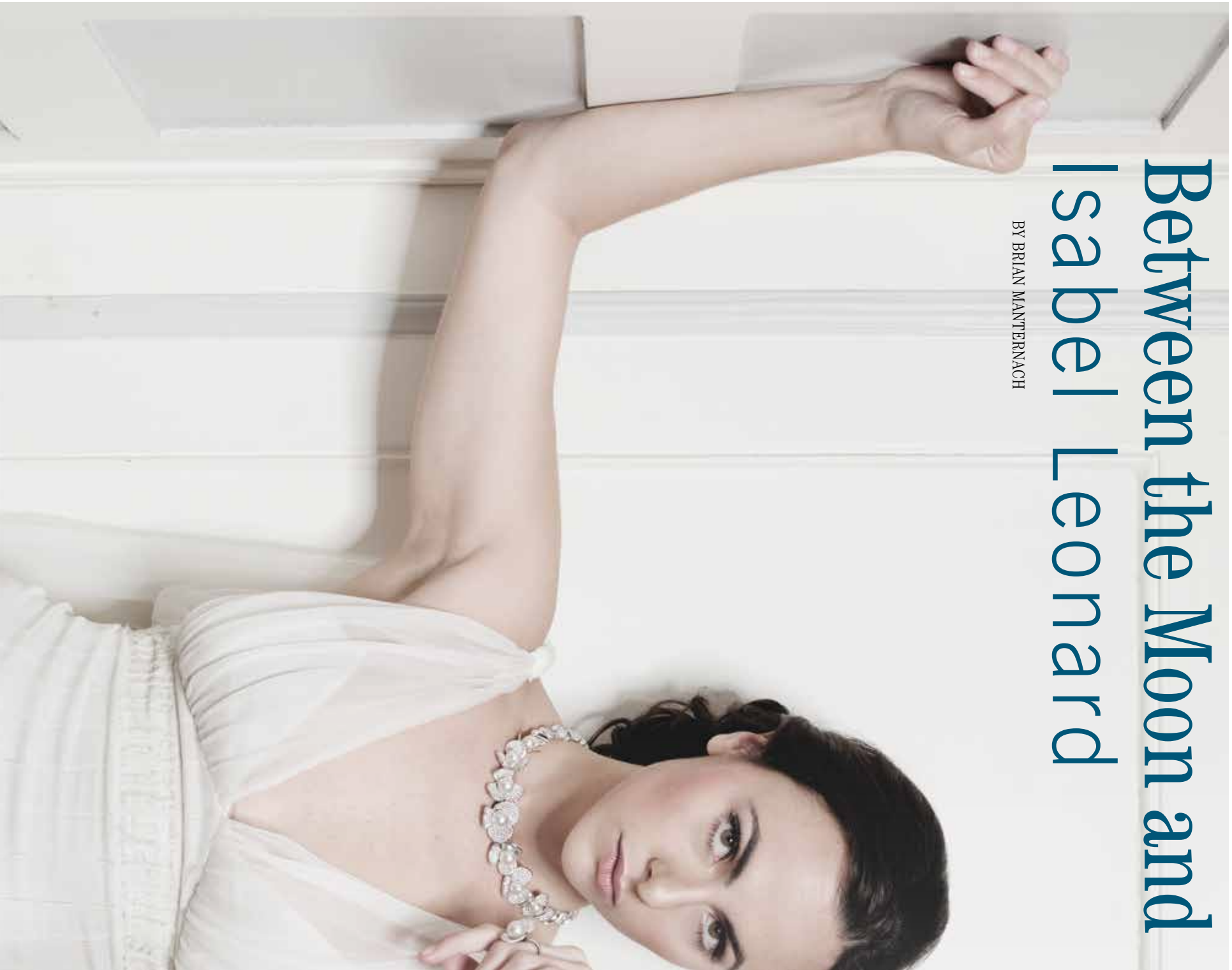


Between the Moon and Isabel Leonard

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH



New York City

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 know for certain that she would end up on its stage. Blessed with a level-headed mother who helped her keep things in perspective, Leonard followed her voice wherever it would lead her. Now that voice—after years of hard work, training, and lots of determination—continues to take her around the world.

While many singers move to New York City to seek their fortunes, 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. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. 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 launched an international career that has taken her to 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 maybe than in another place. So you've got to bring it! [laughs]

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 and work.

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 their own ways and wanted me to appreciate art, of course. I did go to the opera with my mother and was very influenced by my father in terms of visual art. So that was a part of my upbringing.

I wasn't a theatre brat by any stretch of the imagination, though.

Was there an added thrill for you, then, when you performed for the first time at the Met, having been there at a much younger age?

You know, I don't remember the first time I was in the Met as an audience member. That's my own bad memory, I suppose. I always knew about the Met because that is what was 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 have been exposed to as a child—so being on the other side of it, being part of a big institution, being part of this big cog that has been in motion long before you ever existed, 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 just exciting! It was exciting just to be a part of it.

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. [laughs]

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?



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Leonard performing at the 2013 Richard Tucker Award Gala.

Definitely not. My mother particularly has a very heavy dose of “you don’t know where you’ll end up” type of attitude—a very heavy dose of humility. She has always been very heavy handed with me, so to speak, in that sense. Not because she had to, it was just her own sense—maybe from her own upbringing—of “well, we don’t know where you stand in the world of opera.”

Like when I was in high school, [she said], “Well, we don’t know where you stand in the world of all the other people auditioning for music programs in the country, so you’re going to audition and then we’ll figure that out. We’ll see what this means.” That’s kind of always been the way we’ve approached things and now, of course, it’s a part of who I am, where you say, “You don’t really know where you are until you try it.” I think that’s sort of how I’ve gone along with all of these things.

I’m sure at some point when I was at Juilliard I thought how cool it would be to sing on the Met stage, but it was never the thought of I *have* to or I *will* or it *will* happen or it *has* to happen. It was just like, “It would be really awesome if it did; hopefully it’ll happen”—that kind of thing. Maybe it’s my own way of protecting myself so that I’m not disappointed. But it certainly helps to never desire something above all else so that if it doesn’t happen, you’re not disappointed.

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 until maybe 12 or so. I did the *Mitcracker* twice when the Joffrey did it at City Center for two seasons, which was a lot of fun. I was a young, student dancer. I never continued it 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 I would have become one. I don’t think, physically, that’s my body type.

However, it provided me with great physical discipline. Anyone who has a physical discipline, whether it’s mar-



photo by Dario Acosta

tial arts or dance or a sport or anything, [builds] command of your limbs. In the-atre, of course, it's very useful.

Did you entertain the possibility of going somewhere else for college or did you know that Juilliard was where you wanted to be?

I narrowed my choices down when I was going for undergrad to NYU to their Tisch program—the musical theatre program, CAP21—and to Juilliard. When I left LaGuardia, I wasn't sure whether I wanted to go directly into classical music, though, because I was very much into musical theatre, as most high schoolers [are]. I got into both CAP21 and to Juilliard and I thought I should spend a day in each place and see what I thought—where I felt more comfortable. And the truth is I just happened to feel more comfortable at Juilliard for whatever it was—the day, the students I met, whatever. I felt more comfortable and more at ease

Leonard (left) and Emma Bell as Cherubino and Countess Almaviva in the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Le nozze di Figaro*, 2009



photo by Marty Sohl/Metropolitan Opera



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Leonard (left) and Miah Persson as Dorabella and Forliligi in the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Così fan tutte*, 2010



photo by Marty Sohl/Metropolitan Opera



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

photo by Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera

in that particular building than I did downtown around the variety of buildings that NYU has. It just wasn't the right atmosphere for me quite yet at the time.

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 *Cannulet* or *Show Boat* or *West Side Story* or any of those, I would do it in a heartbeat!

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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. It's not being overlooked, but I believe there is a whole group and wealth of singers that could do justice to that music [who are] not really being allowed to do justice to the music at the moment.

Opera companies are doing more of what I would call the “classical” musical theatre pieces, and that's really exciting. This is all my big soapbox about the future of music and everything, but I think it's our responsibility also to continue educating our audiences in a natural way by exposing them to the best singing that they can get in any type of music. So an opera company's responsibility, if they're going to put on musical theatre, is always to make sure they've got the best singing that they can find for that music, because it just perpetuates good music.

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 group to carry the torch for; it's very exciting for anybody that gets that honor.

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 benefited 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 technician and a theatre animal but also as a businesswoman and a mother. She's done so much and she continues to give—which is one of, I think, the most important things to do in the arts.

If you're involved in the arts, there is a point where just doing your craft actually isn't enough for most artists, and the desire to give back becomes very

strong as well. And then you find this sort of balance between what you do for work and what you do that actually fills your soul. Being able to do both is really a balance, and she does that wonderfully and she teaches how that is. She's the embodiment of what that means.

It's hard to pin her down in words because I feel like I would go on for ages trying to get it right. She's a person to admire.

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 to the

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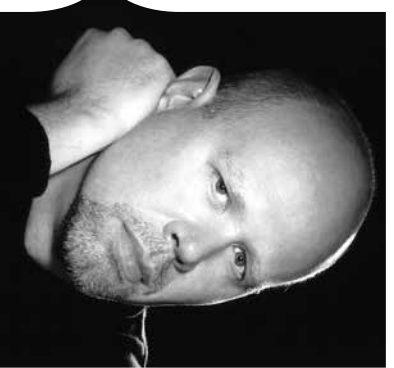
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“If you’re involved in the arts, there is a point where just doing your craft actually isn’t enough for most artists, and the desire to give back becomes very strong as well. And then you find this sort of balance between what you do for work and what you do that actually fills your soul.”

opera with me more. I’ve never pushed it on him and so sometimes I say, “Would you like to come?” and he goes, “Yeah, I wanna come to the opera!”

I Skype him all the time, so he sees me dressed as a girl, dressed as a boy . . . [laughs]. I may have to cover up some of the more inappropriate things.

What did he think of your 2013 appearance on Sesame Street?

He thought it was pretty cool. It’s different for little kids, though. He just knows that Mama is talking to some really furry, fuzzy-looking creatures. So he’s like, “Oh, that’s Mama!”

When you were growing up and progressing in this field, was there a time in your life where you wondered if you would make it as a singer?

I feel like 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 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 will continue to protect it. You can’t take your voice box out and stick it in a case and say, “All right, I don’t need to use it now, so it’s going to go 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 first. If it doesn’t make sense to me, I don’t know how it could possibly make sense to anybody else who’s watching.

If I can’t get into the character and if I can’t find the center truth of it all, I have a really hard time singing—like, the actual technical part of singing doesn’t work as well. I mean, it’s different now because you develop and you evolve as a singer and you learn how to do things even on the worst of days. But if I’m really connected to a character and I can tell a story, I don’t usually have to think about my voice as much as I do if it were the other way around.

That’s sort of my perspective on it, what I try and aim for. [But] I don’t see what other people see; I just try to do my job. [laughs]

You know, I’ve got my close group of friends and my teacher and manager and very close colleagues of mine who I trust. If they say it’s good, I believe them. But,

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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—among this 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 rep 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 very fortunate that way.

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'm a person to give advice. I think every career has different stages. I'm at a stage right

Leonard as Dorabella in the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Così fan tutte*, 2010



photo by Marty Sohl/Metropolitan Opera

now which is very different than a much younger singer's career.

In the beginning, I would say 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. 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 rep, then do new rep. If you're a person that does well repeating rep, 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 ad-

vice. 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, have a group that you trust, have that kind of thing going on—when you get to other moments in your career which are challenging, you can get through them with a lot of self-discovery and self-awareness that propel you to whatever next stage is appropriate for you.

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@gmail.com.

