

All for the Love of Singing

Interview with countertenor Zachary Gordin

We love to sing. We love to perform. To be able to sustain our love in a big way, we realize that we need to establish a name for ourselves, a career. So how do we make our career happen?

By Zoe Vandermeer

Zachary Gordin, counter tenor/soprano, has seen many different sides of the music business, and like many of us, discovered his love of singing and music at a very early age. Thinking back to his early childhood, Zachary remembers making a promise to his family: "I'm going to be an opera star when I grow up." Influenced by the Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts, the singers in his church, and public television, he said that he experienced "this magnetic pull to it."

Sound familiar? Zachary knew by age 3 that singing opera would be his life. By following the development of Zachary's career, we can begin to glean valuable information that can be helpful to us as we build or restructure our career.

In the Beginning

Zachary: "For my third birthday I begged my mother to get me a piano, and she did. My great-grandfather, a great organist, was my first teacher. As a small child, I would sit and practice for hours and hours a day. I started studying voice when I was 8, after it was discovered that: 'Oh! He's really got this instrument.' I started being paid to sing when I was 9."

Zachary: "My mother and grandmother supported me, to the point that they could understand. When parents are presented with a great talent, they generally don't know what to do with it. Support from the community was really more touching to me. I've had a fan club for a long time, and that support base is absolutely vital for building any kind of career."

Vocal Technique

Zachary: "My grandmother took me to sing for the matriarch, who then sent me to a teacher she knew. Ruth Osmond and Marjorie Remington gave me my foundation. They taught me how to breathe, they taught me how not to press on the voice, how what you've got is enough, just let it be.

"This technique was always based on simplicity, not making more of the voice than there is. Just keeping things simple, learning about interpretation, what to do with text, where to

breathe, how to breathe, where not to breathe, learning about legato. "Legato" means that you start a sound and it doesn't stop until you breathe again. It was that basic."



Zachary Gordin

Since that time, Zachary has studied with other teachers, such as Anna Carol Dudley. His most influential teacher to date is Erie Mills who, he says, "Is probably the most responsible for my sound right now, and really gave me my top [Eb above the treble staff]. Erie taught me what it was to sing smaller, not make a small voice, but to make it sing where it could cut through any orchestra ...that you can have stamina and don't need to press on the voice."

Currently, Zachary is working with Jane Randolph. Still, those early days were critical in his vocal and musical development.

Educational Institutions

Zachary is unusual in that he did not attend a conservatory or university. He explains that he, "got busy right after high school, because I found out that I could make money, more

money singing, teaching, modeling, or whatever. I went right into my career."

Career Abroad

The notion of living in Europe and making a living singing is more than a fairy tale. As we know, the relationship of the community with the arts is rather different than in the United States, not only in terms of an educated community base who actually want multiple concert series and operas to take place in their city, but also in terms of government support. Although this platform of support is changing—fewer productions and jobs overall—Europe offers opportunities that are not to be missed.

Zachary found himself in Italy and France about five years ago in search of those wished-for moments of effective networking and success. He found them. He won the Bellini International Voice Competition. He also won the Ibla Grand Prize Baroque Music Competition. This, says Zachary, was indeed his big break.

Finding Management

Winning competitions and singing concerts is great. The next step is management. How do you go about getting management? Mailing out promotional packets and doing follow-up calls is necessary, but does that approach actually attract the attention of a manager or agent that you will want to work with and who will get you sufficiently well-paid gigs?

This is one huge X factor for most artists.

Zachary was fortunate. He didn't look for management. Management found him.

"This woman who had worked with pop/rock/actors had built a very successful agency in Europe and was representing big stars," he says. "She left all of that behind and moved to the United States. Five or six years after her move, she hears me sing (in California), approaches me, tells me who she is, and that she wants to take me on. She represented me exclusively for the world, although mostly in France and Germany. She got me all of my first jobs, all my first big contacts, really got me out



there, and she still represents me in France.”

To be appealing to management, Zachary continues, “You have to have something special to give. You not only have to be a total package—have the acting, the looks they need, the right *Fach*, sing the right repertoire, hope to God that you’re a good musician—but they have to *want* you.”

The Myth of Management

Piece of cake: Manager in place, competitions won, everything is taken care of.

“No,” says Zachary, “Singers cannot expect to be taken care of by agents or managers. If you’re not involved in administration, if you’re not involved in making contacts, you’re letting go.

“For the first few years expect agents to arrange auditions, serve as a contact point. You cannot expect a whole lot more than that.

“I hear from so many singers: ‘Well, I’m going to get an agent and my career’s just going to take off.’

“Wrong. It doesn’t. Because the people that think that way don’t take responsibility for their own careers. They leave everything to the agent, who probably already has enough to do. They see people with management who have big careers. They don’t tend to see the people who have management but who don’t sing for three or four years anywhere.”

Zoe: What are your thoughts about the retainer fee?

Zachary: I would like to see where and how it’s being spent.

Zoe: Since not all agents are above board, how would someone be sure of finding one who will actually follow through with what they say they will do?

Zachary: You can’t [be sure]. It’s that simple. There’s really no way you can hold anyone accountable. There’s no magic paper that says you will have X amount of gigs in this period of time. It doesn’t exist. The agent can make contacts, get you penciled in for things, even get you contracts—sometimes. Nothing is really guaranteed.

Vocal Sounds, Image and the Music Business

There you are, administrating, networking, doing follow-up calls, e-mails and letters, self-producing concerts, updating your website, notifying agents, developing your solo album material, finding your niche market, all the while studying voice, learning music, working a day job, maybe having a relationship and kids, and if you’re lucky, a vacation once a year. From this vantage point, you keep noticing certain types of vocal sounds that get hired.

You wonder about developing that type of sound, with an eye towards becoming more marketable. Here’s how that pattern of thought and action can begin, and where it can take you—maybe.

Zoe: Do you find there’s the allure of the fuller, bigger, seductive sounds, especially when performing on a larger stage?

Zachary: Absolutely. But what people often don’t realize when they make that sound—or they make the illusion to themselves of that sound by adding pressure up against the vocal cords—is that it in fact shrinks the voice. It’s like eating really good chocolate—and then we see it on our hips the next day.

Zoe: What do you believe leads us down the path of thicker, less productive singing?

Zachary: It’s what people make you think sells. It’s what wins competitions. It’s so-and-so they admire, whoever’s career they admire. It’s the draw of fame, the draw of the trappings. People want to be the big, honkin’ sopranos, or mezzos, or whatever, because of admiration from fans, from administrators, from the people that do the hiring, from the people that judge the competitions. Recording companies are another animal, and bigger voices are harder to record.

Zoe: What do you think it is about the warmer, deeper, darker chocolate singing sounds that is appealing, or that we believe is appealing?

Zachary: That not everybody can do it easily. It’s not normal to make these sounds. How many coloraturas can make a sound like Callas? That was a hefty voice. Just think of the big dramatic sopranos, Eileen Farrell and others. Not many people make those sounds anymore.

The lyric soprano has evolved. I want to say that it’s lightened up, it’s gotten a little more silvery, it’s gotten easier, it’s gotten more brilliant sounding. But at the same time, you have, on the other hand, all these people who call themselves lyric sopranos, who have big heavy middles and don’t have a high C. So you have two ends of the spectrum. It’s like there was a splitting off or something.

We have the middle of the road, too: sometimes baroque, sometimes Bel Canto singers. And then you’ve got the full-throttle, knock ‘em dead, big-voiced, dark, yawn singers, and they all make recordings. And some of them have great careers and some of them don’t.

But I think that people are drawn to whatever is presented as a “star.” And young people, in conservatory or university or whatever, who see this persona being presented, see the album cover that has a beautiful, well-coiffed, and elegantly dressed woman, you know, they want to be that woman. Or [they want to be]

the stud guy, who’s seems like this is an attractive thing. It’s just like pop music: whatever sells.

The Bottom Line: Zachary Speaks to Singers about Vocal training: “Make sure that you can sing. Take lessons from a good teacher. Don’t stick with anybody out of necessity or loyalty. Keep getting what you need. Don’t be one of these singers where everything is chewed for you.”

Become accomplished: “Learn about what it is that you’re wanting to do and why you want to do it, first. Learn about music. Learn to read music, please. Get your keyboard skills in order. Learn theory. Be able to accompany yourself. Learn about the voice and physiology. Learn repertoire. Learn language. Learn acting. Do dance. Read about history. Learn as much about art and creativity, not just singing, and allow yourself to explore creativity.

“Go to performances. See it happen. Listen. Watch. See what works, see what hurts. This is how we learn to teach.

“Learn about law and contracts. Learn about taxes.”

Create balance: “Have your singer-calendar and then fill in with life. Take time away from the work of singing and go play! Work out. Exercise. Have a journal. Meditate. Develop your network of support.”

Step aside: “Don’t attach yourself to the negativity of others who are competitive, jealous and envious.”

Be yourself: “Don’t make yourself less than you are, or more than you are. I’ve been there, trying to say: ‘OK, turn it on, now you’re a big opera star. Now turn it off.’

“You become psychotic! It doesn’t work. Be true to yourself by doing your job well.”

Take responsibility: “Take responsibility for what it is you build yourself into, instead of allowing people to impose an image and a sort of pre-fabricated education, with lots of holes in it, onto you—which would lead to the misconception that that’s enough, because it worked for so-and-so.”

Community: “Be friendly, and genuinely so, with the people you work with. Do not be malicious or ruin opportunities for others.”

Through thick and thin: “Remember the constant belief and knowledge that this is what you are here for.”

Develop as an artist: “Allow yourself to mature as an artist. You’re organic. The voice matures. If the voice wakes up one day and says, ‘Well, you need a rep change,’ don’t fight it, because if you do, you could be ending your career.”

Crossover genres: “Be careful. Know what you want out of it and make sure your reasons are honest.”



Zoe Vandermeer

Career longevity: “Don’t limit yourself. Diversify performance opportunities. Put yourself out there. Give the community some arts.”

Teaching: “Allow for exploration. You can’t wedge a young person, even up to age 25, into a *Fach* or certain repertoire. The voice is too flexible. Remember that it’s not the teacher’s experience, it’s the singer’s experience.”

A note to choral directors: “I would like to see choral directors have the ability to take a singer that shows promise apart from the choir. Give them solo opportunities. Make sure they’re going to a good teacher. In an ideal world, choral directors would know what singing is about and there wouldn’t be such discrepancy between solo singing technique and choral singing technique, which have just gone two different directions entirely.”

What success means: “Success means being creative, getting jobs, being part of the process, getting involved with the arts situation in the world and in your life, not just being paid to perform.”

Zachary Gordin will be appearing in the role of Wilder in ‘Earthrise’ composed by Pulitzer Prize winner Lewis Spratlan, with San Francisco Opera (www.usoperaweb.com/2003/spring/earthrise.htm). You can hear Zachary at: www.mp3.com/zacharygordin

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Resources

Organizations

California Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts (calawyersforthearts.org)
 Chamber Music America (www.chamber-music.org)
 Early Music America (www.earlymusic.org)
 The Foundation Center (<http://fdncenter.org>)
 National Association of Teachers of Singing (www.nats.org)
 Swain Center (voice disorders) (www.theswaincenter.com)
 Voice and Speech Trainers Association, Inc. (www.vasta.org)
 Voice Foundation (www.voicefoundation.org)
 Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts, New York (www.vlany.org)

Career-Related Books and Websites

Musical America (www.musicalamerica.com)
 Rhinegold Publishing Books (www.rhinegold.co.uk):
 British and International Music Yearbook; Classical Music; Early Music Today; Music Teacher; Opera Now; The Singer
www.legalmatch.com (aid in finding the right lawyer)
www.nolo.com (legal books and information)
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