

Stage Door Entrance:

How Can Singers Land Engagements with Symphony Orchestras?

BY GREG WAXBERG

Get a glimpse into the obscure world of orchestral work from those who do the hiring.

Flipping through the brochure of nearly any orchestra, the casual observer will see a list of conductors, musical selections, and soloists. However, a singer will see a list of potential opportunities—concerts with vocal music. How are singers chosen for these engagements? Do orchestras hold auditions? Do reviews play a role? What can singers do to become visible to orchestras?

Classical Singer approached several orchestras in a quest to demystify what may appear to be a mysterious process. Aside from the almost universal explanations that music directors and guest conductors have singers in mind, that artist managers are regularly consulted, and that administrators attend concerts and operas across the country, the responses provide a glimpse into the decision making that happens behind closed doors.

Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

According to Director of Artistic Administration Naimah Bilal, the Cincinnati Symphony does not hold auditions for major roles, but the orchestra occasionally auditions singers from regional conservatories for small and less prominent roles. “When we hold auditions, we try to have them in Music Hall, which is rather large,” she says. “It is important that the vocalist is able to fill the space.” Singers are also evaluated on musicianship, vocal beauty, and vocal maturity.

On the topic of reading reviews, Bilal does not fully commit to their effectiveness. “Reviews can provide important and varied perspective for a particular artist on a particular night, but they are not the true measure of an artist’s ability,” she explains. “However, a review of a performance at a major venue with an important conductor—for example, at the Met with

James Levine—carries far more weight than other reviews.”

Dallas Symphony Orchestra

If a conductor does not suggest a specific singer and the artistic administrators do not have someone specific in mind, Vice President of Artistic Operations Mark Melson says they often call agents in New York. “They usually recommend people on their roster, but sometimes mention singers they don’t represent if they know someone who they think would be perfect for the part,” he says. “For small roles, we sometimes consult with artistic directors of opera companies in this region.”

There are no general auditions for the Dallas Symphony, and auditions for a specific singer happen only when the administration cannot find the right singer for a part or if a recommended singer is already in Dallas for another engagement.

Melson also cites YouTube as a good starting point for finding singers. "The higher the quality of the production in which they appear on YouTube—such as a telecast from a major American or European opera company instead of a homemade video from a college production—the more weight we give to it," he says.

Apart from joining the roster of a manager in New York or a major European city and singing well in a YouTube video, Melson says singers can become visible to the orchestra by "being around" when they have to cast small roles. "By 'being around,' I mean singing in local or regional productions so that the people we consult know you. In general, sing well, sing often—so more people will know about you through your opera and concert work or even church jobs—and try to build relationships with agents," he says.

Detroit Symphony Orchestra

In addition to recommendations from

Music Director Leonard Slatkin or the guest conductor, suggestions of singers to appear with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra come from the orchestra's musicians, board members, patrons, and "other friends of the arts in Detroit," according to Director of Public Relations Elizabeth Weigandt. A private audition is held occasionally if a singer is in town and Slatkin's schedule permits.

Houston Symphony

What happens if a conductor suggests the kind of voices that he or she prefers for a certain work? Senior Director of Artistic Planning Aurelie Desmarais offers suggestions based on her knowledge of singers, resulting from a 27-year career in arts administration. "Also, I was trained as a singer, so I have some extra first-hand knowledge of the challenges and qualities required for many of the pieces we program," she says.

Like other administrators, Desmarais often looks for specific singers but also

seeks suggestions from artist managers about who is available and whom they would like the Houston Symphony to consider for various projects. "I tell them what vocal works we are planning and when we will perform them. They suggest singers on their rosters who are available and whom they feel are well suited to sing that repertoire," she says. Auditions are sometimes held for particular roles after the orchestra receives a CD or sound file or if Music Director Hans Graf's schedule allows time to listen to a singer who is in Houston.

When evaluating a singer, the orchestra seeks a combination of excellent vocal training and, preferably, experience singing concert works with an orchestra and singing the piece in question. "We have, on occasion, engaged very talented and promising singers at the very outset of their careers who have very little experience," Desmarais says. She receives a lot of unsolicited material from singers and/or their managers, tries to listen, but

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acknowledges that the volume can be daunting.

"The classical music world is a small one, so positive performance experiences with conductors or other singers who can speak well of your work will go a long way to aid in introducing an unknown singer to me. It can also help in securing representation at an agency—then it is your representative's job to knock on doors," she says.

Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra

For Music Director Edo de Waart, his affiliation with Santa Fe Opera is helpful for finding younger singers. In general, if the singer of initial interest is not available, Vice President and Chief Program Officer Larry Tucker consults a group of artist managers and, if necessary, the orchestra's staff asks their colleagues for a list of available singers. Tucker cites Marilyn Horne and artistic administrators like the Boston Symphony's Tony Fogg and the Met's Jonathan Friend among his

contacts. "We call people we trust and we have faith in their tastes," Tucker says.

The Milwaukee Symphony does not hold open auditions, but a singer can ask his or her manager to contact Tucker and forward him a copy of a live performance. As for reviews, "I do not read them because they don't mean anything to me," he says. "No manager is going to send me a bad review, so those are screened. Plus, reviews only tell part of a story, based on someone's tastes, which might not be my tastes. For me, it's a matter of whom the singer has sung with and where they have been re-engaged. We might make time for a single audition."

On the subject of young singers building their careers, Tucker has two messages. First, it is important to have a manager because that affiliation makes an administrator's life easier. Second, be persistent and focus. "Don't worry if a manager has other singers of your type," he advises. "If you're an artist, it doesn't matter what your range is—

it matters more what is inside of you. Your individual artistry is going to come out, not just the voice. Think about the artistry first and how that fits in to whom you're working with rather than who else is in competition. You can't look at it as a competition. You're an individual."

Mississippi Symphony Orchestra & Lima Symphony Orchestra

"I listen to vocalists every chance I get. I never turn down a singer's request to be heard," says Crafton Beck, music director of both orchestras. When a singer calls either of the orchestras' offices, he finds 15 minutes, a satisfactory place for singing, and an accompanist. "While I do take recommendations from my most trusted colleagues, I ultimately try to depend on my own ears."

San Francisco Symphony

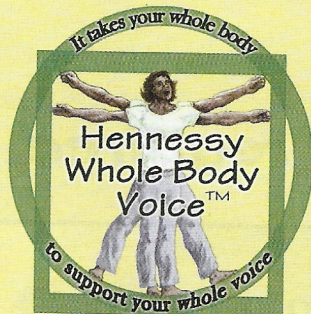
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organizations, and the orchestra also holds selective auditions that are by invitation only and usually arranged through a singer's management.

"We look for a great many things in auditions, chief among them musicality, tone, diction, and the flexibility to sing pieces in a number of different characters, styles, and tempi," says Artistic Administrator Mark Williams. "The repertoire a singer brings to an audition matters as well—while we are happy to hear an opera aria, adding a selection from a concert work or an oratorio makes for the best package. Barring that, a Mozart aria, contemporary piece, or selection in English is very useful for our purposes."

St. Louis Symphony

The starting point for the St. Louis Symphony is which singer they would like to have for a specific piece. Administrators base that preference on which singer has sung a particular part, could sing it, or has sung something similar—and this knowledge stems partly from Music Director David Robertson's experiences conducting at the Met. Another part of the puzzle is ensemble chemistry.

"When you're casting, you want to make sure that the voices blend together well and that you have a cohesive cast—not just 'soprano,' 'tenor,' 'baritone,'" says Bret Dorhout, vice president for artistic administration. Auditions do not often take place.

Dorhout does read reviews. "They draw attention to someone you should keep an eye on," he says. "The hard thing about reviews and recordings is that, ultimately, you're relying on someone else's opinion. When we bring in someone to sing with our orchestra, we should be making the judgment about the voice."

Singers are welcome to send him their materials and managers can contact him, but Dorhout offers one caveat: "Recordings are nice, but there are a lot to listen to," he says. "The challenge with recordings is not necessarily if they have been edited and if the singer actually sounds like [what you hear]—the challenge is judging the size of the voice, particularly if you're casting something

like a quartet. You need voices of similar sizes."

Speaking of recordings, Dorhout sheds light on what may happen in the event of cancellations. When administrators might be forced to take a chance on someone unfamiliar, YouTube is a valuable resource for finding names and checking availability.

Addressing the question of orchestras' general practices for casting singers, Dorhout explains the St. Louis Symphony's rationale. "There are some singers with whom we have relationships, such as Christine Brewer, who grew up in our chorus and lives across the river from us. We often program around her, and she anchors the cast. I know that singers can be frustrated and wonder, 'If you don't audition people regularly and you haven't worked with them, how do you learn new people's voices?' But when an orchestra has only a certain number of concerts each year, do you want to work with people you know or do you want to work with new

people? The reality is that different artists have different perceptions," he says.

Every orchestra has a different approach to finding the singer who will be the perfect fit, but they all agree on several points about what helps to open the door of opportunity: preparing a varied repertoire, performing in a wide array of venues, developing successful working relationships, and seeking responsible management.

Then, when an orchestra hires you, how do you interpret music in a concert setting? A panel of established singers explores the answer in an upcoming issue.

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