

FROM LOW POINTS TO HIGH NOTES

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

Bass-baritone Ryan Speedo Green's journey to an international opera career at first glance seems rather ordinary. Green earned vocal performance degrees at the Hartt School and Florida State University. He went on to Young Artist Programs with Opera Colorado and the Martina Arroyo Foundation. And in 2011, he won the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and landed a spot in the Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. But as a new book and subsequent national media attention reveal, his story is a truly extraordinary one about his very troubled childhood that somehow led to a life Green could never have imagined—until he did.



From time to time, an opera singer strikes a chord with popular culture and develops a following outside the realm of classical music. Renée Fleming's reputation as "the people's diva" was built, in part, by her TV appearances on the likes of *Good Morning America* and the *Late Show with David Letterman* as well as by singing the national anthem for Super Bowl XLVIII. Luciano Pavarotti solidified his celebrity status outside of opera partly through the "Pavarotti & Friends" concerts, in which he performed alongside pop music icons like Sting, Jon Bon Jovi, Mariah Carey, and the Spice Girls. Other opera singers occasionally appear on talk shows or make cameos on *Sesame Street*—but, for the most part, their fame does not extend too far beyond the footlights of the operatic stage.

Not so with Ryan Speedo Green. In the last year, the bass-baritone has been interviewed by Harry Connick, Jr., Tavis Smiley, and *The Daily Show's* Trevor Noah. He was heard on National Public Radio's *Here & Now* and *Fresh Air* and was featured on *CBS This Morning*. His interviews in print media include the *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Washington Post*, and *Parade* magazine.

Considering that Green, at 30 years of age, is still in the relatively early stages of his career, it may seem surprising that he has become such a media magnet. Make no mistake: his early operatic accomplishments are significant. He was a winner of the 2011 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and earned a spot in the Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. He returned to the Met recently to perform Colline in *La bohème* and has given multiple

performances abroad with the Wiener Staatsoper. He has also appeared as soloist with the symphonies of Cleveland, Boston, and Philadelphia.

To understand the firestorm of media attention Green has garnered, however, his career accomplishments must be placed in the context of his larger journey and the unlikely path that led to his success. Not many opera stars can claim growing up in a trailer park in impoverished, drug-infested neighborhoods, but Green can. Fewer yet could say they were handcuffed, shackled, and "escorted" to a juvenile detention facility where they would spend months of their pre-teen years, but this was Green's reality.

His harrowing sojourn is chronicled in the recent book *Sing for Your Life: A Story of Race, Music, and Family* by Daniel Bergner. A tale of struggle and hardship, it also is a story of inspiration as Green finds his own determination and self-worth with the help and attention of devoted teachers.

To understand the firestorm of media attention Green has garnered, however, his career accomplishments must be placed in the context of his larger journey and the unlikely path that led to his success.



Green as Mandarin in The Metropolitan Opera's production of *Turandot*, 2012

photo by Marty Solt/The Metropolitan Opera

The book begins as Green is participating in the Met competition. The opening sentence summarizes much of his life up to that point: “Ryan Speedo Green did not belong here.” Though he was determined and willing to pay the price for success and had advanced to the finals of this prestigious national competition, Green’s feelings of inadequacy led to a single-minded focus that nearly kept the book from ever being written.

Author Daniel Bergner, tasked with writing an article for the *New York Times Magazine* about the Met competition and its participants, sent e-mails to all 22 finalists requesting interviews. He received 21 responses. “I was so nerve-

wracked by going to the Met competition that I didn’t want any distractions and I didn’t write him back,” Green says. “I was like, he doesn’t need to hear my story . . . just let me focus on the competition.”

Bergner eventually tracked Green down and the two agreed to meet on the promise that it would take only 45 minutes of Green’s time. “So I met him in the cafeteria,” Green says, “and he just asked me a couple questions and I answered them honestly. I didn’t think it was a story to tell. And 45 minutes turned into three hours, and then three hours turned into half the article that he wrote for the *New York Times [Magazine]*, and then that turned into a book.”

There are many poignant stories related in the book and retold in Green’s countless interviews that portray the depth of his beleaguered youth. Yet, in so many cases, Green’s challenges are depicted alongside the dedicated resilience of the teachers who were committed to his cause. In one instance, Green was sent to a special classroom with a collection of 4th graders from across the district who all had severe behavioral issues. On the first day of class, Green greeted his new teacher, Mrs. Elizabeth Hughes, by throwing his desk at her, declaring that he would not be taught by a white woman. Rather than send him to the principal’s office or call his mother, Hughes removed Green’s desk as well as his chair, informing him that he could sit on the floor instead. She included the caveat, however, that when he was ready to learn, he could have both desk and chair back.



Lingua e Canto

July 5-26, 2017

Sant’ Angelo in Vado, Italy

**Sing & Speak Italian
In Italy!**

\$4,450

Total for Tuition + Housing

Intensive Language Training Opera & Art Song

- Professional Faculty
- Limit: 25 singers
- 2 Coachings/week
- 3 Concerts
- Intensive Diction
- Audition Strategies
- 2 Excursions
- Housing in Apartments
- Career Workshops
- 45 hours of Italian with native speakers!
- 2 Voice Lessons/week
- Breath & Movement
- Acting Lessons

www.linguaeacanto.com

**Robin Fisher (Director), Donna Loewy (CCM),
Daniel Weeks (CCM), David Ward (UNT)
Hatem Nadim (Washington, D.C.),
LeAnn Overton (Manhattan School)
Certified Language Instructors of the Scuola Italia**

Hughes would become a major figure of support throughout Green's life, helping mold his character through life lessons that extended well beyond the classroom. Her daily ritual of having the entire class recite sections of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech was an ongoing reminder to Green that, though his classroom was a conglomeration of students of different races and backgrounds, Hughes was concerned primarily with the content of their character.

At age 12, Green's life at home was growing increasingly volatile, and the violence and threats of continued violence—both toward him and from him—necessitated his placement in a juvenile detention facility. For much of his early stay, his ongoing outbursts raged against the people, situations, and circumstances that seemed to be set on his demise. In an



Green as Varlaam in the Wiener Staatsoper's production of *Boris Godunov*, 2016

photo by Wiener Staatsoper Michael Poehn

Jennifer Aylmer
soprano

Douglas Ahlstedt
tenor

Daniel Teadt
baritone

Maria Spacagna
soprano

Mildred Miller Posvar
mezzo-soprano

ASPIRE

WHERE ARTISTRY + INNOVATION SHARE CENTER STAGE
music.cmu.edu | Application Deadline: December 1

Carnegie Mellon University
School of Music

"America is great because people like me, who come from a trailer park, can be on the stage of the Met . . . And I'm not a football player, I'm not a basketball player, I didn't invent something. I'm not the best singer in the world, by any means, but I'm traveling the world. I'm living my dream."

act of compassion following one of his many stints in the isolation unit, one of the staff members gave Green a radio, which became a window to the outside world as well as one of the first channels through which he could begin to explore his voice. He sang along with whatever he could tune in to, and music began to become a part of him.

After his release, through the intervention of Mrs. Hughes, Green secured a spot in the Governor's

School for the Arts in Norfolk, Virginia, where his formal music education began. Although many of the issues that plagued his life before and during his stay in juvenile detention remained part of his life, he had a newfound fortitude to move his life in a decidedly more positive direction. Studying music became his way forward.

Uncertain exactly how he was able to make the decision at that young age to move beyond his unfortunate

past, Green is grateful that music appeared in his life when it did. "I fell into classical music not knowing or understanding what it really was [but] knowing it was an opportunity for me to experience something new—something that wasn't the normal for me where I grew up. And I embraced it."

The list of teachers and mentors who appeared in his life at opportune moments continued to grow, including his first voice teacher, Robert Brown. Understanding Green's financial difficulties, Brown not only taught him without compensation but often gave him rides home as their evening sessions concluded. Once, when Brown noticed that Green did not have a sufficient coat for the impending winter season, Brown offered to buy Green a coat himself. Rather than head to a thrift store or seek a donated hand-me-down, Brown

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL®

Cirque du Soleil® is seeking **professional singers** with strong technique, stage experience and versatility for live performances in its current shows and upcoming creations.

FEMALE - MALE SINGERS
ALL VOICE TYPES AND STYLES

Apply now!
CIRQUEDUSOLEIL.COM/JOBS

 **FACEBOOK.COM/CIRQUEDUSOLEILCASTING**

 **Let your talent shine**

Cirque du Soleil is a trademark owned by Cirque du Soleil and used under license.
Photos: Perla Global Media Costumes: Eiko Ishioka © 2015 Cirque du Soleil



took Green to Nordstrom, explaining that since that is where he bought his own clothes, Green should have a coat from the same store.

The Governor's School for the Arts provided Green's first exposure to live, professional opera via a school-arranged trip to New York City to see a production of *Carmen* at the Metropolitan Opera. Since Green was unable to afford the trip, Mrs. Hughes stepped in once again to provide the funds so that he would not miss out.

The book describes the myriad ways in which the trip would become a life-changing and pivotal moment of his young life. He was awed by the spectacle of Lincoln Center. He was stunned by African-American mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves and her portrayal of the title role (and seeing "someone who looked like me" onstage). He was humbled to meet her after the show and to have a celebrity

treat him with earnest kindness and affection. And he was astounded to realize that—contrary to what he had heard from friends and family—opera was not "elitist music for white people." As he was learning, classical music was revealing itself as a medium through which people from all races, religions, and creeds could gather to express themselves.

The experience made such an impression that on the way home he boldly—and fortuitously—declared to his teacher his new dream: one day he was going to sing at the Metropolitan Opera. "Coming out of my town, my trailer park in the hood, it was something like Disney World to me," Green says. "Every bite I got in the sense of every new opera I listened to, every new singer that was introduced to me by the school—including Leontyne Price and Simon Estes—I just fell more and more in love with this art form."

As the book continues, describing the years that follow, readers track Green as he graduates from high school, earns two degrees in music, is named a winner at the Met competition, and launches his professional career. With each step, he demonstrates the ability to consistently rise above arduous circumstances in pursuing the career he is now living out.

While telling this story necessitated revealing some painful memories and unflattering images of himself and those close to him, Bergner earned Green's trust early on. "He's a phenomenal writer," Green says, "and to have someone tell your story, it's already a very personal thing. You want someone who you feel does it justice and gives an honest portrayal of both the good and the bad. Because, honestly, there's always good and there's always bad. For me it was

We are pleased to announce the 2017

SAN MIGUEL Institute of Bel Canto

"San Miguel Institute of Bel Canto was the best experience I've had with a program. The program catered to the singer's strengths while constructively addressing weaknesses."

"Thank-you for this wonderful experience! I love you all."

"I auditioned...and was cast in the female lead. Without all the training in San Miguel, there is no way I would be here!"

FACULTY

VOICE
Laura Brooks Rice,
Special Guest Teacher
Nadine Secunde
Michael Sylvester

COACHING
Ted Taylor
Marcie Stapp

STAGE TRAINING
Joseph McClain

BODYWORK
Ruth Hennessy

LIFE COACH
David Manning

PLUS...
Auditioning
Master Classes
with
LENORE ROSENBERG
Associate Artistic
Administrator (MET)

- A comprehensive and intensive program
- Internationally acclaimed faculty
- Centered on the principles and traditions of Bel Canto

- Releasing the artistic potential of the whole singer
- World Heritage Site San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, named by Conde Nast the *Best City in the World 2013*

June 12 – July 8, 2017

Application deadline: April 14, 2017

Details at SMIBelCanto.com

Apply at YAPTracker.com

Green as Basilio in the Wiener Staatsoper's production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, 2016

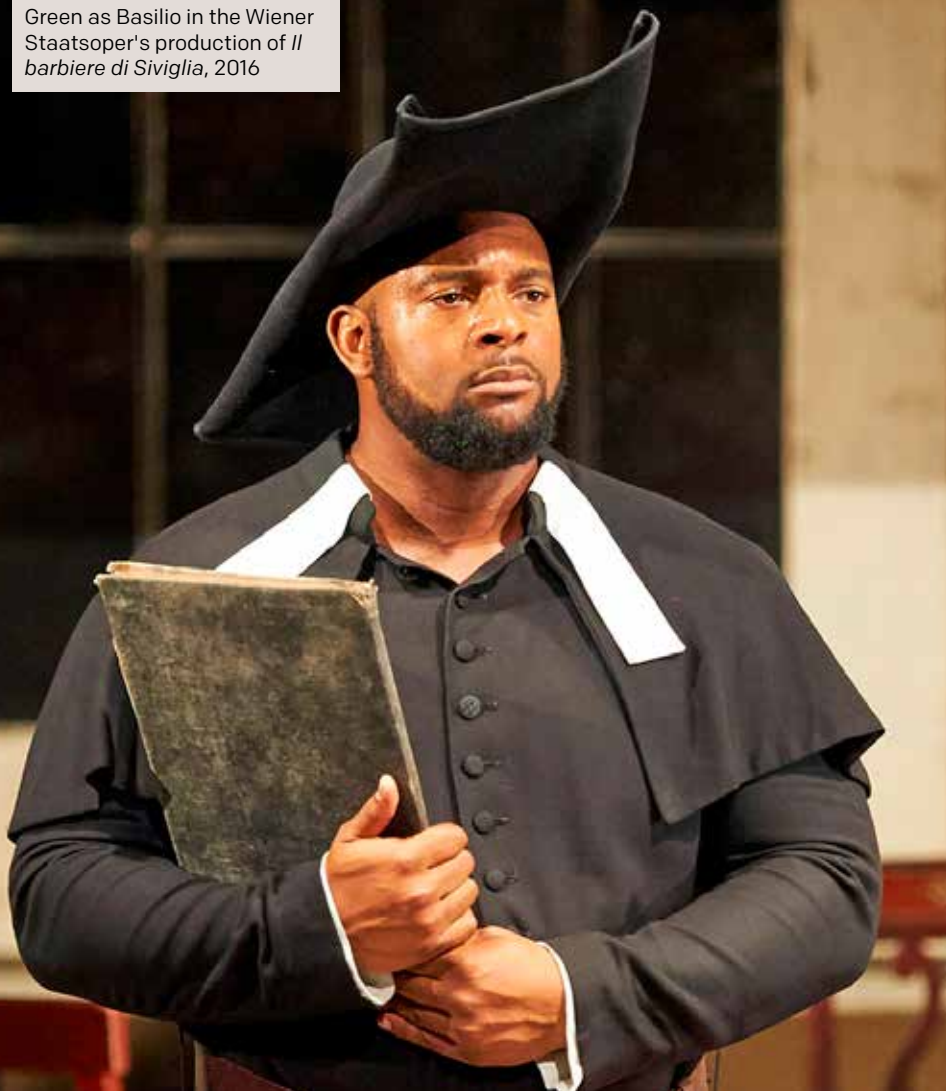


Photo by Wiener Staatsoper Michael Poehn

almost therapeutic to work with him in a sense of realizing what I have accomplished in my short life.”

Though the story he shares is personal, Green insists he is not ashamed or embarrassed that it is “out there” for all to see. Rather, as a living depiction of the American dream, he hopes others may find some inspiration from his story. “America is great because people like me, who come from a trailer park, can be on the stage of the Met, can be on the Harry Connick, Jr. show. And I’m not a football player, I’m not a basketball player, I didn’t invent something. I’m not the best singer in the world, by any means, but I’m traveling the world. I’m living my dream. And it took a lot of hard

work, it took a lot of disappointment, but I’m there and I did it. And for me, that alone is the reason I was willing to share my story, because who knows what young singer, young musician, young person, or adult who reads it will realize that even the smallest dream is possible with some dedication, some work?”

Green refuses to believe that his ability to overcome difficulties is particularly extraordinary. He recognizes that his background placed him at a disadvantage and that he hit “the bottom of the bottom” early in his life. But his philosophy from then on was fairly simple. “I just told myself, any door that is open to me, I’ll take. I’ll jump through.”

That attitude continues today as he takes consistent, small steps toward his goals. “I feel very comfortable and confident where I’m at in my career and I’m so excited for the future, but I’m constantly working on getting better,” he says. “I think that mentality will help me continue to make progress, hopefully.”

In fact, he finds inspiration in others whom he considers to have accomplished considerably more than he has. As an example, he points to Mrs. Hughes. He admires her, an educator for more than 40 years, for all the loving attention she has shown so many students throughout her career—including himself. “That, to me, is even more amazing than my story,” he says.

His background, however, may have uniquely prepared him for the public life of an opera singer by helping him understand that he will never be able to please everyone. Though his early reviews have been quite positive, there has not been universal praise. Green understands the need for both confidence and a thick skin but is also adept at separating mere criticism from the constructive comments that he can use to improve his craft. “You have to realize that not everyone is going to love you. But, surely, not everyone hates you.”

This attitude should prove helpful in the future given that, as any 30-year-old opera singer knows, his peak years of singing are likely ahead of him. As a bass-baritone, his waiting game may be even longer than many of his contemporaries, which is why he appreciates the book’s emphasis on the journey of being an opera singer. “The book is not about me being a finished product,” he says. “This is not like a Renée Fleming memoir or anything like that. I have not accomplished one tenth of what I would like to accomplish in my career.”

As he contemplates the future, he understands that he is essentially a blank slate. “Honestly, my dream was to sing at the Met,” he says. “After that dream was accomplished, I had to make more dreams.”

CS MUSIC CONVENTION

Chicago May 25-28, 2017

Join the singing community in Chicago this May for the **CS Music Convention & Competition** weekend.

Compete for cash and scholarships. Attend the career changing **Audition Feedback Experience, Convention Classes**, and **the Expo** with more than 90 vocal programs.

Get feedback to help you win competitions, nail your next audition, and know what you need to work on to for your ultimate success.

Register today at:
www.ClassicalSinger.com/convention

Find us on Facebook: @csconvention

CS | **MUSIC**



Get ready for your next audition & competition!

15
minutes can
change
your audition to
awesome!

Are you singing the
right **repertoire** for the
audition?

Are your *materials*
correctly representing
you?

Are you doing what you
need to do for **success**?

Get the
Audition Feedback Experience
at the CS Music Convention May 25-28.

*Work with the very best vocal coaches to **polish**
your audition before the competition begins.*

Or choose **immediate feedback** on **auditioning** for
places in **opera houses, Broadway, management,**
grad school, or college programs.

CS | MUSIC

Get your 15 minutes at ClassicalSinger.com/convention/afe

Now entrenched in the world of professional opera, he has a long list of houses in which he hopes to sing. But his journey has also given him a depth of perspective his troubled younger self could never have imagined. Despite all the accomplishments onstage, the television appearances, and the attention his story has received, the highest point of his life occurred recently when he married his wife. "Being an opera singer is an amazing, amazing job . . . but sharing that journey with someone . . . having my best friend there with me throughout this journey . . . is even more exciting than being an opera singer."

Of course, his youth provides no guarantees regarding his professional staying power. Therefore, he considers himself fortunate to be where he is in his career and is excited for his next chapter. "The book ends, and even now I'm still moving forward," he says.

As he forges ahead, Green continues to pay homage to the teachers and mentors who encouraged him along the way. Mrs. Hughes was in the studio audience for his appearance on the *Harry* [Connick] show. When Connick acknowledged Hughes, she received a standing ovation from the crowd.

Green's high school voice teacher, Brown—whose many acts of kindness included buying Green a winter coat—has since passed away. As art imitates life, Green's Met performances in *La bohème* were lauded by James R. Oestreich in the *New York Times* as "the real showstopper" due to his "immensely touching . . . aria lamenting the loss of his overcoat, which he is about to sell for the communal good." One can imagine this as Green's nightly "thank you" to the man who taught him so much.

Despite all the personal satisfaction Green receives from a life in the arts, he is committed to giving back, especially to those who came from circumstances similar to his own. On numerous occasions, he has spoken to student groups and even to students in juvenile detention facilities like the one where he used to reside. The book describes his return to the same facility in Virginia where he spent the lowest moments of his life. Since the book has been published, he has made additional visits to similar facilities.

After returning home from one such visit, he was surprised to receive a packet of letters from the residents, expressing their heartfelt thanks to him for taking the time to visit with them, sing for them, and share his story. For many, it was their first experience hearing an opera singer in person. For others, it provided a needed glimmer of hope for them to realize that someone who had been in a similar situation could go on to college, travel the world, and inspire so many through music.

"To sit there all day with them and talk with them and sing for them and tell them my story, that it's possible to be at the lowest of the low at a young age and pick yourself back up and accomplish something—even if it's something as small as graduating high school and getting a job and being a productive citizen in our country—is a huge

accomplishment," he says. "The more opportunities I get to do that, it makes the book worthwhile."

His time visiting teens in juvenile detention facilities has provided some of the most powerful experiences of his life. He relates how meaningful it is to read their letters since, as he jokes, they are "normal people" and "not opera singers." Though they bill his visits as a guest appearance from an opera singer who will perform for them, he is just as appreciative of the opportunity to meet the residents and hear their stories. It is humbling for him, especially knowing firsthand that their paths forward will be difficult.

"You can do a lot in your life as a performer," Green says, "but to have a child tell you that you made them feel happy for a short amount of time or that you've given them the inspiration to continue . . ." He trails off and flashes a wide smile before finishing. "It was awesome, man."

Brian Manternach is on the voice faculty of the University of Utah's Department of Theatre. In addition to his contributions to Classical Singer he is an associate editor of the Journal of Singing. An active singer, he holds a doctor of music degree from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. Visit www.brianmanternach.com for more information or contact the author at bmantern@gmail.com.

CS



60th EDITION

LORRAINE NUBAR
from July 17 to 31
2017

DALTON BALDWIN
from July 24 to 31
2017

ACADEMIE INTERNATIONALE D'ETE DE NICE
JULY 17 TO AUGUST 14 2017

MASTER CLASSES
2 FORMULAS:
TRADITIONAL
& BOOSTED SESSION

CONSERVATOIRE PIERRE COCHEREAU
150 CLASSROOMS
DISTINGUISHED TEACHING FACULTY
PIANO ACCOMPANISTS
COACHING
EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT
ACCOMMODATION ON CAMPUS

STUDENTS CONCERTS
PREPARATION FOR
INTERNATIONAL
AND PROFESSIONAL
COMPETITIONS

JACQUES TADDEI AWARD
CERTIFICATE AT COMPLETION
FESTIVAL LES CONCERTS
DU CLOÎTRE

academie-internationale-ete-nice.com
Académie Internationale d'Été de Nice
@RIENmusique

REGISTRATION OFFICE
+33 (0) 4 93 53 33 91 – registration@aien.fr
Académie Internationale d'Été de Nice
Monastère de Cimiez – Place Jean-Paul II
06000 Nice – France