

Regional

For Truckenbrod, being a soprano is hard work

The world of opera may seem glamorous – maybe even exotic – to people who are unfamiliar with it. And opera singers, it is often presumed, come about their abilities naturally. While natural talent is a big factor in making it in opera, it also requires years of dedicated practice. Just ask Emily Truckenbrod, an assistant professor of music at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Singing, it appears, is not just about the voice.

“It is sort of like learning a new language,” Truckenbrod said. “We begin the study of diction by learning the International Phonetic Alphabet, where each sound is assigned a certain symbol and from those symbols we apply certain rules to each language we go through.”

A practicing opera singer and teacher, Truckenbrod was born in DeKalb, Ill., and obtained her bachelor’s degree of music in vocal performance from Northern Illinois University, her master’s in vocal performance from the University of Iowa, and her doctorate in vocal performance and pedagogy, also from the University of Iowa. She was born to a musical family. Her father was a percussionist and her mother still plays guitar.

“I began playing piano at a fairly early age, but I have always sung,” she said. “When I was in fifth grade I began playing French horn but things changed and I went into singing land.”

As a soprano she has the highest voice type there is. Sopranos are usually considered to be females, but there are a few male sopranos and sometimes even children have been used in that role.

“In the opera repertoire, you do not see that so much,” explained Truckenbrod. “Although we have had sort of a re-birth of males singing female roles and they usually sing contralto parts that are meant

either for women or males.” Besides range, there are other factors that define the type of voice a soprano – or any other singer – has.

“Generally, a soprano has a lighter vocal weight,” she said. “Also, there is sort of a lighter timber. If you think about painting, maybe you think about the soprano’s voice being more like a watercolor whereas the mezzo-sopranos could be more like an oil painting. Those types of things all come in play in terms of vocal classification.”

Singers have to be in shape when it comes to managing their voices. “When I am doing a certain role, I really train myself to sing that role,” Truckenbrod said. “For instance, I just sang a role in “Die Fledermaus” (“The Bat,” an operetta composed by Johann Strauss) and the highest note was a D above high C, which I have not been singing so much lately. I had to sort of train and work my range up to be able to do that comfortably and make it sound good as well. Also I recently sang a piece with Dan Smithiger, a percussion professor here at SIUE, and one of the notes was G below middle C. I had to train to do that as well, so I practiced to use my voice and accommodate those big ranges.”

Among the courses Truckenbrod teaches is vocal pedagogy. “It is a class to train people how to teach voice,” she explained. “We start by teaching students the physiology of the voice, how it works and all the different physicalization that go into singing, like breath, laryngeal function, diction, articulators, we talk about what makes a good teacher, how to start with a beginner student, musicality, vocal function, all kinds of things that go into training singers.”

When asked about how the use of electronic devices can change the way a singer sounds, she is categorical. “It is cheating,”

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she said. “It is tricky because we encourage our students to listen to recordings of professional singers, and when the recording is tailored is such a way it really makes it a little bit discouraging for a young singer to think that they always have to be perfect when performances are rarely a perfected product.”

She also cautions singers about changing the way they perform based on the venue. “It is complicated because you do not want to change how you really use your voice because that can lead to some dangerous vocal situations,” she said. “If you are in a room that has less positive acoustics, you do not want to push your voice. You can really damage your vocal cords.”

And when it comes to pleasing audiences, Truckenbrod advises her students to first “read” them. “I think a lot of times in an opera you really feed on how the audience is responding,” she said. “There is a lot of give and take and back and forth with the audiences. That’s something you learn by experience.”

Truckenbrod is now working on a recital she will perform at SIUE. “I am hoping to perform a song repertoire using Emily Dickinson poetry as well as E.E Cummings poetry,” she said. “Sort of like creating a program around those two poets.”

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Sciences@siue.edu.



Dr. Emily Truckenbrod performs.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Truckenbrod