

HOME INSPIRATION

EVERYDAY ICON: NY METROPOLITAN OPERA SINGER, REBECCA RINGLE

When we got together with this accomplished mezzo-soprano, Rebecca Ringle, we discovered how she handles her nerves, how her workouts impact her performance, and a multitude of ways that her age-old art form remains so relevant in modern culture.

BARBARA SUEKO MCGUIRE · JUN 22, 2016

When Rebecca Ringle hops in an Uber on her way to work, she has to preface what's about to happen with, "I promise, I'm not insane." That's because for her, work is singing professionally at the New York Metropolitan Opera as a mezzo-soprano. And when she's on her way to practice or perform, it's necessary to warm up her vocal chords wherever she might be.

"When you're working a specific piece, there are all sorts of things you do to get ready," she explained. "I will do crazy exercises on the floor and sing things with a Pilates ring or a Bosu ball to keep my core muscles working together in a way that works for the music. I love the Jascha Heifetz quote: 'Practice as if your life depended on it and perform as though you didn't give a damn.'"

Ringle first began singing opera at age 15, when she was growing up in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and fell in love with it, because the classical music made her feel connected to the rest of the world in a way that nothing else did. Now, she can belt it out in seven different languages, from Latin to French to Czech, and will travel to Cuba in July to perform with the Chamber Orchestra of Havana. Not too shabby.

We were excited to get together with Ringle and talk more about opera than she possibly ever has. What we discovered is that this powerful centuries-old art form is still highly relevant and capable of speaking to a part of our soul in a universal human language.

Tell me about what kind of opera singer you are and what that even means.

I'm a mezzo-soprano, but if you were being picky, you'd say I'm a full lyric mezzo-soprano with a strong low range. I started college as a soprano since I'd always sung the high parts in choir. I have a longer face, and a darker voice often comes with that territory—think of Joni Mitchell or David Bowie. After a year of conservatory, my teacher asked me whether I'd like to try the mezzo-soprano repertoire, and I loved it. We wondered a bit about my classification, even through graduate school, but then in my early 20s, a busload of low notes just seemed to arrive and announce themselves, and most sopranos don't have those.

Mezzo parts are the most varied and I love that. We sing roles for innocent girls, femme fatales and sassy sidekicks. We always push the story forward. There's also a strong and very old tradition in opera of mezzo-sopranos playing male roles. I never had brothers and was always fascinated by the male mind since it seemed so foreign. I've developed crushes on male characters I've played.

How did you get your start singing professionally?

I was very lucky that Franz Welser-Möst came to head the incredible Cleveland Orchestra when I was in college 20 miles away at Oberlin. I had taken a semester abroad to get some space from conservatory life and study literature in Paris, and when I came back, I was afraid I'd lost momentum. But Welser-Möst programmed a piece called "Don Carlo" with the orchestra and auditioned Oberlin singers to play small parts. They cast me as Tebaldo, a pageboy, and those performances had some of the greatest singers in the world holding down the stage.

I was 22 and got to see how these singers behaved during rehearsals—the things I didn't think about that they were very exact about, things that in my student mentality I worried all night over that they wouldn't give a second thought to. I took it all in. Then, partly on the strength of that job, I got into Yale for graduate school. They had a very small department that gave lots of detailed feedback. They also set up auditions with important agents and casting directors and my career really started out of there.

What do you love most about singing opera?

I love the feeling of having a direct line to the audience's emotions. You use your whole body and brain to mold a sound that helps people to reflect on their day, their life, their relationships with others, themselves and the world. I have learned so much about humans by watching from the stage as hundreds of people react to a piece of music at the same time.

We perform very potent stuff: the highest impact emotional music from the last 500 years of Western culture. You see what parts make people perk up and what parts make them sigh and take their date's hand. It's lovely and the world needs the thrilling, vivid, soft experiences people find in live concerts.

Can you tell me about the first time you performed on stage for the NY Metropolitan Opera?

My debut was hectic but wonderful. We only had three weeks notice since I filled in for another singer. I played Rossweise, one of the Valkyries (warrior-goddesses) in the production of Wagner's "Ring Cycle" directed by Robert LePage from Cirque du Soleil. Our entrance involved "riding" a twenty-foot long set piece that rocked up and down with a horse's face projected onto it and then sliding all the way down to the stage below. It was wild, but ironically the first time I sang that role, at the Washington National Opera, we were lowered in from 40 feet in the air, so sliding down a set piece was nothing.

I think on my first entrance at my Met debut, I forgot something with my "reins," but it sorted out quickly and shot me mentally into that moment. Sometimes it's good to make a small mistake early because it jolts you out of your nervousness.

Speaking of nerves, how do you calm yourself down before a performance or do you just go with it?

Every performer you've ever seen gets nervous sometimes. It's an animal reaction to getting up in front of thousands of people. It may not happen every time, but the chemicals can flow all over your brain and body and you have to be ready for them. The adrenaline, noradrenaline, endorphins...all of it. They can disorient you if you're not ready or in a negative mental place, or they can catapult you to the best performance you've ever given.

I try to be friendly and respectful and even grateful towards nervousness when it shows up. Some people like to zen out and sit very still, but my body likes to be active when it's nervous, so I will put Jay-Z or Santigold—something with a lot of energy—into my earphones and dance.

Where would you like to see yourself in, let's say, the next five years? What are some of your career goals?

Well for a while, my top career goal was "sing my first Mahler 'Second Symphony,'" but I have one on the books now for next year, so I need to find new goals. I would love to work with the director Peter Sellars. I understudied in his first production at the Met and was so inspired by that experience. I'd also like to be at the front of finding ways to get the immediacy and power of our work to wider audiences. The best minds in my field think about this a lot and I'd like to help them.

So far, what's been a career highlight?

They're little moments. Your big career milestones are a bigger deal for family and for teachers, but the highlights are little experiences you wish you could bottle up. Early on, I was in an incredible Mark Lamos production of "Madama Butterfly," and during the flower duet, they rained "flower petals" from the rafters. The magic of that moment was beautiful and I couldn't believe I got to be on stage during it.

In concert repertoire, we're seated on the edge of the stage in front of the orchestra and we can see audience reactions. I love the moment near the end of Beethoven's "9th Symphony" when the whole audience sits up a little taller as the music becomes familiar. The beginning of Handel's "Messiah" when so many people have a reaction that looks like, "Oh yes, this music... I can't believe it's Christmas again..." Or in the Verdi Requiem during the "Dies Irae" when it "sounds like a classical action movie," as my friend says, and everyone smiles at the intensity of the bass drum bangs.

When you sit in the audience, you might think it's just you and your friend or date having that reaction, and that everyone in the rows around you is staid, but from the lip of the stage you can see that the whole audience has a reaction to that moment. The conductor doesn't get to see this because he's busy waving his arms to keep everyone together. The orchestra musicians don't get to see it because they're playing their hearts out. But the soloists get to see it and I wish I could give it away to everyone.

Any special trade secret ways you keep your voice strong and healthy that might be beneficial even to the layperson?

I would say definitely experiment with your workout routine and its effect on your voice. When I was in school there was almost no talk about exercise and some teachers would even warn you away from gym-style core work. But in a professional context I found that the appropriate exercise—lots of strength, but some good stretching in there as well—totally transformed my experience of singing. Everything felt so much easier. I was more able to make the phrases I wanted to.

Every body is different: I have a very long torso. I'm 5'8" and if I sit next to my 6'1" fiancé we'll be the same height. Some singers don't like to work the middle part of their body at all, and for the most part they're built very differently from me. I'd had teachers describe a sensation for me but you have to know what something feels like in your body for it to work. Also, I'm really into those alkalizing green drinks—the low sugar ones—to prevent colds and blunt the effect of any colds you do get.

Anything interesting about the opera that might surprise us?

We're all about the pre-show get-in-the-zone playlist...in fact, I made you guys one.

p.s. Have you met Shannon, another one of our musically-inclined icons?