

Eve Gigliotti



photo by Gillian Riesen

Eve Gigliotti:

“I didn’t really have a Plan B”

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

American mezzo Eve Gigliotti recounts the experiences, struggles, and opportunities that helped launch her professional career.

Visitors to the website of mezzo-soprano Eve Gigliotti can read about the many accomplishments the celebrated singer has achieved throughout her career. Performance highlights include the Metropolitan Opera, Washington National Opera, and the Houston Grand Opera. Glowing reviews from *The New York Times* and *Opera News* dot her resume. And diplomas from prestigious conservatories acknowledge her training pedigree.

Even so, in preparation for my interview with Gigliotti, one detail drew me in. The first line of her bio states that she is “known for her passionate portrayals of complex characters.” Understanding that opera audiences often assign personal attributes to their favorite singers based on the characters they play onstage, I had my first question ready when our Zoom call began: Is Eve Gigliotti herself a complex character?

“You can ask my husband,” she says with a laugh, “who’s eating chips right behind me.”

I caught up with Gigliotti between engagements as she and her family were preparing for a vacation trip to the American West, including a visit to the Grand Canyon. Her family members came in and out of the screen, gathering items to pack and discussing travel preparations, bringing a bit of normalcy to the life of the singer, whose career has been anything but normal.

Back to the question at hand, Gigliotti says, “I 100% think I’m a complex character.” She points out that certain elements of her professional life are not complicated at all, like showing up for rehearsals meticulously prepared, being responsible, and being a good colleague. But she also believes that, as is true of many performing artists, there is an inner complexity they must connect to when bringing who they are to the stage.

“I think one of the things that I plug into in a really deep way is the capacity to utilize the tools that I have been given to communicate,” she says. “So, when I’m performing, when I’m in a collaborative space where we’re creating a work, I want people to have an experience where they feel seen, where they get something out of that experience.” Whether those performances inspire audiences, help them process emotions, or simply communicate with them in the special way that only music and the human voice can, complexity is critical. “If the complexity wasn’t there,” she notes, “I wouldn’t have much to say.” She quickly adds, “But that doesn’t mean dysfunction! There’s a difference.”

Finding Her Voice

Communication onstage is not the only element of Gigliotti’s career where she has embraced complexity. She also welcomes opportunities to perform new music, give life to new stories, and explore the bounds of what opera



Gigliotti as Giulietta in the Hawaii Opera Theatre's production of *Les Contes d'Hoffman*, 2017



Gigliotti as Mother Goose in the Metropolitan Opera's production of *The Rakes Progress*, 2022

photo by Jonathan Tichler

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Gigliotti as Isabella in Opera Santa Barbara's production of *L'italiana* in Algeri, 2015



can be as a genre. Simply mentioning new works infuses a heightened energy into our conversation. “When we start talking about new work and new opera and creating, there’s something that happens to me in a physical way,” she reveals. “I get so supercharged. I get so excited. It’s really visceral for me.”

She explains how, early in her career, she was chased by ghosts—the ghosts of operas past and the ghosts of opera singers past. Admitting how much respect she has for opera as an institution, she also acknowledges its traditional, conservative nature. This inclination means that singers and opera companies alike have to be intentional about innovation. “I believe so deeply in continuing the creation of what [opera] is, continuing to participate in a modern context, and continuing to tell *our* stories,” she says.

There is an additional, significant reason Gigliotti is drawn to new opera: it is what kept her singing while she was finding her voice. As she describes, in her early 20s, her teachers assumed she was on the vocal path to becoming a spinto soprano. “The top was there and there was a really interesting, darker color to the sound,” she says. But then, in her mid to late 20s, her voice started to settle downward, making the top range increasingly difficult to sustain. As previous roles no longer felt like they were the right fit, she was left wondering what rep she should pursue.

“I got myself into a pickle and it was hard for me,” she recalls. “But the thing that I could always do was sing

contemporary work in English. And so I kept doing that until I found the right circumstances and the right teacher who really worked with me to explore my Fach.” Eventually, after she turned 30, she made the official switch to mezzo-soprano.

“Sometimes you have to go down to rebuild, so you’re not trying to rebuild on scaffolding that has no structure underneath,” she says. “We went back to the core—the ground level—and my voice just settled. As I’ve gotten older it’s become apparent that even though the top is there, I like to live in a mezzo range and visit [the top]. I don’t like to live above the staff. Thus, I’m a dramatic mezzo, not a dramatic soprano. They’re very similar, but the way things are written in the tessitura and where the voice lives makes a big difference.”

Obviously, being caught between voice types can be problematic when trying to build a career. She describes what she calls an “obsessive conversation” in the opera industry as to how singers should market themselves, which often hinges upon knowing exactly what Fach they are in order to know what specific roles to pursue. Although there are ways this approach can benefit singers, Gigliotti knows firsthand how it can limit those like herself who are not always so easily classifiable. “It boxes us all in, in a way that sometimes makes it difficult for certain singers to literally find their voices,” she says.



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Gigliotti as Dodo in
Opera Philadelphia's
world premiere of
Breaking the Waves,
2016



photo by Nick Korkos

For Gigliotti, that meant spending time away from Verdi, Bizet, and Wagner—now familiar friends—as she worked through her vocal shift. Instead, what felt more vocally comfortable were new works. Still today, she eagerly takes on projects in contemporary music, performing world premieres, working with new organizations like White Snake Projects, and serving as Artist in Residence at National Sawdust, an organization that describes its work as curating and producing music and artistic works rooted in curiosity, experimentation, innovation, and inclusivity. “For me, personally, it took a long time to really understand my individual voice and how it fit within the traditional canon. My greatest successes have all been new work or

work in English,” she says. “Contemporary music saved me, in a lot of ways, because it also gave me the agency to say, ‘I’m more than my voice type.’”

Getting the Ball Rolling

Once her voice started to fall into place, the opportunities quickly followed. In 2005, Gigliotti was accepted into the International Vocal Arts Institute in Puerto Rico, where she started working with Ruth Falcon. “Ruth recognized that there was a voice in there and was really interested in helping me figure it out,” she says. “She took me under her wing, which was a really huge opportunity for me.” She then enrolled in the Professional

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Gigliotti as Isabella in Opera Santa Barbara's production of *L'italiana in Algeri*, 2015

Gigliotti as Bradamante in Whitebox Studio's production of *Alcina*, 2015



Studies Diploma program at the Mannes School of Music at the New School, in part to continue working with Ms. Falcon, who was a member of the Mannes voice faculty. Although Gigliotti found herself to be a bit older than most of her classmates, she was inspired by the talent she was surrounded by in the program.

After graduation, she was invited to serve as an apprentice at Glimmerglass Opera. It was there that Gayletha Nichols heard Gigliotti and asked her to prepare an aria by Nico Muhly for an audition. Nichols then hired her for the Metropolitan Opera's workshop performances of Muhly's opera *Two Boys*. "All of a sudden, I'm in a room with Craig Lucas, Bart Sher, and Nico, and I'm working on

this new opera," she says. "I remember calling my brother just elated. I felt like it was huge."

Following that workshop, held in October, she was invited to make her Met mainstage debut the following spring, joining the last performances of *Carmen* as Mercédès, alongside Jonas Kaufmann playing Don José and Kate Aldrich as Carmen. "That was really the start of my professional career, from that point forward," she notes. "The springboard was the Glimmerglass apprenticeship to the Met workshop to the audition for the Mercédès debut. Then it was more *Carmens*, the Ring cycle, and it just kind of—knock wood—kept on going. [There were] peaks and valleys, but it kept on going."



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Eve Gigliotti performs at the Grand Opening of National Sawdust, 2015



Gigliotti as Isabella in Opera Santa Barbara's production of *L'italiana in Algeri*, 2015

photo by Jill Steinberg

Maintaining Focus

So how did Gigliotti have the tenacity to stay on the path for as long as she did, especially when engagements were not forthcoming? “First and foremost,” she says, “I love it. I love singing, I love interpreting, I love creating work. I love being a performer, I love being an artist, I love the work.” She acknowledges the sacrifices that a singing career requires, which sometimes means that certain milestones in life need to be put on hold due to performance goals. “But I loved it, loved it, loved it—I think that’s a big part of it.”

She also credits the fact that she had a plan for reaching her overarching goals, even if she was not entirely clear

how the path would manifest itself along the way. “For me, it was knowing what the ultimate goal is, but not necessarily dictating how to get there,” she says. “I always had this overall goal of knowing that I wanted to live an artistic life. I wanted to contribute as a performer in some way, but I didn’t know how I was going to get there.”

Therefore, she just concentrated on continuing to work as much as she could, lining up projects, connecting and collaborating with other creative people, and taking the opportunities that presented themselves. She also had specific vocal goals and stayed disciplined about consistently practicing and taking lessons, even while working multiple jobs to pay the bills.

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Gigliotti as Dodo in Opera Philadelphia's world premiere of *Breaking the Waves*, 2016

photo by Nick Korkos

Some of Gigliotti's important steps included finishing graduate school and completing a young artist program. After that, she set goals of performing a certain number of times each year. "Really, it was never about the financial game. It was always about steadily working," she says. "Who do I want to be working with? What kind of pieces do I want to be working on? Continuing to go down the path that opens up for you is a really important thing to be aware of. But I also did have benchmarks. I wasn't just floating out in space and being like, 'Let's see what happens.'"

Those benchmarks kept her eyes on each next step while she remained mindful of how they might eventually lead to her larger goals. They also kept her focused on consistently progressing in her field without ever seriously considering a change of career. "I didn't really have a Plan B, because I hadn't fulfilled Plan A yet," she says. "I got to the Met debut within my timeframe. Once I got there, I had to reassess and create new goals. I guess that's how I've done it. I've just taken it five years by five years and, the next thing you know, 15 years have gone by and you're like 'What happened?'"

Gigliotti also readily acknowledges that she relied on relationships built during her student days throughout her career-building stage. "Even though I was in a transition period that was scary, I still had connections from being a student at Curtis [Institute of Music] and Manhattan School of Music that I, frankly, could reference and lean on," she reflects. "It's not like I was coming out of oblivion and nobody knew who I was. I may have disappeared for a while or been in a transitional period where I wasn't singing well and I didn't quite know where I fit. But I still had that network that I can't discount."

Necessary Innovation

Throughout her journey, Gigliotti has always been willing to innovate, which helped keep her active when the pandemic shut down most live performances. As many of the traditional opportunities have come back, there is still a sense that the industry has not entirely returned to what it was. Some of that is simply due to the repercussions of the pandemic, although some changes are more intentional. Regardless, given the new era we are entering, are traditional paths still available to singers? Should the current generation simply expect that they will have to be as inventive as Gigliotti has been in their own careers?

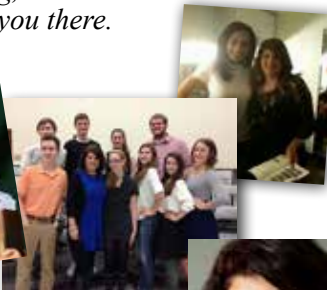
"I would reframe [the question] and say that they *get* to do it," Gigliotti laughs. "They're so lucky!" She notes that singers are not the only artists who are asked to innovate. Actors, for instance, commonly wear multiple hats, working as directors or screenwriters, often creating original content on platforms like YouTube. Singers may learn from their example and seek different avenues for their work. "I think it's been really exciting to see what's happened post-pandemic with people and their social media accounts, to see how people have really created subsets of their art form and what they have to offer as individuals, creatively,

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through their content on social media,” she says. “I don’t think that it takes anything away from the heart of the art form. If anything, it continues to open doors and invite people to the party.”

Gigliotti advocates hanging on to the best of what we learned how to do during the pandemic, specifically how to utilize technology to create what she calls “yes/and” situations instead of “either/or.” “How can we lean into the technological discoveries that we’ve made, and continue to push what opera can be and what opera will be, as we continue to walk forward into this digital world?” she asks. “Nothing beats live performance; nothing can replace live performance. We all know that. We’re not trying to compete with that. But there’s a ‘yes/and’ here, as well. I really hope that we continue to see opera companies innovate in digital ways. Not just visually digital ways, but digital ways that create access to larger audience groups and to communities that either can’t necessarily get to the opera or who want to go to a live performance but also want to be able to experience things at home—truly innovative things.”

She acknowledges how quickly we all moved to the digital platforms and devised creative content when it was a necessity. She also observes that, once it was safe again, many organizations simply went back to the way things were before the pandemic, perhaps in part to replenish the audience subscription base. “I completely understand,” she admits, “but it’s almost like there are these little ghost-town pockets of digital innovation that got left on the side of the road. I’m hopeful that we will continue to push forward.”

To Thine Own Self...

Given these significant changes within the industry and the uncertainty of how best to proceed, Gigliotti has a difficult time offering advice to the current generation of singers hoping to start their own careers. She also recognizes what has not changed about the process, which is that every singer’s path is unique. She does not hold up her journey as a template that any other singer should expect to follow simply because it worked for her. Even so, when pressed, she stresses the importance of tenacity, staying true to self, and having a plan. “I would just say to work smart and listen to your gut. Always listen to your instincts, because they’re usually right,” she says. “Then, if you can, map out a path and just keep putting one foot in front of the other.”

Brian Manternach, DM, is an assistant professor at the University of Utah Department of Theatre and a research associate at the Utah Center for Vocology. He is an associate editor of the Journal of Singing and his research, reviews, articles, and essays have appeared in numerous voice-related publications.

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