

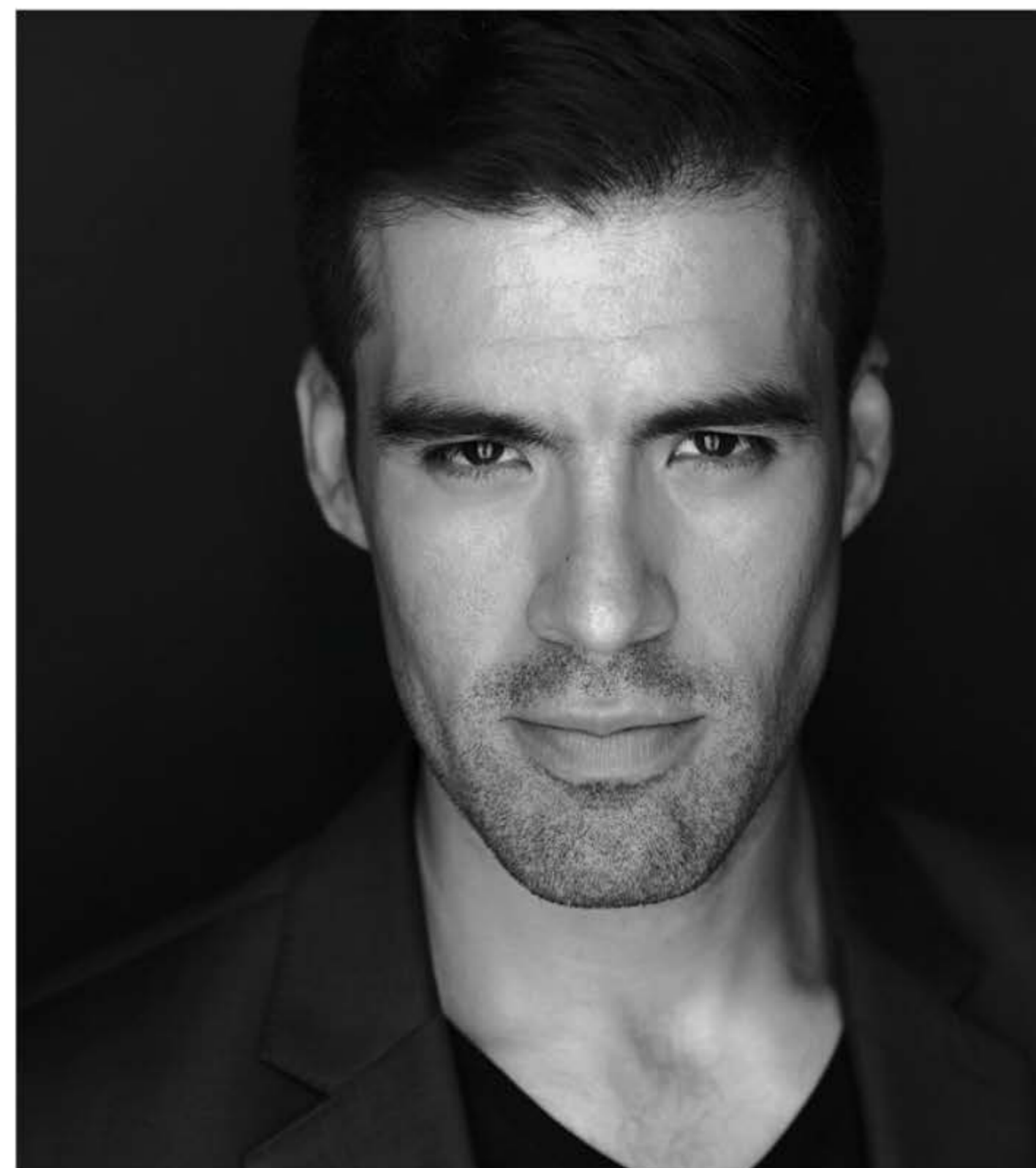
Luis Orozco

The Artist's Dilemma

By Fatima Mejia

After sitting in the audience to watch Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème* for the first time, Luis Orozco left the theater in love with opera. The performance follows a poor Parisian seamstress and her friends, a group of young bohemian artists. One of Orozco's favorite scenes takes place during a makeshift dinner party, where meager food is shared among the group while they pretend they're hosting a lavish party. "They're making the best out of a troubled situation by relying on their friendship and their love of making art," he says. "It's tragic, but it's a show with so much heart."

Currently an assistant professor of music, Orozco didn't grow up wanting to be an opera singer. Feeling somewhat directionless in college, he took a singing class for non-majors with Christopher Meerdink at Texas University. "He was the one who first heard me sing and said, 'You know what, what do you know about opera?'" It was Meerdink's mentorship that introduced Orozco to the genre and inspired him to pursue it professionally. "I fell in love with the art form," Orozco says. "I had that passion where I couldn't get enough of it."



Assistant Professor
School of Music
Voice and Opera

Once he discovered his love for opera, Orozco faced the difficulties of a career consisting of worldwide performances and freelance work. "It can bring a lot of self-doubt and financial hardship," Orozco says. He explains that singers in the U.S. mainly work as independent contractors, traveling between opera houses to secure a full season of work. On one hand, the travel can be incredible; Orozco has performed with the Nashville Opera as Marcello, a nearly destitute painter in *La Bohème*, and toured Russia as part of a concert honoring Leonard Bernstein. At the same time, these roles are competitive, and he shares how unnerving it can be when not every audition results in a role. "It's like getting hired and fired every year, all of the time," Orozco says.

To help mitigate the uncertainty of the job market, Orozco emphasizes the importance of controlling as much of the audition process as you can. "They say getting hired in this industry is hard—getting rehired is even harder," Orozco explains. While raw talent can help someone land a job, he says getting invited for another season comes down to how good of a colleague you can be. Whether it's knowing

your music or practicing enough for rehearsal, Orozco tells his students that preparation is crucial to keeping your spot. "If you're not prepared, they're on the phone calling someone else and you're out the door the next day. The industry isn't bleeding money, so they're not going to waste it."

As intimidating as the field of opera can be, its rigorous work culture can reward singers who are dedicated to their work, even if they're not the most technically skilled performer in the room. Beyond talent or luck, the job requires a lot of dedication, organization and business skills to manage yourself. Orozco says he can't predict where students' careers will take them, but he tries to focus on giving them the support that Meerdink gave him. "The best thing I can do is give them advice based on experience and what I've observed with others, and push the students who are hungry for it." Orozco trusts that students who have a deep love and passion for this career will have the dedication required to find success as performers.

Once students land jobs, Orozco believes that one of the most important parts of their career is maintaining connections. In his

course called Opera Theater, the curriculum is focused on performance and acting, but he emphasizes the importance of working as a group. "One of the things I told them on the first day is that we're an ensemble, we're a team, and your responsibility is to everybody else in this room." Developing this mindset before a student graduates is vital to their success. This is in part, Orozco says, because the freelance nature of opera can feel isolating. "The way the industry works, you might be in St. Louis for six weeks away from your family, so your family becomes the people in that room."

"Opera has provided me with the most beautiful friendships and relationships, and I wouldn't have these if it wasn't for this job," Orozco says. Like the passionate artists of *La Bohème*, Orozco says it's the connection and love for this art form that drives artists like him to continue their work, no matter what troubles they find along the way.

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