

John Chest: A Budd-ing Career Centered on Signature Roles

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

John Chest's career path did not initially go where he wanted or expected. But now, with a repertoire rich in European experience, he has returned to the U.S. to debut a roll that has been following him from the beginning of his studies. With a young family in tow, the mentors, teachers, and opportunities that presented themselves to Chest are not necessarily the path he would have chosen, but they have led him toward a career that is catching the attention of the classical singing world.

n Benjamin Britten's operatic adaptation of Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd*, the title character can barely contain his excitement when he is welcomed to the crew of the HMS *Indomitable*. The young sailor commits himself entirely to whatever the future may hold, singing, "Billy Budd, king of the world! . . . Goodbye to the old life. Don't want it no more." In similar fashion, the indomitable baritone John Chest has been making a splash on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, steadfastly sailing wherever the winds of opportunity take him.

The American-born singer has already made an international name for himself in competitions, winning the 2010 Stella Maris International Vocal Competition and reaching the finals of the 2017 BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition. Now, signature roles like the aforementioned Billy Budd are leading him to major operatic stages the world over.

Musical Beginnings

A native of Greenville, South Carolina, Chest found an early musical influence in his father. In addition to serving as the music pastor at the family's hometown church, he also played clarinet and taught woodwind instruments, ensuring that each of his four children would have their turns in clarinet lessons. For Chest, however, music and singing were not an obvious career path. "I didn't know I was going to be a singer until I already was one, basically," he says. "It kind of snuck up on me a little bit."

Since both of Chest's parents worked at Bob Jones University, a Christian liberal arts university with about 3,000 students, he knew early on where he would attend college. But that was about the only thing that was determined about his future. "I think really I had no direction at all," he says. "I had a lot of friends who, by the end of high school, knew exactly what they wanted to do with their lives. I didn't, really."

Majoring in music, then, was not so much an avenue to follow his passion as it was a choice to study a subject that seemed like it would be interesting and "maybe even fun." Chest's interest began to deepen, however, during his last year of college. "I was reading Richard Miller and was really into it," he says. "I had a buddy, and we would sit in a practice room for hours and talk about the passaggio and singing top notes. We were really, really nerdy about it."

Chest decided to pursue graduate studies in voice performance and, although he did apply



to a couple of programs on the East Coast, he began to target schools in Illinois as his search narrowed. "I realized I didn't want to live in New York," he says. "I was scared to death of New York. Chicago seemed a lot more doable for me."

In the end, he auditioned for two schools, the University of Illinois and the Chicago College of Performing Arts (CCPA) at Roosevelt University. As he was waiting to hear whether he would be awarded any scholarships (which were necessary for him if graduate school was to be financially viable), he received a phone call from David Holloway, who was on the voice faculty at CCPA. Holloway offered Chest reassurance that, regardless of which school he decided to attend, a bright future lay ahead for him. As Chest recalls, "It was really human. I think that was the moment I



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decided I wanted to go to Roosevelt, on that interaction."

When Roosevelt came through with a generous financial offer, that sealed the deal. "I stuck with my gut and I went to Roosevelt," he says.

Studying with Holloway proved to be fortuitous. Drawing on a long career in opera, Holloway knew exactly what repertoire to assign the young baritone. "He'd sung all the roles that I've either sung or will sing," Chest says. "So that was a great meeting of the right person at the right time to give me the right information that I needed."

Holloway also helped shape the way Chest began to approach music, helping him see beyond the notes on the page to communicate the emotion that was within. "He was like, 'If you're not singing from your heart, it's useless. Don't do it.' That resonated," Chest says.





Summer in Santa Fe

After his first year at CCPA, Chest was still trying to determine whether a career as a singer was really in the cards for him. It so happens that Holloway was the apprentice director of the Santa Fe Opera, and he encouraged Chest to audition for the summer program. "I think I basically said, 'No, thank you,'" Chest says. "I wasn't particularly ambitious. I wanted to be as good as I could be but, at that moment, I wasn't sure this is what I wanted to do."

When fellow Roosevelt faculty member Michael Best—who had been Chest's first contact at the school when he was auditioning—heard about that conversation, he sought out the young baritone. "He stopped me in the hall one day and he said, 'I heard that the director of the Santa Fe apprentice program wanted you to audition and you said

no," Chest recalls. "And I said, 'Yeah,' and he's like, 'Are you dumb? What are you doing?" Chest laughs as he retells the story.

"Now I know him better, but at the time I thought he was being really rude or rough," Chest says. Still, it made an impression. "He kind of said, 'Are you not serious about this? We're giving you \$20,000 a year to be here and we thought that you really wanted to do the best that you can do with what we have to offer you. That's part of what you're here to get.' That was a big wake-up moment for me."

Chest did audition for Santa Fe and, after first being named as an alternate, was eventually accepted into the program. "It was all I had going that summer," he says. "The summer in Santa Fe probably, more than anything, changed my life."

As an apprentice, he was given chorus assignments while serving

as an understudy for one small role. Once again, Holloway stepped in to offer guidance. The operas slated for that summer included *Falstaff*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, and *Billy Budd*. "David was like, 'You need to make the most of this summer," Chest remembers. "Since your assignment is really small, you're going to have lots of free time, so you need to learn the role of Billy."

Unfamiliar with the opera, Chest did as his teacher requested. "As far as David was concerned, I was the second cover for Billy, which was not a thing," he says. "But he took time out of his schedule and gave me lessons and coachings. There were other coaches there and he arranged for me to work with them."

Holloway gave Chest similar assignments to learn the Count in "Figaro" and to learn Ford in *Falstaff*, working on repertoire he knew would



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be in the young baritone's future. But there was something about Billy Budd that Chest found compelling. "That bit me," he says. "The music, the role, the atmosphere—that was really cool."

Signature Roles

After that summer in
Santa Fe, things began to fall
into place. Chest graduated
with his master's degree in
2009 and entered the Merola
Opera Program at the San
Francisco Opera (SFO) that
same summer. Following that,
he moved to Europe to join
the professional Opernstudio
at the Bavarian State Opera
from 2009 to 2011, later
becoming a member of the ensemble
at Deutsche Oper Berlin—a position

he held until 2016. Of the many roles

he performed in Berlin, three directly

connected him to that fortuitous summer in Santa Fe: Ford in *Falstaff*, the Count in *Le nozze di Figaro*, and the title role in *Billy Budd*.

"Before kids, it was easier to just go with the flow.

The careers were our kids and we just made everything work around the careers. Priorities just left immediately when we saw that baby."

Since his early 20s, people had been encouraging Chest to explore the role of Billy. "[At the time,] I didn't know who Benjamin Britten was," he says. "I didn't know what *Billy Budd* was except for just very peripherally." All that changed when he opened the score for the

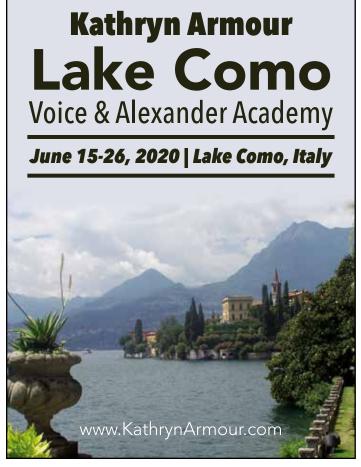
first time. "I had the feeling of stepping into a suit that had been made for me, tailored for me."

Much of that comfort has to do with Britten's vocal writing. The role of Billy Budd requires a high, lyric baritone, but it also contains dramatic moments that Chest finds similar to those common in Verdi baritone roles.

He also believes he physically fits what audiences have come to expect from the role. "I get told all of the time, 'You look like Billy Budd," he says. "I don't have any control over that. ean, I look the way I look. It's

I mean, I look the way I look. It's funny—there are a couple of lines in the show that kind of give me a complex. He's described as the big





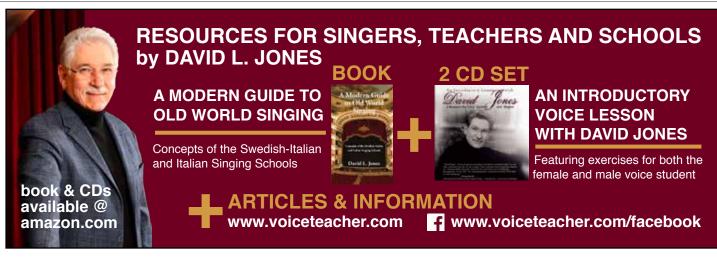


lad with the stammer, and I'm not particularly tall and I try not to be too heavy. I don't think of myself as a big person, so I try to hit the gym before every production of *Billy Budd*!"

In 2019, Chest had a full-circle career experience, returning to San Francisco Opera to sing Billy Budd exactly 10 years after he had been an apprentice in the SFO Merola Opera Program. Due to his work in Europe, Chest had not even visited San Francisco in that decade, much less performed there. He describes being able to return to the company that played such a significant part in his early development as "a really, really good feeling."

Chest acknowledges that performing as a featured artist for a company in which he had previously cut his teeth as an apprentice can come with a unique set of problems. "It can be a tricky thing for everybody," he says. "For me to get over feeling like a student, for the people who are in charge to get to the point where they look at you in a different way, it's hard." Even so, his experience returning to San Francisco Opera was tremendously positive. "It's really gratifying. It feels like turning a page or starting a new chapter."

Critics seemed to enjoy his performances, too, as the *San Francisco Examiner* described Chest's



"splendid impression in his SFO debut as Billy Budd" and the *San Francisco Chronicle*'s *DateBook* hailed "an impressive company debut with a performance of freshness and vitality."

Balancing Work and Family

While working to meet the demands of his career as a singer, Chest is also dedicated to maintaining a healthy family life. He is married to fellow opera singer Layla Claire, and they have two young children. When the two singers were expecting their first child, they sought the advice of other singing couples regarding how to keep both of their careers moving forward while also being committed to their growing family.

Although there were few people they could turn to who were in the same situation, those they did find emphasized the importance of planning. "There's a lot of planning that goes into our lives anyway with travel," Chest says. "You plan far ahead and you know where you're going to be in two or three years sometimes. But then with kids, there are just that many more variables."

Today, the couple decides together who should take which jobs, ideally allowing one parent to be with the children while the other is working. When possible, the family travels together, which they understand will become more difficult when the children reach school age.

"It's tricky," Chest says. "Before kids, it was easier to just go with the flow. The careers were our kids and we just made everything work around the careers. Priorities just left immediately when we saw that baby."

He admits that it is not always clear which choices to make and he

feels every family must find the path that works for them, knowing that there is no set formula for success. But he is comforted to find more couples in their situation now than he was aware of when he and Claire were first having children. "A lot of people are doing this now," he says. "More and more, I'm meeting so many people who are in the same boat as we are."

Good Advice and Good Fortune

Just as he sought the advice of others when becoming a parent for the first time, the best experiencebased advice he can offer to those looking to become professional opera singers is to make the most of training opportunities.

"This is universal for everything, but when you're a student, you take for granted what you're being given," he says. "I would have made a lot



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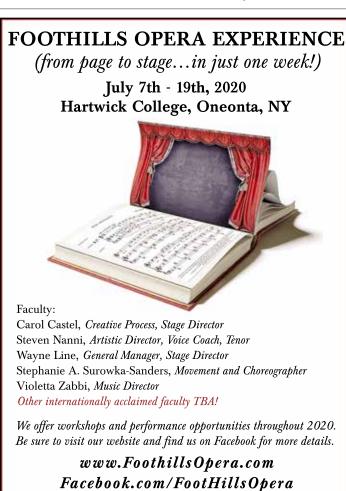


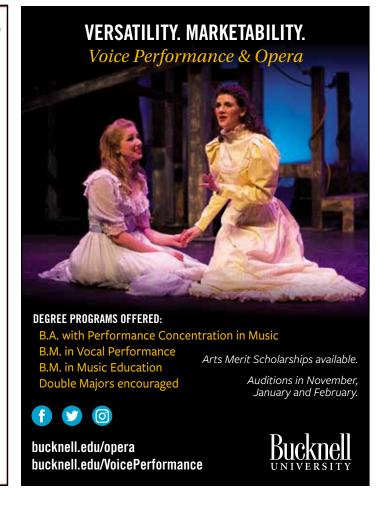
more out of the coaching time I was given in grad school. And then later, when I was in Munich, I would have made a lot more out of the coaching time I was given there. At the time, you kind of see it as an inconvenience or you see it as another thing that you have to do. But that actually is the work."

He believes that outside of school and young artist settings, regular coachings can be difficult to come by and can be costly to the budgets of young professionals. "When you have it, you don't realize what a gift it is," he says. "Use the resources you have."

Even so, he realizes how fortunate he has been thus far in his career. Although there were short dry spells between gigs, for the most part, one engagement has consistently led to another.

"I was really lucky in that way," he says. "I met a manager who had heard me sing in 2008 who took me on in an advisory way and he helped me plan things. He became my manager, and I'm still with him, and that's going well. I was lucky to have that—and I was lucky that there was





always something on the horizon to get me to the next step."

Navigating through Rough Seas

Looking back on the many successes in Chest's young career, it may be difficult to imagine that a life on the operatic stage was not something he was seriously considering until relatively late in his training. "I still think the influence from my upbringing was that performing wasn't necessarily the best pursuit for your life," he says. "Teaching was a very honorable thing . . . and if you were a church musician, that would be even better. It's like there was a sliding scale, and opera singer was not even on the page."

Chest says he knows people who were drawn to performing from an early age and, although he always did enjoy performing in front of people, it was not "programmed" into him as a worthy pursuit. Making this mental shift came partly from the guidance of mentors, like the professor who chided him for not initially pursuing the apprenticeship at the Santa Fe Opera. "The deprogramming, and the tough love from Michael Best, was part of me realizing that performing was something I *could* do and maybe was something I really *wanted* to do," he says. "I just had to get my brain wrapped around the idea."

In Act 1 of *Billy Budd*, the title role meets the HMS *Indomitable*'s master-at-arms John Claggart. In their introduction, Claggart asks the young sailor, "Can you read?" Billy Budd replies, "No, but I can sing!" to which Claggart responds, "Never mind singing."

Chest experienced similar discouragement and uncertainty that could have derailed his career

as an opera singer before it even got started in earnest. But his current success may be credited to good mentoring, personal dedication, and a willingness to follow the opportunities that presented themselves. "There were a lot of times when the next step wasn't that obvious, and I ended up going a way I didn't really want to," he says. "So, if I'd have had my way and gone back and did what I wanted to do, I wouldn't be where I am right now."

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