Between the Moon and New York City
Isabel Leonard

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

photo by Deniz Saylan
Mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard's skyrocketing career began in the city most singers consider a destination. Yet even while growing up in the Met's shadow, Leonard didn't consider a career in New York. "I thought opera was just something that happened in Europe," she said.

But after years of hard work—training, and lots of determination—Leonard followed her voice wherever it would lead her. Now that voice—tive, Leonard followed her voice wherever it would lead her. She was blessed with a level-headed mother who helped her keep things in perspective.

"I know for certain that she would end up on its stage," Leonard said. "And I think that's a good thing, because it means I'm not the only one who gets to enjoy the fruits of my labor."
While many singers move to New York City to seek their own adventures, mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard never had to leave her backyard to find hers.

Born and raised in Manhattan, Leonard’s preteen years included dance training at the Joffrey Ballet School before she enrolled at the Fiorello H. La Guardia High School of Music & Art. Upon graduation, she headed just down the street to the Juilliard School, where she completed bachelor’s and master’s degrees in music and earned the William Schuman Prize for Outstanding Achievement and Leadership in Music.

Since then she has performed at the Canadian Opera Company, the Opéra national de Paris, the Vienna State Opera, and other far reaches.

Amid her travels, though, she regularly returns to her hometown for engagements with the New York Philharmonic, concerts at Carnegie Hall, and frequent appearances at the Metropolitan Opera, where she debuted in 2007. This month she will sing Dorabella in Così fan tutte for the Met’s HD broadcast under the baton of James Levine, a role she previously performed at the Salzburg Festival.

I caught up with Leonard amid a string of debuts with San Francisco Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and Dallas Opera (all as Rosina in Il barbiere di Siviglia), to reflect on career, family, and life in her hometown.

As a native New Yorker, how do you feel about having the opportunity to perform so much in the city where you grew up?

I think it’s fantastic! Of course, it’s wonderful to be able to be in a city I’m so familiar with and to work at the same time. It’s also, in its own right, very nerve wracking. It’s possible to feel more scrutinized in your home city, your home turf. You have fans that are rooting for you, but they’re aware of everything you do—more than in another place. So you’ve got to bring it!

Has New York City always been your primary residence or was there a time when you lived outside of the city?

It has always been my primary residence. I was born and raised in New York, so for me it’s been home and school. I love to work. It feels right to work anywhere. I think anyone would say that we like to work. We like having a job.

When you were growing up, did you attend a lot of musical events? Did you go to the Met and the symphony?

I did. Not in excess, however. Both of my parents were involved in the arts in some way, and I grew up in a music-rich household. My father was a painter and my mother was a dancer. So I was surrounded by music and exposed to a variety of musical events. I grew up in New York, so the Met was always a part of my upbringing. But I think it’s also part of my identity.

When you were growing up, did you think you would become a singer?

I didn’t think about it in that way. I was more interested in visual art and painting. I remember being a child and thinking about becoming a painter. I also loved music, but I didn’t think about it in that way. I was more interested in the visual aspect of it.

When you heard about the Met for the first time, did you think you would end up performing there one day?

I don’t remember the first time I heard about the Met. I always knew about it because it’s in New York City, and I didn’t necessarily know about other opera houses in the country because I didn’t live in other cities. You know what you’ve been exposed to as a child—so being part of this big institution, being part of this big cog that has been in motion long before you exist, and getting on that stage is very much like being integrated into this great machine that produces incredible music and incredible art. And so it was exciting! It was exciting just to be a part of it, to be a member of this great company in your hometown.

I love to work. It feels right to work anywhere. I think anyone would say that we like to work. We like having a job.

Since it is your local company, in your mind did you feel it was a natural next step for you to sing at the Met? Do you think you just assumed that is where you would eventually end up as a singer?

I think it was more a matter of my upbringing. If you’re a native New Yorker, it’s part of your identity to reflect on your career family and friends. It’s part of who you are, and it’s part of my identity to reflect on my upbringing.

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Growing up you danced with the Joffrey Ballet School. How old were you at the time, and what was that experience like?

I started studying at the school when I was about 5, and maybe 12 or so. I did the Joffrey for two seasons, which was a lot of fun. I was a young student dancer. I never continued to become a part of the company or anything, nor did I want to. I didn't want to be a ballerina, nor do I think physically, that's my body type. However, it provided me with great discipline. Anyone who has a physical discipline, whether it's mar-

Definitely not. My mother particularly has a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy dose of humility—a very heavy 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Leonard (left) and Miah Persson as Dorabella and Fiordiligi in the Metropolitan Opera's production of Così fan tutte, 2010

photo by Marty Sohl/Metropolitan Opera
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However, that doesn't stop me from wanting to do musical theatre now. I mean, you think I didn't go to CAP21 so, therefore, I didn't choose musical theatre as a career. But if I could sing in Camelot or Show Boat or West Side Story or any of those, I would do it in a heartbeat.

You have said before that you are a fan of George Gershwin and Irving Berlin. Would you like to pursue more musical theatre as your career develops?

Absolutely. I mean, I'd love to pursue more Bernstein—and even Sondheim, because I think the words are fantastic, even if he didn't necessarily do much about the actual vocal line as much as Bernstein, for example. But good singers, classically trained singers, could sing his work. I just love all of that music. It's such a part of our culture in this country.

Opera companies are doing more of what I would call being showed to do justice to the music at the moment. However, that doesn't stop me from wanting to do musical theatre. But if I could do it in Camelot or Show Boat or West Side Story or any of those, I would do it in a heartbeat.

In that particular building there I did downtown around the

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Leonard as Rosina in San Francisco Opera's production of Il barbiere di Siviglia, 2013

photo by Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera

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Studios:
This April marks one year since you won the 2013 Richard Tucker Award. How would you say that honor has impacted your career?

Well, something I said when I was asked this several months back when it first came out was that all of us who have been awarded this honor have been accepted into the Richard Tucker family, so to speak. Barry Tucker [president of the Richard Tucker Music Foundation] is very hands-on with the singers; he’s very involved in our lives. He really wants to be there for us. That’s the person he is, and that’s obviously how his family is, and he wouldn’t be that way if his father weren’t. So there’s this great feeling of being part of the family.

It’s just a great honor to carry the torch. It’s just a great honor to carry the tradition. What is one of the things you do differently because you’ve been awarded the honor?

One of the things that comes with the honor is that you’re expected to do something for the organization that awarded you. There’s a requirement to give something back, whether it’s your time or your efforts, or your skills. That’s what the Richard Tucker Foundation is about. It’s about giving back.

Classical Singer profiled Marilyn Horne back in our January issue in honor of her 80th birthday. You were a Marilyn Horne Foundation Award winner at the Music Academy of the West in 2005 and you recently sang at the Marilyn Horne birthday gala at Carnegie Hall earlier this year. As a fellow mezzo, how have you benefitted from your relationship with her?

She is one helluva lady! [laughs] She is an incredible force of nature—kind and loving with an incredible head on her shoulders. She is a model, I think, for lots of people and in many different ways—not just as a singer and a recitalist, but also as a businesswoman and a mother. She’s done so much and she continues to give—which is one of the things I think is so important. She gives so much, and she continues to give, and she has a great family that also gives—a foundation named after her. She is one helluva lady! [laughs] She is from your foundation, and she gives so much. She is a model, I think, a great model to all of us. She gives so much, and she continues to give.

Speaking of being a mother, you have discussed in previous interviews how your young son often travels with you to different engagements. Does he have a pretty good sense of what it is that you do for a living?

He kind of gets it. He’s sweet. I tell him, “Say ‘Toi toi toi!’ to me,” and he goes, “Toi toi toi! Sing well! Sing pretty!” He actually wants to come back because very often, when you get back from tour, your voice is not as good as when you went out. I think he understands that. He kind of gets it.

This April marks one year since you won the 2013 Richard Tucker Award. How would you say that honor has impacted your career?
When you were growing up in New York City and went on to study music, did you ever doubt that you would make it as a singer? I think there’s always a bit of doubt. I think any singer would agree that anytime we get sick, there’s eons and eons of doubt. We think that life is over—I’m sick and I’ll never sing again. It’s really pathetic. You’d think after years and years and years we could get through that, but a lot of the time it’s “This is it! This is the one! This is the cold that’ll do me in!” [laughs]

There is always a healthy level of doubt. I mean, I think it’s important because if you have a healthy level of respect for what you do, you’ll protect it. You can’t take your voice box out and stick it in a case and say, “Alright, I don’t need to use it now, so it’s going to rest in a corner.” I wish I could sometimes. With a toddler, I feel like I talk all the time. But, you know, you’ve just got to figure it out.

In 2009, a writer referred to you as the “opera it-girl.” Then, just recently, five years after that first article, you were again referred to as the “opera it-girl.” Clearly, people are seeing and hearing something in you that they find unique. Do you have thoughts on what it is that sets you apart?

Oh, gosh! That’s a hard question. I wouldn’t even have a clue how to answer it. [laughs] All I can say is that I love my job and I want more than anything to tell a story. More often than not, I really want it to make sense to me. I don’t know how it makes sense to me, but I do know that if I really, really mean a story and I really believe in it, that’s what I love. I’m not sure anything else makes sense to me.

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generally, I don’t believe much of what I hear. [laughs]

Being in your early 30s, you’re still quite young for an opera singer. Has there been pressure already for you to start singing roles that you may not feel are right for your voice yet? What is your plan for adding new repertoire as you go forward in your career?

Luckily, in terms of managing a career, I was taught and am still guided by the best—Matthew Epstein. He’s really taught me how to think about roles and music and what to do and what not to do in different stages of my life so far. Between him, my teacher Edith Bers, and my confidants and friends—there’s a small group—I feel very well protected in making the right decisions when it comes to business. It’s invaluable to have that, to have a few key people that you really trust who know your voice.

You learn as you go along. Your opinion becomes stronger and stronger and outweighs more of the other opinions as you get older. You feel stronger making those decisions yourself. It’s a process; everything’s a process.

For me, I didn’t really know very much about all of the classical music repertoire when I started. I’m still learning. I mean, there’s so much! Key people that I could really trust could say, “This is going to be a stretch and it’s going to be a good stretch. This is going to be a stretch in the other direction and it’s a good stretch. This is going to sit easy for you, you could do it on your head.” And all of those comments have been true so far. I haven’t done anything that I have thought, “That was a huge mistake!” Everything has really been in the right direction, so I feel fortunate.

Do you have any advice for up-and-coming singers who would like to emulate the success you have seen?

Gosh, in some ways there’s so much, and in some ways I don’t know if I’ve got the success you would like to emulate the most. But I think that, rather than having too much, you need to have one thing very strong that you really know you’re good at, whether it’s double-roles or whether it’s your range. And then, of course, you need to have that confidence in yourself as well. It’s one of those things that you hear a lot, but you need to have that confidence in yourself.

I think if you have the steps, the building blocks before it—get your technique right. You’ve got to have a good technique. If you want to be a long-distance runner, you’d better know how to run because consistently doing a small thing that’s wrong will injure your long-distance standing, and you won’t be able to do it anymore. And understand that your voice will continue to change because these are muscles we’re talking about.

You have to kind of know yourself. If you’re a person that does well with new repertoire, then do new rep. If you’re a person that does well repeating repertoire, then repeat the rep. And then, of course, find those people that you trust and talk to them a lot. Get their opinions and talk a lot about the kinds of things that interest you.

I know more about myself now of course, than I did seven years ago when I debuted at the Met. And self-discovery is so personal. A student could hear [advice] and think, “Oh, that’s really awesome and so profound. A writer could hear [advice] and think, “What an odd idea! Where did you come from?” I didn’t even hear it before me.

I know more about myself now of the kinds of things that interest me. I know a lot more about the kinds of things that I like. I’m going to write that down! That makes so much sense!” I remember doing that too. But it slowly leaves your mind, because that’s just not where you are yet in your career. It’s only later on that it pops up again.

I think if you have the steps, the building blocks before it—get your technique right, have a group that you trust, have that kind of thing going on—you will have a process.

Tenor Brian Manternach teaches voice at the University of Utah in the Musical Theatre Program. He holds degrees in vocal performance from Saint John’s University of Minnesota (BA), the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (MM), and the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music (DM). He can be reached at bmantern@byu.edu.