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Santa Fe. Photo: Robert Reck



Joyce DiDonato

A Conversation With Mezzo-Soprano Joyce DiDonato About Her Roller Coaster Ride to Success Amidst Doubt and Faith

“Nobody – not a manager, not a teacher, not a maestro – nobody is going to hand you a career, and even if they do, they won’t be there to hold your hand through it. The only ones who can make a career happen are the artists themselves.”

By Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us
June 1, 2006

Joyce DiDonato was feeling nervous. It was the first time she was being coached by Michael Franciosi as an apprentice in the Santa Fe Opera Apprentice Program. The year was 1995 and she'd spent two years at the Academy of Vocal Arts without practically any encouragement from the vocal staff. After she'd sung a few pages from her score, Franciosi stopped her and stared.

"Oh, my God,' I thought. 'It was terrible,'" the critically-acclaimed DiDonato told OperaOnline.us by telephone from Geneva in May. "But he looked at me and said, 'You're really great.'

"What?' I said a little stunned.

"And then he answered me, 'Seriously, Joyce, you're really fabulous.'"

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

The road to success has been a difficult one for DiDonato, but the struggle has made her a stronger performer. "It was slow and steady," she said. "I built up a body of confidence so that when things started to break for me in my career, it didn't really throw me. I felt that my foundation had been built solidly along the way."

DiDonato, 37, attended Wichita State University and had planned on becoming a high school music teacher. "Like most 18-year-olds, I was absolutely positive," she said, "and then low and behold, you end up doing something completely different."

Her roommate was majoring in voice performance and introduced her to a new way of looking at opera. "I never liked it," she said. "I thought that people made these very bizarre unnatural sounds, and I just didn't get it; and in every video I saw, someone huge was usually standing on the edge of the stage making a bad hand gesture."

Wichita State had a good performance program, but it was a small program, so DiDonato, a music education major, had the opportunity to audition for opera – something, she said, that would have never happened at a larger university or conservatory. She knew that she could sing because she'd been in high school choirs and musicals, so she auditioned for a production of "Die Fledermaus" and became a chorister. "I took my first vocal lessons from a teacher who taught me naturally and showed me what the instrument was able to do," she said. "I started realizing that I had some power, and I really liked it. I got into college productions, and I was bitten by the bug.

"The thing that got me most excited about it [performing opera] was that it required everything I had at my disposal to succeed," she continued. "You have to be good onstage; you have to be intelligent to juggle the things that are required of you; you have

to work with languages; and politically, you have to handle maestros and other colleagues.”

After attaining her undergraduate degree in music education, she decided against pursuing a master’s degree because she wanted to perform. She was determined to go to the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia, but she had to almost beg to get in. After her audition there, the school’s director, Kevin McDowell, told her, “We liked you, but we really don’t have anything to offer you. We’re really not sure that this is the right place for you.”

DiDonato said that she answered him with: “Look, if you let me in this first year, I don’t expect a single role. I just want to be here and I’ll work really hard.”

She thought that after a year they’d be excited about her, but that never happened. “The head of the music staff was never convinced of my talent. . . . I just wasn’t his cup of tea,” she said. “I think he would probably say that to this very day although he hasn’t heard me sing for a while.

“I saw them pick a lot of other singers and give them the silver spoon treatment,” she continued. “They won all the competitions and were cast in the big roles. I was always delegated to the secondary parts. It was so hard for me when I was there because my experiences were making me question everything that I was doing.”

DiDonato came to the conclusion that she wasn’t “the golden one there,” she said, and that she would have to work harder than the others and find her own path. “I learned at AVA that nobody – not a manager, not a teacher, not a maestro – nobody is going to hand you a career, and even if they do, they won’t be there to hold your hand through it. The only ones who can make a career happen are the artists themselves.”

So DiDonato started to take control of her life and began taking voice lessons in New York. “I knew I had talent . . . but I wasn’t singing particularly well,” she said. “When I sang, I had muscle and tongue tension. That was the only way I knew how to do it. I realized I had to get that fixed so I went to New York, which helped me a lot.”

NEXT STOP – SANTA FE

“I auditioned for all of the summer programs which is what all the young artists do,” she said. “Wolf Trap, Merola, Santa Fe, Central City – the whole circuit. And the only place that invited me back was Santa Fe.”

“We always looked for a distinctive sound – and she certainly had it,” said Santa Fe Opera General Director Richard Gaddes who heard her audition. “She was obviously a fine musician, and in addition to being able to spin a fine legato line could also perform breathtaking coloratura.”

According to DiDonato, the program in Santa Fe was and continues to be different from the others. In most programs, participants receive extensive coaching and then perform in

a production at the end of the summer. All of the roles are cast from among the participants. But in Santa Fe, all of the primary roles are sung by professional, often world-renowned singers. Apprentices are cast in the smaller roles, cover the larger parts and sing in the chorus. Then at the end of the summer, they perform fully-staged opera scenes in front of an audience that includes artist managers and opera company representatives who are casting roles for their own productions and looking for talented young singers to fill slots in their young artist programs.

Santa Fe was DiDonato's first exposure to the inner workings of a professional opera company. "As a chorister, I was able to watch professionals rehearse and work their craft, taking the language, music and drama and putting it all together. The people that ran the program were much more a part of the real opera world than the staff at a conservatory, with the exception of maybe Juilliard," she said. "In a conservatory, the only thing that seems to matter is what happens between those four walls."

Trying to remember, DiDonato recalled that when invited to participate in the program, apprentices receive contracts with specific performance roles, cover roles and choral assignments. The choral music is sent to them a few months before the program begins, and they are expected to know the music when they arrive. "Everything you do is really scrutinized," she said. "I think that the people who show up eager, prepared and on time are the ones who tend to have the most success."

The operas and operettas produced in the summer of 1995 were "Le Nozze di Figaro," "Salome," Kálmán's "The Countess Maritza" and a world premiere of David Lang's "Modern Painters." DiDonato covered for Judith Christin in "The Countess Maritza" and had a small role in "Modern Painters."

"I learned so much being onstage every night," she said. "I was in the chorus of 'Figaro,' and when I was finished after the third act, I would go out into the house and watch the fourth act because it was so glorious. Rebecca Evans played Susanna, and she sang the most heavenly 'Deh vieni' every night. In that atmosphere – I didn't mind being in the chorus."

For her scene audition, DiDonato sang Rosina's "Una voce poco fa" from Rossini's "Il Barbiere di Siviglia" and Erika's "Must the Winter Come So Soon" from Samuel Barber's "Vanessa."

"I think they got excited about my singing because they gave me good scenes," she said. "I sang Giovanna Seymour in the big duet with King Henry from 'Anna Bolena,' and I sang Nicklausse from 'Tales of Hoffmann' – the big scene with the barcarolle going into the septette."

"At the end of the summer you're tired, and you're tired of being scrutinized every time you open your mouth. The morale tends to sag a bit and the people who have good scenes stay excited. . . . The scenes are their reward for having worked so hard the whole summer. There are always a few standouts."

And Joyce DiDonato was one of them. Michael Franciosi had mentioned her name to Gayletha Nichols who was the director of the Houston Grand Opera Studio at the time -- one of the most prestigious young artist development programs in the country -- so Nichols paid extra attention to DiDonato at the scene performance evenings, and she liked what she heard.

But DiDonato didn't act upon her newfound connection right away. After her successful summer, she still returned to the Academy of Vocal Arts for a third year. "Good things had happened for me in Santa Fe and my confidence was in a different place," she said. "I finally thought that maybe I had a shot [at a career]. The conservatory world had existed for me between those four walls, but now those walls had been smashed down."

The mezzo-soprano auditioned formally for the Houston Grand Opera Studio a few months later, was accepted, and sang in the program from fall 1996 to spring '98. During the summer break in 1997, she participated in San Francisco Opera's Merola Program. She did a year of regional work in the United States, found a European manager and started working in Europe.

SUCCESS ABROAD AND AT HOME

"In about 2001, the European thing started happening. That's where it took off for me -- in Europe before the states," she said. And it's been smooth sailing for DiDonato ever since. She has sung Angelina in "La Cenerentola" at La Scala, Cherubino in "Figaro" at the Met, and Rosina in "Il Barbiere di Siviglia" at Covent Garden, for which she was recently awarded the coveted Royal Philharmonic Society Best Singer award.

She remains faithful to the companies that have paved the road to her success. In the year 2000, she sang Cherubino in Santa Fe, then returned in 2001 to sing Annio in "La Clemenza di Tito." In 2007, she will sing "La Cenerentola" at the Houston Grand Opera, and her first Octavian in "Der Rosenkavalier" will follow in San Francisco. When we spoke to her in May, she was singing Sesto in "La Clemenza di Tito" in Geneva before heading back to Santa Fe to sing Cinderella this summer in the company's production of Massenet's "Cendrillon."

This marks Santa Fe Opera's 50th season and the 50th anniversary of the apprentice program. A gala concert on Aug. 12 hosted by Frederica von Stade will feature the voices of former apprentices who have forged successful operatic careers, and DiDonato will be among them. In addition to Massenet's "Cendrillon," this season's operas include Bizet's "Carmen," Mozart's "Die Zauberflöte," Strauss's "Salome" and Thomas Adès' "The Tempest."

"It all came together for me in Santa Fe. . . . It was an amazing summer," DiDonato said. "The apprentice program is a big part of the company's identity. By highlighting former apprentices at the anniversary gala concert, the company is showing its commitment to the program and its singers."