

# It's All in Your Head:

Mental Preparation Makes  
a Big Difference for  
Auditions

BY GREG WAXBERG

*Singers share what they do and don't think about before and during an audition, including how they manage nerves when things don't go as planned.*

Perhaps singers should heed Abraham Lincoln's famous quotation, "You can please some of the people some of the time . . . but you can never please all of the people all of the time." His words seem tailor-made for singers, most of whom probably think they need to make everyone in hiring positions like them every time they open their mouths—a mindset that can create a lot of angst during auditions. Yet, a number of younger singers with distinct strategies that have guided them to successful auditions confirm that psychological preparation for an audition is just as important as musical preparation.

By her own admission, lyric soprano Chloé Moore has always been a "people pleaser," trying to make everyone happy. But something wonderful happened when she stopped trying to please everyone who listens to her during auditions: her singing improved because her body relaxed and her voice felt freer. "I had to get away from the mentality of 'I hope they like me' and just give it my all and have fun," she says. "The judges will either like it or not and, eventually, someone will like it."



photo by Rebecca Fay/Metropolitan Opera

Moore, who is beginning her fourth year as a resident artist at the Academy of Vocal Arts (AVA) and has placed first, second, or third in more than 30 competitions over the past five years, further explains why her strategy is beneficial. "A lot of us feel like we want to win everything and get every job. But I think if you work hard, find consistency, hone your craft, believe in yourself, and know what you have to offer, success will happen," she says. "There's a point when you have to say, 'I'm more than just a singer. I'm an artist, and here is my art.' Some people will like it and some won't, but be proud of what you've created."

Similarly, soprano Rebecca Pedersen, a winner of the 2013 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, constantly reminds herself why she sings in the first place: she has a voice and a message to share through music. "It is so easy to get caught up in external things, like traveling to an audition and getting ready to walk on stage," she says, "but I have to let all of that go. My goal in the Met auditions was to touch one person. If I touched one person out of those 4,000 people, that was enough." And she

wholeheartedly believes that singing is a mind game.

"Singers talk about how well they perform in lessons and always get annoyed about their mistakes in performance because they weren't making those mistakes in their lessons," she observes. "Those mistakes are probably caused by nerves, so you have to calm yourself before going on stage for an audition. Start relaxing an hour beforehand. You can't calm yourself and perform at the same time. You have to be thinking about the words, context, emotion, and technique at that point, not about nerves. Learn to tell yourself you're OK."

One way to be calm is to do what second-year AVA resident artist Dominick Chenes tries to do on the day of an audition: be quiet, especially during travel time. Already the recipient of both second prize in the 2013 Gerda Lissner Foundation International Vocal Competition and a grant from the Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation International Vocal Competition in 2013, the tenor focuses on what he calls "getting in the zone"—thinking about his arias and how he will portray his characters. "I don't want to be talking

Rebecca Pedersen

Chloé Moore as Mélisande in AVA's production of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, 2012

or listening to people talk, because that might add an unnecessary thought process that will interfere with my preparation," he says.

Focusing on the character also motivates him: "I'm telling a story, and not just going out there to say, 'Hi, I'm a good singer, so hire me.' Otherwise, I feel robotic. This is very personal—you're there for your benefit and to give your best performance, and you want the judges to see that you are at a different level than in the past."

Also speaking about travel time, tenor Jonathan Johnson, who auditioned successfully for the Aspen Music Festival and sang *Candide* for them this summer, habitually plans for extra time to get to an audition. Last December, he was staying with friends in New Jersey who live only six blocks from the Lincoln Tunnel. His bus to Manhattan sat in traffic for ages before even reaching the tunnel, so Johnson, knowing he would be late for the audition, alerted the studio. In the midst of this seeming nightmare, he reminded himself to stay calm and that he would arrive as soon as he could, mentally singing through his arias and thinking about translations. "It was

a great distraction and beneficial for that audition and future auditions," he says.

Though the trip took nearly three hours longer than anticipated, the judges were able to hear Johnson after returning from their break, much to his relief. "I walked into the room reminding myself to breathe, reminding myself that I had done all the work to prepare vocally, and that I wanted to tell a story. I keep it that simple—when I am auditioning, it is a snapshot of who I am and what I do," he says. Johnson got the role.

Confidence got Johnson through that unsettling situation, and he remains certain that, while there is always room to improve, he does as well as possible in any audition. Bass-baritone Thomas Richards, another 2013 National Council Audition winner, mentions confidence as well; if he can perform well in practice, he can perform well anywhere.

"When it comes to high-pressure situations such as the Met auditions, I try not to have expectations. I try not to think about what will happen once I finish singing. The judges, audience, agents, directors, and reporters aren't under my

control. Rather than focus on what I could ultimately gain or lose, I try to achieve my goal of producing a good performance. If I satisfy my own standards, I should feel good whether I win or lose," Richards says.

For singers who have entered or are considering entering the National Council Auditions and feel overwhelmed by the lengthy process, Richards relates that he tried not to think ahead of whatever performance lay directly in front of him. He acknowledges that the competition's many rounds can be intimidating as a whole but, as he progressed, "I found myself looking back at the previous rounds and how unlikely winning seemed until the moment it happened. I thought, 'If it happened then, why can't it happen now?'"

Interestingly, lyric coloratura Sydney Mancasola, a fellow 2013 National Council Audition winner and resident artist at AVA, spent a great deal of time considering which region to enter. At a glance,



photo by Paul Sirochman

that might not seem like such a weighty decision, but she had a compelling reason for choosing Boston instead of Philadelphia. "I wanted to feel like I could walk into the audition bringing with me only what I wanted to show the judges on that day, free of the expectations of my colleagues and coaches in Philadelphia," she explains. "It was important to protect my mental space, because the Met auditions are accompanied by some pretty high stakes. I would perform my best if I felt like no one in the audience had any expectations."

Mancasola strategized about repertoire, choosing arias she sings extremely well (avoiding trap arias, which panelists are supposedly tired of hearing because they hear them so often) that are undeniably suited to her voice. "You have to feel fantastic about all of your choices," she points out, "because you never know what the judges will ask for." She also feels strongly about not being scared to make a mistake. "Otherwise, you can't communicate. I didn't want to focus on being 'perfect'—all the right notes, all the right rhythms, all the traditional artistic choices. I just wanted to be authentically myself and communicate my original thoughts so the audience and panel could hear my artistic point of view."

What about the other people in the room, the audition judges? How do they think singers should prepare mentally for auditions? Two heads of opera companies who are former singers and have heard *thousands* of auditions over the years, Des Moines Metro

Opera Artistic Director Michael Egel and Fort Worth Opera General Director Darren K. Woods, share their advice. The first thing Egel advises is to make sure the entire process feels routine and is not left to chance. Take advantage of opportunities to engage in mock auditions.

"That might feel trite and unnecessary, but knowing how you feel in and react to various situations is important. You need to be comfortable with any scenario, including how to interact with the panel," he says. "People who don't know you can tell you how you come across to a stranger." Speaking from experience, Egel warns about projecting negative thoughts onto the panel; when he was a singer in his first auditions, he was convinced that a panelist was not listening or was acting gruff, and those negative projections unsettled him until he learned to ignore the feeling.

Egel relates that his voice teacher had wanted him to always be performing. "The best auditions are sung by people who are comfortable with the piece and with the audition process. They feel the spontaneity to create and explore. It should be easy to deal with annoying issues so that you can focus on performance," he says. His third major point is to be open to the evolution of both your list of arias and the piece you choose as your first. The aria you choose as an opener today might not be the aria you should select as your opener years from now. And ask for feedback to make sure your package represents your voice type.

Woods urges singers to sing only those pieces that require a technical skill that you can achieve most of the time in the studio, and sing only those arias you know well. "Even if you're auditioning for a specific role, you should not learn an aria just to sing it, because you probably will not sing it as well as someone who has lived with it. If the aria is already in your package, by all means use it," he says. This advice prompts the question of whether Woods ever expects a singer to know the role for which he or she is auditioning. "I never expect them to know the role. It is not necessary to know it or even audition with it. Generally, we are casting two to three years in the future, so they have plenty of time to learn it."

Speaking about aria packages, Woods recommends tailoring your arias to the repertory of the house where you audition for principal roles, and he uses his own theater as an example. "Fort Worth Opera is known for doing new work alongside traditional pieces. An artist should come to one of our auditions with a 20th or 21st century aria," he says.

He also shares some general tips to put your mind at ease as much as possible: it is just an audition, not something gravely serious; you will not be everyone's type; and judges are on the singers' side and want them to do well. Ultimately, as Woods and a number of other singers emphasize, your mission in an audition is not necessarily to get a job or win an award, but to demonstrate the gifts and tools you possess at that moment.

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