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Mezzo soprano

Shouldn't You Be Fatter? (And Other Opera Singer Myths)

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If I'm in a good mood, I'm one of those people who chats with strangers. Shop clerks, waiters, baristas, shoe salesmen, you name it -- if I'm feeling friendly, I'll start a conversation with any of them about the weather or what I'm buying or my favorite foods. And if the conversation lasts longer than five seconds, the question, "and what to you do for a living?" inevitably gets asked of me. And nine times out of 10, the person I'm chatting with, when learning that I'm an opera singer replies with confusion, "Aren't you too skinny/small/thin to be an opera singer? Shouldn't you be fatter?"

The question troubles me for a couple of reasons. I don't blame them for thinking it, mind you -- when opera singers are parodied in cartoons or commercials, they are generally large and wearing horns, and Pavarotti, the most famous opera singer from the past century, was not exactly a size 0. What bothers me about the question is the implication, that because everybody assumes that opera singers are fat, and because it's still okay to openly mock and disregard overweight people in our society, there is really no reason to even imagine what it means to actually *be* an opera singer. If somebody tells you they are a violinist, you can probably imagine what they do, sitting there in an orchestra playing away, even if you've never been to a symphony concert. You know what it means to be a painter even if you don't "get" modern abstract art, and when you meet a ballet dancer, you can certainly picture them onstage with their bun and their toe shoes. You don't say to a chef when you meet them, "shouldn't you be fatter?" -- even though they spend all day cooking and tasting food, and frankly, they have every reason to be fat (and there are plenty of examples of non-size-0 chefs such as Mario Batali and Ina Garten). But I think most Americans don't really get a picture in their head when someone says they are an opera singer of what that means, exactly, so they equate the profession with the extremes they have seen parodied, or they're just talking about one particular singer -- the only one they've ever happened to see.

First of all, as a rule, opera singers are not fat. They come in all shapes and sizes, although lately, as the entertainment industry continues to whittle down the sizes of actors and models so much that drawing them as stick figures is actually quite representational, most famous opera singers are in fact quite thin and fit. Hot, even. Performing onstage can be a work out, and it helps if you're in decent shape. But the fact that most people's only association with opera singing is obesity suggests that we have a long way to go in educating people about what opera is, exactly, how it's made, why it's important, and why they should care.

Have any of you been watching the NBC reality competition *The Voice* this season? (I know some of you have because it has, like, 10 bajillion viewers.) Did you know that one of the four finalists, Chris Mann, trained to be an opera singer? What I mean by that is that he went to a school of music and majored in something called "vocal performance," where he studied all the techniques of how to breathe, sing, and project without the aid of a microphone; various foreign languages; music theory and history; acting and movement; and a bunch of other stuff.

And while he has a specific story that has brought him to this national pop competition and has the talent and showmanship to back it up, there are also literally *thousands* of other singers who have trained in the same way, and whose voices you would find powerful and impressive if you heard them. It's funny to me that those four judges are giving Chris Mann singing "tips" when, after years of intense study, he would certainly overpower all of them in volume (when unamplified), have more breath control (and therefore be able to hold notes much longer than any of them), and have a much larger range than any of them. In essence, his classical voice training would allow him to sing any of those famous singers under the table -- but most of America has no idea just how many more Chris Manns there are out there, and what they could be missing out on as a result of ignoring them.

We love Olympic athletes because they are able to push the limits of what the human body can achieve, and we love singing and singers, so why is there such a disconnect? Why aren't we interested in the singers who can do the most athletic and acrobatic things with their voices? Who can sing the loudest, the fastest, the highest, the lowest, and according to many, the most beautifully? I think one reason is that most people don't think of opera singers as people they can relate to, so the fact that they can achieve these amazing feats with their voices is much less relevant. That's where I come in.

What we do is this: We are simultaneously actors and musicians who perform in plays that are completely sung, in voices loud enough to be heard by thousands of people and often in a language other than English. The foreign language thing tends to turn a lot of people off, but when you see an opera anywhere in the U.S., the translation of the words we are singing is projected above the stage, and so seeing an opera is no more confusing than seeing a foreign film. I mean, come on, we all saw and loved *Life is Beautiful* that year Roberto Benigni climbed over all those chairs to collect his Oscar, so the language excuse is out.

Did you know that there is probably an opera company in your town, if you live in or near a city of at least a 200,000 people, and that you can watch live opera there, often for less money than the cost of your local IMAX? We already mentioned that nowadays, most opera singers look like the parts they are portraying and they're trained in acting and movement so are plenty believable. So what you're seeing when you see an opera is part foreign film (unless the opera is in English, which happens about 25 percent of the time), part theater, part an Olympic sport of vocalism, and all underscored by constant music.

So, maybe you don't "get" the style of music -- maybe it doesn't appeal to you, or it doesn't feel as accessible as pop music or even a Broadway score. Now hang on -- that's a generalization I can't let you get away with either, because there is not just one style of music. There are literally hundreds of years of music from which to choose. Every element of music that you like, from pop music and especially from

musical theater, came from a previous era of music history and can be represented by some type of opera, albeit in a slightly more complex form. Music is meant to make you feel something, and opera is no exception.

So, okay, you just don't like opera. It's boring. It's loud. It's annoying. But hang on -- have you ever actually been to an opera? Have you ever been inside a theater and heard an unamplified voice soar out over the orchestra and reach inside and squeeze your guts? Have you ever watched a woman die from consumption while music swelled around her or watched a guy with no money triumph over a rich Royal using only his wits, charm and his flexible baritone voice? If your answer is "no," then at least don't automatically say that you hate opera or that it's boring or that you could never possibly find a single piece of music within it that might move you. If you are one of those people who thinks opera is boring, stupid, and full of people you aren't interested in, I dare you watch clips from these famous operas; [La Boheme](#), [The Barber of Seville](#), and [Carmen](#). Just take five minutes and see what you think.

Because what if just because you and I couldn't do a long jump or a back flip, we all lost interest in the Olympics and eventually it had to struggle just to exist? Then how would we know what the human body was capable of, and how would we inspire ourselves when we're sprinting through the park or playing catch with our kids? The same is true for opera -- if people continue to ignore and marginalize it, it will continue to disappear, and eventually nobody will know just how high a woman can sing when she trains for years, and nobody will remember that once, people used to be able to reach thousands of audience members with one pure sound that came out of their body. And wouldn't that be a shame for everybody who has ever been moved by a song or has even sung one to themselves in the shower?

I know not everybody is supposed to feel moved by hearing opera, just like not everybody likes rap or country or hip-hop or bluegrass. But most people can agree that Adele, who swept the Grammys this year, has a great voice. They can agree that her voice is full, and has a depth and range, and she's really able to make most people feel at least a little something. And opera singing is just one step beyond Adele -- it's a little deeper, with a little more range, and a few extra notes added in for good measure. But it's still the sound of the human voice, whose wail becomes your wail when you close your eyes and let yourself be enveloped by it. And wouldn't you know it -- Adele's not even a size 0. Isn't that just a kick in the pants?