

Pursuing an Operatic Career in America

BY ALISA SUZANNE JORDHEIM

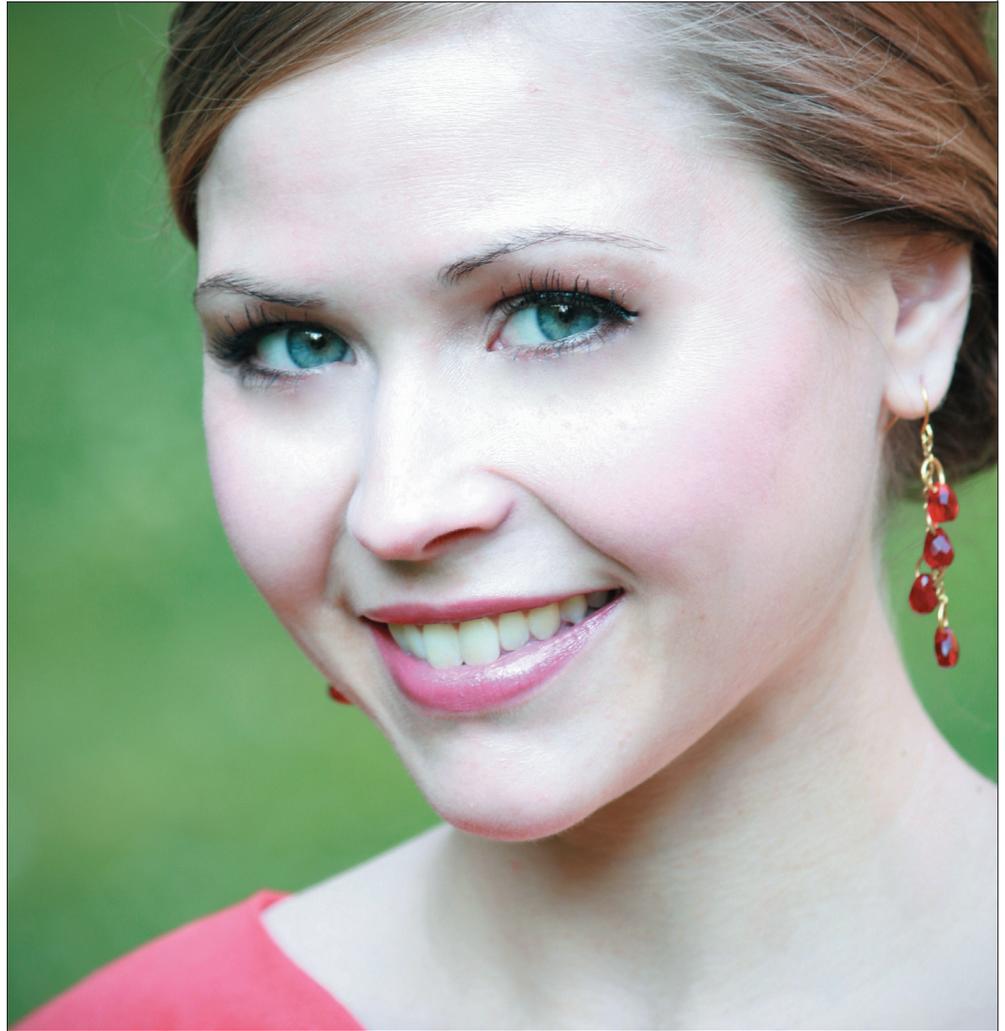
The career path for an opera singer (or for anyone pursuing a career in music performance, for that matter) requires patience, dedication, tireless preparation, and above all, persistence.

The pursuit of an operatic career in America today is vastly different from that undertaken by solo instrumentalists or other stage performers.

While it is possible for many instrumentalists to begin performance study as a child and even launch a performing career during his or her teenage years, such is not possible for an opera singer. For a number of reasons, it is nearly essential that an opera singer study at a university or conservatory before trying to begin a career. First, the operatic voice matures later in a person's life (the peak of one's vocal maturity depends on the voice type and gender), typically in a singer's late 20s or early 30s. Consequently, the technical improvement possible during college years can be tremendous. Second, singers must sing in numerous languages and learn the grammatical structure and pronunciation of each of them. The most commonly sung languages are Italian, French, German, and English, but Spanish, Russian, Czech, Polish, and the Scandinavian languages are surfacing more frequently in performance. Third, collegiate singers need stage time and role experience to prepare them for auditions and professional mainstage work. College productions are a great way to build a résumé and the requisite skills for success on the operatic stage.

Singers have two options when considering the type of institution at which to pursue their education: a traditional four-year college or university, or a conservatory. As the daughter of two music professors at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, I grew up valuing the liberal arts approach to education and took voice lessons and foreign language courses at the university from the time I was in middle school.

However, I also grew to value the focus on one's instrument fostered by the conservatory approach to the education of singers, and I chose to attend universities that housed fine conservatories of music. Whenever I am asked to advise young singers on where to go for schooling, my response remains consistent: for undergraduates, I cannot stress enough



Career Performance Grant and Doctoral Grant recipient Alisa Suzanne Jordheim.

the importance of a well-rounded liberal arts education that shapes a questioning, thoughtful, perceptive, and wondering individual. In addition to providing a strong foundation in music and access to foreign language courses, an education at a four-year school encourages students to explore areas outside their major, exposing them to disciplines in which they may not have otherwise found themselves interested. After completing a well-rounded curriculum at the undergraduate level, a singer may decide to further hone his or her craft in graduate school.

I attended Lawrence University for the first two years of my undergraduate career, and having grown up in that particular college and conservatory environment, I felt the time to focus more specifically on the art of singing came before my graduation. I had studied with Patrice Michaels at Lawrence University since the age of ten — an age that could be considered too

young for many singers. Nevertheless, because I developed early and had an excellent and careful teacher, starting my studies at such a young age gave me a head start on repertoire, musicality, diction and language study, and singing technique.

Having studied at Lawrence for so many of my precollege years and for two years of undergraduate study, I felt it was time to transfer to complete my undergraduate and graduate work. After visiting and taking voice lessons with several teachers at each of the four schools I was considering, I decided to move to Cincinnati and attend the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) and study with William McGraw. Many American students choose their school according to name and prestige — and it may be a different ballgame if you're choosing to pursue a career other than music performance — but finding the best fit

with a studio teacher is of paramount importance for a singer. While CCM is a renowned school for singing, I made my decision to transfer there because, after all the sample voice lessons I had taken at various schools, I had found another teacher whom I admired, trusted, and knew would help me to grow as a singer and performer.

I earned my Bachelor of Music and Master of Music degrees in voice performance at CCM, and I finished my coursework for the Doctor of Musical Arts degree with a cognate field in Scandinavian Song and Diction in May of 2012.

While in Cincinnati I also became a Certified Nursing Assistant in 2008 and served as a teaching assistant in voice during years of doctoral study. I am forever grateful for the encouragement I received to explore my interests (musical and otherwise) and to have had the opportunity to pursue degrees in a field I am passionate about and that will enable me to remain in the field for a lifetime.

It is customary in America for aspiring singers to audition for opera companies that offer “young artist programs” or “apprenticeship programs” for summer seasons or yearlong seasons. Most singers audition for such companies while still in college or graduate school, but singers are eligible for these kinds of programs until around the age of 30. The fact that such programs accept singers at or beyond the age of 30 is an acknowledgement that the formative period of an opera singer begins later than that of an instrumentalist. Young artist or apprenticeship programs provide stage experience and coaching in singing, acting, and diction, as well as training in movement and stage combat.

Acquiring a position in one of these summer or yearlong programs is challenging; one must consider the repertoire programmed for a given company’s season to determine whether or not his or her voice would be appropriate for casting. Beyond the suitability of voice type for specific repertoire, music and stage directors consider whether auditioning singers fit the production concept, complement the statures or voices of other cast members, or are able to project well enough in the hall.

And, of course, there is always the element of luck — being in the right place at the right time — and that plays a big role in winning any job or

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performance opportunity, competition, or even acceptance into a school.

I have been fortunate to be cast in many productions with Central City Opera in Colorado in the 2009, 2010, and 2012 summer seasons, as well as Cincinnati Opera in summer 2011, and I made sure to audition for these companies because I found that the operas programmed for these seasons were well-suited to my voice type and appearance. This upcoming summer, I’ll be singing two roles with the Merola Opera Program in San Francisco (Lucia in Britten’s *The Rape of Lucretia* and Barbarina in *Le Nozze di Figaro*) and taking advantage of the opportunities for coaching and training that Merola provides its participants.

Yearlong programs are similar to summer programs, but they are, obviously, longer — a minimum of nine months typically. I am currently the resident soprano Studio Artist with Florentine Opera in Milwaukee, WI, and I got the job after auditioning in the spring of 2012. Once again, I looked into the repertoire the company planned to present in the 2012-2013 season, and my voice type was a good fit.

This year, I have already performed the role of Frasquita in Bizet’s *Carmen* and sung eight performances as soprano soloist in Händel’s *Messiah* with the Milwaukee Symphony, and I’ll be singing the roles of Miss Wordsworth in Britten’s *Albert Herring* and Barbarina in Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro* in addition to four performances of a program called *That’s Amore: A Concert of Love Songs* in spring of 2013.

When I’m not in rehearsals for mainstage productions, my colleagues and I tour

Milwaukee’s public schools performing a children’s opera (John Davies’s *Little Red’s Most Unusual Day* — a pastiche opera comprised of music by Offenbach and Rossini with English text underlay by Davies that tells a youth-friendly version of the Little Red Riding Hood story. Yours truly sings the role of Little Red.). We also perform concerts in various community venues and teach masterclasses to young singers. It’s a busy schedule — sometimes we work six or seven days a week rehearsing or performing — and it certainly is a labor of love!

The challenges of pursuing an operatic career in America are numerous. One particular challenge very much worth mentioning here is the issue of expense. Trying to launch a career in opera requires funding and support, and while there are avid supporters of opera to whom we are indebted, many don’t realize the expense a young singer faces when trying to build a career. Audition and accompanist fees, travel expenses, attire, and music are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to an aspiring performer’s budget.

Prizes, scholarships, and grants often assist performers in funding their pursuits, and SAI has been a source of constant support, both financially and otherwise, for me. I was initiated into the Xi Chapter of SAI at Lawrence University and then affiliated with the Eta-Iota Chapter at CCM (where I was chapter president from 2007-2008), and now I am affiliated with the Cincinnati Alumnae Chapter. I received the SAI Career Performance Grant in 2010 and the SAI Doctoral Grant in 2011.

Many of my dearest friends are my SAI sisters, and the network of support the organization has given me is invaluable. SAI has supported my efforts as a performer and scholar and inspires my desire to continue making music each day; for that, I am constantly grateful.

A native of Appleton, WI, Xi initiate Alisa Suzanne Jordheim is currently the resident soprano Studio Artist with Florentine Opera in Milwaukee, WI. She is a member of the Cincinnati Alumnae Chapter and Sword of Honor recipient. She was awarded the 2010 SAI Career Performance Grant for Voice and 2011 SAI Doctoral Grant. More information regarding her experiences and performances can be found at her professional website, alisasuzannejordheim.com.