

Brooks finding success with San Francisco Opera

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Colleen Brooks, daughter of Howard and Catherine Brooks, 1998 graduate of Platteville High School and current resident of St. Francis, has had a big summer. She got engaged to her boyfriend of nine years, Larry Johns, finished her doctorate and was one of 25 people invited to participate in the Merola Opera Program in San Francisco.

Brooks has been singing professionally since 2006 and has not only finished degrees at UW-Madison, Indiana University and now the College-Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati, Ohio, but she has also participated as an artist in the Central City Opera in Central City, Colo., Aspen Music Festival in Aspen, Colo., and Florentine Opera in Milwaukee.

“The biggest two benefits of these programs are contacts and experience,” said Brooks. “You receive invaluable feedback and advice from well-established professionals in the field and contacts are vital for a career in opera as it is really a small world in which everyone eventually knows everyone.”

When she received the news that she had also

been accepted into the Merola Opera Program, Brooks was ecstatic.

“Merola is one of the upper level summer programs that a lot of young singers apply to each summer,” said Brooks. “I had applied several times, but this was the first summer that I received an audition. I sang two arias (solo pieces from operas) at the audition in October 2009, and then I had a call back audition a few days later in which I sang another two arias. In November, I received the call that I had been accepted.”

Brooks began her career as a soprano and now she currently sings as a mezzo-soprano. She said that there are a lot of factors that go into determining one’s voice type. Range, how low and high a person can comfortably sing, is an important factor, but it is also important to know what tessitura one prefers to sing in. According to Brooks, tessitura refers to the smaller range of notes that a person feels most comfortable singing for a long period of time. She said that a person’s height and body type can also be a determining factor.

Brooks said that she finds the career of an opera singer fulfilling because of the constant collaboration with other talented musicians and colleagues, the motivation to maintain good physical health and the schedule.



Colleen Brooks

“Maintaining one’s physical health is a necessity for my career as your body is your instrument, so that makes it a little easier to take care of myself by working out, eating well and getting plenty of rest, even when I am often tempted not to,” said Brooks.

Brooks’ schedule often includes weekends, and although it was not uncommon for her to put in 10-12 hour days for the Merola Opera Program, she usually does not have to put in an eight-hour day, a factor that made it possible for her to be

full-time student while pursuing her bachelor’s, master’s and doctorate degrees.

Brooks said that her musical influences started early in her life.

“I had a wonderful piano teacher, Mary Turner, from second grade through high school,” said Brooks. “She was extremely musical and really encouraged my talent and study of music. Singing with the Platteville Children’s Choir also played a key role in developing my musicianship from a young age, and Rebecca Lewis, my middle school band and jazz ensemble teacher, taught me a lot about musicianship and discipline.”

Brooks also saw the musical “Phantom of the Opera” in high school while visiting her aunt in San Francisco. She said she was completely enraptured throughout the entire performance, and interestingly enough, when her aunt came to her final performance in the Merola Program this summer, she reminded Brooks that the “Phantom” performance they saw so many years ago had taken place on the same stage.

Even though she was steadily involved with and exposed to music as a young child, Brooks did not consider a musical career seriously until she was an undergraduate biochemistry student at UW-Madison faced with an important decision to make about medical school.



Colleen Brooks performs with the Merola Opera Program in San Francisco, Calif.

“When I was having trouble deciding whether to go into a career in medicine or one in music, all of the people in the medical field said that it is extremely challenging, and if there’s any other career that could make me happy, I should pursue it,” said Brooks. “Well, as it turned out, everyone in the musical field gave me the same advice, so I realized that I was just going to have to pick which one I wanted to try.”

Brooks’ gamble paid off and her leap of faith was a leap to success.

“Madame Butterfly,” “The Magic Flute,” “The Barber of Seville,” “Don Giovanni” and “Hansel and Gretel” are just some of the operas she has performed in.

She said her favorite part of performing is when she really feels in the zone, when all the pieces of the puzzle are coming together without her even thinking about them. Being completely present in the moment, voice and body resonating, shaping beautiful, meaningful phrases, and clearly delivering her text to her scene partner and her story to the audience are all key to an unforgettable performance, she said.

Before performances, Brooks generally begins with a few minutes of body work that might include a short meditation, breathing exercises on her exercise ball or just lying still on the floor. She then adds humming or a few lip trills to warm up her voice.

“After I’ve sung for a few minutes, I begin technical exercises consisting mostly of scales and arpeggios on different combinations of vowels and consonants,” said Brooks. “I usually do technical exercises for 10-20 minutes, then I work on whatever songs I want to practice that day for a half an hour to an hour.”

Brooks said that unlike a pianist or violinist, it is not expected that a singer practice for long periods at a time. “Since we use our voices all day long, it’s important not to tire it out by singing too much. Instead, it’s best to just be consistent in one’s practice by doing a little each day.”

Also a part of her career development is learning foreign languages. Brooks has studied English, Spanish, French, German, Italian and Russian, and said that in order to be a successful opera singer, a person really should eventually become fluent in Italian, German, French and English.

In her free time, Brooks likes to see movies, read and practice Bikram yoga, not only for physical conditioning, but because she enjoys it. She said she also likes to play volleyball and routinely watches football and college basketball.

Brooks said that her greatest support has been her parents and godparents, Jack and Rene O’Neill of Belmont, who have come to almost every single one of her performances and even traveled to see her perform in Salzburg, Austria. “It is so much more fun to perform when you know people in the audience, so I cannot thank them enough for their support,” she said.

When asked to summarize what it’s like to be a professional opera singer, Brooks said, “It’s crazy, but I love it. A career in music is still a leap of faith, but really, a lot of things in life are and I am fully confident that this is what I want to be doing.”

Brooks currently maintains a web page that includes her upcoming performances, reviews and audio samples at www.colleenbrooks.com.