



Kathryn Harries: 'physical, intellectual, emotional, psychological and spiritual issues have to be addressed'

as weight and looks have to be discussed, gaps in musicianship filled, self-belief and self-criticism finely balanced so that each individual can work alone or as part of a team.

After assessing each singer's strengths and weaknesses, we aim to design a tailor-made programme which meets an individual's artistic needs whilst equipping them to deal with the tremendous challenges they will have to face on the operatic stages of the world. The cultivation of a uniquely expressive personality based on a strong technical and musical foundation is more important now than ever before.

Today's increasing pressures may be viewed as both positive and negative but there is no doubt that the career of a professional opera singer can be successful, rewarding and fulfilling despite the demands of our brave new world.

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Deborah Birnbaum is one of the world's leading teachers of the art of bel canto singing, with a focus on the role that breath-support plays in developing a great singing technique. She studied singing with the legendary Spanish soprano Montserrat Caballé, giving her a rare perspective on a generation of great artists and their singing technique that is now almost lost.

BODY

Learning to sing has always been a physical process that takes time. It requires physical maturity and coordination to assimilate highly technical information into vocal production.

Today's young singers have so many teaching resources available to them, through the Internet, YouTube, and digital technology. They also have an abundance of Young Artist Apprentice Training Programs and other advanced educational opportunities. However, with these expanded opportunities come a different set of expectations, standards and pressures than singers in the past faced. In our world today, everything has to be accurate and fast.

Singers of the past built their voices differently. They had a very structured vocal technical approach, cultivating the 'art of singing' – often having a daily voice lesson during their formative years. That is not feasible today.

In addition, the singers of the past took time to acquire repertoire, building slowly and progressively. They cultivated a very thorough understanding of musical style and were fluent in several languages. They would take six months, or more, to learn a role, gradually working it into their voice. The goal of good technique was vocal longevity and slow, steady career advancement.

Today's emphasis on health and physical awareness has had a very positive influence on singers. We expect them to look good, move well and be able to meet the close-up demands of HD performances and complicated stage productions. I think physical fitness improves aerobic activity, which is the essence of breathing for life and for singing. Singers these days are more attuned to their bodies: being physically fit gives people confidence and stamina and these qualities are essential for singers.

Young singers still have to have solid musical skills and be able to sing a wide range of repertoire in different languages and styles.

They also belong to the generation that embraces contemporary opera, which is often very difficult and vocally challenging repertoire. I admire their ability to 'think outside the box' and try new things.

BREATH

Breath is the direct link to our emotions. It is also our most natural function ... it's the first thing we do in life. We breathe approximately 20,000 times a day!

Joyce DiDonato has an instinctive feel for the relationship between breath and singing, which leads her to possess great technical skill and facility. I think she is one of the greatest bel canto singers of her generation for her ability both vocally and interpretatively. Here is an outline of the sort of things that Joyce will be thinking about in her own performances and her technical approach to great singing.

The breath is the onset of sound, or phonation, allowing the vocal cords to activate at an acoustical speed. The breath needs to remain calm and centred, through low abdominal breathing and the natural movement of the diaphragm. The breath creates a legato line for the coloratura and allows for the movement of sound. In fact, in fast passages we think of articulating the breath in bigger beats while organising the coloratura into smaller rhythmic groupings.

One of the biggest mistakes singers make is not having a 'three-dimensional' breath support. Often they isolate their breath, hold their breath or use too much air.



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