

Record: 1**Title:** LIFE AFTER THE ASSEMBLY LINE.**Authors:** KENNICOTT, PHILIP**Source:** Opera News. Aug2013, Vol. 78 Issue 2, p30-33. 4p.**Document Type:** Article**Subject Terms:** *MUSIC students
*MUSIC conservatories
*OPERA singers
*SINGERS
*PSYCHOLOGY
*HIGHER education -- Finance
TRAINING of**NAICS/Industry Codes:** 611310 Colleges, Universities, and Professional Schools
611610 Fine Arts Schools**Abstract:** The author discusses the gap between the number of aspiring student musicians studying at conservatories and the number of jobs available in opera, suggesting that schools and teachers are profiting from the tuition paid by students who may not make a living as musicians. The psychology of singers, vocal training for singers, and scholarships are discussed, and the author debates the benefits of small versus large colleges for career development.**Full Text Word Count:** 1889**ISSN:** 0030-3607**Accession Number:** 89130703**Database:** Academic Search Complete**LIFE AFTER THE ASSEMBLY LINE****PHILIP KENNICOTT analyzes the supply-and-demand problems facing today's music schools**

There is a worst-case scenario for a singer who dreams of a big opera career -- failure, after years of study, tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars of investment and the emotional manipulation of unscrupulous teachers and institutions who dangle the prospect of success while cashing the checks of aspiration. With a vast imbalance between the numbers of young people who enter conservatory or university training programs and the limited numbers of jobs that await them in the professional opera world, it can seem that this scenario is an orchestrated plot, an inherent evil of the music-educational complex, which needs warm bodies, tuition money and the naive zeal of young acolytes to keep the system functioning and solvent. The basic logistics of training an opera singer -- the need for conservatories to have a full orchestra at hand, the cost of hiring coaches and teachers, and all of the

ancillary theater, language and drama advisors -- seem designed to mimic the cruelty of the Ayn Rand jungle: a few will flourish at the expense of crushing all the rest.

Those in the business of molding young singers certainly acknowledge the crisis of opportunity for newly minted singers and the harsh job reality they face. And they are well aware that the bad state of the economy over the past five years may be making the situation worse. "I think it has been a problem for a very long time," says Dona D. Vaughn, artistic director of opera programs at the Manhattan School of Music. "The people who succeed are a very small proportion of the people who are coming out of our music schools."

"That's not a new thing," agrees Michael Heaston, director of the Domingo--Cafritz Young Artist Program at Washington National Opera. He adds, "The situation is exacerbated as a result of the economic crisis. We've had more companies close down, more companies reduce seasons." That means experienced singers are snapping up what were once entry-level roles, and entry-level singers are scrabbling for fewer gigs. And as opera companies cut their budgets, aspiring singers bear hidden costs. Some companies, which once set up shop in New York for a week to audition young singers, now expect those singers to travel to them and shoulder the costs (though OPERA America's new National Opera Center is helping to ameliorate this). An enormously expensive profession to enter is only getting more expensive.

But is the system fundamentally flawed? Does it knowingly grind young talent in its maw just to reward a few lucky survivors?

Many professionals say that there are indeed deep problems -- unpromising students lured into false expectations -- just not at the institutions where they teach. Others admit there is a lot of sadness and hurt in the profession but don't see anything particularly exceptional in that. Many professions weed out the less talented and ambitious, and part of life is realizing where your real strengths lie. The most thoughtful professionals acknowledge all of the above, and something else -- that singing is and always will be existentially fraught, full of paradoxical demands and contradictions, requiring irrational sacrifice and steely, hard-nosed pragmatism at the same time, from people who need enormous inner resources yet must rely on the ears and instincts of others to survive and make smart decisions.

"That's why singers are crazy," says Gianna Rolandi, a Chicago-based vocal consultant who just stepped down as head of Lyric Opera's young professional organization, the Ryan Center. "You have to be crazy."

Rolandi worries about the current state of affairs. She sees young singers loaded with student debt and doesn't know how they are going to pay it off. And while the Ryan Center, which nurtures a handful of elite young artists, attracts singers with solid prospects of a career, there are a lot of kids upstream in the training process who will never make it to that level.

"I think the schools put out too many people because they honestly do have to fill quotas," she says. And the larger schools don't necessarily graduate students with the full range of skills they need to succeed. While singers who make it to top-tier postgraduate training programs at the Juilliard School or Curtis

Institute of Music are likely to survive and sing onstage, at many large schools it's easy to get lost in the mix and emerge ill-equipped to make a career.

The critical question, for singers and the people who nurture them, is when to push forward and when to acknowledge that a career onstage may not be viable. But how can one know that? The dilemma, for everyone involved, is the inscrutable, unpredictable and sometimes fickle ground on which every career is based -- the human voice. Even among top vocal teachers, there is disagreement about when it becomes clear that a singer may or may not have a real voice.

This means there is a huge cull of talent as students pass through undergraduate vocal training, enough to raise serious questions about whether it makes sense to offer undergraduate degrees in voice. But advocates of musical education argue two things: some voice types, especially higher, lighter voices, mature early, and students need to be thoroughly trained by their mid-twenties; and a musical performance degree is valuable even if the student doesn't proceed to a musical career.

"Their course of study is a lens through which to see the world," says OPERA America's president, Marc Scorca. "I think singing vocal music and opera are a fine lens through which to see the world. To suggest that there are too many is to suggest that there are too many history or poli-sci majors. That argument doesn't hold up."

The problem at this level is often money. Can a student afford to keep studying and wait to see if the voice develops? The lucky ones, such as the young bass Evan Boyer, who recently sang the First Soldier in Salome in Toronto, proceed seamlessly from undergraduate to graduate-level training to top-tier postgraduate young-artist programs, often with full scholarships. But Boyer says he was prepared to reconsider things if he hadn't been accepted into one of his top three vocal programs -- Curtis, Yale or Juilliard.

"I thought, 'If I don't get into one of these, then maybe this isn't what I was meant to be doing,'" he says. But that doesn't mean he would have quit. "I love to sing, and I hope I wouldn't have stopped if it hadn't worked out quite so well. There is something enormously satisfying about expressing yourself in this way."

If Boyer hadn't managed the transition to graduate-level training at Curtis, he likely would have ended up in a large, messy, talent-rich pool of singers for whom the way to success is more circuitous, complex and capricious. There is a world of day jobs, small gigs at enterprising chamber-opera companies and continuing education with teachers and coaches, sometimes within larger, less elite conservatories and universities, and sometimes independently in the sink-or-swim world of learning through doing.

Pursuing a singing career can be a spiritually exhausting and financially draining existence. Working with a vocal coach and teacher -- essential to learning new repertoire and developing the voice -- can cost hundreds of dollars a week. In a young-artist program, those costs are generally covered. Outside of such a program, the burden falls on the singer. And that burden may continue through his or her

professional lifetime.

"An artist is never fully formed," says Heaston. "To go into a full career path as a singer is to accept that you are living a life of continual education. If they are looking at one or two voice lessons a week, if they have a major role debut coming up, that's very expensive. If you are working with top people, you could spend \$175 an hour for a top voice lesson."

"I don't know a lot of singers who are making a full living from singing," says Philip Shneidman, founder of the Little Opera Theatre of New York, which focuses on intimate productions of neglected and rare repertoire. His company thrives in large part because New York is home to singers who are still building careers role by role, who haven't grown discouraged because they didn't glide effortlessly from undergraduate vocal lessons to star billing on the great stages of the world.

Scorca argues that smaller companies such as Shneidman's are precisely the reason we shouldn't fret too much about the seeming overabundance of young singers.

"The benefit right now to the over-supply of singers and the relative paucity of professional engagements in the established opera world is that these artists are creating their own opera infrastructure," says Scorca, who counts dozens of small companies in New York, Boston, San Francisco and other established musical centers. These companies not only nurture new work and young singers; they present a standing challenge to larger, establishment opera houses to be more adventurous, more rigorously theatrical and more attuned to younger and novice audiences.

This leads to a troubling, but poetic, sense of the larger opera ecosystem -- that it does indeed thrive on the excess zeal of young singers, that their hopes and dreams are indeed a kind of fertilizer for the health of the whole enterprise. But as you talk to people in the field, the one thing that becomes fuzzy and ill defined is the premise of that worst-case scenario, the very idea of failure.

Sally Gaskill is director of the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project, which since 2008 has been trying to get a statistical sense of what people who studied the arts think about the education they received. Her surveys cover all the arts, including music. And the results are surprising. Despite the miserable chances that an aspiring musician will have a successful performance career, most people who studied music don't have negative feelings about their education. More than 90 percent of responding alumni who listed music-performance as their major considered their education to have been excellent or good.

"What the SNAAP data points out is that there are lots and lots of different reasons that people want to get arts degrees, and they ultimately use those skills in different careers," says Gaskill.

This isn't surprising -- nor is it surprising that many musicians who once dreamed of performing now maintain happy and productive careers teaching, or serving in arts administration or fields completely unrelated to the arts.

What is surprising, in a way, is that we -- people who love opera -- worry about the idea of failure so much. Learning to sing well is no different from learning to read Latin, or parse the problems of philosophy, or analyze the political debates of the eighteenth century. Very few people in the broader humanities consider it a failure of the discipline that most philosophy majors aren't sitting in the forum teaching the youth of America the difference between substance and essence. The hard path that all young singers face leads to failure only in the minds of people who define success in a very limited way.

~~~~~

By PHILIP KENNICOTT

PHILIP KENNICOTT is the Pulitzer Prize-winning art and architecture critic of The Washington Post.

---

Copyright of Opera News is the property of Metropolitan Opera Guild Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.