



John Chest

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.

In 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



Christina Gansch and Chest as Mélisande and Pelléas in the Glyndebourne festival's production of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, 2018

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

photo by Richard Hubert Smith



U ARTIST MUSIC WORKSHOPS AND CONCERTS 2020

Kyiv, Ukraine, August 10 - 20, 2020
Conductors and Singers

Concert performance with a professional orchestra for every participant

- 11 days intensive of masterclasses and workshops with a symphony orchestra, individual and group lessons
- 3 public performances (1 recital and 2 with full symphony orchestra) featuring all the participants
- Singers to work on 2/3 arias with a symphony orchestra and 2/3 arias or art songs with a pianist
- Conductors to work with orchestral repertoire and on 2/3 arias or duets with singers

Principal workshop language: English
Secondary: German, Russian and Ukrainian

Application Deadline: May 15, 2020
www.uartistmusic.com

THE GIULIO GARI FOUNDATION

2020 INTERNATIONAL VOCAL COMPETITION

Held at

The Liederkrantz Foundation
6 East 87th Street, New York, NY 10128

Age Requirement 21-35

PRELIMINARIES:

May 4-7 from 10:30AM to 5:00PM

FINALS:

May 8 from 10:30AM to 5:00PM

FIRST PRIZE: \$10,000

SECOND PRIZE: \$7,000

THIRD PRIZE: \$5,000 FOURTH PRIZE: \$3,000

FIFTH PRIZE: \$2,000 GRANTS: \$1,000

ENCOURAGEMENTS: \$500

Email Applications preferred and must be received by
April 20, 2020, 5:00PM EST

For more information visit: www.giuliogari.org

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.

photo by L’Opéra national de Lorraine



Chest (left) and Johnny Herford (right) as Heathcliff and Mr. Lockwood in Opéra national de Lorraine’s production of *Les Hauts de Hurlevent*, 2019



WILLIAM  COLLEGE

Artist Diploma in Voice

Our small, intensive and highly personalized program is modeled after professional young artist programs, yet within an academic setting

jewell.edu/artist-diploma

- 2-year program (graduate); 24 credit hours with seminars, private and group lessons, acting classes
- Auditions held on and off campus at the singer’s convenience. Enrollment limited to six singers per year.
- 15 minutes from Kansas City’s premier performance venues

Faculty includes Kathleen Smith Belcher, 17-year director at the Metropolitan Opera. Guest faculty includes artists from the Metropolitan Opera, Opera Colorado, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Opera San Antonio, Utah Opera, Opera Saratoga, Opera Orlando and more.



Program Director Daniel Belcher, GRAMMY® Award-winning baritone

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



54th International
Vocal Competition
Opera | Oratorio
28 Nov - 6 Dec 2020
's-Hertogenbosch
Netherlands

Jury
Pál Christian Moe
jury president
Deborah Polaski
soprano
Vesselina Kasarova
mezzo-soprano
Yue Liu
bass | Central Conservatory of Music Beijing
Vincent Bousard
stage director
Damia Carbonell & Rosemary Joshua
Dutch National Opera
Hein Mulders
Intendant Oper, Philharmonie,
Essener Philharmoniker

Preliminary Rounds
's-Hertogenbosch, Amsterdam,
Luxembourg, Beijing
Auditions also via YouTube

€42,000 prize money plus engagements

ivc.nu



WORLD FEDERATION
OF INTERNATIONAL
MUSIC COMPETITIONS

OPERA. CONNECTIONS. EUROPE
www.operaconnectionseurope.com
**Attention emerging young opera
singers, conductors and coaches**

**Want to Audition in Europe?
Prepare Yourself !**

10 day intensive to perfect audition repertoire,
work one-to-one with European professionals in
the field and make those important personal
mentorship connections with top coaches,
conductors, casting directors,
stage directors, artist managers and agents,
career and media consultants

**Only 8 singers and 4 pianists
accepted per session**

AUGUST 01 – 11, 2020
La Roche d'Hys Domaine des Arts
Burgundy France
application deadline April 15, 2020

**For further information please visit website
or write to:**
opera.connections.europe@gmail.com

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. 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

McClosky Institute of Voice

2020 Summer Seminars

*Help for the Troubled Voice
Enhancement of the Healthy Voice
Where Science Meets Art*

3½ days — 20 hours of instruction

9 hours of small-group work on technique

7 lectures, including

Life Cycle of the Voice • Speaking Voice
Practicing Repertoire • Popular Styles

Plus: Opening Night BBQ and Faculty Recital

Salem, MA — July 9–12

Greenville, SC — July 15–18

\$499

www.mcclosky.org



Kathryn Armour Lake Como Voice & Alexander Academy

June 15-26, 2020 | Lake Como, Italy



www.KathrynArmour.com



photo by Cory Weaver

Chest as the title role in San Francisco Opera's production of *Billy Budd*, 2019

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



book & CDs
available @
amazon.com

RESOURCES FOR SINGERS, TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS by DAVID L. JONES

**A MODERN GUIDE TO
OLD WORLD SINGING**

Concepts of the Swedish-Italian
and Italian Singing Schools

BOOK



2 CD SET



**AN INTRODUCTORY
VOICE LESSON
WITH DAVID JONES**

Featuring exercises for both the
female and male voice student

ARTICLES & INFORMATION

www.voiceteacher.com

www.voiceteacher.com/facebook

“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 experience-based 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



Hugh Hodgson School of Music UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

*Opera Assistantships
& Scholarships available.
To learn more, visit:*

OPERA.UGA.EDU

FACULTY

Gregory Broughton
Frederick Burchinal
Veronique Burchinal
Elizabeth Knight
Stephanie Tingler
Kathryn Wright

VOICE & OPERA STUDIES
BMus, MM, DMA



UGA Opera Theatre, Donizetti's Don Pasquale

For more information and area-specific audition dates, visit:

music.uga.edu/voice



Chest at Deutsche Oper Berlin.

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

FOOTHILLS OPERA EXPERIENCE

(from page to stage...in just one week!)

July 7th - 19th, 2020
Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY



Faculty:

Carol Castel, *Creative Process, Stage Director*
Steven Nanni, *Artistic Director, Voice Coach, Tenor*
Wayne Line, *General Manager, Stage Director*
Stephanie A. Surowka-Sanders, *Movement and Choreographer*
Violetta Zabbi, *Music Director*

Other internationally acclaimed faculty TBA!

We offer workshops and performance opportunities throughout 2020. Be sure to visit our website and find us on Facebook for more details.

www.FoothillsOpera.com
Facebook.com/FoothillsOpera

VERSATILITY. MARKETABILITY.

Voice Performance & Opera



DEGREE PROGRAMS OFFERED:

B.A. with Performance Concentration in Music
B.M. in Vocal Performance
B.M. in Music Education
Double Majors encouraged

Arts Merit Scholarships available.

Auditions in November, January and February.



bucknell.edu/opera
bucknell.edu/VoicePerformance

Bucknell
UNIVERSITY

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.”

Brian Manternach, DM, is an assistant professor at the University of Utah Department of Theatre and a research associate at the National Center for Voice and Speech. He is an associate editor of the Journal of Singing and he blogs at drbrianmanternach.blogspot.com. Visit brianmanternach.com for more information. CSJ MUSIC

VOCAL ARTS AT DEPAUW

A VOCAL PERFORMANCE WORKSHOP FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

JUNE 21-27, 2020

APPLICATION DEADLINE: MAY 1, 2020

TUITION, ROOM, AND BOARD: \$700 PLUS TAXES

MUSIC.DEPAUW.EDU/VOCALARTS

“I love you all! I was really worried about coming to the camp and tried my best to not make prior expectations so I didn’t get disappointed. It was so much more than I ever expected and will forever make a mark and impact my music life!”

