

Technology and Today's Classical Singer

BY MEGAN GLOSS

Technology has made the world very small. Have a closer look at how Skype propelled one aspiring vocalist's education forward.

For Veronica Richer, a career in opera might have once seemed far fetched. But through the use of technology, it became a reality that hit closer to home. The budding soprano had grown up in the town of Bryan, Ohio, its population just shy of 8,600 and her graduating class comprised of only 170 students. Still, being from a small town didn't minimize Richer's big ambitions, especially when it came to music.

The apple didn't fall very far from the tree. Her father, Ken, was

a sound engineer and her mother, Leisa, performed as an adult contemporary Christian vocalist. "I grew up in a musical family," Richer says in a phone interview. "My parents traveled as a Christian duo called the Stovers. Later, my aunt joined the group, and they became a trio. Music was just always something that we cherished."

In fact, it was during a Stovers concert that Richer would first take the stage, singing her debut solo at the tender age of two. "I toddled

onto the stage, interrupted my family's performance, and announced I wanted to sing 'Amazing Grace,'" Richer recalls. It wasn't long before the allure of the spotlight and a natural talent began to manifest even further in Richer through a knack for classical music.

"I played the violin, but when I first started singing, my mom encouraged me to move toward a more classical style," Richer says. "My voice was different in high school. I had a much easier time

accessing my head voice than knowing how to belt in my chest voice. And when I first heard opera, I just instantly fell in love with it—the long and beautiful phrases, the text. I loved everything about it from the very beginning."

Being a small-town girl, however, created some big challenges when it came to acquiring the right vocal training. But Richer's "love at first" listen inspired a unique drive in the then teenager. "Bryan has many talented teachers and individuals who teach in the area or have moved out of Bryan to pursue a music career," Richer says. "But with my passion for opera, I realized that I needed a vocal teacher who was fluent with languages and a teacher who had performed in operas."

The city was also lacking in opera programs. "The closest opera

company to Bryan is the Toledo Opera company, which is an hour's drive," Richer says. "I was in their production of *Faust* during my junior year in high school. That was such a talented crew to work with. But coming from a small hometown, my journey had only just begun."

She began traveling to the Eastman Community Music School in Rochester, New York, for its Music Horizons summer program—a nine-hour commute by car, one way, for the family. Under the guidance of vocal instructor Cecile Saine, Richer's passion for opera continued to broaden. But the distance between her hometown and her place of lessons posed a challenge for consistent study. And so Richer let a few modern advancements in technology pave the way for her continued musical growth.

A Growing Trend

With the fast-paced growth and accessibility in modern technology, advancements for singers have significantly altered their training ground. From online translators and pronunciation tools to digitized musical scores available at the click of a button or the swipe of a finger—not to mention a plethora of recordings and video that can be accessed almost instantaneously—so much is at the fingertips of today's singers as it has never been before. Thanks to instant face-to-face communication through mediums such as Skype and FaceTime, however, today's singers also can connect with teachers and coaches from long distances for lessons and other fine-tuning opportunities.

According to Saine, Richer, then a junior in high school, was the first

student at Eastman to embrace such a use of technology for the purpose of vocal training. "Working with Veronica through Skype was a new experience for me, as I am not a complete virtuoso on the computer," Saine says via e-mail. "Since her parents had some rather exceptional equipment, we were able to see and hear each other rather well. The actual technical connections were fairly easy to settle into, and we were able to adjust to the small delay between us."

Richer's father used a projector to reflect a full-body image of Saine off a wall in the family's basement. Richer also used a high-quality

microphone—a Neumann—for sound clarity. "I even had a local accompanist come over to play for the lessons," Richer says. "The lessons worked out beautifully. I felt so grateful that I could study with such an awesome teacher and live so far away."

The pair would go on to collaborate this way for two years, getting Richer through both her junior and senior years of high school and preparing much of her undergraduate audition material. "I noticed a natural strengthening of her overall sound as the first year unfolded," Saine says. "We were able to work on songs that challenged her range and agility, which seemed to open more possibilities for her vocal development. She came to me with a lovely light soprano voice and was very excited to continue her vocal development."

"The major advantage for Skyping Veronica's lessons was the element

of distance," Saine continues. "The hands-on approach to vocal instruction is very helpful; however, if the student lives in another state and cannot attend regular lessons, distance learning can be beneficial. We did couple this with intermittent (once-per-month) voice lessons in my studio at Eastman."

Some Challenges Remain

Despite the obvious perk of enabling singers the opportunity to continue honing their skills with voice professionals a considerable distance away, some challenges still remain, and nothing replaces the benefits of being able to learn in person. "The immediacy of a hands-on lesson is important because of its innate ability to address vocal needs," Saine explains. "This is difficult to always manage when the student is not directly in front of you. The sound

of the voice is delicately finessed in a studio setting, and some of that diminishes with visual and audio reinterpretation."

In assessing the needs of today's aspiring singers, however, and for promotional uses for those already in the professional realm, Saine says she embraces the use of technology. "I love technology when I want to share a professional recording (YouTube) and if a student needs to have regular distance lessons," she says. "It is very easily accomplished by anyone. I would use this method again if the need arose."

In order for such sessions to be effective, a strong and reliable Wi-Fi connection and high-speed Internet is essential. Also, to insure good sound quality, it is important to invest in the proper sound equipment. "I was at an advantage in that I had a full-screen projection and a space to work,"

Richer says. "With a full-body image, my breathing could be seen, and with a good microphone, I could be heard very well."

"But there were occasions where a lag in connection would disrupt the lesson," Richer continues, "or a storm would affect the Wi-Fi connection. A lesson in person is always better. But if it's between being from a small town and having to travel long distances or not being able to study with a good teacher . . . It's not always perfect, but Skype is a good alternative."

Today, Richer is in her senior year as an undergraduate student at the prestigious Boston Conservatory of Music, pursuing her degree in vocal performance and studying with opera department chair, Patty Thom. She has had opportunities to perform in Florence, Italy, in scenes from Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* and *Così*

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fan tutte, as well as covering roles such as Mabel in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*. She has performed as a soloist for countless concerts and recitals. She has also earned numerous awards and recognition as an emerging young vocalist, including as a winner of the 2014 Barry Alexander International Vocal Competition, as a finalist in the 2016 Classical Singer Vocal Competition, and as a semifinalist in the 2016 American Prize in Vocal Performance

competition for college/university opera. This past summer, she participated in Opera in the Ozarks and is looking ahead to graduate school auditions within the year.

For those hesitant about the idea of embracing technology as part of their training, Richer says she is living proof that it can be beneficial. "I just feel very fortunate," she says, reflecting upon where her musical training has taken her. "The main thing I would offer as advice to other

singers and teachers considering it is not to be afraid to try. Because of this kind of vocal training, I have been able to communicate with teachers all across the map and I am where I am today because of it."

Soprano Megan Gloss has crafted a unique career that bridges music and writing. Within the concert hall, she is a versatile soloist in opera, musical theatre, and jazz. She has been recognized by the Anna Sosenko Assist Trust for her work in opera and musical theatre and is a district and regional winner of the National Association of Teachers of Singing Artist Award competition. Outside the concert hall, she is a features editor in Dubuque, Iowa, where she covers the arts for her hometown daily newspaper, the Telegraph Herald. When not living the arts, she enjoys traveling, mastering yoga poses, sipping wine, and hanging out with her husband, Keith, and their cat, Mabel. 



Veronica Richer