

The Singer's Library:

The Singer's Audition & Career Handbook

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

Claudia Friedlander's second book provides information and inspiration for singers on the professional track.

What does it really take to be a professional classical singer? How can singers know that they are progressing in ways that make such a career most likely? What can they expect as they transition from student to young artist to professional?

Singer, teacher, and author Claudia Friedlander answers these questions and many others in her most recent book, *The Singer's Audition & Career Handbook*. In this interview, she discusses the necessary but undervalued skills singers should build, the ways the professional industry is changing, and how singers can use their voices to speak their truth.

In *The Singer's Audition & Career Handbook*, you state, "My aim in writing this book is to provide a comprehensive survey of the many and varied skills a singer must master in order to meet the requirements of both artistic preeminence and professional viability." That statement can refer to a variety of skills, like a solid technique, the ability to make creative expressive choices, and being a hard-working and supportive colleague. What other skills do you believe are just as necessary as the ones I mentioned that singers often overlook?

Probably two of the most important ones are self-awareness and the ability to emotionally self-regulate.

In my opinion, our ability to sense and respond to our own psychological and emotional needs is a prerequisite for being able to share our imagination and feelings with an audience. We need to empathize deeply with the characters we embody, whether they are good, evil, or silly. We need to be able to respond to and communicate well with our fellow performers effectively in rehearsal and performance. A high level of self-awareness enables us to accomplish these things without feeling insecure or unmoored.



Similarly, skill at emotional self-regulation helps us ride all of the highs and lows throughout our learning, creative, and performance experiences. The ability to self-regulate enables us to expose and work on vocal issues without freaking out, keep our egos in check, channel the excitement of opening night into our performances, keep from crashing too hard after a production wraps, and so on.

Joyce DiDonato, who wrote the foreword to the book, asks each singer who applies for the masterclasses at the Weill Music Institute to answer the question “Why do you sing?” Many of the singers’ responses are included in the book. You also answer the question yourself, saying, in part, “Singing means a willingness to take risks and to step outside my comfort zone.” Does that apply equally to writing? Having published two successful books, what skills did you build as a singer that applied directly to this other creative outlet?

For me, singing and writing flow from the same expressive source, but through very different modalities. Singing requires real-time expression in front of a live audience and it involves interpreting words and music someone else wrote. By contrast, writing happens in advance of anyone reading what you wrote—and unlike singing, you can go back and change anything you’re not

fully satisfied with, which somewhat diminishes the sense of risk!

However, the fact that writing involves communicating through my own words rather than someone else’s, in plain English, often does make me feel quite exposed. I frequently write about what I see as a need for significant changes to the ways our educational institutions and producing organizations train and support singers, and I am aware that this will probably not endear me to everyone in the industry I seek to serve. My early experiences on stage definitely helped me develop the courage to speak truth to power.

I believe that in this lies the real value of learning to sing. Not everyone will go on to perform professionally—many will discover that they don’t wish to. But anything



Claudia Friedlander

photo by Kristin Hoeberrmann

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you do to empower your voice, literally and figuratively, will enhance your life experience and your effectiveness in the world.

The landscape of professional singing has changed dramatically since your book was published in 2019. Besides the lack of performance opportunities caused by the pandemic, the classical music industry has finally been forced to deal with issues related to lack of access, lack of representation, and certain predatory practices that were either ignored or overlooked for far too long. Given such significant changes, is there anything you would amend in or add to this handbook that addresses these issues for today's singers?

There are indeed things I would like to amend and add to the handbook to these ends. Fortunately, I am in the beginning stages of doing so! I'm working with my publisher on plans for an updated, revised edition.

The planning is still in its very early stages, but I would like to compose an entire new chapter addressing the diversity, inclusivity, and workplace safety issues that have historically plagued our schools and producing organizations. The industry is undergoing an important reckoning with these issues, and I too have discovered ways in which opera's elitist trappings have wormed their way into my own thinking and biases. Scrubbing those biases from my brain is an ongoing project, and it's important to me to scrub them from my writing.

Consistent with the established format of the book, I will interview singers and industry professionals who belong to and advocate for minority and marginalized demographics. I will invite not only their views on DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] issues, but also any commentary they would like to contribute to chapters that address their areas of expertise.

The revision will take a couple of years, so please do read the [current] book now! My recommendations about how to navigate your way through your education and early career remain solid.

Review

The Singer's Audition & Career Handbook by Claudia Friedlander is divided into three primary sections. Part

I, "Learning the Craft," describes the obvious skills necessary for a career in classical singing, like vocal technique, acting skills, and foreign language comprehension and diction. But it also highlights "Audition Preparation and Presentation" elements (Repertoire Package, Building Your Audience, Social Media) and tips for "Developing and Sustaining Your Career" (Professional Correspondence,

regular self-assessment and includes a worksheet where "The Complete Package" of skills can be periodically evaluated.

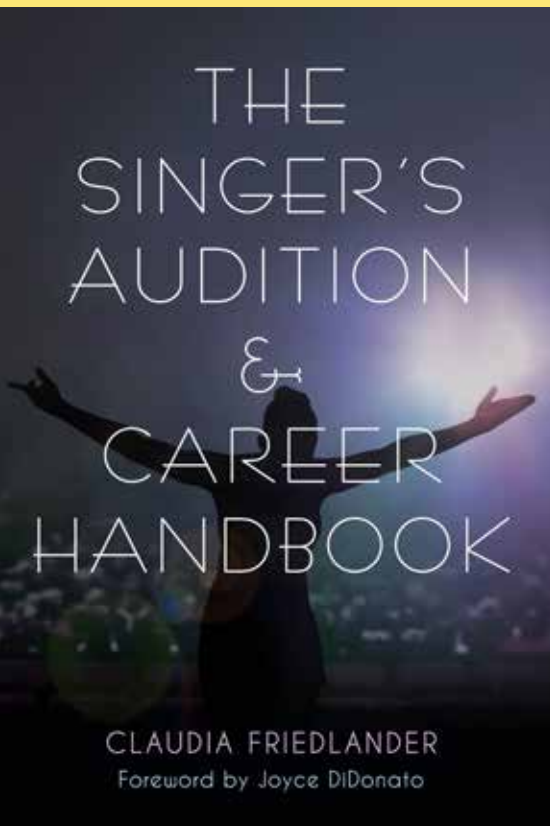
Part II, "The Apprenticeship Phase," describes the benefits of resident artist programs, offers advice on producing effective promotional materials, and presents strategies for keeping afloat financially while still pursuing artistic aspirations.

Part III, "Going Pro," gives detailed descriptions of what it is actually like to be a professional opera singer. This includes guidance for career marketing and management while also exploring the many career trajectories singers can pursue.

The Singer's Audition & Career Handbook provides crucial information for would-be professionals, filling certain gaps that formal training programs often omit. Furthermore, the many quotes from singers and other industry professionals that appear throughout add real-world perspectives that contextualize Friedlander's steps. Joyce DiDonato's contributions are particularly noteworthy, reflecting the loving wisdom she is known for imparting to young singers.

Those wishing to enter the competitive field of professional singing must do so with their eyes wide open to the challenges and expectations as well as the rewards. *The Singer's Audition & Career Handbook* presents the realities of the business through a text that is both informative and encouraging, providing direction and guideposts to hopeful career-track singers.

Marketing and Publicity, Resource Management). Friedlander also emphasizes the value of honest,



You write, “If you wish to have an impact as an artist, you must first have something to say.” You expand on this idea by saying that your own education enabled you to arrive at informed opinions and to express them articulately. Further, you had mentors who valued your “voice” and helped you express your ideas effectively. As opera is evolving, I think there are many singers who would like to raise their voices in support of positive change. But they may also fear negative impacts on their career if they are too free with their opinions and are labeled as “controversial.” To what degree can singers be true to themselves and use their voices to tell stories and amplify issues they believe in without costing themselves jobs for being viewed as too outspoken or political?

I believe that each of us has to navigate these thorny aspects of the industry in whatever way feels right to us. Everyone will have their own response to this question, so I cannot offer any general advice other than emphasizing once again the importance of self-awareness. The better you know your own heart, the more easily you will sense what the right response is for you.

Singing is motivated by a desire to speak our truth—the emotional truth we channel through the stories we tell and the characters we embody. Sometimes the need to speak our truth about the industry becomes so visceral that we find ourselves willing to risk our standing with the gatekeepers and our continued access to performance opportunities.

None of us can control or second guess the reactions anyone may have to either our artistry or our advocacy. Advocacy is always a bold choice, and bold choices are always polarizing, at least at first—some will hate you for them, while others will adore you.



Brian Manternach

Bold choices are also defining for the artists and advocates who make them. It is what they are remembered for. No one can demand bold choices of you—but when you feel moved to speak your truth in a way that feels both exciting and a little scary, I truly hope that you will.

Brian Manternach’s bio can be found on page 31.



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