

Could Singing in a Young Artist Program Help You Succeed in the Met's National Council Auditions?

photo by Marty Sohl/Metropolitan Opera



Metropolitan Opera's 2011 National Council Audition winners (L to R): Michelle Johnson, Philippe Sly, Joseph Lim, Ryan Speedo Green, and Joseph Barron

BY GREG WAXBERG

CS catches up with the five recent winners of the 2011 Met National Council Auditions to discuss how their YAP participation played in to their recent success in one of the most coveted wins. Read what they feel made the difference here.

While no singular factor is responsible for a singer winning the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, a glance at the biographies of the five singers who won this year reveals a common denominator: Young Artist Programs (YAPs) and summer festivals. *Classical Singer* spoke with the winners to determine if these programs helped them win, or if they feel that they acquired the necessary skills from other sources.

Bass-baritone Joseph Barron has participated in four programs—those operated by Opera North (summer 2007), Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (summer 2008), Santa Fe Opera (summer 2009), and Glimmerglass Opera (summer 2010). He received his bachelor of music degree from Oberlin Conservatory of Music and is studying for his master of music degree at the Curtis Institute of Music.

“I give most of the credit to my graduate work at Curtis,” Barron says. “Their program is strict, and I have learned invaluable language and expression skills, as well as the necessary technical understanding of my voice.”

The YAPs, however, were invaluable in their own ways. “Those programs were fantastic stepping stones,” he says. “You get a taste of *real* work without losing the sense that the programs are still helping young artists to develop. Working alongside professional singers like Natalie Dessay, Paul Groves, and Christine Brewer is so helpful because they share their insights into the business of singing, which is not really possible in an academic situation.”

When asked how YAPs specifically helped him succeed in the Met competition, Barron immediately thinks of size. “Santa Fe’s and Glimmerglass’ large stages were helpful because you learn to be comfortable and to project to a bigger theater—good training for a 4,000-seat house like the Met,” he points out. “Plus, because each Young Artist Program means that you are working with new coaches and directors, you learn about yourself as a singer when you are in a new environment. When I got to the Met, I

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was used to working with different coaches and conductors, which facilitated the rehearsal process.”

Interestingly, speaking of the Met’s rehearsal process, Barron felt incredibly prepared for the finals, comparing what he experienced with the behind-the-scenes perspective provided by the film *The Audition*. “The Met competition *was* very stressful, in a positive way—standing on such a big stage and singing for so many important people—but I wasn’t as nervous as I thought I could be,” he recalls. “I felt

very confident in the finals, even more than in the semi-finals, for which there isn’t as much preparation. I think my confidence was a result of the training at Curtis, the training at Oberlin Conservatory, and these Young Artist Programs.”

A resident artist at Opera Colorado, **bass-baritone Ryan Speedo Green** received a master of music degree from Florida State University, where he credits voice teacher David Okerlund for nurturing his vocal skills and selecting the

arias that proved successful in the Met competition.

Green’s role with Opera Colorado was Colline in *La bohème*—which happened to be his first major role for anyone. Prior to Opera Colorado, he had sung only in school theaters with a few hundred seats. At Opera Colorado, he also sang in patron concerts and outreach events.

“Their Young Artist Program enabled me to develop stage presence and acting skills and gain experience performing in an opera house that seats about 2,400 people. Colline is no small role, so I learned how to prepare,” Green says. Compared with college, where preparation can take months, *Bohème* received one week of staging rehearsals. That additional pressure instilled more confidence in him.

Plus, he feels he had a distinct advantage in the Met competition—Green was used to singing in the Ellie Caulkins Opera House, where the Rocky Mountain Region district and regional auditions

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took place. "I knew my voice in the house and I knew the kind of singing that was needed to be heard, safely," he says.

Thanks to his Young Artist Program, Green was able to make leaps and bounds as an actor. In the past, at other auditions, he had been told that he has a beautiful voice, yet stayed in the same place while singing. During his time with Opera Colorado, he was urged to act. "Many of the performances are outreach for elementary, middle school, and high school students who don't understand foreign languages. You have to be able to act so that the students can understand the story," he says. Among the interpretive skills he learned at Opera Colorado were speaking the libretto in his own words, not just using the translations, and developing several interpretations for each piece he sang.

"I always thought of myself as a singer, not an actor, but now I realize that those two are hand-in-hand when it comes to opera," Green says. "The Met auditions

"I feel that there's a lost art of 'understanding the true nature of music,' in the sense that it's always going to be different. It's always changing. It's important to feed into that difference and uniqueness and react to it accordingly so that you're participating in that improvisation, instead of sticking to a preset plan . . ."

are about performing, not just singing, and I think my potential to be a mainstage performer at the Met came through."

Soprano Michelle Johnson received her opera training certificate from the Boston University Opera Institute and her bachelor of music degree from the New

England Conservatory of Music. She is currently a candidate for an artist diploma at the Academy of Vocal Arts and has also participated in programs with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Tanglewood, and Music Academy of the West.

"I feel the Young Artist Programs were very helpful with stage presentation,"

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she says. "Through masterclasses and the opportunity to observe and cover principal artists, I was able to [become] the kind of artist I wanted to be."

Baritone Joseph Lim participated in the Santa Barbara-based summer festival Music Academy of the West, which he describes as an intense training program. "For young singers like me, a lesson or a masterclass with Marilyn Horne means so much," he says. "This experience helped me realize how valuable music is to me and it motivated me greatly to keep pursuing the highest ideal of music." Lim also left the academy with "indescribable confidence."

"There is no doubt in my mind that the confidence the Young Artist Program gave me contributed to my having the willpower and confidence to even enter the Met competition, let alone win," says **bass-baritone Philippe Sly**. As a young artist at Canada's Banff Centre Opera

as Theatre program, Sly's first role was Escamillo in *Carmen*. The focus at Banff was acting and improvisation.

"I feel that there's a lost art of 'understanding the true nature of music,' in the sense that it's always going to be different. It's always changing. It's important to feed into that difference and uniqueness and react to it accordingly so that you're participating in that improvisation, instead of sticking to a preset plan," Sly says. He hastens to add that he is not referring to improvisations in the style of jazz but, instead, to being able to feed off the characters and the performance in the moment.

Sly completed his undergraduate degree in voice performance at McGill University's Schulich School of Music, where he learned how it feels to be on stage. "I credit my skills to my voice teacher as well as the amount of time I spent on stage at McGill in major roles like Escamillo, Marcello, and Nick Shadow," he says. "While at McGill, I was

given the opportunity to be my own artist, making my own discoveries and choices while still working within the framework of a composer's oeuvre and a director's vision. One loves to sing when one is free to express and not simply to reproduce."

Thus, the consensus from the five winners is that YAPs and festivals offer environments in which singers gain "real world" experience, sing on larger stages than when they were in school, develop stage presence, become better actors, and feel more confident—all characteristics that served these singers well when they competed on the Met stage.

Greg Waxberg, a writer and magazine editor for The Pingry School, is an award-winning freelance writer specializing in classical music and opera, as well as a program annotator for opera companies. He can be contacted at GregOpera@aol.com. ©



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