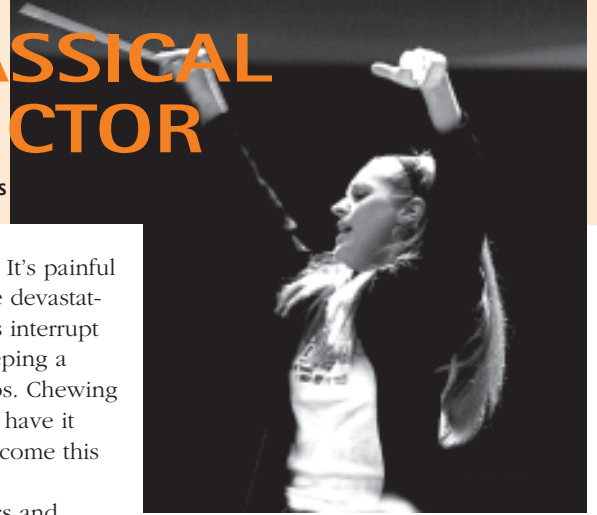


PAIGE VICKERY—CLASSICAL MUSICIAN, CONDUCTOR

Paige has recently moved to New York City and pursues musical opportunities



TSA: Please tell us a little about your career in music.

P.V.: I am currently a professional conductor and I have been for twelve years. I marvel at that—I'm on stage, right in the middle, I giggle at it, that it's real.

I'm also a professional flutist, but I took a Masters in orchestral conducting and it has taken me to more interesting places. I'm a travel junkie. I'm going to conduct a chamber orchestra in Bombay and I just got back from an international competition in the Ukraine. I'm always one of very few women to compete at these events. In the Ukraine, I took the silver medal and was the only American to place.

I really love adventure and travel. I lost my husband in an accident when I was only twenty-four, which I think is part of my desire to move and do things. My life was very tidy then, it's not now. I've been all over—the Czech Republic, Russia, New Zealand, even Antarctica. There was no gig in Antarctica, so I took a photo of myself conducting penguins.

In addition to being a woman and an American, I have to overcome my tics in front of strange orchestras. I never know what new people will think or say. I have to negotiate each time and brace myself for the question — What will this orchestra think of me? But they really just want to make music. I come out of “battle mode” and I'm ready to answer their questions, but what it really comes down to is that as long as I can do my job they don't mind.

Sometimes they do ask questions—especially youth orchestras. But I don't stand at the first rehearsal and say anything about my TS. It's really “let's play” then I address the questions and they're OK with it.

TSA: The impact of TS varies from person to person. What has been the biggest impact of TS on your life?

P.V.: The impact has been two-fold. Physically there is the pain. For several years I've had painful tics—head and eye tics and clamping my teeth together. I've

broken teeth and my jaw locks. It's painful and it's impossible to talk. More devastating to me has been the way tics interrupt my work. I have found that keeping a piece of gum in my mouth helps. Chewing gum at my job is a no-no, but I have it there in my mouth to help overcome this particular tic.

I've also had some neck tics and headaches from head jerking. This is tough sometimes, but I find myself blessed for having no verbal tics. I count my blessings and know that TS waxes and wanes. I never know what's coming down the pike, so I try not to whine.

TSA: What was it like when you were a child? Did you have any role models?

P.V.: My first grade teacher is my role model. I still know her. She takes me to football games and Jimmy Buffet concerts. She could have put me in a special class, but she didn't. She didn't make an issue of my tics, never pointed them out and never talked to my mom and dad about it. I didn't realize how much I was ticcing. I didn't realize that it was distracting. But that's how I got my blueprint on how to proceed—is it with confidence or an apology?

I wasn't diagnosed until I was nineteen. I was just an oddball. My father is a heart surgeon and, ironically, he didn't have any idea about my TS. He'd just say, “Stop it, you're making us nervous.” I just tried to keep up and concentrate. I managed to stay up there and that pattern followed through until today. I still work twice as hard, but then I didn't know I was putting that much effort into just keeping on a par.

TSA: How were you finally diagnosed?

P.V.: My sister saw the TS episode of *L.A. Law*. I went to a neurologist and got diagnosed. I was in college at the time. I didn't take medication, but the diagnosis changed the way I felt. It was liberating. When people asked, I had an answer. I could finally explain it and didn't have to be defensive.

I immediately joined the TSA chapter in Denver. I was active there for ten years

and worked with a lot of kids with TS. Now that I'm based in New York, I've gotten involved with the New York City Chapter, but I'm traveling a great deal and I've been out of town for two meetings in a row.

TSA: When you were diagnosed did you look back at your family and see that anyone else had symptoms that might have been TS?

P.V.: I did, the closest thing I found was my grandfather with Parkinson's—it's a dopamine imbalance. But I didn't find one person with TS.

TSA: Some kids withdraw, some discover a special outlet, what worked for you?

P.V.: Music is both my passion and my outlet. It was something to hang my hat on. My big sister played the flute so I wanted to too. Then I got the bug that you get when people applaud. People always look for the figurative standing ovation—I got real ones. It was an outlet, but it was also a way that I could excel and belong to something.

TSA: Stress has a big impact on people with TS. Do you do anything to help alleviate your stress?

P.V.: It's a constant battle. Stress and exhaustion irritate the tics and when you step on a podium there's both adrenaline and stress. Usually I take an entire day to prepare—no coffee that day, no rushing to arrive on time. I take my time on the days I conduct.

Now I'm taking medication—because of the tooth thing. On nights I conduct, I

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might take an extra dose in the middle of the day, get a little groggy but feel rested and OK when I'm on the podium. I choose not to take a lot of medications, but I do take them.

TSA: Did TS ever prevent you from getting a specific conducting job?

P.V.: The only time I recall was when I was being considered to conduct an All State Youth Orchestra and a bass player said, "Do we really want to expose our children to this?" That was devastating. He'd never even seen my work. Since then, youth orchestras have become my niche.

In Boulder I had an orchestra with three autistic children. It took patience and understanding from the other kids around them. I told the board that they can't deny those kids—and the kids around them—the opportunity to learn about acceptance.

There are more difficulties with being a woman conductor getting posts in orchestras—there's an old school mentality. Of course there's also the positives of not blending in with all those faceless tuxedos. I'm unique.

TSA: TS is in the media a great deal lately. Some of the presentations are more realistic and more positive than others. What do you think of the role of the media in increasing awareness?

P.V.: They associate it so much with verbal tics and I think that we need to start realizing that a smaller percentage of people with TS have vocalizations. My problem is about pigeonholing TS.

TSA: Do you have any last words for kids with TS and their parents?

P.V.: I don't want to diminish what anyone goes through, but I've found that obstacles you overcome—with hard work and heartache—help you develop skills of equal value. As you stretch one way, you stretch the other way too in empathy, an increased sense of humanity and what is possible. Try hanging your hat on what you are achieving. Because you are overcoming what most people never have to tackle, it can make you a better human being.