to make a decision they have something to hold onto. The young singer can become autonomous and it is our job as a teacher to help them.

Performing and Teaching
Nicole Asel: How do you balance your own personal artistry with your teaching?

Alan Smith: Two things come to mind when you say that - mentoring or fostering a talent at a university over 15 weeks of the semester (multiplied by eight semesters) is a completely different journey than working with them for three masterclasses and two private coachings [during one week]. You can accomplish a lot of work in those classes but what you don't experience is everything they deal with in their lives during the course of those semesters.

Here at Fall Island we are highly charged and everything is done with enormous energy, and then we leave. The challenge in academia is to realize that life happens and instead of fighting it, help them to be better than they are. You set the bar high enough in every lesson so that the student has to strive for something more, while remembering that the bar can't be so high that they cannot achieve it. Since we are teachers we have to help them every step of the way to achieve their goals. They may go down one week and up the next, but it will be a consistent progression. That is the difference between this festival and normal academia. I'm the administrator of two departments. I have a large class of students, I love to adjudicate and give master classes (which are great because you have an audience where everyone can learn similar things). I perform, I read all the time - especially in my field. I study languages and translate poetry and writings.

Now the second part of your question: The best way to teach is by your example. I go to a lesson and say; “Well, what does Franz Schubert have to say to me today?”, or “What does Johann Mayrhofer (Schubert’s friend and poet) have to say about that?” Then the lesson becomes a kind of a space capsule and we get our batteries charged.

Stephanie Blythe: I admire Alan and all teachers because I can't do it. After every masterclass I give around the country, or after Fall Island, someone contacts me wanting a private lesson, but I say, “No, I don’t give private lessons.” The reason is; I am not a teacher, I am a very good consultant. I am the person hired to charge the battery of the company. Then I leave. I have worked with some of the singers here (2015 Seminar) before because I work with the young artists at the Ryan Opera Center at the Chicago Lyric Opera and I see them two or three times during the course of that program.

Every time I go to a university I am filled with admiration because what voice professors do is so difficult. Voice teachers tell me that it's so nice to hear the same things they have been telling their students day after day. I can say “I know you've looked at this in this way for a long time, but let's look at it this another way.” It's similar to when you were a little kid and you got upset with your parents, so you go tell your next-door neighbor how upset you are because you're not going to talk with your parents. I like to think I'm the next-door neighbor.
Alan Smith: Stephanie, you're much more than that. Also, I have to say that if you're still singing or still playing the piano it is very important that the students hear you doing this. We were saying in this morning's masterclass, it's not necessary to do an entire recital, but a 20-minute recital is fine. For example, having a studio recital in which the students perform something, then you perform something. When they see and hear us do it, it becomes clear to them what we are talking about. However, I do have to say that performing for our students is the hardest thing we do.

Stephanie Blythe: Exactly. Alan, it's like what you did today when you sat down at the piano. Just those few measures you played made an enormous difference, because it showed them the direction you wanted them to take. I don't demonstrate all the time, but there are certainly moments when it works.

Alan Smith: Also there are times when you stand next to a singer and say to do it together. You can sing an octave lower as I did today with a singer, which can be amusing because it is lower and we're singing in a different register, but the shape of the phrase was absolutely clear. It was like training-wheels on a bicycle at that moment, because you work slowly and then you get out of the way so that the performer can ride alone without help.

Mitra Sadeghpour: I find you both very positive in your masterclasses, in that you start by giving a compliment. Do you find this more effective? I ask because I have experienced master classes where a positive attitude was not employed.

Stephanie Blythe: I have learned that the first thing that comes out of your mouth must be praise. That's what applause is about. It is a validation that we need. What the singer is doing, as Ricky Ian Gordon said last night, is dangerous, especially if we have an audience. Every time a singer gets up they reveal a little bit about themselves. They reveal something that is personal, and sometimes frightening. It's like taking a peek in somebody's bedroom or even in somebody's underwear drawer. Sometimes it can be very embarrassing. If the singers are willing to take the risks (as are all the singers and pianists here at this program) then the result is edifying for both the performer and the audience and for me. I am always a better singer and a better teacher after my week at Fall Island.

Alan Smith: I use the mantra Plus – Minus - Plus in my own teaching and in every day of my life. That is I say something positive, then I [make a critique], then I follow with a plus. It is very important for all three of those stages to be really specific. For example; it's almost useless to say that was really lovely, because you need to be specific. You need to say what worked, that it had legato and such. Then comes the minus. I never say that we need to work on this particular aspect, but I usually say that this aspect [needs attention], for example if a student comes in and makes the same mistake three times then I will point that out immediately and not start with a plus; or I will ask that they name me a
date and time that that mistake will be fixed because I want to be there. They usually remember it.

Stephanie Blythe: You also have to come to a point as a teacher that you realize there's only so far that you can go. There are some people who you will not be able to help and that is not a sign that you are a bad teacher. It is a signal that perhaps you don't have the language to get this across to them and someday someone will. For instance today I worked with someone about parlando in singing and afterwards the person came to me and said they finally understood it, that something clicked to them today because they had heard this before. That is to say they had heard the same words before but now they were in the necessary order. It's like a puzzle box and you turn it until you get it to open. Maybe it was Alan maybe it was me or a combination of both of us, or of the pianist or colleagues, yet suddenly it clicked. You need to find out where the threshold is and try to help them.

Alan Smith: Over a 15-week semester year, I like to teach by starting with what I perceive to be the greatest issues. I find if we start with too many details it confuses the person. For example, here in the five master classes we give, there were maybe two or three other details I would have liked to have worked on, if we had had more time, but what they did accomplish was so astounding that you need to let them celebrate that.

Stephanie Blythe: There's always the chance that what you don't correct will be fixed by the big issue, which we saw a lot this week. Then you call their attention to it through praise and support.

Alan Smith: I also ask the question of what did you learn in this class and it is fascinating to hear what you thought they got out of it. Sometimes it's the same - often it's not. I also use this questioning technique a lot in my one-on-one teaching. I am not asking that question judgmentally because I do want to know what they got from that session.

Stephanie Blythe: It also reinforces everything you say or have said and they are much more likely to remember it.

Nicole Asel: Stephanie, you mentioned that art song is a respite for you from opera. I wonder when you're in a situation in opera that is less than desirable, maybe with a production or a director that does not jive with how you feel, how do you handle it?

Stephanie Blythe: What you have to do (and what teaching has taught me), is that there is nothing we do that cannot teach us something. What I try to do in such a situation, where the situation is untenable, where the production is confusing or uninteresting, is to try to find a way to learn something from it.
Mitra Sadeghpour: I do want to say before I ask my question that this is an extremely well-organized program. I know you said that you have people that work on this 12 months of the year and it shows.

Listening to you talk about the pedagogical reasons behind every single thing you do here, even talking about the way you do the final recital, shows that you want the artists to be basically autonomous. It's just an awesome set up you have and I really admire what you have done. At the risk of being totally obvious you two seem the perfect team, the way you work together, with the Fellows. You have different ways of approaching things, but you work together perfectly. I have enjoyed watching that and kudos to this program all around. As an auditor I think it's invaluable to be here and the opportunity to do the recital was also excellent because I could absorb some of the ideas [from the masterclasses] and use them in my performance, for example, “Look people in the eye”, is a concept of yours I have taken to heart.

Stephanie Blythe: Thank you! You know, it's the scariest thing to look the public in the eye. I'll use this example - the first time I sang Carmen, I was terrified. I told the tenor, John Keyes, that I was afraid to go on stage for my scene in the Habañera. I was afraid the audience was going to laugh at me because I'm so much bigger than any woman who has ever sung Carmen – that they were going to hate me. John told me that it was not my job to make people like me - it was my job to show them who Carmen is and they will like her or they will not, and the people who don't like her never intended to in the first place.

All of my feelings on recital have developed from his comment. Some people feel very uncomfortable if you look at them. I once had a revelation after doing a recital in Baltimore and going to a party afterwards and hearing people say how much they enjoyed it. Of course I thanked them for being magnificent audience members! I told them that I loved watching them while I was performing and that they were so helpful to me. Many were shocked at my comment because they did not understand that they could be seen!

I like to perform with the [house] lights up so we can all see each other. People often come to recitals and sit there as if they're sitting in front of a television set. They don't realize there's a reciprocal arrangement going on. If we take the chance to invite them in, 95% of the time they will come. The 5% who don't never will, and it has nothing to do with you. This concept isn't about “Look at me!” It's about what we are experiencing together.

Also you don't know who you're going to affect when you do look at the audience. One of the most poignant moments I've had as a performer was with a lady who came up to me after a recital and said “You know I've had the worst week, I didn't expect that I would want to leave my apartment, and I feel so good now.” That's whom we perform for. Opera is great but it is more difficult to make as intimate as recital.
Text Recitation & Interpretation

Nicole Asel: Stephanie, you recited the texts at your recent Carnegie Hall concert - I love the idea and want my students to do it, but I'm curious about your experience. What was challenging and what was gratifying to you?

Stephanie Blythe: I have been doing recitations for some time now. The first time I did it was at the Lincoln Center Chamber Music Festival where I debuted Alan Smith's piece *Covered Wagon Woman*. I did it because no one had ever heard the work and I wanted all of us to experience the piece for the first time together. At the time Alice Tully Hall was being renovated, so we performed in the in The Center for Ethical Culture in New York City, which is a very intimate space. I explained to the audience that we were not providing texts, but that we wanted to go on the journey together. Furthermore, I explained that they would not have to worry about understanding me and would be given a handout after the recital. No one complained and it was a magical time.

After that, I decided that I want to do most of my recitals only in English. No one ever complains about French singers singing only mélodie or German singers only singing Lieder. However, if American singers sing only American song then they are chastised and I wanted to make a statement about that. I am an American and there’s a lot of great music in this country which I would like to sing.

At my debut recital at Stern Auditorium (at Carnegie Hall) I did all American art song debuting a cycle of *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, by James Legg (1962-2000). These are rather difficult poems, which require a few readings to understand. I noticed that if I read a poem it might take me a couple of repetitions to understand, but if I said it aloud, I understood immediately. Poetry is written to be read aloud. I asked [my collaborator] Warren Jones if he would mind reading this poetry aloud with me before we did the songs…Every single venue where Warren and I performed those songs, we would recite the 12 poems and then sing the music.

My last recital at Carnegie Hall was not entirely in English - some of it was in French. We would recite the translations in English, making sure the translations were beautiful [and] understandable. The second half we did four cabaret songs of Benjamin Britten. We recited the texts because they are not easy to understand, as are most of the poems of W. H. Auden.

After the Britten we did Noel Coward songs and did not recite those because a lot of them are funny and you don’t need to give away the joke…I find that, generally, the audiences are more active, are listening more closely, are quieter
and are more appreciative of the music. This is because they experience the text and have an opinion before hearing the composer's. Additionally, when we did this at Carnegie Hall we did not use amplification for the recitations. Our reasoning was simple; if you hear a voice amplified and then you hear it not amplified; it gets confusing. Carnegie Hall was built for orators. Great speakers have spoken there and did not need a microphone.

Now before I recite at any concert I always say I have the most attractive audiences on the planet and I want to see their faces (instead of them looking at their program). That is [one way I] break the fourth wall and become friends with my audience.

Nicole Asel: I had not realized that Warren Jones also read some of the translations and texts because there was no mention made of that in a review I read.

Stephanie Blythe: Warren does read the texts aloud. I started doing this at Tanglewood with students. I observed that when pianists and singers did this together they played and sang [more authentically]. Additionally, when the pianists did this they listened better. In fact we did an experiment one afternoon [where] we had them sing and play without reciting the text. Then [they did] a recitation and performed it again and the difference was remarkable. Alan, how do you feel about reciting text?

Alan Smith: I love to recite, and it makes me play differently, because I know more specific ideas with the timing of the words, or stresses, or consonants.

Stephanie Blythe: I've also realized that not everyone understands the singing voice. Not everyone can sing. Yet, most everyone can speak. If the first thing they hear is the spoken voice they connect to you faster and that is when it becomes a reciprocal [relationship] with the audience.

Alan Smith: It's also wonderful to hear the voice of the pianist. It makes them real.

Stephanie Blythe: It's like when you were a kid in kindergarten and the first time you see your teacher shopping you realize that your teacher is a real person, too. And the same thing when you hear the pianist speak; it's similar to seeing your teacher shopping. The pianist is a real person, not a machine playing an instrument.

Mitra Sadeghpour: How you get young people to slow down enough to read poetry and understand the metaphors? For example, they sing a song about a hummingbird drinking nectar and they think it is a song about nature, but in reality it is a song about sex.
Stephanie Blythe: If you want them to start understanding poetry you have to get them to read it. I would invite each of them to read a poem or perhaps conduct a master class where everyone reads a poem. Then take the whole class and discuss what the poem is about. In a weekly class you can have one person get up and read a poem and not sing the song. After which you can have a discussion about [it].

Alan Smith: For me in class song preparation - the first session is always about the text. We take a popular song, for example, Sting’s *Fields of Gold*. We talk about Sting and the poetry, then we listen to him sing it and hear what he does to illustrate the words. We [have] also analyzed *Fever* by Michael Boublé, which mentions Pocahontas, Romeo and Juliet, and Samson and Delilah. Then we listen to Boublé perform, listening to how he does the text. We also listen to the orchestration, firstly because it is brilliant and secondly, because the orchestrator stresses the text by using the brass, percussion, or double bass. This sort of analysis gets them listening because it sneaks up on them.

After this I go to one of the hardest, gnarliest poems I know by Michael Fried called *Japan* from the song cycle *Simple Daylight* by John Harbison. Usually they don't even notice how difficult the text is because the music is wild. In addition, it’s nice if you can include a song that is ballad-like. Even hip-hop is suitable. For example some of the poems of Tupac are excellent because the students [are familiar with his work].

Mitra Sadeghpour: I can't get them to slow down enough to read the poetry.

Alan Smith: My answer to that is; don't slow them down - keep it fast and keep it contemporary.

Melanie Shank: Do you keep the same ideas when you first read the poetry or do you read it again to see if you have new and different ideas?

Stephanie Blythe: Absolutely! Are you the same person you were a year ago? In a year I will have a whole new set of experiences and everything I look at is going to be different. One of the first big roles I sang was Cornelia in *Giulio Cesare* by George Frederic Handel. Her first aria is a horrible and heartbreaking one about her dead husband. I sang it differently after I got married. Every time we have an experience it changes the way we interpret everything.

Jie Zhou: Do you think that singing in your native language is better than singing in foreign languages? Is this especially true for a beginner?

Stephanie Blythe: I don't think it's better; I think it's different. The reason Alan and I wanted to do only American Art song and only in English is that when we work with singers on communication and connection, they can experience it more immediately in their own language. The idea is that they will take that knowledge,
that feeling of what it's like to have that connection and use it in other languages.

[Regarding] the second half of your question about being proficient in other languages - yes, that is important [as well as] to be able to understand everything you perform. You [must] make sure everything on the page is translated and clear for you.

Melanie Shank: Do you have other ideas for taking art song out of the box and for presenting recitals in different venues or different places or occasions?

Alan: I think two of the strongest ones are master classes in which your students sing or play and you perform. Also museums often have a recital room or an opportunity to perform among works of art; as well as your church or synagogue. Sometimes restaurants, hospitals, or retirement homes will have a piano and you can perform there. I would start small with 15 minutes then maybe 20 then maybe a half hour and leave yourself and them wanting more. Interestingly, the University where I teach [USC] has a requirement for the guitar majors that they perform four times a year in a venue that is not a performance venue.

Stephanie Blythe: One of the things I'm doing now is a sing-along recital. For example, singing in church creates community and I want more people to have that experience. Alan and I are going to do a sing-along recital on January 23, 2016 at Carnegie Hall, where the [audience] will be singing such songs as “Always,” and “I'm Looking Over A Four-Leafed Clover.” Last summer, with six singers and four pianists we did a sing-along with the students at Tanglewood and it was wildly successful with over 1500 people singing On Moonlight Bay and other Tin Pan Alley songs. We (those of us onstage) sang the verses and the audience sang the chorus. The audience was just shivering to sing.

Alan Smith: We could see people out on the lawn running to find a seat and grab a booklet because the back of the hall opens up onto a lawn.

Stephanie Blythe: It was one of the reasons that inspired Carnegie Hall to accept my proposal for doing this concert. I've done this with students at Florida State University among other places. We piloted this type of program here at Fall Island in 2013. People love it. It's a really great way to get [them] to realize the power of song, the voice and how wonderful it is to sing. There is something visceral that happens when you sing. It's the breath, the exhalation or the aerobic affect.

21st Century Songs for Young Singers

Nicole Asel: Alan, you've composed a couple of song cycles like Ellis Island and Covered Wagon Woman which are about journeys. What is it about the poetry that draws you out, that inspires you? Is it about where you are in your life?
Alan Smith: Yes, it is about where I am in my life. When I chose the text for *Ellis Island* and *Covered Wagon Woman* I wrote for what affected me emotionally at exactly that moment. I read volumes of women's diaries from that period. I chose Margaret Frink's, because she wrote beautifully and her story was magnificent. I could tell that she was a big-hearted person, just like Stephanie, so I thought she would love to sing something from this diary. My thought was, how to boil it down how to leave out 90% of the diary? The way I made the choice is to pick quotes, which I liked. I had 35 pages of quotations, which had to be shortened to become a 30-minute song cycle. My next step was to write all of the quotations onto little pieces of paper, which I sorted by putting these quotes over here because they spoke to me strongly and these over there because they spoke to me not as strongly. I could then pick out the ones that spoke to me the strongest. Then I taped the strongest ones to an 8 x 11 piece of paper and looked through them trying to see which of the quotes would finally make it. At this time the strips started ordering themselves - getting on the boat, being on the ocean, seeing the Statue of Liberty.

Stephanie Blythe: That's very David Bowie. At the beginning of his career he would use text like that. Early on in his career in the *Ziggy Stardust* stuff the texts are really crazy, because he was chopping things up that really spoke to him and he would just arrange them on the table and would put them together in a particular way. So you're very David Bowie! And Alan I'm still waiting for Mrs. Foshee’s song.

Alan Smith: Let me explain! There is a lady in Margaret Frink’s diary, *Covered Wagon Woman,* a Mrs. Foshee that they kept running into. She was quite a character, you can tell. I could write an entire song cycle about this woman.

Stephanie Blythe: I just want one song.

Alan Smith: Okay, will do!

Stephanie Blythe: Mrs. Foshee was remarkable. Her story is fantastic. I think Mrs. Foshee is one of my favorite people ever. In the Frink diary she writes that they discovered her sitting on her valise by the side of the road all by herself. Her idea was that God was going to get her to her destination and when she needed something it would come. They did take her a little way but they were completely out of food. Mrs. Foshee told them that she was not worried about it because God would provide. They rounded a curve where there was a cow tied to a tree with a note attached to it, “We can't feed this cow anymore so if you need this cow take it.” There was food and that was the gift.

Alan Smith: Does that answer your question about my inspirations for composition? I hope so. I just finished a set of songs for the baritone Matthew Worth and these songs are also extremely personal.
Mitra Sadeghpour: I teach mostly undergrads and some of the songs, for example of Ricky Ian Gordon’s, are extremely difficult. In fact, so much of American music in the 20th and 21st century is difficult. Do you have any suggestions of American Art songs that you would introduce to young singers? I am inquiring especially for those with beginning techniques who couldn’t possibly do the songs coached and performed during this seminar.

Alan Smith: I think some of Ricky Ian Gordon's songs from the [19]80’s work really well. Richard Hundley is a great resource…as his songs are really accessible for young singers. William Bolcom songs, or John Musto’s song Litan, for example, are good songs to teach.

Stephanie Blythe: Some of the Lee Hoiby [passed away in 2011] songs are quite gratifying. Steven Mark Kohn is excellent. His folk song arrangements are fabulous - each song telling a real story. I also think that some of Alan Smith's work is very accessible.

Alan Smith: Yes, my folksong settings and some of my other songs are quite doable for young singers.

Stephanie Blythe: Alan’s folksong settings are gorgeous and I think also Ellis Island is quite good. But I wouldn't give Covered Wagon Woman to any beginning student. Alan composes a folksong arrangement for me every year for my birthday and I get to sing it all alone for a full year before he publishes it.

Alan Smith: All of my songs are published by Glendower Jones, who you can find online at http://www.classicalvocalrep.com/

*The Fall Island Vocal Arts Seminar will celebrate its 5th season May 23-29, 2016 at The Crane School of Music, SUNY Potsdam. For more information about Fellowships for Singers and Pianists or the Program for Auditors, visit fallisland.org.*

A renowned opera singer and recitalist, mezzo-soprano **Stephanie Blythe** is considered one of the most highly respected and critically acclaimed artists of her generation. Her repertoire ranges from Handel to Wagner, German lieder to contemporary and classic American song. Ms. Blythe has performed on many of the world's great stages, such as Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Covent Garden, Paris National Opera, San Francisco Opera, Chicago Lyric and Seattle Operas. Ms. Blythe was named Musical America’s Vocalist of the Year in 2009, received an Opera News Award in 2007 and won the Richard Tucker Award in 1999. Ms Blythe starred in the Metropolitan Opera’s live HD broadcasts of *Falstaff, Orfeo ed Euridice, Il trittico, Rodelinda, and the complete Ring Cycle*. She also appeared in PBS’s *Live From Lincoln Center* broadcasts of the New
York Philharmonic’s performance of *Carousel* and her acclaimed show, *We’ll Meet Again: The Songs of Kate Smith*. Her recordings include her solo album, *as long as there are songs* (Innova), and works by Mahler, Brahms, Wagner, Handel, and Bach (Virgin Classics). This season, Ms. Blythe’s many engagement include returns to the San Francisco Opera as Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd* and the Houston Grand Opera as Nettie Fowler in *Carousel*. She also performs her new program, *Sing, America!* at Carnegie Hall and at the Harris Theater in Chicago. She is the co-founder and Artistic Director of the Fall Island Vocal Arts Seminar.

Pianist **Alan Smith** enjoys a reputation as one of the United States’ most highly regarded figures in the field of collaborative artistry. His performing experiences have included associations in major musical venues with such musical personalities as bass-baritone, Thomas Stewart; soprano, Barbara Bonney; mezzo-soprano, Stephanie Blythe; violist, Donald McInnes; baritone, Rod Gilfry; violinist, Eudice Shapiro; as well as the Los Angeles Chamber Virtuosi. His expertise and experience in song literature, chamber music, and opera make him much sought after as an accompanist, coach, faculty colleague, teacher of master classes, and adjudicator of area and international competitions. At the USC Thornton School of Music, Professor Smith serves as the chair of Keyboard Studies and serves as the director of the Keyboard Collaborative Arts Program, one of the oldest and largest programs of its kind the country. He has served for 25 years as a member of the vocal coaching faculty at the Tanglewood Music Center. His own compositions for voice and piano have received performances in many parts of the world by some of the world’s most acclaimed artists in such venues as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center, Wigmore Hall, Tanglewood Music Center, Music Academy of the West, and the Ravinia Festival. Commissions include Tanglewood Music Center, The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, The Boston Symphony Orchestra for the Tanglewood Festival Chorus and Stephanie Blythe, as well as Virginia Tech. Dr. Smith is the Musical Director for the Fall Island Vocal Arts Seminar.

**Donald George** is a Professor at The Crane School of Music, SUNY Potsdam. He is the recipient of the 2014 SUNY Potsdam Presidential Award for Research and Creativity, in addition to the 2014 Award for Research Mentorship. He is a lyric tenor and has sung at La Scala, Vienna Staatsoper, Paris Opéra Bastille, Kennedy Center with such conductors as Leonard Bernstein, Vladimir Jurowski, Jeffry Tate or Simone Young. He has recorded for Sony, Naxos, Philips Classics with his recordings of music of Margaret Lang being nominated for Grammys. His publications include recent articles for *Die Tonkunst, American Music Teacher, Society of American Music Bulletin*, NOA Opera Journal and *Classical Singer*. He has written a major book for Oxford University Press entitled *Master Singers: Advice from the Stage* with interviews of famous opera singers including Blythe, Kaufmann, DiDonato, Hampson and others. His students consistently sing leading opera roles and win honors at NATS or MTNA including the Lotte Lenya
Competition and the Renée Fleming Award.

Dr. Carleen Graham is a State University of New York Distinguished Teaching Professor and has been the director of the award-winning Crane Opera Ensemble since 1991 and her productions have received awards from the National Opera Association, The American Prize and the American College Theater Festival. In 2014, The Crane Opera Ensemble premiered the winners of the first Domenic J. Pellicciotti Opera Composition Prize, an award (presented every four years) that encourages the creation of new opera works exploring themes related to tolerance and the celebration of diversity. She is co-founder (along with Stephanie Blythe) and Executive Director of the Fall Island Vocal Arts Seminar, a member of the Board of Directors of the National Opera Association, and a member of OPERA America’s Singer Training Forum. She is an active free-lance stage director, masterclass clinician and conference presenter. Her publications include articles for The Opera Journal (March 2016), National Opera Association NOTES, Journal of Singing, Opera America Perspectives Series, and Classical Singer magazine.