



Mind Your Manners: Proper Etiquette Opens Doors

When it comes to being a singer, communication is key. But often some of the most important dialogue is done without accompaniment. Being a polished professional means never missing a chance to make a good impression, whether in person or on paper (and computer screens, too).

BY GREG WAXBERG

The cost of your next coaching session could be the price of a stamp or the time it takes to write a one-paragraph e-mail. Your future with an opera company could hinge on saying “thank you” at the appropriate time. Maybe you need someone’s assistance? Choose the right words. Proper business etiquette is crucial to being a good colleague and securing future opportunities, according to experts who believe it is not enough to simply be a talented artist.

Etiquette extends to e-mails, written notes, letters, phone calls, and speaking appropriately to administrators, conductors, and established singers. Some of the stories and advice shared by opera insiders may surprise you, but they illustrate the impact of good etiquette.

E-mail: Pros

E-mail is a common form of communication for good reason—it is a fantastic medium. It is so pervasive and standard in business that many people expect it. E-mails can be used to acknowledge acts of kindness, exchange information, and ask factual questions. If

time is of the essence, you cannot beat the speed of clicking “Send,” and recipients have the flexibility of both reading and answering at any time of day.

E-mail: Cons

Sending an e-mail is not always the best method, and some people argue that e-mail has severely reduced human interaction in the business world. When sensitive issues arise, if emotions run high or people go back-and-forth without resolving a situation or misunderstanding, e-mail can make matters worse—partially because there is no way for the recipient to know exactly how to interpret the words on the screen.

“E-mail today is abused,” declares Ken Noda, musical assistant to James Levine at the Metropolitan Opera. “People express too much or too little, especially if they don’t write well, and they tend to be overbearing or too familiar in business situations.” Noda prefers phone calls, in-person appointments, or brief, formal, typewritten letters with essential information. He also warns against a potentially damaging use of e-mail: pitting colleagues against each other. In

other words, to use one example, if an administrator makes a decision you do not like, do not contact another administrator who works closely with that person to complain about the situation.

E-mail: Usage Tips

After you decide to contact someone through e-mail, etiquette experts offer advice to make sure the message is taken seriously. “E-mail is still written communication, so there is no excuse for using improper salutations, spelling, or punctuation. Proofread, edit, and make sure you say things correctly,” says Beverly Langford, author of *The Etiquette Edge: The Unspoken Rules for Business Success*, clinical assistant professor of strategic communications at Georgia State University and president of LMA Communications.

While good grammar is one aspect of e-mails, format is equally important, according to Barbara Pachter, author of *When the Little Things Count . . . and They Always Count*. “The fonts used in e-mails are not as much of an issue as people using *different* fonts, different *sizes* of fonts, and different *colors*—those

inconsistencies make e-mails difficult to read," she says. "Everything in an e-mail is basically the same as for a business letter."

E-mail or Pick Up the Phone?

This question is difficult to answer because it really depends on your audience—e-mail is expected by some administrators, but considered improper or informal by others. But there are a few other questions you can ask yourself: How well do you know the person? Is the issue sensitive? Knowing that the individual might be too busy to talk, is the

issue so timely that it warrants a call?

Sarah Billingham, the Met's assistant artistic manager, offers this advice: "I always recommend sending e-mails because of people's busy schedules. It is also easier to forward an e-mail than a voicemail."

Handwritten Notes: The Extra Step

Consider how you would feel if you opened your mail and discovered a note that someone had written to you. That paper or card needed to be selected at a store, with wording tailored for the

occasion. The person took extra time and energy to show that he or she cares about personal communication. Simply put, handwritten notes are noticed because they are so unusual in today's society. Keep that method in mind the next time you are considering whether to send an e-mail or a note. Also, acknowledge the achievements of the person to whom you are writing, in addition to expressing what you are hoping to achieve from the contact.

Let your talent shine




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Thank You Notes: Common Courtesy

If a thank you note is not helpful in the hiring process, what, you might wonder, is the point of sending one? “They are well received, and you establish the perception of being a courteous professional. This courtesy sometimes keeps your name in the mind of a producer,” observes Zurich General Director of the Atlanta Opera Dennis Hanthorn, an opinion shared by other opera administrators. As Kathryn Smith, general director of Madison Opera, puts it, “It doesn’t hurt to send one.”

That said, after auditions are not the only times when you should consider sending thank you notes. In fact, other scenarios practically demand them. “They are *so* important,” Noda says, “and handwritten thank you notes mean the most. A thoughtfully written, beautiful card speaks *volumes* to me. If I spend time coaching a singer or offering a singer advice, and that person sends a thank you note, I will make time for that singer again. When there’s no thank you, by any method, I won’t bother with them again. It’s not about my ego—it’s about good manners, acknowledgement of my time, and reciprocation.”

Since life is unpredictable and singers sometimes need to cancel a production to be able to do something else, a thank you note is only appropriate. For San Diego Opera General and Artistic Director Ian Campbell, a note is expected when the company does you a favor. “It is

astonishing how seldom such messages are received,” he says. “Singers have an obligation to fulfill contracts, and the company has a right to decline any request for a release from a contract. Every release causes problems for the company, which needs to find a suitable replacement—sometimes in a hurry—and even the marketing plan can be compromised. Consequently, if a release is given, the singer should show gratitude by writing a note of thanks.”

Typed Letters: People Still Send Them

As Noda pointed out earlier, a typed letter can be a wonderful way to introduce yourself to someone, especially if your handwriting might be challenging to read. Besides the handwriting aspect, though, several reasons exist to send a typewritten letter: it can make the content seem more important; it might be less likely to be discarded; you can use it to establish trust with the recipient because, for many people, letters are an inherently respectful form of communication; and it can sometimes be easier to obtain a person’s mailing address than e-mail address. If you send a letter, use letterhead so that the page looks professional.

Choosing the Right Words

A way of considering the right words is not to be too shy or too forward. Noda actually speaks from his own experiences of respectfully approaching artists. In one example, when he wanted to work with

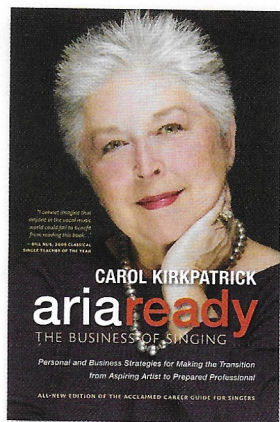
Hildegard Behrens, he wrote her a one-paragraph, typed letter that resulted in being her accompanist for 10 years. In another example, his wording was crucial to avoid a potential insult.

“When Waltraud Meier was singing Marie in *Wozzeck* at the Met, I wanted her to coach two young singers, but I didn’t know if she taught [when she wasn’t singing],” Noda explains. “Asking her to ‘teach’ might offend her because of the implication of aging. I also didn’t want to go backstage to her dressing room because I wanted to give her time to think about it.” What did he do? “I sent her a short, typewritten note to compliment her Marie and ask if she might consider hearing and advising two of our most gifted artists who sing a similar repertory.”

He delivered the letter to the stage door prior to a morning rehearsal. About 15 minutes after the rehearsal ended, Meier showed up at Noda’s office, leading to several sessions in which she worked with the two singers on dramatic interpretation. “They sang better than I ever heard them sing. Both girls made a quantum leap after those sessions,” Noda says.

Learn from Others’ Mistakes

Unfortunately for some singers, their etiquette mistakes left poor impressions with administrators. Fortunately for you, some of those stories are shared here so that you can get a sense of what *not* to do in your career. For example, Smith is not as bothered by the fact that she has received



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e-mails from singers she has never met as she is that “the language in some of those e-mails was reminiscent of a singer texting his or her best friend.”

Campbell was once forced to take action against a singer who apparently did not understand that the panel listening to an audition may talk about the singer while he or she is singing. “A tenor who claimed to be a heldentenor was singing as my colleague and I were noting that he had a good voice that was not suited to what he had chosen. We were talking about what we could ask him to sing next, so that we could hear the true sound which seemed to have genuine potential. Suddenly, he stopped singing. I asked if he were OK, and he responded, somewhat indignantly, that I was not listening. He did not get to sing the second aria,” Campbell relates. “Whatever happens [in an audition],” he advises young singers, “keep singing.”

It is common knowledge in the opera world that Metropolitan Opera Music

Director James Levine is known to his colleagues and fans as “Jimmy.” But that nickname has limits. “Some young artists, upon their arrival at the Met, have [taken the liberty of calling] him ‘Jimmy,’” Noda says. “Even though he walks around with a towel and seems very informal to help singers feel at ease, he is still *Maestro Levine*. Calling him ‘Jimmy’ is just shocking and disrespectful. Or, when he’s coaching singers, they’ll banter with him, and that is so inappropriate. *He* can make the joke. You should just laugh. You’re there to work with him on music.”

The director of the Met’s National Council Auditions, Gayletha Nichols, warns against the bad sounds of silence. “When singers receive an inquiry or an offer from someone in the business, they should respond the same day—even if the answer is, ‘Thank you, and I will get back to you about this within the next two days.’ There needs to be an immediate acknowledgement.” Nichols

also recommends that, to project the image of being an artist rather than a student, one should avoid answering a question with “My teacher says . . .” It is professional to speak for yourself.

If nothing else, some of the different opinions presented here prove that you have to know your audience when communicating. Be organized in your communications and know exactly what you want to tell and ask people. The bottom line is that showing you care; showing that you respect people’s time, positions, and opinions; and demonstrating your professionalism and courtesy at all times are the best ways to be a valued and sought-after singer.

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