

ABSTRACT

Beyond Talent: Understanding Longevity in Classical Music

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The opera industry is brimming with talent, and yet, career longevity in classical music is uncommon. Students and young artists often observe this phenomenon and wonder: what really helps an individual achieve success in the opera business? This project attempts to answer that question by taking a cross-section of the habits and experiences of several singers, directors, and teachers involved in the business of classical singing. Over twenty interviews were conducted, delving into each individual's journey and approach to a successful career. These interviews informed an in-depth discussion of what an opera career really looks like, and how best to achieve balance. All of the direct quotes and analysis are intended to highlight any continuities within the overall group in order to provide guidance and inspiration for a new generation of singers. The discussion takes an honest look at the realities of loneliness and relationships while on the road, and offers advice and strategies for finding comfort and confidence through the rigorous audition processes experienced by singers. It also examines the role that spirituality plays in career longevity and suggests characteristics that are conducive to a successful career, questioning the definition of success as an opera singer.

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BEYOND TALENT: UNDERSTANDING LONGEVITY IN CLASSICAL MUSIC

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Life on the Road

Introduction

A career in the opera industry is one of the most difficult professions to pursue. Although the idea of an international opera career seems glamorous, it often requires a strength of spirit and can lack stability. Many people who are incredibly talented do not find success or fulfillment in this line of work, often without explanation. Singers feel aimless at times because there is not a linear path, structured by certifications and internships, that goes from point A to point B. In fact, One may get to point B, only to find out that points C, D, and E are pay-to-sing programs that cost too much, and point F has to wait because graduate programs are not looking for mezzo-sopranos this year. The process can be completely overwhelming and feel as though success is almost impossible.

As I began to think about possible thesis topics, I realized that I wanted to spend a year thinking and writing about a concept that would be helpful for the people around me. I decided to try to figure out what people do in order to be successful and fulfilled by an opera career, besides being talented. Each interview began with a standard set of questions that addressed both personal career aspects and general ideas of success and spirituality: what do they do on the road? How do they handle audition anxiety? Do they

go to church? I interviewed singers, coaches, directors, teachers, and backstage workers at varying places in their career to create a realistic and accurate picture of what being a performer looks like in practice, and how real people handle the most difficult aspects of their jobs.

Life on the Road

“The day off can be torturous. You do your laundry and grocery shopping and suddenly you’re stuck in some hotel room or crappy apartment and that’s when you start to look around and think “this is my life??”, so I try to let myself do things that make me happy. I go to the art museum or local theater in every place I am in. I think it’s about learning to use your time wisely and knowing how to take care of yourself, both as an artist and a human being.”

-Kristine McIntyre

Professional entertainers are nomadic, a condition that seems to amplify as their success does. Opera singers and directors are a rare breed within the vein of professional entertainers because they very rarely repeat the same show more than a handful of times, requiring them to be particularly mobile in order to be successful. If these people were robots, or existed in a vacuum, or even just remained completely devoid of emotional attachment, being an opera singer would be easy. Instead, they are well-developed artists with high capacities for emotion and human connection, which makes living a mobile lifestyle extremely difficult. This theme was prominent in every single interview that I

conducted, and while the strategies put forth for dealing with loneliness and relationships on the road varied, there was an underlying tone of resentment and resignation to loneliness that pervaded the interviews.

Jamie Barton, currently one of the most recognized mezzo-sopranos in the opera world, is a prime example of the correlation between success and instability, saying:

“The travel aspect is the hardest aspect of this job for me. I have colleagues who literally do not have homes because they are on the road so much and they keep their belongings in a storage unit or their parent’s house. I even know people that have children who travel with everything they need in suitcases.”

In response to these colleagues’ habits, she asserts:

“I can’t do that. I discovered early on that I need a home base. I think I said at one point ‘My kingdom for a bookshelf,’ which is absolutely the case with me. In the career, you have to learn how to do it in the way that makes sense to you. That is incredibly subjective and it’s a learning process that keeps on going.”

Several people, in so many words, described their own experiences with the “learning process” that Barton describes. What seemed most remarkable to me was the level of well-earned self-awareness that pervaded their responses. They were able to specifically recall a laundry list of go-to tricks and items that helped keep them grounded and comfortable while on the road. Susan Stone Li, opera director and stage manager, effectively delineated the importance of exploring what works for her personally, saying:

“The stress of work can really impede the way you sleep and eat, and you can’t do your best work that way. You have to address the stress and loneliness so that it doesn’t get

away from you. You have to be your own playdate; you have to know what you like to do. Part of that is just doing it over and over, to figure it out.”

Or, as Jamie Barton simply puts it:

“I know I’m an extroverted introvert, and you need to know who you are, so you can structure what you need.”

As each artist commits time to understanding themselves and what makes them feel the most comfortable, their ability to perform well in a new environment dramatically increases. After gaining this new insight, they have to move forward with practical steps to help themselves.

Balance

The process of structuring needs looked different for everyone. Joseph Li, conductor and vocal coach, attributed his relaxation to running and video games. Several people suggested Netflix, or recreational reading in order to reset. Allowing frivolous pauses in the day or week is pivotal, not only to doing great work, but also to feeling like the person that is being put forth is authentic and whole. Joseph Li describes himself as “an introvert, galore... [and] if I don’t get the time alone I need, then people don’t get as much of the bubbly side of me. It’s a balance.”

Balance is a funny word for people working in opera. One of the things that makes this career unique is that each new show and contract is an experience on its own. Even with a reprised a role, it could be a new production, a new director, a new scene partner, or it

could be all of the above. This can be thrilling, and attracts a lot of people to the career, but it can also be extremely isolating and exhausting. Creating a routine becomes an anchor, something that feels secure and unique to the singer, amidst all of the change. The responsibility then falls on the singer to know themselves and know how to create balance for themselves. For some, a physical practice of moving intentionally was the answer. Brenda Harris, soprano, took several years developing her own strategies and described her process:

“I did meditation, I learned to do a little bit of yoga. I find that stress makes you forget why you are doing this, and why you love music. I learned to put certain things that I think are unbelievably fabulous pieces of art in a playlist that I could listen to, so I would remember that I loved music.”

The type of physical or mental practice does not matter as much as the intention with which one pursues it. Setting balance as the goal helps keep things in perspective and prevents a singer from dwelling on unhealthy aspects of their life.

Relationships

Although many of the people I interviewed had a strong understanding of themselves and their needs on the road, all of them had a lot to say about how their careers effect their relationships, and foster loneliness. Interestingly, working in music can really make a singer hate something that they have spent so long cultivating a passion for. This hate could stem from resentment for lost time with loved ones. Although Jamie

Barton has reached a level of success that many singers only dream of, she is not immune to the repercussions of her achievements, saying:

“I need downtime, which translated to meditation. It’s a really really big thing for me, especially when my job gets crazy and I can barely find time to take care of myself.

Carving out time to literally just sit and breath is something that for me keeps anxiety and panic at bay. Another big thing for me is being able to travel and live in places that are comfortable. For me, home is 3 things. My actual house, my friends and family, and my kitty, River.”

Jamie emphasized that the reward of an international career does not offset the emotional effects of distance from loved ones. But, she continues because she loves to create art beautifully, in spite of the downsides. Nate Wheatley, lighting designer, introduced one of the biggest misconceptions that young people entering the opera business have, explaining:

“There were a lot of people coming out of college that I thought didn’t have a real understanding of the sacrifices that are required in this business. No one is skyrocketing to the top. You have to work your way up.”

While a singer makes those sacrifices, their friends in the normal 9-5 crowd are often progressing through life in the traditional sense: buying houses, having children, leading a domestic life. For some, sacrificing the white picket fence for a full-time career in opera is the obvious choice. For others, the allure of staying in the same place and maintaining a sense of normalcy causes them to retire their pursuits for something different.

The topic of having both a relationship/family and a performance career was an extremely divisive one amongst the people I interviewed. Tammy Wilson, soprano, made a very candid statement about relationships on the road, insisting:

“A lot of people get divorced in our job. It is not really conducive to healthy relationships. Not having that comfort there is hard, and also, daily life for us is work. All day, we don’t really do extra things. We just go to rehearsal. There is a lot of cheating, mostly due to loneliness. They get lonely, and they get weak, and then they cheat.”

The close relationships that are fostered when making art with others, combined with a basic human craving for intimacy, can be a dangerous combination. I was also left with the impression that this aspect of the business is prevented by couples who are intentional with their time and the quality of their communication. In fact, several individuals believed that maintaining a serious relationship increases the quality of their performance. Kristine McIntyre, director, explained:

“Most of the really successful singers I know are in some sort of serious relationship. And most are crazy traditional. Gay or straight, they tend to have been with the same person for a long time and most of them have kids. It grounds them, its wonderful, and it gives them a launching place to do really good work. It helps the loneliness and the difficulty of being on the road when there’s someone on the other end of the phone that gives a shit what you ate for dinner that night.”

It begs the question: how much of the lives portrayed onstage or developed behind the scenes should be experienced in order to present an authentic product? Is it better to build a career without having to consider the well-being of another person, even if that limits

opportunity for connection and intimacy? I did not receive a clear answer in either direction, but I did not expect to. What I did receive, though, were more strategies from those who chose to maintain a long-distance relationship. Some, like Kristine McIntyre and Nate Wheatley, stressed the importance of having a form of entertainment in common with their partners, like a favorite TV show, that they watched together in their respective locations. Being able to experience something at the same time makes them feel connected and more present in each other's lives. It also helps prevent their conversations from dwelling on negative aspects of their days, and letting them turn into ranting sessions. There was also a consensus in communicating openly about the amount of time one can spend away from their partner before the relationship begins to strain. For some it was 4 weeks, while for others it was a couple of months. The amount of time does not necessarily matter. What matters is the intentionality behind having preemptive conversation for the sake of the singer's future. These issues and solutions are not at all unique to opera, but I believe that this career takes the most difficult parts of a relationships and magnifies them. The way a singer handles that up close and personal look influences the emotional wellbeing of both them and the people they love.

An individual's basic needs have to be met in order to present the best version of themselves, both as a person and an artist. Even if one understands this concept, the execution tends to get fuzzy. Initially, I expected my interview questions pertaining to experiences and practices on the road to be the fastest part of the interview, a sort of routine part of the conversation before we approached the heavier parts like success and rejection. Instead, what I discovered was that these tangible aspects of their careers were the ones that people were the most passionate about expressing. They gave example after

example of how knowing their own limits and developing day to day physical habits had influenced their career success immensely. It is important to remember that before being a singer, actor, director, designer, stage manager, etc., one must be a person. The most successful people in the business make sure to treat their person with kindness and introspection, and consistently observe the positive ramifications of that in their own career.

CHAPTER TWO

Auditioning is the Worst

“I believe what you say to yourself on a daily basis is very important, just in your mind how you feel about yourself and what you feel you have to contribute. Everybody has an opinion on your singing. One of my practices when I was starting out was to listen to the people who believed in me and people who I trusted. Listen to them and actively seek out constructive criticism. It is so easy to start to tell yourself that you don’t belong and you’re not really an interesting, vital part of the performer community because comparison is inevitable. The people who survive are the ones who just keep their eyes forward and always try to get better.”

-Jamie Van Eyck

Every singer experiences the dreaded audition day at least once in their lives. They prepare for months, painstakingly preparing five arias that will wow directors and conductors alike, all the while knowing that the odds are not in their favor. Then, they walk into a room and hand their resume to an ominous row of important people sitting in front them, and do their best to make an impression. The idea that a seven-minute snapshot accurately reveals the artistic capabilities of an opera singer is pretty ridiculous, and yet, that is the process. Also, the bulk of auditioning a singer will do in their career

takes place in the first 5-7 years, when they are the least experienced and most unsure of themselves. Then, after enduring the whole process, the dreaded rejections begin rolling in. For some, being told “no” is a minor setback, a bump in the road. For others, rejection is debilitating.. After discussing auditioning and rejection in my interviews, I got the impression that composure is the single most important skill for career longevity in opera. Luckily, many singers also emphasized that composure a well-earned skill that can be developed through intentional reflection and hard work.

Routine

Preparation for audition day looked different for every person I interviewed. Some people had a very structured approach, taking solace in their well-defined routine. Brenda Harris presented an interesting perspective when she said:

“I started looking at sports people and realized that I’m not high maintenance. If you are really serious about something, you have to make all of the details a priority, and know yourself. If you have to wake up 6 hours before an audition to feel ready, then do it! We’re talking about how we manage our emotional and mental bodies, so that we can give these people an idea of what we do.”

There is a stigma against being perceived as high maintenance that often prevents singers from making their personal comfort level a priority. That includes avoiding certain foods/drinks before an audition, laying out all of the necessary materials the night before, leaving a large buffer of time to travel, establishing a warm-up routine for continuity in any location, taking a few breaths before walking in the room, and exuding

confidence. If a singer is frazzled and all over the place before they walk into an audition, they can only blame themselves. Danielle Pastin, soprano, furthers this point by pointing out:

“Personal consistency helps with business inconsistency. Put your energy toward things you can control and focus on those.”

Maintaining a set routine allowed many of the singers who I interviewed to create expectations for the audition day that they fulfill themselves, instead of feeling like audition day happens to them.

Preparation

Even after building a routine, auditioning looms over the singer as an anxiety-inducing experience. As I have both heard and experienced first-hand, preparedness is the single greatest cure for nervousness in a performance or audition setting. A singer who walks into every audition with total confidence in their level of preparation has the luxury of being calm and consistent. This does not just apply to notes and rhythms. A singer has to know how their body reacts under stress and focus on what aspects of the process are in their control, acknowledging that what happens on the opposite side of the audition table is out of their hands. Bronwen Forbay, soprano, discussed this self-awareness, saying:

“It helped me to develop a willingness to acknowledge the limitations I have that are real and find ways to accommodate them. If you know you get nervous for performances, you can visualize a successful performance, so you can slow down the rate of your breathing.

We all have things that we do, but it is finding the consistent ones to carry you through

that really makes a difference. It takes a lot of focus and discipline. Acknowledging what you can do, and what you really can't, and not seeing that as a failure but as a reality and therefore, within these circumstances, you are going to find your own ways to stay calm.”

A singer's level of artistry will better as they grow and progress, but they do not exist in a state of failure until reaching a certain milestone. Whatever they are capable of, and wherever they are in the trajectory of their career is okay. Practicing kindness toward themselves throughout the journey goes a long way toward enhancing their comfort and confidence in an audition room.

Comparison

A common audition experience for young singers goes as follows: The soprano singing at 10 AM sounded amazing through the door, and the one in the next slot is bragging about her roles at Santa Fe last summer. All of the women came to auditions wearing long dresses, but this singer seemed to have missed the memo. Also, three people have already sang the aria they prepared, so they contemplate changing their first piece at the last minute. Suddenly, they panic and start lining out all of the reasons they could not possibly be chosen before they have even entered the room. They have defeated themselves without singing a single note.

A common barrier to success in auditions is comparison. A basic, human response, this barrier must be dealt with in order for a singer to be successful. Jeremiah Johnson, baritone, described the way he dealt with this issue, saying:

“The thing is, at least I think, you don’t have to set yourself apart. You are innately different from them. All of the baritones that go into that room are going to sing an audition completely different. Each person’s inherent life and background and who they are will make the performance different than mine. All you can do is go in and give the best version of you that you can in that moment, and then you go on with life. And if they want to buy my brand-o-singer then cool, they’re going to buy me.”

Several of the singers that I spoke to similarly highlighted the importance of a delineation between the artist as a person, and the product that they are putting forth. This allows the rejection of someone’s product by an opera company to be independent of their self-worth as a person. This idea is paramount, but gets lost in translation somewhere in undergraduate and graduate studies, amidst a focus on passing juries and winning recognition from professors and colleagues. The truth of the matter is, a lot of casting is about money and confidence in a singer’s marketability. Directors and Conductors are betting that the singer they hear for 7 minutes is capable of carrying a million-dollar production, so bigger names and established contacts are a safer choice. Also, they might absolutely love the voice and artistry they see, but do not have a place for the singer in their upcoming season. The result in all of those scenarios is still the same: a stilted email, regretfully describing the overwhelming number of people auditioning prevents them from casting you at this time. But their rejection is in response to a product, not a reflection of an individual’s worth as an artist.

That being said, a singer has to maintain an authentic passion for their talent and product. Kristine McIntyre gave her perspective of auditions from the director’s side of the table, describing what she called the “It Factor”:

“It is how they use their voice; they use their voice to tell me a story...how they shape it and use their text. I can always tell when someone is singing an aria that they don’t really give a shit about for an audition. Bad idea.”

Notice she didn’t say anything about the font on a resume or the number of high C’s in an aria. It is so easy to get caught up in all of the details, but auditioning well boils down to preparation, self-awareness, confidence, and passion.

Self-Advocacy

As difficult as audition day is, the days following any audition can do far more damage if not approached healthily. Many singers I spoke to believed that building an opera career depended on whether or not they were willing to be the last man standing. Sheer force of will and tenacity pushed them to keep working after rejection. It also helps to hold onto the success already achieved, no matter how small. Early in her career, Jamie Barton was very intentional about focusing on the positive feedback, saying:

“It comes down to putting the work in and then being lucky. When I was getting the no’s to my product, I still had enough people saying yes that I felt like I had a product that was worthwhile.”

Rachel Copeland, soprano, goes a step further and focuses on advocating for yourself, saying:

“When dealing with rejection after auditions, you have to remind yourself of what you did well. You have to have a good self-resolve to acknowledge what you did well because no one else does.”

Jamie Van Eyck also emphasized this in the opening quote of this chapter, making a point to filter her self-talk and seek the advice from people she trusted. Everything else is a distraction, and ultimately counterproductive to the end-goal. She suggested a very practical way to objectively judge the success rate of auditions, saying:

“What would’ve helped me, that I didn’t do, is to take stock of everyone you audition for, which auditions yield something positive, and which auditions just go nowhere (which is the majority). Start to look at the percentages in each column and see if at least ten percent of your auditions yield something. In hindsight my ratio was much higher than ten percent, which was lucky. Its great and helpful to not expect it to be higher”

Although these women are essentially expressing the same message. I think it is important to include each of their descriptions because self-advocacy is not unfamiliar, and yet it is one of the most difficult concepts to implement. The trick is, there is not a prescribed or correct way for an artist to push and support themselves. They just do it. Maybe the practical approach of documenting audition rates is not appealing, and that is okay. Maybe it takes months of trusted people encouraging and praising a singer before they really hear them, and that is okay too. Auditioning and presenting an authentic representation of themselves as artists brought the singers who I interviewed success early on because they took every audition as an opportunity to show off, sing well, and do what they loved.

CHAPTER THREE

Spirituality

“Music allows us to connect to others in a very spiritual and powerful way. It feels superhuman and beyond yourself.

-Kathy Kelly

Spirituality is the emancipation of control. Spiritual practice instills in an artist an awareness of themselves as a small part of the greater picture. It makes the heavy times more bearable, and encourages continued gratitude for life, as it is. Many of the people I interviewed choose not to ascribe to a single organized religion, but a few credited their ability to continue as a professional singer to the tenets of their Christian faith. No matter the response, observing each person while they grasped for the words to describe the spiritual response that music evokes from them was incredible. Their tone of voice completely changed and their body language shifted, as if they couldn't help but give me a sacred piece of themselves in that moment.

Brenda Harris' described her impactful experience with music, saying:

“You can certainly sing really fabulous music and have no spiritual beliefs at all but there is something about doing this that is super intangible. You're dealing with your subconscious connecting to the audience's subconscious; you're dealing with goose

bumps and electrical impulses, and things that don't have any explanation. Just the act of producing sound is a spiritual event, so I think it is essential to have some kind of belief in the "outside of us" realm in order to allow that to transfer through me to move the audience. And I feel like that's what happened to me when I saw great singers or dancers, like something that was intangible, a lighting bolt or line of electricity that came at me from them, and I don't think it came from nothing. I feel like if I'm doing this right, I'm channeling the dead guys that wrote this music. You feel this thing and you're just like woaaaaahhhh, ok that was it. It has to be called spiritual for lack of a better word, it is certainly nonphysical."

This description brings up a very valid point: it is not necessary to practice a specific religion in order to have a spiritual experience in music. In fact, things often move in the other direction, where one moment is so impactful that the individual seeks out a spiritual practice. But why does that matter? What does "channeling the dead guys" really do for an artist? What I gathered from my interviews is that the instances when a performance connects to some intangible force are the moments that sustain an artist. They take all the stress and preparation and give them meaning, the kind of meaning that comforts them and reminds each artist of their humanity.

Seeking Peace

Spiritual practices also have a practical application because they have the power to center an individual and bring them peace. Bronwen Forbay had a lot to say about using Buddhist meditation to find balance, explaining:

“My sense is that we are put here for a reason and its important to be kind to each other. It is also important to be kind to ourselves. The Love and Kindness meditation is a Buddhist practice which can be incorporated into any religion I believe. The love and kindness mantra, called a metta, goes like this: “May all beings be free from harm. May all beings be free from pain. May all beings be at peace.” And then you turn it around and say it to yourself. “May I be free from harm. May I be free from pain. May I be at peace.” It is amazing what that does to say it out loud when you are having a challenging moment.”

Those challenging moments in the life of a performance career often stem from self-doubt, loneliness, rejection; all of the practical concepts that have already been discussed. Spiritual practices like the mantra Bronwen describes connect to an artist’s overall success because they increase the individual’s overall self-awareness, another topic discussed in the previous chapters, creating a whole, immersive experience in which an artist recognizes both the tangible and intangible components of their artistry.

Control

Believing in a force greater than one individual is yet another factor in the pursuit for success and contentment. Rachael Colman practices Christianity, and attributed much of her ability to maintain a career in professional music to the tenets of her faith. She wholeheartedly believed that she would not have staying in the business if not for Christianity, admitting:

“I would go so far as to say, if you are type A like I am, I don’t know that it is possible for someone like me to continue in music without some sort of faith structure in their life because it will eat you alive.”

Her explanation is rooted in control, or lack thereof. Faith granted her permission to relax her more high-strung tendencies and move forward with strength. Joseph Li very simply explained the role a higher power can play in a person’s own confidence, saying:

“What I love about a higher power is that there is only so much control you can have over your own life. In a sense that’s terrifying, and comforting at the same time. One thing that believing in a higher power gives you is your own sense of pride, and the freedom to decide what exactly you want to take pride in.”

Essentially, not everything lays on the artists’ shoulders alone, and because of that they can choose how much of that weight to dwell on.

Some singers I interviewed would argue that a choice exists whether or not they practice spirituality. One of those singers are Tammy Wilson, who chooses to abstain from organized religion after being raised in the Catholic Church. She describes her thought process directly, saying:

“I would probably say now that on good days, I’m an agnostic, and on bad days an atheist. I still kind of believe in some kind of universal force. I do not believe in a dude with a beard in the sky anymore. That is just something I do not subscribe to. I have no problem with other people having their own faith. It helps them get through a lot, but I’ve actually found more peace in knowing, well not knowing because nobody can KNOW, but accepting. Maybe there is not anything but this, so enjoy this and do good and put

good out into the world. I will be grateful for what I get and share that gratitude with everybody else.”

Those concepts aren’t much different from those of her more traditionally spiritual colleagues, but the difference is she views herself as the source for good in the world. She accepts the responsibility of making choices on her own, and focuses on leading a life as if it has a definite end. Many of the artists I interviewed did not think there was a right or wrong way to approach spirituality for a career in opera. They stressed the importance of developing a context and language in which to express what happens when one creates authentic, impactful art; and that they understand their place in the overall process in order to maintain a healthy perspective.

Artists’ Reactions

Bringing up spirituality in an interview with someone in the arts can get a little awkward. I found that this topic elicited a strong response from everyone I spoke to, whether or not they had some sort of spiritual practice. Many of their explanations were uncannily similar, even when the official title of their belief system varied. Also, whether they thought the experience came from within or a high power, each of these professional artists of varying gender, sexual orientation, age, political beliefs, and upbringing described an ethereal experience in making music. This section of the interviews brought about more questions than answers, but that is ok. The point of discussing and contemplating spirituality is not to find a concrete answer, but to acknowledge that

creating art is a spiritual practice in of itself, however it manifests itself in an individual's own life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Defining Success and Conclusion

“You never do just one thing. There is this persistent idea that success is a ladder where you do one thing after another, but its not. Success does not look the same for everyone, and its not so much a ladder but a hillside. Where you land may not be as high as someone else but you still get a pretty good seat. There is enough room for everyone.”

-Joanie Brittingham

Success is a difficult concept to approach because it is somewhat intangible. One of my goals for each interview was to challenge people to verbalize their own opinions and evaluations of success, instead of listing off the qualifications that they feel like society tells them to say. That resulted in some of the most authentic moments of this process, eliciting a strong emotional reaction from most. The discussion of success was divided into two concepts: an artist’s own personal definition of success, and the qualities that each person thought helped them succeed.

Financial vs. Personal Success

Some people approached success practically, thinking about it in terms of income, and reaching a certain rung on the opera ladder. Others took a moment before answering,

slowly describing a more personal motivation to move forward and pursue a career in opera. There was a clear delineation between financial success and personal success, as Corinne Hayes described, saying:

“Emotionally, success is in the moments of discovery where you find something that is honest and real in your daily work. Practically, paying your bills with work that you love”

Her description seems so simple; just strive for authenticity, and get paid for it.

The phrase “pay your bills” came up frequently but was not discussed much further.

Unfortunately, many people expressed that financial payout in the opera business is not very high. In fact, Kristine McIntyre bluntly stated:

“If you can think of anything else you’d rather be doing, go do it. This is too hard unless it is the only thing you can imagine doing with your life.”

That statement is jarring, and could seem discouraging, but the truth of the matter is, she chose to pursue a career in opera in spite of the financial difficulty. Similar to Corrine’s description of the “moments of discovery”, many other singers I spoke to emphasized an aspect of their day to day creation of art that functions as a sort of intangible payment, which artists use to counteract their income dissatisfaction. The artists were quick to explain that creating art and having a fulfilling career offset the financial disparity that they sometimes felt.

Several individuals described a level of understanding that was only earned after pursuing success for awhile, almost like a badge of honor. Joseph Li gave a particularly poignant definition of success, saying:

“Being comfortable in one’s own skin. I don’t like quoting Harry Potter, but there are some profound things there...you just have to dig for them. Dumbledore says that the happiest man in the world would look in the mirror and see himself exactly he is. And that takes so much self-awareness and time. Having a huge perspective on things that are wonderful about you, things that are just downright awful about you, and being able to reconcile them somehow; that would be my definition of success.”

That is a dramatically different perspective than Corrine Hayes, but it serves to highlight a strong distinction in people’s approach to achieving personal success. On the surface, Joseph Li’s definition has very little to do with opera, and without context, he could be speaking from the perspective of any profession because how he views himself is independent of his career. But, his approach fostered success in opera because it focuses on self-awareness, a key aspect that came up again and again in my interviews. This gave him the ability to healthily evaluate his place in the overall process and maintain a positive outlook amidst adversity. Some people preferred Corinne’s more simple approach of the appreciating everyday moments in their career instead of focusing on introspection. Whether they defined success as being an inward state of being or an outward result of something they achieved/created, the intentionality with which they applied that definition to their lives was what was most important.

Curiosity and Stubbornness

An important distinction between the people I interviewed was what qualities they thought helped them succeed. Two that were frequently brought up together were curiosity and stubbornness. Tammy Wilson mentioned this, saying:

“I think that curiosity, mixed with my ambition, leads to me being prepared and not be too scared to try things.”

Her drive and want to learn pushes her forward and fosters a more outward, result based focus on success. She also allows her direction to make her brave, which is a fantastic way to use a strength to foster success. Similarly, Jamie Barton described a specific mindset that has helped her progress in her career, saying:

“I’ve always been someone with a growth mindset, and my mom was really focused on growth mindset versus closed mindset. I’m not the kind of person that believes things are just how they are. I’m the kind of person who believes that things can be different. I can work to learn an opera in a new language, I can work to get out of the place where I grew up, I can work to achieve whatever is put in front of me. It just requires a lot of work.”

The term “growth mindset” is so empowering. It allows us to understand the engine behind her success, and Tammy Wilson’s. They chose to seek out training and opportunity, beyond what was required of them, and relentlessly pursued their goals. I think Robert Best, baritone and teacher, described it best when he said:

“My most successful students have a very strong work ethic, they’re self motivating, and can see their path clearly. They have an innate sense of curiosity, and they spend their time efficiently.”

Being a Good Colleague

Discussing what makes an opera professional successful can be deceptive because it looks relatively simple on paper, but is hard to execute in real life. Luckily, several singers were able to give practical advice that makes the picture of the driven, balanced, successful singer more attainable. One thing that came up quite often was just being a good colleague. Brenda Harris accredited much of her career to the presence she has in the rehearsal room, explaining:

“I am not trouble, and I do not make my problems other people’s problems. If I screw up, I own that. I do not make excuses. Also, I have a great sense of humor. Finding the fun in rehearsal is crucial.”

Being a good human seems obvious but it gets lost in the process. The trouble is trying to find the balance between a personal and professional connection in a business where the line is often blurred. Susan Stone Li gave a simple explanation of her strategy in navigating this process, saying:

“I think networking is so important. I’m a really great networker in the sense that I can talk to anybody about anything for a relatively short period of time and make people comfortable, but I can also do that in a way that doesn’t scream “I need something from you”. I see them as a person and not as a rung on a ladder. People want to be treated as humans, and if you don’t do that then they will have no affinity for you and no reason to remember you.”

Networking can be a nightmare, especially for young singers, because who they know is just as important as how well they sing. Like Susan Li explains, singers should just relax,

show genuine interest, and allow authenticity to attract people to want to invest themselves in their success.

Skill Set

One of the most interesting qualities mentioned was a diversified skill set. Kathy Kelly described how this contributed to her career, saying:

“It was an advantage to be interested in a lot of different things (opera, coaching, orchestra), and to actually be really fired up about each of them. I could always find a niche and it solidified my usefulness.”

Her curiosity cast a wide net within the context of classical music, and this gave her a more thorough understanding of opera, increasing both her versatility and her musicianship. Pushing outside of the scope of music and maintaining diversified interests in general helps one function as a complete artist. Bronwen Forbay described how an interest in yoga and meditation allowed her to appreciate the perspective of others, saying:

“Because I respect the fact that I do not always know what you are going through, I am not going to overreact in a situation, I am going to pause. I’ll give it a moment and I’ll breath and look for a resolution because you are a person. I think it has helped me in my career because often I’ve been invited back to do things and I have a network of people that I would consider friends that came out of a good work relationship. How you deal with conflict makes a huge difference professionally.”

As discussed in a previous chapter, opportunities to retreat from the everyday realities of a career or studies are a necessary catharsis. It is important to note that what someone does specifically doesn't matter. The point is not to acquire skills that directly apply to singing or performing. Take up bird watching, or crocheting, or drag racing...anything that brings fulfillment and happiness outside of music. Being a happy, fulfilled person goes a long way in exuding a vibe that people want to take an interest in and hire.

The Measuring Stick

The final impression I took from the interviews is that success in the opera business can be attained at any level. A young, working singer often carries an implied measuring stick that they use to measure their progress and success in comparison to others: get a Masters and then get into a Young Artist program within 2 years, start winning big competitions before the age of 30 and be moving up into A-B level houses before 35 (or some variation of this). My biggest takeaway from discussing success with the people who have all already gone through that period is that the path is not linear. Kathy Kelly expressed this beautifully, saying:

“There is a hierarchy of success in place in our business that ignores the idea of identifying where every individual can best be practicing their art, but really every artist at every level is important.”

Singing at the Met is not a requirement to be a respected and sought after artist. An artist does not even have to be a singer, exclusively. When one really understands this, it is

incredibly invigorating because suddenly the only person who gets to decide how successful they are is the artist themselves.

Conclusion

Writing this thesis was a deeply personal process for me. As the project began, I thought about the practical aspect of what I was doing, of how helpful it would be to have discussed habits and career longevity with people who are actually out in the business right now. How great, I thought, that I will be able to understand what it really takes to make it. Funny enough, what I was actually able to understand was that personal happiness and sustainability are extremely valid factors in making life decisions. I watched people get lost in what it feels like to dive into a role and fall in love with practicing. I cringed when singers confessed what frequent traveling does to their marriages and families. I spent hour after hour experiencing snapshots of different lives in the opera business, and came out the other end a different person. Through all of this, I thought that the specialty of opera is what makes singers in the business extraordinary. The talent and discipline required to execute this niche form of art felt like a badge of honor, as if achieving greatness in this industry could make me happy, just because it was something that others could not do. What I came to realize was that every single artist I spoke to was extraordinary because of their process and their passion for creating fulfilling art, not the notoriety it brought them. In the end, I hope I've created something that artists can read and recognize parts of themselves in, even if it is in the hard truths, using the information to move forward in a way that is authentically for them, just as I have.

