

OPERA IN THE UNDERGRADUATE ENVIRONMENT

Brian DeMaris | www.briandemaris.com

I recently participated in a forum on singer training with opera professionals and educators from across the country. Discussions were inspiring as well as challenging, particularly with regards to the role that undergraduate institutions play in the training of opera singers. There were some who challenged the entire notion of a vocal performance degree, and one colleague even remarked that "undergraduate institutions shouldn't be producing opera." There wasn't much of a response to this comment, perhaps because it made most of us in the room really think seriously about what we do and why we do it.

Undergraduate opera directors are well aware that only a small fraction of our students will go on to have sustainable operatic performance careers. Yet our programs continue to grow and accept more students each year. *How do we justify teaching opera to so many young singers when so few of them will go on to become professional opera singers?*

First of all, we have to remember that undergraduate vocal performance degrees are not solely designed to train opera singers. They provide a broad array of performance skills intended to help prepare students for many possible careers in music, not just opera. One could even argue that they are not the most ideal place to acquire some crucial foundational skills required of future opera singers, since in many programs it can be difficult to find time for sufficient language training, acting and movement courses, and perhaps even more liberal arts courses. Not to mention, many undergraduate singers aren't vocally ready to be singing operatic repertoire. Thus, *exposure to opera in an undergraduate vocal performance degree should primarily be introductory, serving mainly to broaden students' performance skills and musical horizons.*

Moreover, undergraduates are still in the process of figuring out who they are. *What we are really teaching is self-discovery through opera.* In essence, this is what we are teaching to the very few who will go on to become opera singers, as well as to those who will go on to have successful academic or research careers; future primary and secondary music educators and pedagogues who will take opera with them into their classrooms and lessons with youth across the country; future arts administrators, fundraisers, managers, advertisers, and producers; people who will end up working behind the scenes as stage managers, props masters, wig masters, costume builders, painters and carpenters; and even possible designers, directors, conductors, choreographers and coaches.

This teaching expands to our campuses where *we are exposing students from all disciplines and entire communities to opera, often for their first time*; thus introducing the art of opera to many young adults who will become parents, audience members,

possible donors, and - at the very least - advocates for the arts and theatre, hopefully for the rest of their lives.

When undergraduate institutions produce opera, we are not only giving a few young singers a taste of operatic performance at an introductory level. We are also introducing an entire community of young scholars to an art form that provides *a retelling of our stories and a reflection of our world and ourselves*. Opera in the undergraduate environment is at the very least about teaching opera to voice majors. It is about providing opera as a unique component of interdisciplinary education for an entire community of learners who are in the process of discovering themselves and their world, and who are fast becoming the citizens of tomorrow.