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Guestbook

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Top Five Ways to Improve Your Next Audition

by **Chantal Panozzo**

Often, the worst part about the audition process isn't the sweaty palms, dry throat, or nervous anticipation. It's the silence after the fact. The not knowing. The wonder at what the judges were thinking.

You walk off the stage analyzing whether the one judge smiled, whether they noticed that you didn't hold that one whole note a full four beats, whether it was a good thing that you were cut off in the middle of your third aria.

And a few weeks later, you're still wondering, wishing you were a mind reader.

Thankfully, there is one event where singers get the feedback they crave: the Audition Feedback Experience, part of the annual Classical Singer Convention. At the 2010 Convention in New York City last May, singers in the Professional Track—those currently auditioning for professional jobs and roles—had the opportunity to participate in this program, nicknamed AFE. The program allows singers to receive feedback after their audition from professionals that hire in their respective areas. Participants learned both what they did well and also what they could do to improve.

Throughout the program, individual singers were advised on clothing choices, repertoire lists, performance choices, technique, and more. While the singers represented diverse categories—A/B Opera Houses, C/D Opera Houses, Oratorio and Concert, Musical Theatre, Young Artists Programs, Summer Programs, and Grad Schools—the general consensus from the AFE panelists showed that no matter the category, there were five main areas that most singers could improve upon.

One: Dramatic Presentation

"People are not just hired for their voices," said the late opera conductor John Douglas (see obituary, p. 43),



who was a panelist for the C/D Opera House auditions as well as the Young Artist Program auditions. Other AFE panelists agreed with his sentiment. Overall, many thought strong, dramatic presentation was one of the areas most lacking from the singers they heard at the AFE. Dan Montez—general director of Taconic Opera, in Westchester County, New York, who also provided feedback for the C/D Opera House auditions—feels that acting and any kind of connection to a subtext was absent from many performances. “It’s not that the singers are afraid to make decisions of subtext for their characters,” he laments, “but that they hadn’t even thought it through.”



If you can learn to be dramatic, it’s good news for you. Because, according to Montez, the reason there is so little competition at the top is that so few singers go the extra mile to work out the meticulous acting, phrasing, and interpretation details.

Suggestions for how to improve: Take acting classes, pay for dramatic coaching of arias, make decisions about characters, study Daniel Helfgot’s book *The Third Line*, and work with a videotape to make yourself look interesting enough to consider hiring.

Douglas observed, “As auditioners, we do not see and hear singers the way they see and hear themselves. They need to treat themselves as if they were working with someone else.”

Two: Awareness of How to Use Your Body

What should I do with my hands? This is a question that many singers ponder. And apparently, they should. Because along with dramatic presentation, an awareness of how to use your body was another point that most judges felt could be improved upon.

According to A/B Opera House panelist William Florescu, who is general director of Milwaukee’s Florentine Opera Company, far too many singers left their body actions to chance—and it showed. “In a world where competition is fierce, every component of your audition can either help you or hold you back,” Florescu says.

Concert and Oratorio panelist Kent Tritle—one of America’s leading choral conductors—agreed, noting that a clear, direct focus from singers was lacking. “Singers need to videotape themselves to actually see what they are doing physically while they sing.”

Artistic director of Opera Fort Collins and tenor Todd Queen, a C/D Opera House panelist, adds that an awareness of how to use your body starts the moment you walk on stage. “Remember that you are marketing an entire package, not just your voice. From the moment you walk in the room, we start to judge you to see if you are the kind of singer that we want to hire and work with. Every moment counts.”

Suggestions for how to improve: Work with a mirror, hire a dramatic coach, take acting classes, try the Alexander technique, and videotape yourself while you sing.

Three: Knowing Your Limits

Do you have star potential? You should know. The singers Florescu heard at the AFE ranged in talent from having no chance at a career to singers having talent but being somewhat raw in refinement. But he says that many were not aware of their potential (or lack thereof) for a professional career. Queen agrees, adding that many singers need to get a reality check—especially when it comes to repertoire choices. He felt that many sang pieces that were too heavy or difficult. “Many singers could step back and go a bit lighter and they would be more marketable,” says Queen.

Kristin Cowdin—artist manager for Guy Barzilay Artists, who judged both the A/B Opera House and the Young Artist Program auditions—felt that none of the singers who auditioned at the A/B level belonged there. “The singers I heard [at the AFE] were lacking essential elements in their personal presentations, albeit different ones for each. Many didn’t have sufficient experience (with smaller companies, Young Artist Programs, etc.) on their résumés that would garner a coveted audition spot from companies at this level.”

Suggestions for how to improve: Sing for coaches, teachers, managers, and general directors who will give you honest feedback about your potential and what kind of work you need to focus on to have a chance at a professional career. You should also look—in advance—at a company’s repertoire and website and research singers on their rosters to find out their previous experience. Then you should ask yourself if your current experience and abilities match that level.

“Honest self-assessment is an integral key to success,” Cowdin notes.

Four: Vocal Technique

Good tone quality. Adequate vibrato. Many judges agreed that most singers possessed these qualities, but some felt coloratura technique was less than sparkling. “The coloraturas I heard were generally messy and rarely articulate,” says Montez, who also reminds singers that every voice type should learn the coloratura technique, even those with big voices. Douglas wanted higher levels of vocal technique overall. He felt—which also relates to point three above—that many singers were not aware of their technical weaknesses.

Suggestions for how to improve: Find a teacher that specializes in coloratura technique and study with them. Make sure fast notes are clean and precise. Coloratura should be connected to the body and not be just an

insubstantial flutter of the throat. Make sure you are singing pieces that show off your strengths and minimize your weaknesses. Don't sing music that is too difficult. Singers that have a strong sense of themselves progress the fastest.

Five: Diction and Intention

"They could be reading the phone book!" Tritle's long-time mentor Richard Westenburg used to say of singers who perform with no inflection. And during the AFE, Tritle heard participants sing five- or six-word phrases where every syllable and word sounded the same—a key giveaway that the singer isn't thinking about what they are communicating. Montez agrees.

"Understanding the ideas that precede the words coming out of one's mouth and understanding the nature of improvisation are necessary to a successful and long career."

Suggestions for how to improve: Pay close attention to what is happening at the Metropolitan Opera and elsewhere. Know what your text means. Be imaginative in considering why these words are set in a particular way by the composer. (For example, when a soprano sings "Rejoice Greatly," from *Messiah* the repetitions of "rejoice" should not all sound the same.)

Conclusion

Overall, one thing about auditioning is certain: you sing, walk off stage, and it's over. It's difficult for you to know what the judges thought about your performance—even the judges themselves admit that. "It's hard to get feedback from knowledgeable, working professionals. Considering the panels I was on, I think more advanced singers should take advantage of the AFE," Douglas advised.

Chantal Panozzo is a writer living in Zurich, Switzerland.
www.chantalpanozzo.com