

The Singer's Library

Sing for Your Life: When Hard Luck Turns to Good Luck

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

New York Times author Daniel Bergner discusses his new book about singer Ryan Speedo Green and his remarkable journey overcoming significant hardships on the road to an international opera career.

Those who follow opera closely may know of Ryan Speedo Green from his appearances at the Metropolitan Opera or the Wiener Staatsoper or from any of the other performances on his increasingly packed schedule.

Others may have first learned of him through the numerous interviews he has given to arts media (like the cover article of this magazine) as well as mainstream media outlets.

This attention is largely in response to Daniel Bergner's book, *Sing for Your Life: A Story of Race, Music, and Family*. Originating as an article for the *New York Times Magazine*, the narrative of Green's journey through poverty, a violent youth, and even a stint in juvenile detention to eventually perform on America's most famous operatic stage is now a *New York Times* bestseller.

My conversation with Bergner explores Green's success, his character, and his willingness to allow the personal story of his troubled past to be made public.

Since you were following Green before he had reached the level of success that he has now achieved, did you feel like you were taking a chance by making him such a big part of the original *New York Times Magazine* article and

then telling his story in *Sing for Your Life*?

I felt like just his being there in the semifinals [of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions] and making it to the finals—and certainly once he'd been selected as one of the winners—meant that he'd had a tremendous success given where he'd started out. I said this to him at the time. To me, the meaning of the story was fully formed already, and even if he hadn't had all of the success that he's had since, I think it would have been a really powerful story. I really wasn't worried. [Laughs.]

I think many people felt like they didn't know how this was going to turn out. They truly, truly didn't. At the Met, once he was picked for the Lindemann [Young Artist Development] Program, there was real uncertainty. But again, for me, both as an artist and as a person, he had accomplished something amazing that I wanted to write about.

Green's story is written in a way that is intriguing for singers and opera aficionados but is also compelling for those who are not necessarily



Brian Manternach



Daniel Bergner

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classical music fans. What do you think it is about his story that has such appeal beyond the world of opera?

I think there's something so compelling about Speedo's sheer will in transforming himself from the 12-year-old kid who got taken away in not only handcuffs but leg shackles, to the man who not only won that contest and has been onstage at the Met but is also this radiant human being. When I met him, there's this immediate and profound question posed which is, "How do you get from there to here?" I hope that readers are connecting with that journey and asking that question. And,

of course, like all good questions, it has no simple answer. But I think we all want to know how that kind of transformation takes place.

The other thing I hope is that, even for lay readers, there's something about the art, about the music, about how that sound is created that's really compelling. . . . I hope I was able to translate that into a language that would both capture the beauty of the music and capture lay people's interest in how art—in this case, music—gets created.

Though Green is enthusiastically complimentary of your writing and your work with the book, in the beginning he had to take a leap of faith in entrusting you with his story. Considering

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Book Review

Biographies of opera singers are frequently written as collections of anecdotes gathered over the course of an illustrious career. Readers are allowed to become flies on the wall as secondhand witnesses to backstage interactions, rehearsal antics, and recollections of performances on the operatic stage. Stories of career triumphs as well as failures and setbacks are all presented through the lens of memory, allowing readers to wade through without trepidation, knowing the inevitable success that will come as the books progress.

This is not Ryan Speedo Green's story. *Sing for Your Life: A Story of Race, Music, and Family* chronicles the daunting path of a young artist whose distressed start in life makes survival, much less success, unlikely. It is a story of constant struggle—for direction, for purpose, for a chance—that ends with the fulfillment of a dream.

In *Sing for Your Life*, Green's story unfolds in such a way that each positive step feels tenuous, as if his gains could be snatched away at any moment. As daily reminders of his hardship abound, he constantly faces the seemingly insurmountable odds that follow him from his childhood into his adult pursuits.

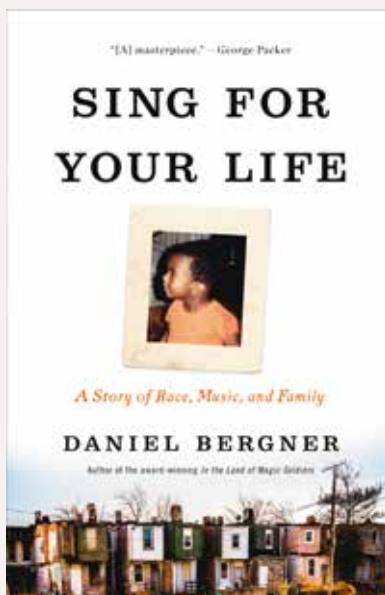
Readers follow his progression as a singer and celebrate his crowning achievement of winning the Met competition. Along the way, several themes in Green's story emerge as applicable to life outside of opera, such as allowing for second chances, treating others with compassion, finding a sense of belonging, and offering forgiveness (to others and to oneself).

Even the overriding theme of the book explores finding the strength to overcome obstacles—much of which boils down to taking advantage of each new opportunity that presents itself, however small.

Daniel Bergner's title, *Sing for Your Life*, offers a bit of hidden wisdom as well. While singing did offer Green an escape from his troubled past, Bergner did not title the book *Singing for HIS Life*. Instead, *Sing for YOUR Life* brings us all into Green's story, asking what tools each of us has that we may use to move beyond our own setbacks to be sources of inspiration to others.

Green's compelling story, dynamically told by Daniel Bergner, is a profound, sometimes shocking example of courage and recovery from defeat through persistent, eager determination. It reminds us of the importance of pursuing our passions—regardless of the odds—and that there is healing power in singing.

—Brian Manternach



the personal nature of the material, did he have any editorial veto power or did he give you liberty to tell his story in the way you best saw fit?

He had 100 percent faith and, I guess, had to hope—to honor that faith. No, there was no veto power; there was no editorial power. There was just a lot of talking and listening and asking the same questions over and over again in different ways. And listening again and imagining and making sure that I was—through imagination and through empathy—understanding. . . . He really did place a lot of faith.

Knowing that, did you have any reservations in what you wrote? It's a very honest story and some of the portrayals are unflattering. Did you have any hesitation about including those elements?

Ultimately, no. For me, the process is always about being careful and at the same time honoring someone's real experience. I talk about this with writing students a lot. I feel like there's a difference between being really compassionate, which I hope that I am as a writer, and just being nice. If you're going to write something that matters, you really have to wrestle with the truth and hope that that wrestling with the truth creates something meaningful on the page.

When you initially interviewed him for the original article in the *New York Times Magazine*, did you suspect his story may turn into a bigger project? At what point did you foresee that you would be following him for as long as you have now?

Not quite that early. My memory is that it was at least several months after the [Met] finals when we even began to talk about the possibility of a book. And that didn't become finalized between us for quite a while even after those several months. But, and here's what's important to say, we did stay in pretty close contact. So we were definitely having conversations without any commitment throughout that period following the finals.

The overriding themes of the book seem just as applicable to life outside of music as they are to building a career in opera. Green said it was almost therapeutic to talk through a lot of his story with you. In the process of working with him on

this book, have you witnessed further growth in his performing abilities and in his character?

I'm really flattered by his saying that but, from my perspective, he had done so much of the growing before he and I even met. I'm sure I've already in our conversation used the word "radiant," but when I met him I was getting to know a radiant human being. It was very difficult to connect the person I was spending time with with the person who he'd been as a kid. . . . The growing that I witnessed was musical. And that was magical—that I really got to see up close. At the level he was at inside the Met's training program, he really had some ground to cover and some obstacles to get past and I got to watch that from all kinds of different perspectives.

This is a terrible tangent, but I always think of writing as kind of an impure art form. It draws on thorny parts of who we are as creators. Singing also, of course, draws on some thorny parts—but it's so pure, it just stirs us in such a more visceral and immediate way. For me, as a writer, it's just a great luxury to be in a room where that kind of pure art form is made.

Brian Manternach's bio can be found on p. 25. ©

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