

To Sing a Role *or* Not to Sing a Role

That Is the Question

BY GREG WAXBERG

Saying “yes” to an offer to sing a role can seem like a no brainer. And yet, saying “yes” can sometimes be detrimental to both voice and career. Singers, YAP directors, and managers weigh in on how to determine if a role is right for your voice.

What happened when 23-year-old lyric soprano Cherity Koepke was offered the chance to sing Norma? “I accepted, because I was dazzled by the chance to sing that unbelievable music,” she relates, “but I didn’t make it through rehearsals. I was sick and stressed out and I couldn’t cope, vocally. I pulled out of the production, which was worse than if I had just said no.”

And what happened when Sheri Greenawald, well into her singing career, was offered the chance to sing the soprano part in *Missa Solemnis* with Daniel Barenboim? “I would have had about two days to learn it, which was not impossible—but, having sung the Ninth, I knew how awkward the vocal writing really was,” she recalls. “Rather than embarrass myself, I turned down a very high-profile gig.”

Both women are now heads of training programs for young singers—Koepke as director of education and community programs and the Opera Colorado Young Artists, and Greenawald as artistic director of San Francisco Opera’s Merola Opera Program. Along with voice teachers, artist managers, and vocal department heads at colleges and universities, Young Artist Program (YAP) directors are in the best position to offer singers guidance about whether or not to sing a role. In fact, this question is one of the most important decisions that singers will face during their careers (with the understanding that some singers do not have the luxury of turning down opportunities due to income). Singing appropriate repertoire will ensure vocal longevity, leave a positive impression, and build a singer’s reputation.

Research, Research, Research

Before you sing a note, research can help determine if you should bother with the role at all. “Familiarize yourself with famous singers of the past of your voice type,” says Salvatore



Champagne, director of the Division of Vocal Studies and associate professor of singing in the Conservatory of Music at Oberlin College. “Study their careers and find out what roles they were singing at certain points in their development.” Koepke also advocates for the perspective that only history can provide. “Singers in the first half of the 20th century made smart choices and enjoyed amazing careers. They were vocally healthy because they produced sound consistently and safely,” she says.

Taking a more technical approach, Michael Benchetrit in the vocal division of Columbia Artists Management also recommends studying scores and recordings, each as needed. “Looking at a vocal score is helpful for tessitura, but the score doesn’t tell you how thick the orchestration is. For that, you should consult an orchestral score or live recordings, because studio recordings can be altered to make things sound a certain way,” he says.

When accepting his first major role, Don Alfonso in *Così fan tutte*, 22-year-old bass-baritone Brian Mextorf did his homework. He not only considered his physical and vocal comfort and took his environment at Oberlin into account, but he also studied the orchestration. “The orchestration is light . . . and many different voices sing the role,” Mextorf says. “I watched and listened to a number of recordings and sought counsel from my team of more knowledgeable and experienced musicians.”

Factors to Consider for a Particular Production

While Mextorf describes a decision that he made in the context of a college production, singers will need to say yes or no to professional productions. In those cases, criteria include the cast, the size of the theater and its acoustics, the conductor, the orchestra, and the director. Casting might be a question of how your voice blends with the other singers’ voice types.

Theater size can make a difference for how much you need to project, especially where acoustics are concerned—in some cases, it could be easier to sing in a large house with excellent acoustics than to strain your voice in a smaller house with poor acoustics.

The level of the conductor and orchestra should not be overlooked. “A more experienced conductor and orchestra can offer more sensitivity to singers’ needs,” Champagne observes. As far as directors are concerned, Greenawald warns that “some directors may want a singer to *look* a certain way, but body types don’t always come with the requisite voices for the parts, so be careful not to let your desperation to have a role to sing bring you to a wrong decision to sing out of Fach.”

If the production is several years in the future, “make up your mind before accepting, but the luxury of time can help you avoid a mistake,” Benchetrit says. “If,

after several months of study, you realize the role is wrong for you, it’s time to bow out, as long as you give a valid reason. If it’s an extremely demanding role, you will be forgiven.”

Excerpts versus Complete Roles

Some singers have tried to judge roles by singing arias or duets from those operas but, according to Greenawald, that tactic can backfire. “Were the singers to explore the entire role, they could probably conclude that it would not be for them,” she says. “One of the most continually misassigned arias is ‘Ain’t It a Pretty Night?’ from *Susannah*. I think teachers assign it because it’s in English and only goes to a B, but they don’t consider the fact that *Susannah* has a huge orchestra. So many singers have no clue that they would not be heard if they sang the entire role.”

Physical Impact

One of the upsides of singing an excerpt is that you can get an excellent sense of a role’s physical demands. “Be honest about whether singing a particular aria or duet is wearing you out,” Greenawald says. “If, when really having learned a piece of music, anything but your legs and midsection is tired, you’re probably singing things too difficult for your technique or you’re singing out of Fach.”

All singers need to be aware of stamina. For example, Koepke has observed that tenors tend to gravitate toward heavier, romantic Italian roles too early in their careers, instead of waiting until their mid 30s or 40s. “Early on, their bodies are not ready for the physical demands. The romantic repertoire has long passages, so you need to be able to maintain stamina,” she says.

Mextorf is keenly aware of the physical aspects of singing in relation to age, so he has chosen to *not* make new roles a



Oratorio Society of New York

37th Annual Solo Competition

over \$18,000 in cash prizes

Vocal Competition **April 2013, New York**

Eligibility **Oratorio singers to age 40**

Application Deadline **February 1, 2013**

Applications are available on our web site
www.oratoriosocietyofny.org

Enter on-line or mail all correspondence to:

Oratorio Society of New York

1440 Broadway, 23rd Floor, New York, NY 10018
Attention: Janet Plucknett, Competition Chairman
www.oratoriosocietyofny.org

2011-2012
Season of the Arts
at Shorter

The arts, whether visual, musical, or verbal, express the core of one's beliefs about life. Shorter has, throughout her history, given emphasis to the aesthetic for all of the curriculum whether in music drama, or visual arts.

The School of Fine and Performing Arts at Shorter University brings students' talents center stage, allowing them to shine through countless performance opportunities. They learn from our internationally recognized faculty who provide personal attention in a conservatory-style setting.

Undergraduate degree programs:
Performance (voice, piano and organ),
Piano Pedagogy, Music Education,
Church Music, Instrumental Music,
Musical Theatre & Visual Arts

SHORTER
UNIVERSITY

Transforming Lives Through Christ

www.shorter.edu
315 Shorter Ave., Rome, Ga.
706-291-2121 800-868-6980

“... just because you can sing one role does not mean you can sing another. ‘It is a case-by-case basis . . . Some roles fit in one’s voice, but some roles are atypical.’”

priority. “I have no idea where my voice will want to go after five or 10 years,” he says, “so I’m more focused on singing healthily and learning breathing, style, legato, languages, and musical skills rather than building my operatic repertoire. I’m still singing a fair amount of arias and occasional roles when the opportunities arise and learning operas by listening. But I’m solidifying my technique with song repertoire, which allows for a more reasonable range of dynamics.”

Beware of Comparisons

There are at least two tricky situations that you may encounter. One is the case of a category like “Verdi baritone”—just because you can sing one role does not mean you can sing another. “It is a case-by-case basis,” Champagne warns. “Some roles fit in one’s voice, but some roles are atypical.” A second is comparing yourself to other singers of your age. “Your comfort is what’s important—keeping up with trends is dangerous,” Koepke says.

Composers’ Intentions

One comparison that you *do* need to make is whether your vocal skills support the composer’s vision of a piece. “You have to be able to do any piece justice,” Champagne declares. Mextorf has already made one such decision: shelving the Toreador Song for a few years. “The role fits my voice type, but I don’t have the requisite color and weight in my voice to live up to the aria’s expectations. It’s about more than being able to sing the high and low notes, but being comfortable and giving a performance that the audience will want to hear,” he says.

Why Did They Sing That?

Like Koepke’s poor choice about Norma at a young age, other examples serve as lessons for rising singers. “A young tenor with a fairly strong voice offered Fenton’s aria in an audition,” Benchetrit remembers. “That aria is about grace and lightness, but he told me, ‘I like singing it.’ My response was, ‘That doesn’t mean you *should* be singing it.’” In fact, Benchetrit is on the fence about Maria Callas’ decisions to sing roles like Aida, Isolde, and Turandot early in her career, roles that were too big for her voice: “You can use Callas as a cautionary tale or as an example—maybe you want a long career, or maybe you want a five-year career full of excitement.”

Artist manager Matthew Laifer describes the case of a lyric tenor who won the Pavarotti competition in 1985 while still in his early 20s. Two years later, he sang the taxing role of Enzo in *La gioconda* in a very large venue because, Laifer was told, nobody else was available and this particular tenor was interested. In 1989, still not 30, the tenor covered Turiddu in

Cavalleria rusticana. As of the early 1990s, “he sang [with a horrible wobble],” Laifer laments. “So many young singers have never heard of this tenor, yet he had one of the most beautiful voices to ever come along. That’s a perfect example of wrong repertoire choices and what can happen as a result.”

Young Singers’ Success Stories

A few success stories illustrate younger singers’ smart decisions with roles. Two years after Koepke’s bad experience with Norma, she had a wonderful time singing Gretel because the music fit her voice. Amy Maples offers a success story about Susannah, which she sang in her early 20s.

“Given my age and the fact that I was, and still am, a light soprano, the role would not have ordinarily been appropriate. However, I was going to be performing in a very small theater with a reduced orchestra and smaller chorus. I weighed the possible vocal risks against what I would gain personally and I decided that the stage experience was worth the small amount of vocal risk. I am glad I sang Susannah—although I may not sing it again, or for a long time,” she says.

Turandot, Leonore, Ariadne, and Vanessa are some of the heavier roles that 33-year-old soprano Marcy Stonikas has championed. “My voice can fill a room and soar over a large orchestra, I have a good technique from studying with great teachers, and I can sing for a long period of time without feeling any strain on my voice,” she explains. “In the case of Turandot, it’s only about 20 minutes of singing, and the arias did not fatigue me in the audition.”

Confidence Will Come

You will develop confidence about saying yes or no when you do the research, place reputation over money, and see the results of good decisions. As Benchetrit puts it, “Saying no to a role for the right reasons makes you look smarter. Trust the process.” He also shares an anecdote about Leonie Rysanek, who received numerous requests to sing Isolde; she struggled for years with her decision and ultimately said no. According to Benchetrit, her reasoning was that “I would rather have people say ‘What a shame that Leonie Rysanek did not sing Isolde’ instead of ‘What a shame—she thought she could sing Isolde.’”

Note: To assist with researching a role, Greenawald recommends the Opera Production handbooks by Quaintance Eaton.

Greg Waxberg, a writer and magazine editor for The Pingry School, is an award-winning freelance writer. He can be contacted at GregOpera@aol.com. ©