

Leanne Rubinstein
Profile

Attempting to find success in vocal performance is an extremely difficult feat; being in the middle of a gender transition, however, brings an entirely new obstacle to the table.

Baritone Elizabeth Healy is a second-year student the University of Colorado at Boulder from Arvada, Colorado pursuing her bachelor of music degree in vocal performance as a transgender classical singer.

She has studied music professionally since the age of six through private voice lessons, participation in the Colorado Children's Chorale, attendance at the Denver School of the Arts and roles in local opera productions.

Though initially interested in musical theatre, Healy found her voice is better suited for classical performance.

"I got asked to perform with Central City Opera in "Carmen" in about sixth grade, and then the very next year I got a lead in their production in "Turn of the Screw". Ever since then I've been like ... opera!" Healy said with jazz hands.

Healy has portrayed a number of smaller roles in operatic productions including "Billy Budd" and "I Am Harvey Milk," though her crowning roles were her portrayal of Miles in "Turn of the Screw" and Amahl in "Amahl and the Night Visitors".

Healy began her transition from male to female in 2017 confidently, unbothered by the knowledge that because her voice can never rise, she will continue to sing baritone roles.

"When it comes to roles, I don't care who they are. You've given me a name, you've given me a character. I'm not going to try to gender-bend characters, especially when it wouldn't make sense thematically in the story," she said. "As long as you're not making me take my shirt off onstage, I'll have no problem."

In fact, Healy expressed her preference toward baritone roles in most shows, explaining that getting to be the villain can be much more fun.

As she continues to grow into her feminine identity, these roles begin to contrast more heavily with her presence onstage.

Brandon Padgett, a second-year master of music in vocal performance and one of Healy's studio classmates at CU Boulder, argued that this can be true for any role taken on by a performer.

"Recently, Elizabeth performed 'Javert's Suicide' in our studio class. Her ability to delve into such a tortured character when her true personality is nothing like Javert was remarkable; Elizabeth as a person is more sensitive, kind, and concerned. But one's aural identity and personal self is seldom a complete match."

Jeremy Reger, an assistant professor of vocal coaching in the School of Music, has had substantial opportunity to work with Healy in opera chorus situations with both Central City Opera and CU's Eklund Opera.

"I think her openness to embrace characters of various genders, and her unique perspective on the human condition with regards to gender, makes her artistic voice even stronger and more compelling. As a teacher, I appreciate her contribution to all types of repertoire," he said.

Chorus roles in productions, however, pose a bigger challenge to Healy.

"A big problem in (CU's) opera last year was that we didn't have as many baritones and tenors as sopranos and altos, so when we came across scenes with couples dances and stuff they would put me in a suit since I was already singing with the guys," she said.

Reger acknowledged the opera company's occasional insensitivity due to their inexperience with situations like Healy's.

"Liz's presence has made me aware of a few rehearsal issues that I have taken for granted, and which I have worked to remedy. For example, it is common in chorus rehearsal to ask for the men to sing, or the women to sing instead of specifying voice type (Soprano, alto, tenor, bass). Though Liz never asked about this, I found this gender-based terminology is no longer appropriate in today's culture," he said.

Outside the university, Healy has found some environments to be less accommodating. She said she has been advised by professors when working with bigger opera companies to "detonate" herself, which she explained to mean using the name she was given at birth, whether that be in auditions or in programs.

This is a decision she also must enact with her family, as she was raised traditionally Catholic. Healy often uses her birth name in programs even with the university for fear of her family being in attendance and finding out about her transition.

The only member of her family who knows is her mother, after one of Healy's grade school choir teachers mistakenly listed her as Elizabeth in a program.

"It's hard knowing that if I were to move forward and start taking hormones, I basically have a six-month timer before I can't really hide the changes anymore and have to cut myself completely from family. Starting hormones is everything to me, but so is my family," Healy said.

Despite this, Elizabeth Healy is proud of the woman she has and continues to become, and she has no regrets in regard to her decisions.

"It's always been my philosophy that you're given a set of cards and you can either play them or hold them. I chose to play them," she said.

Sources:

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