

Redefining “Success”: A Singer and Teacher’s Guide

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The Problem:

In the spring of 2016, the University of Northern Iowa’s Advanced Vocal Performance class, consisting of nine graduate students, began examining a series of four performance success self-help books as part of the process of developing and applying an individualized auditioning process. These texts, among other sources, were offered as possible models that students could draw upon when codifying their own personal process. We focused on four books: *The Performer Prepares* by Robert Caldwell, *Audition Success* by Don Greene, *Complete Preparation: A Guide to Auditioning for Opera* by Joan Dornemann and Maria Ciaccia, and *Power Performance for Singers: transcending the Barriers* by Shirlee Emmons and Alma Thomas. We found much of value in each of the sources; following closer examination and much discussion, the class perceived a trend in the books’ content not only in their advice for becoming a successful performer, but also in their definitions of success. We found that those definitions of success resonated with the many written and unwritten “rules” of success that the students had picked up throughout their study. Success is winning the audition. Success is a path straight from training to young artist programs to singing for companies. The ultimate success is singing at the Met. While these clearly are examples of success, the class did not see them supporting an individualized path that was conducive to the changes that life inevitably brings. As the group questioned this dominant view of singing success we worked toward ways in which to redefine and reclaim success. The class began to explore the creation of more practical and inclusive definition of success that would recognize each singer and teacher’s individuality.

Through this process we realized that not all paths are the same, it is all right for goals to change and that, ultimately, success stretches far beyond definitions employed by specialists of the operatic industry.

Methodology:

Our goal was to produce a methodology that teachers and students could take back into their own performances, studios, and practice rooms that could foster a healthy relationship with the success/failure binary resulting in growth as a performer and/or teacher. The goal is not to discredit the “success” of an international performing career or an award winning teacher, but rather to instill in all peoples the power and permission to be happy with their individual successes. We will work to take the outcomes of the present and find and validate the successes in those things. We will lead a journey through defining personal goals, celebrating the success of small steps, defining what success is to the individual, and putting situational “successes” or “failures” into personal perspective. The outcome will ideally be the freedom to create an individual path and the motivation to try new things without fear of “failure.”

Example: Perhaps student A is preparing for their first solo contest and is competing against student B, a seasoned young performer. “Success” may be defined by society as winning the competition. However, is that likely a realistic goal for the novice performer?

Our job as teachers and performers is then to put the situation into perspective and define what success means to each individual. If student A does not win, student A may feel like they “failed.” If student A does not win and is influenced by society’s definition of “success,” they may be discouraged, lose motivation, and feel badly about their performance despite how well they may have performed in regards to their present state of being. The methodology applied here would be talking student A through the realities of the situation, look at the quantifiable goals set before the performance, seek out the victories, and find the successes. Ideally, this method will help students feel successful, increase motivation, and encourage individual growth. Resilience, positive thinking, and perspective are key elements in creating a success environment.

1. Create quantifiable goals (daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, five-year)
2. Assess the realities of a situation
3. Seek out the small victories
4. Create a path to and a definition of success that fits each individual’s personal journey

Application/Transformation:

“Success is very ephemeral. You depend entirely on the desire of others, which makes it difficult to relax.” Eva Green

With a success chance of less than 1% for acceptance into a top-tier opera studio, such as Houston Grand Opera or Chicago Lyric, not to mention Merola or the Metropolitan Opera’s Lindemann program, now is the prime time to reexamine the meaning of “success.” Often defined according to its constructed binary opposite—“failure”—young musicians and their teachers are often caught in the cross-hairs of seemingly arbitrary and highly subjective criteria that often boil down to the personal preferences of a judging panel or committee. Instead of seeking to affect systemic change at the institutional level (i.e. toppling the existing systems at play in YAP auditions or a singing competition), our research seeks to affect systemic change at the personal level.

We are all capable of creating new pathways to success that include: refocusing of goals, vigilant evaluation of self-talk (and re-framing of negativity), redefining the nomenclature of “success” as process-based and incremental, and developing a rubric that both teaches and evaluates through continuous feedback relative to tangible goals mediated and honored by the student/teacher team. By employing one or more of these practices, a singer or teacher will begin an empowering inside-out journey that reclaims “success” through an empowering new lens of personal accountability and self-evaluation. The transformative power of reclaiming and redefining “success” at a personal level with controllable variables ultimately fosters the organic development of a new breed of singers and teachers that, while living in a competition-driven society, never lose themselves in the pursuit of a career.

By going through the materials in the session--you will be ready to go back into your studio/practice room with a rejuvenating methodology that affords tangible benchmarks and not only encourages but celebrates incremental success.

Conclusion/What We Want our Audience to Take Away:

Each member of the research team has had our own conflicting experiences with how we personally have been told what is defined as being successful and what is failure. We posit that we are not alone in feeling the frustration and self-doubt that can come from these conflicting messages, and that most singers and teachers of singers have experienced this. We want to help teachers and students re-assess their definition of success and failure, and examine who or what contributed to creating that definition. Our goal is to find a way to help each individual redefine their definition of the meaning of success by reframing it in a positive light with an outcome of reclaiming their own success. We will present a case study that illustrates the positive utilization of our exercises to reframe experience. Attendees will have the opportunity to implement the process on their own experience, and will be supplied with handouts that will lead them through the process of redefining, reframing, and reclaiming success in order to create a more positive and nurturing environment to all individuals in the arts.



Kelly Behling, soprano, is a first year graduate student pursuing her Master of Music degree in Vocal Performance at the University of Northern Iowa and also works as a graduate assistant for the UNI opera department. Kelly is originally from the Appleton, Wisconsin area and graduated last spring with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Kelly's operatic credits include the title role in Puccini's *Suor Angelica*, and *Une pastourelle* in Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges*. She has also had the privilege of singing Juliette in Gounod's *Roméo and Juliette*,

Echo in Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and Pamina in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* in opera scene productions at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Giannetta from Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* in UNI's fall scenes program. Kelly is currently studying under Dr. Mitra Sadeghpour.



Rachel Storlie is a Soprano who hails from Spring Grove, MN. She is currently pursuing a M.M. in Vocal Performance at University of Northern Iowa and serves as a graduate assistant in vocal accompanying. Private vocal instructors include Drs. Clifton Ware, Wendy Zaro---Mullins, Karen Kanakis, Jessica Paul, and most recently Drs. Jean McDonald and Korey Barrett. Storlie received first place honors from the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), was the winner of Luther College's Concerto Competition (performed

"Marietta's Lied" from Korngold's opera *Die Tote Stadt* with symphony), and fulfilled a Young Artist contract with La Musica Lirica (performances in Umbria, Italy). Opera roles prepared and performed include Susannah (Carlisle Floyd cover), Contessa (*Le Nozze di Figaro*), Rosalinda (*Die Fledermaus*), Lauretta (*Gianni Schicchi*), Abbess (*Suor Angelica*), and Donna Anna, Mimì, and Fiordiligi (scenes).



Mitra Sadeghpour, opera educator and soprano, joined the UNI School of Music in 2014 after 12 years at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire where she was honored as a Max Schoenfeld Distinguished Professor. At UNI, Dr. Sadeghpour directs the opera program, which includes productions, Opera Performance I and II, and Advanced Vocal Performance. She also teaches applied voice and collaborates with the Theatre Department on musical theatre productions. Since joining the UNI faculty, she has directed full productions of *Susannah* and *Merry Wives of Windsor*, directed two Opera Showcases, and taken opera students on tour to Costa Rica. Dr. Sadeghpour is also committed to opera education and outreach

to students and the community. As a performer, Dr. Sadeghpour regularly performs in recital and concert. She currently serves as the NATS National Vice President of Outreach and is the Iowa Governor of NOA (National Opera Association). Special interests are American opera, art song, and musical theatre.



Michelle Monroe, soprano, will complete her M.M. in vocal performance at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) in the summer of 2016. Miss Monroe completed her B.M.E. from Northern State University in 2012. This summer she will be preparing Blanche in *Dialogues des Carmélites* with the Midwest Institute of Opera. Her previous roles include Mrs. Gleaton in *Susannah*, Belinda in *Dido and Aeneas*, and a Novice in *Suor Angelica*. Partial roles include the Governess in *The Turn of the Screw* and Euridice in *Orpheus and Euridice*. Michelle has appeared as soprano soloist with the Mittelsächsisches Theater Orchestra as

Zerlina in “La ci darem la mano” and with UNI’s Cantorei choir and chamber orchestra in Bach’s “Schweig stille, plaudert nicht” and “Ich bin vergnügt mit meinem Glücke.”

Michelle won 1st place in the creative performance category of UNI’s Graduate Symposium in 2015 and 2016. She was also selected as a finalist in the 2015 graduate division of the Iowa NATS competition. Her young artist programs include the Johanna Meier Opera Theatre Institute and Music in Germany for Singers and Pianists.



Kelly Noltner, soprano, is currently attending the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) pursuing her M.M. in vocal performance. Kelly earned her B.M. degree in Vocal Performance at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (UWEC) in May of 2015. Kelly’s previous roles have included the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro* (UWEC), Mama/Teacup/Dragonfly in *The Bewitched Child* with the Midwest Institute of Opera (MIO), the Midwest premiere of Terentia in *The Beautiful Bridegroom* by Dan Shore (MIO), Rowan in *The Little Sweep* by Britten (UWEC), and Ida in *Die Fledermaus* (UWEC). Kelly

has also performed in scenes programs as Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte* (UNI), Adina in *L’elisir d’amore* (UWEC), and Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* (UNI). Kelly has performed as a featured soloist with the UWEC Symphonic Choir and Symphony Orchestra in *Salisbury Vespers* by Chilcott as well as in Bernstein’s *Chichester Psalms*. Kelly studies with Dr. Jean McDonald.