

# Continuing Education *to the Nth Degree*

BY GREG WAXBERG

*What kind of educational background do those hiring singers look for? And what kind of education should singers seek out? Administrators and singers share their experiences to answer these questions and more.*

Nobody would assume that singers who are trying to determine their post-high school education know for certain which direction to take in their careers. Some might intend to only sing, some might want to teach, and others might want to do both. But in any of these cases, what educational background are people who could hire them going to look for? It turns out that the answers are not simple.

For example, opera companies want the best possible voices and personalities for roles they are casting, and degrees are not that important. "It is usually the case that those who win roles have degrees in applied voice," says James Schaeffer, general and artistic director of the Center for Contemporary Opera in New York City. "While I have run across excellent singers who have studied something besides applied music, they are the exception.

"I have heard excellent singers with only a bachelor's and mediocre singers with a doctor of musical arts," he continues. "Most who are cast have at least a master's and usually a DMA.

We are not looking for a particular degree when casting, although singers from several particular conservatories and universities usually seem to be well prepared. Singers should find the best possible training and not select a school just because of a scholarship offer or the promise of a leading role in their annual production. Select a school where you are going to be tested." Schaeffer also advises singers to learn promotion, financial aspects of the business, how to construct a résumé, and how to write letters of introduction.

Degrees tend to be more important for teaching careers and even in that regard, there are contrasting opinions. Violinist Zeljko Pavlovic, owner and director of the Vivaldi Music Academy in Houston, which offers private and group music lessons in all genres for all ages, looks for performance degrees. "A voice teacher should have the aspect of performing," he says. "It's invaluable because we are training performers and get different levels and ages. We prefer master's degrees or higher but, having said that, I can also say that one of my best and most successful teachers has a bachelor's degree—



she loves teaching and has devoted her career to teaching. It comes down to interviews, personality, and professionalism. We want teachers to build well rounded musicians.”

Utah Conservatory in Park City, also offering music lessons for all ages, offers a contrasting view. “We hire both performance majors and education majors, but prefer education majors because, as a school, we are looking for just that—educators,” says Co-Founder and Faculty Director Aaron Mitchell. “We find that education majors are more upbeat about teaching and that their focus and training are more oriented toward the student, while performance majors are more prone to want to have their careers focus on performing and tend to use teaching as a ‘professional filler’ between gigs. Teachers who are motivated by students’ successes, as opposed to their own, have longer, more successful teaching careers. If a teacher values their professional accomplishments in performing, why

would they be thrilled to come teach every day? If they would rather be performing, the days can be long.”

The conservatory’s co-founder, managing director, and head of the Voice Department, Debra Cook, also observes that education majors tend to have more innate teaching abilities. “They have taken classes in curriculum development based on sequences and creative ways to engage students and introduce new concepts,” she says. “This is somewhat foreign to performance majors, as their core college curricula do not cover educational philosophy and teaching skills. The education majors understand the developmental stages of different ages.

“Sometimes, performance majors come with a bit of a myopic view of teaching, simply repeating the way they were taught in college,” Cook adds. “Our students’ needs and wants require a flexible teacher.”

What about a liberal arts background? Does the conservatory consider it

valuable? “We want well rounded people who study multiple genres and have diverse teaching approaches, which is more common in those who also have liberal arts backgrounds,” Mitchell says. “So, study everything—the more fields of study, the better.”

He also sees voice teachers as doing more than teaching voice, so a broad perspective is helpful. “A good vocal coach becomes, in a way, a life coach. Teaching is not only about proper technique, but the discipline and dedication it takes to produce a product. We take equal pride in students who move to another interest in college as we do if they chose to study music, because the music training helps develop facets of thinking and expression.”

Then there is the example of a school that is most interested in passion for the subject. Jason Asbury, assistant head of school and a music teacher at Saint Ann’s School in Brooklyn Heights, New York, says, “We look for singers who are performers, who understand the

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nuances of the repertoire, who understand language and diction, who appreciate the context in which the repertoire they are singing was written, who have honed their vocal technique, and who understand how to help others to do the same.” Saint Ann’s is open to candidates who have bachelor of arts degrees from liberal arts universities and went on to study voice at the master’s level, as well as candidates who were undergraduates in music schools or conservatories.

Asbury offers a list of what he calls the “transferable skills” of a music education if a singer chooses a different career later in life: collaboration, planning ahead, time management to meet deadlines, and being

able to improvise (when things don’t go according to plan). “These skills are second nature to singers who understand the arc of the rehearsal process, exercise self-discipline to prepare music and to take care of their voices, plan ahead to learn music for various productions during the same time frame, work collaboratively with others to prepare for productions, and appreciate the creative process whether they are premiering a new work or performing an 18th century opera.”

#### A Young Opera Singer Who Also Has an Administrative Job

Mezzo-soprano Jennifer Rivera decided that she wanted to continue singing

while pursuing another of her passions: creating new audiences for opera. Since she has developed an interest in arts administration, she is fortunate to be able to fulfill that desire as the Center for Contemporary Opera’s first-ever director of artistic development. As a regular contributor to the *Huffington Post’s* Arts & Culture section, she wrote in June 2015, “The Center for Contemporary Opera is a particularly good fit for me, since my singing career has allowed me the opportunity to observe firsthand the power contemporary opera has in creating new opera audiences. When a story is told . . . by living composers in a modern idiom in the audience’s native



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CAROLYN GREINER

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history or economics and just continue their voice lessons. In the end, a comprehensive liberal arts education is just as useful at that age as a comprehensive music education, which you can certainly get in graduate school.”

Or, if graduate school is not an option, she suggests acquiring a broad education at a state school, studying languages and piano before beginning undergraduate studies or working while taking voice, language, and piano lessons, to name a few options. Rivera earned a bachelor of music in vocal performance at BU and a master of music in vocal performance at Juilliard and was a member of the Juilliard Opera Center for two years.

During her time at Juilliard, an influential course was “Arts in Education,” a year-long training program for teaching artists, which was followed by the Juilliard Morse Teaching Artist Fellowship during which she spent a semester as a teaching artist in New York City public schools. “This is different than ‘music education,’” Rivera says. “This is artist-based immersive learning. I wish every music student everywhere had access to these courses.

“That course and the fellowship informed my entire philosophy as an artist, taught me a great deal about how to impart musical knowledge to people, had a very positive impact on my artistry, and caused me to become an arts advocate. I am attempting to develop an educational initiative for CCO based on my experiences at Juilliard.”

language, it removes most of the barriers people generally associate with opera.”

Rivera attended Boston University for her undergraduate studies to experience “going to college” as opposed to “going to music school.” She was a voice major, but there was at least one liberal arts requirement each year. “When I give advice to young singers now, I tell them to major in language or art

### A Young Opera Singer Who Also Teaches

Light lyric soprano Carolyn Greiner is elementary music educator for Gulfshore Opera, a regional opera company in Naples, Florida; a choral teacher at Paul Laurence Dunbar Middle School in Fort Myers; a paid chorister and occasional soloist for two local opera companies and churches; and a

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private voice and early piano teacher. She has also been a youth choral conductor for Gulfshore Opera, the Community School of Naples, and the Boys and Girls Club of Naples. For Gulfshore Opera's Outreach, Greiner is writing a curriculum for an after-school program called Harmony Choir for students of varying levels of musical knowledge who need an artistic outlet in their lives; the curriculum covers basic skills such as note reading and understanding rhythms.

Greiner received a bachelor's degree in music performance and music education from the Bower School of Music & the Arts at Florida Gulf Coast University. Why both? "I also wanted to teach so I could pass along my knowledge to others," she says. "To create a sustainable life, I knew music education would help me, and it was the best decision I ever could have made. Adding Education to my degree took an extra year, and a lot of classes overlapped, like basic conducting and choral conducting. Some musicians want to perform *or* teach 100 percent of the time. Others—and I'm in this category—want to do both."

Classes in choral conducting are making a big difference for her, but she has also learned how to adjust her style for the grade level. "For elementary and middle school students, conducting is based on facial expressions and physicality," Greiner says. "You often must feed students words with your mouth and make sure that basics like word memorization are covered. At the high school and college levels, you can add another level of artistry and musical interpretation in your conducting gestures because students tend to be more capable in terms of memorization and have prior experience."

Perhaps most helpful for rising singers who are considering stepping into the classroom, Greiner offers this perspective: "College programs are wonderful preparation for teaching, but very theoretical," she says. "You can't practice teaching until you're in the classroom, so make that leap. There's a stigma attached to teaching, as if vocalists can't do it, but you just have to make that jump and experience it if you think it could work for you."

Generally, conversations reveal that being well rounded and, in most cases, taking liberal arts courses with music courses will increase your chances of success, regardless of the path you choose to take. As Saint Ann's School's Asbury says, "Music does not exist in a vacuum, so a degree in another discipline will only enrich the connection with the music. The more versatile, creative, adventurous, and entrepreneurial a singer can be, the better."

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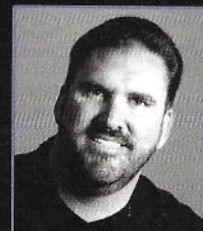
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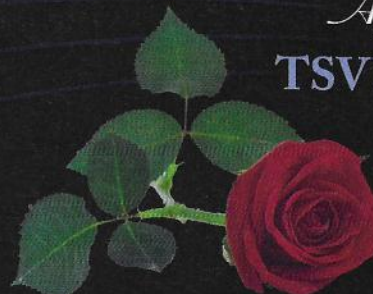
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