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Audition season approaches and singers encounter a plethora of alluring advertisements for summer programs. Young singers need to be informed consumers, and selecting a program should be an objective process—but how do you choose? Do you really need a program?

An honest assessment of your skills will clarify your parameters and help determine what is worth paying for. Consider the advantages and drawbacks of foreign versus domestic programs. Research the experience and credentials of faculty and administrators. Study program descriptions carefully. What does a summer program offer that you do not get the rest of the year? The opportunity to be a singer 24/7 may justify the cost.

Aim to strengthen weaknesses by seeking out the right components. Singing is an expensive profession and personal investment is a reasonable expectation, but you need not fall irreparably behind if you do not attend a program. Having a sparse résumé has certain stigmas attached, but so does being too frequent a participant at pay-to-sings.

The following will help you analyze your costs and commensurate rewards.

First, Who Creates Programs and Why?
Historically, operatic instruction has depended on mentors passing the artistry and traditions of the art form from generation to generation. Today, many professional artists with a desire to give back or pay forward as teachers or impresarios create pay-to-sing programs. Working alongside a great artist provides invaluable experiential learning that cannot be conveyed in books or seminars. When watching such dedication, one begins to absorb the standard.

Do your homework, though—great performers aren’t always great teachers or administrators. Also remember that accredited institutions favor degrees and opera companies trend toward younger artistic staff.

What Do You Need in a Program? Assess Your Skills!
Before you begin applying, assess yourself using the worksheet on p. 39. Where are you in your development? What do you need to improve in order to achieve your goal of becoming a professional singer? What will enable you to return home from a program with enhanced marketability?

After self-evaluation, confer with up to three professionals who know your work and have first-hand knowledge of industry standards. Be careful about polling those who have a financial stake in your choice. Seek the best information available and you’ll then be poised to invest in changing your weaknesses into strengths.

Location, Location, Location—Get out of Your Bubble!
The roots of opera are found in Europe, and a vast majority of the work remains there. Nothing compares to absorbing the culture and language in locations where the masters created their
great works. Study abroad also offers the opportunity to learn to negotiate travel details prior to encountering a high-pressure audition trip or your first international engagement.

If travel seems daunting, numerous universities have their own rather self-contained programs: a school takes its faculty and students abroad, providing résumé building and foreign travel for faculty and students alike. The value of these programs corresponds to the schools hosting them, yet the price point does not differ substantially from the strongest to the weakest. If the American faculty are functional in the local language, this can be a good barometer of the level of cultural immersion you’ll experience. Merely walking by beautiful old buildings on the way to rehearsal may result in less growth than an intensive program held in the States.

Universities encourage professors to find external teaching opportunities, especially abroad, and said programs may rely upon them to recruit participants, for which they are paid essentially on a commission basis. Keep this in mind when objectively researching programs and when seeking honest evaluations of your skills. If you remain domestic, stateside and Canadian programs with strong international resources can prepare you for eventual travel. If that is your preference, consider a different part of the country—get to know our incredible open spaces or exciting urban areas.

Skills Assessment Worksheet

A paraphrase of Arthur Schoep and Boris Goldovsky’s list of components needed in order to succeed as a singer:

1) Serviceable voice with sound technique
2) Good physical appearance
3) Sound command of stagecraft and acting
4) Good musicianship
5) Basic good health and physical condition
6) Intelligence, ability to learn, language and diction skills
7) Ability to work well with others

For each of the seven components above, grade yourself on a 1–5 scale, with 5 being the highest, 3 average. Ask three professionals who know your work and are familiar with industry standards to rate you as well. With a total of 21 or better and a score of at least 3 in each category, you may be considered marketable. If you are outstanding in one area, that is a plus. If below average in one category, the only compensation is possessing a truly exceptional instrument. If there are two weak categories, you’d likely need the voice of the century to be competitive. Two wild card factors may also change the outcome of the assessment: luck and money.

Based on my skills assessment, my summer goals are:

1.
2.
3.

What I desire in a summer program:

• Domestic or abroad?
• Songs, scenes, or opera?
• Performance or preparation emphasis?
• Orchestra or piano?
• Theater or concert space?
• Masterclass, lessons, or coachings?
• Language instruction and immersion?
• Cultural immersion?
• Where are the participants from?
• What level are the participants?
• How do I compare to the videos on the site?
• What is the daily schedule?
• Housing: dorm, apt, home stay, private/double occupancy, meals included?
• Interaction with faculty: in class only, during meals, during free time?
• Location: urban, academic, historic, pastoral, or rustic?
• Additional activities: on your own or as a group?
Whatever the continent, take the opportunity to remove yourself from familiar surroundings and discover your ability to negotiate new environs!

Quality of Faculty, Staff, and Content

Faculty
Read their biographies in depth. Have they worked at the level that you aspire to? For how long? Examine singers’ résumés for specifics regarding roles performed, where, and with whom. Look for evidence of ongoing relationships—are they conduits to the previous generation of great artists? Are they on-site for the duration of the program or just making a celebrity appearance? How much interaction will you have with them in one-on-one, group, and informal social settings?! If you notice the same name on numerous program rosters, do the math—your interaction may be limited.

Do faculty from complementary disciplines know, love, and adequately appreciate the demands of opera? Do they understand how their expertise can augment a singer’s abilities? Have they been professionals in the same capacity they are acting in the program? Will high-caliber coaches lead musical preparation and experienced pianists accompany lessons, or will students and emerging artists be used? It is exciting when a program offers both, providing there is excellent musical guidance from a coach or conductor.

If you desire to bridge the education-to-career gap, find a program that increases your professional network. Look for faculty that are current in the industry and have hiring capability and a wide professional network interested in helping young artists build careers. Be sure to ask these questions for directors and conductors, too!

Administrator
Reading the administrator’s bio is an equally important step. Administrators have one of the toughest jobs imaginable, requiring a particular skill set. Recruiting can be unpredictable, singers may cancel or arrive ill prepared, faculty themselves sometimes cancel, and venues and housing often shift. Look for evidence of organizational skills. Don’t overlook this crucial element!

Program Content
Look for detailed information about a program’s song, scene, or opera repertoire; its masterclasses, lessons, or coachings; the venue, production level, and accompaniment of performances; and the extent of language and cultural instruction and immersion. Don’t overlook other possible content such as managing your own career, procuring professional management,
planning finances, using social media, creating websites, and how to interact professionally in person and through correspondence. Many careers derail due to deficiencies in these areas, yet most schools or programs do not allot adequate time and attention to them.

Seek a program with the repertoire that will best suit your needs—perhaps operas that are among the most frequently produced, perhaps less familiar or newer works. If familiar, what is the treatment? There are cultural traditions reflected in operatic repertoire without which a performance loses perspective. However, unusual treatments can be exciting if well done. It behooves you to become educated in traditions and standard repertoire, but not to the exclusion of all else. Be selective and expand your résumé with experiences you cannot obtain in other ways.

Since, hopefully, you take lessons all year long, consider your options. A new approach can be of interest, yet building a student/teacher rapport can take time. A change in technical language early in a singer’s growth can be confusing and valuable progress can be lost. If still in school, ask your current teacher who might complement the work you are doing together. Lessons may be a conduit to one-on-one attention from an accomplished artist or a glimpse into a program of advanced study with a particular teacher. Yet, programs are not auditions, and teachers may not be able to ensure acceptance into an institution. Note that some programs offer lessons for a surcharge—an interesting option which more closely replicates a professional situation.

Language is a vital component of many programs. How much language instruction is there? Are the instructors native speakers? Are they experienced in teaching the language as a second language? Will conversation and diction be included? Will the study materials address a singer’s vocabulary and the repertoire being studied? Do you know of singers whose languages have improved due to the program? Will you have the opportunity to use the language in situ? You might be surprised—if faculty and participants function as an insular unit or the location is quite accustomed to tourists, you might come home having spoken nothing but English. Whether singing in English or a foreign language, remember the goal is not merely to learn accurate diction and fluency, but to communicate the lyrics in such a way as to move your audience.

Productions with orchestra, sets, and costumes are ideal. If not well
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organized, however, full productions can create as many distractions as opportunities. Study media samples on program websites! You might find you can get excellent dramatic and musical content with less-than-professional-level production elements.

Note the trend toward “get-away” programs designed to address the needs of the artist as a whole. Situated in scenic locations with comfortably paced schedules, these programs can offer many benefits for those who seek the time to make peace with their body as an instrument without the pressure of performance deadlines. But understand that experiencing the true benefits from many of these methods is, like building good vocal technique, a long-term process. Be sure to assess the quality of the nonmusical staff and content just as you would the rest of the program.

Whatever you do, do not make assumptions about the quality and professionalism of a program based on marketing and price! Network with past participants to learn about the faculty, administrator, and program—and to verify that components were delivered as advertised and that day-to-day operations went smoothly.

Cost and Reward: Are You Getting Your Money’s Worth?

Face it—if you are not getting hired by the apprentice programs or companies you wish, there are likely skills you can improve. Be proactive. Successful singers continually strive to surround themselves with inspiring colleagues and seek out (read pay) specialists who can make them better artists. If this is not your habit, do not be surprised if your trajectory stagnates. Even the great artists often get away from the Met to try out new repertoire or work with experts away from the limelight. The right summer program can provide such an opportunity.

Calculate a program’s offerings à la carte: lessons, coaching, masterclasses, travel expenses, housing, meals, etc. Take care to compare equivalent services. All scenes programs are not alike. All lessons are not of equal value.

AIMS in Graz 2015
American Institute of Musical Studies

For complete program details visit www.AIMSGRAZ.com

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GRAZ, AUSTRIA • JULY 4 - AUGUST 15, 2015

Live audition cities & dates
Atlanta GA• Monday, February 9
Baltimore MD• Tuesday, February 24
Cleveland OH• Wednesday, March 4
Greeley CO• Sunday, March 1
Kalamazoo MI• Tuesday, March 5
Kansas City MO• Saturday, January 24
Los Angeles CA• Sunday, March 1
Miami OH• Friday, February 13
Minneapolis MN• Saturday, February 14

Live audition cities & dates
Morgantown WV• Saturday, January 24
Nashville TN• Sunday, February 8
New York NY• Saturday, February 21
Philadelphia PA• Monday, February 23
Provo UT• Saturday, February 28
San Francisco CA• Saturday, February 14
Seattle WA• Sunday, February 1

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www.linguaecanto.com
Robin Fisher (Director), Donna Loewy (CCM),
David Small (UT Austin), Daniel Ebbers (UOP),
Buck Ross (U of Houston)

The whole value of a program may be greater than the sum of the parts.

Being a young artist is a costly endeavor. The industry and its ancillary branches all want your money. Many an operational budget has been balanced through application, audition, and accompanist fees as well as income from education and outreach performed by the young artists who’ve paid to participate. Advertising and holding auditions can be expensive for a program, justifying a fee, but the process is expensive for the singer as well. Programs that rely on electronic submissions save both parties money but eliminate the power of a live audition. Do your research so that your application dollars can go toward the programs best suited to your needs.

Fortunately, some programs have scholarships and others are endeavoring to create them. If you intentionally delay committing to a program in hopes of better financial offers, however, know that you are building your professional reputation. Exhibiting professional decorum now will serve you down the road. Strong-arming a program or canceling will not. It’s a small industry with a long memory.

In summary, investing in your career through a summer program can be an empowering experience. You can enhance your role-preparation process, hone much-needed skills, and discover new approaches to your craft. Since there are almost more programs than singers and price is not a clear indicator of quality, you want to choose wisely. If circumstances dictate that you continue earning money during the summer, you can still advance objectives identified by your self-assessment by creating your own summer plan incorporating the components you desire.

Whether you are a student, a professional, or in transition, once you’ve assessed your skills and identified what you desire in a program, these steps will help you find or create a program that suits your needs. Taking the time to learn the unique characteristics of a program will go a long way toward ensuring a rewarding summer.

Soprano Amy Johnson is known for her breadth of repertoire and particularly for her many portrayals of the title roles in Tosca and Salome. She has been involved in several summer programs as participant, faculty member, and co-director. In recent years she has established herself as a respected teacher as well. Johnson currently serves on the voice faculty of the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati. For more information, please see www.ccm.uc.edu and www.amysjohnson.com.