



‘Today’s successful singer has to be a successful brand’

An excellent voice is just the starting point for a great career in opera these days. **Dr Ralph Strehle**, a leading performance coach and mentor for young singers at Mascarade Opera Studio, takes us through the formidable armoury of accomplishments, from presentational skills to psychological resilience, that young singers need to develop in order to thrive on today’s opera stages

I am sitting in Café Gamberini in Florence opposite speaker and communication coach Elia Nichols. We talk about the appropriate length of earrings for one of our sopranos and how one of our baritones missed a fantastic networking opportunity after our last concert. Elia explains that it is not only about our artists having certain communication skills but also about them being authentic in their communication with others. I bite into a fritella and wonder what it would be like to have our studio artists ‘Queer-Eyed’. Tan France would have fun. I also wonder how much the demands placed on our young singers have changed over the years. Being an excellent performer alone no longer guarantees a career. A successful singer nowadays also has to be a successful brand.

At Mascarade Opera Studio, I regularly hold performance profiling sessions with our singers and pianists. In these sessions they agree on what they think are the most important characteristics for ‘making it’ in their career. They then rate themselves

and, sometimes, their colleagues, on these characteristics. Performance profiling is a pretty good feedback tool as it provides me with an overview of how our artists perceive themselves. In subsequent individual sessions, I use these profiles as a basis for building individual training and performance programmes. At the elite level, you have to start with individual needs, not a generic one-fits-all training programme.

In our last profiling session, our artists identified the following characteristics required to become an elite professional in their field: Appearance, Self-Belief, Team Player, Professional Skills, Presentation Skills, Physical Health, Artistry, Technique, Resilience, Support Network. Each of these characteristics involved sub-items. Professional Skills, for example, included time management, diary management, written and oral communication skills. Physical Health included stamina, flexibility, strength, sleep and nutrition. I am delighted with the progress our artists have made in terms of artistry



Opposite page: Dr Ralph Strehle in a performance profiling session with Polixeni Tziouvaras:

Left: Stage presence: Floriana Cicio, Henry Websdale and Alexandria Wreggelsworth working with Dr Strehle

Below: Head of music Julia Lynch in a coaching session with Polixeni Tziouvaras

and technique. I regularly discuss these items with my core artistic team: our joint heads of music Julia Lynch and Jonathan Papp, voice teacher James Platt, stage director Marie Lambert and artistic consultant soprano Anush Hovhannisyian. At Mascarade, we lead by example, we work as a team, we listen to our colleagues and our artists. The one skill our artists agree they lack more than others are presentation skills. Hence my meeting with Elia.

The first six to seven months of our programme are built around skill enhancement and skills acquisition. We call this the foundation period, which entails a lot of repertoire coaching, vocal consultancy, acting and learning Italian. It also involves working on all those areas identified by our artists in the profiling session. Performances in this period are normally low-exposure events. It's not yet the time to shine. Recent research in football has showed that players brought to the Premier League can take almost half a season to find their form. It's the same for our artists: you can't just throw them into a new environment and expect them to perform well straight away. Psychologically speaking, during the foundation period, we help our artists to increase their perceived competence. They really need to believe they can make it at the top level. Once they have that belief, they feel at home within themselves and here in Florence. That's the time to shine.

After the foundation period we enter the performance-oriented period, which involves the possibility of performing roles at our partner house Teatro la Fenice in Venice and at other European houses which form part of our network. With our training base in Florence and our performance base in Venice, we consider ourselves a mobile studio. If the market doesn't come to us, we come to the market. This March, for example, we have a mainstage audition tour across Germany and Austria in houses such as Staatstheater Braunschweig and Landestheater Linz.

Auditioning and performing in different countries requires resilience, the ability to adapt successfully to a variety of challenging situations and to use these situations as an opportunity for growth. That



Emerging Artists Young Talent



Clockwise from above: Staff and students of the Mascarade Opera Studio with tenors Lawrence Brownlee and Michael Spyres

Helping artists to achieve peak performance: Faik Mansuroğlu in recital

Voice teacher James Platt coaches an auditionee in hoping for a place in the final round in Venice

Time to shine: Julia Lynch prepares artists for their final audition and public concert on the stage of the Teatro Malibran, Venice.

means, for one, being part of a production where the rehearsal language is not English. And that can be very scary because studio artists in general are mostly given smaller roles in productions and holding up the rehearsal process because they don't understand what's going on is a big no-no.

The structure of our training and performance programme is unique in that it allows our artists to grow in a controlled manner and therefore to increase their resilience levels. If we push them too hard, they will feel they cannot cope and shut down; if we are too soft on them, they will get bored. Getting the balance right means hitting the sweet spot, the optimal zone of performance. It is exhilarating to hear a young artist singing at their best. Achieving this requires expertise and time. As an independent institution not bound to a single opera house, we are fortunate to have both. We are also fortunate to be sponsored by philanthropists who share our vision and who are interested in longevity and sustainability. No short-term quick fixes, our artists are in it for the long run.

Nobody is interested in your spicy artisan chutney recipe posted on Instagram until you have established yourself as a leader in your field. How to project a professional image, particularly on social media, is tricky for young singers. It requires the careful mixing of one's public and private identity. Revealing –but not *too* revealing. Enough to satisfy our in-built voyeurism without crossing the line.

Back in Gamberini, I discuss with Elia how difficult it is to get this right. She asks me for social media images of our current singers and pianists. It's

important they start seeing and treating themselves as a brand. At the same time, we expect them to be individuals, real life people. It's a difficult balancing act. Fortunately, soprano Anush Hovhannisyan, who has won considerable acclaim on opera stages around the world, regularly advises our young artists on how to promote themselves on social media. For an opera company, an artist with a large number of followers on social media potentially increases ticket sales and provides free marketing.

A contemporary Young Artist Programme (YAP) needs to have a multi-faceted approach to its training and performance provision. Many YAPs now also expect their artists to engage with local communities through outreach activities, meaning they have to be able to sing in a variety of unconventional places engaging directly with new audiences. To let artists just get on with this all and expect them to swim rather than sink is unethical. A YAP is a continued professional development programme and as such it offers a hybrid form of learning and working. The continued learning aspect must not get lost, otherwise our youngsters simply become cheap labour. At Mascarade we have a quality assurance framework which ensures that the learning part of our programme is efficient, appropriate, and timely. As Director and Performance Coach, I am very proud we have quality assurance at the heart of what we do. It also gives our artists the chance to directly feed back into our programme activities, which in turn increases their autonomy and motivation.

I met co-founders Max Fane, Frankie Parham and Roger Granville four years ago in Glasgow. Back then



they asked me whether I could design an exciting new and innovative opera training programme. It took two years to design the programme which I based on the latest insights from music performance psychology and education management. Our new two-year programme starting in September 2022 retains all of these aspects but has a more pronounced international performance dimension. My co-director Candice Wood and head of strategic partnerships and communications Maddalena Massafra have been working tirelessly behind the scenes to build an international partner network which includes opera houses and festivals throughout Europe. In the coming years we will be expanding our network to the US.

I shake hands with Elia. She will email me a draft proposal for a series of presentation workshops in the coming days. Back in the studio at the Palazzo Corsini I hear extracts of *The Pearl Fishers*' Duet coming from the Sala del Camino. Our mezzo is working on Walton's *The Bear* in the Walter Scott Room. I have a feedback meeting with our Canadian baritone who has just come back from the finals of the Paris Opera competition. I open my laptop, which has a permanent sticker at the front reminding me to stay attuned to the ever-changing environment and demands of our profession: 'What got you here might not get you there'. **ON**

Dr Ralph Strehle is the Director of the Mascarade Opera Studio, soon to become the new Mascarade Emerging Artists programme run in collaboration with the Teatro La Fenice Foundation

