Art Son
Discovering My Love of Opera by Yazid Gray

My mother says she always knew I was going to be a singer because when I was a baby, she would hum into my ear and I would hum the same tune back to her. I have been singing my whole life.

I started taking voice lessons in high school at my chorus teacher's encouragement. During my first lesson, when my teacher gave me my first-ever Italian art song, I thought, “This is going to be impossible.” I had never sung in another language, so it was new and scary for me. But I pushed through that song, and in subsequent lessons, I began to enjoy singing it. I started asking for more music, and for music in different languages.

Although I enjoyed singing in other languages, I was skeptical at first whether opera was right for me. But as I listened to opera recordings and watched videos of opera performances, I would get so emotionally invested that I'd forget that the opera was in another language and that there was no spoken dialogue. I wanted to sing like that.

The Audition

By the time I was a junior in high school, I was very interested in learning more about what it takes to be an opera singer. I asked my voice teacher if she knew of a way for me to work on my voice over the summer. When she gave me a flyer about the Washington National Opera Institute, I was immediately interested. I visited the website and learned that the program included not only voice lessons, but classes in acting, Italian diction, ear training, sight singing, movement, and opera history. I knew I had to go to this program.

I immediately began to work on my application, and I practiced every single day until the audition in January, preparing an Italian art song called “Danza, Danza, Fanciulla Gentile” and a Negro spiritual titled “Honor, Honor.”

On the day of the audition, I was very nervous as I got on the metro and headed to the Washington National Opera Studio. There, I signed in and sat down to fill out an information sheet. As I was writing, I heard other singers warming up for their auditions. They sounded amazing. I was intimidated, but I was also determined to complete my audition to the best of my ability. After I sang my songs, one of the panel members talked with me about the meaning of my songs and told me where I should tweak a few parts. She asked me to sing them again, and I did. And then the audition was over. I would learn my admissions decision in March.

When I got the call, I learned that I had been accepted into the Opera Institute—with a full scholarship! I couldn't wait for summer.

Tenor in Training

When we arrived on the campus of American University the first day, we took a test for placement into our music classes before moving to the concert hall, where we would each sing for our classmates and the faculty. When the recital started and my classmates began to perform, I was even more nervous than I'd been at the audition. To me, my classmates sounded like professional opera singers, while I sounded like a little boy.

At the end of the day, Cindy Oxberry, our director, spoke with us about what the next three weeks would entail. She told us that we would be working at a really fast pace that might seem overwhelming at times. At the end of the program, everyone would perform in the art song recital and opera scenes performance, and a handful of us would be chosen for an honors recital at the Kennedy Center. After explaining that we were in a pre-professional program that would teach us what it takes to be an opera singer, Ms. Oxberry told us to check our e-mails each night for the next day's schedule.

On the second day, we jumped right in: We were each given an Italian art song—and informed that we needed some familiarity with the music and language of our piece before our individual lessons and coachings later the same day. Our days were so jam-packed that we had to spend our lunch break in the music library and practice rooms learning our songs.

After lunch, I went to my first lesson with Millicent Scarlett, a professional soprano and member of the voice faculty at George
Washington University. As we started to talk and I began to sing, it was as if I were singing with someone I had known for years. She reminded me of a member of my family, and I was able to joke around with her as I do with my mother and grandmothers, which I loved. In a private voice lesson each week, Mrs. Scarlett helped me with my abdominal breath support and tone control and taught me how to make my sound more resonant.

From lessons, I headed straight to voice coaching. While voice lessons focused on the technical aspects of singing—how to use your body, control your breath, and keep your voice healthy—the voice coachings focused on polishing our songs to perfection. The vocal coaches would help with the language, character, and overall message of the pieces.

One of the most important experiences I had developing my character came during a master class with bass Kenneth Kellogg, who has sung with the Washington National Opera, the Los Angeles Opera, and the Atlanta Opera, among others. In my art song, Scarlatti’s “Toglietemi la vita ancor,” I was singing about losing my love, but I was not fully connecting with the character. Mr. Kellogg told me to imagine being ready to give up my life for the love of my life, but I explained that I just couldn’t see myself dying for a girl. Then he told me to picture my mother instead. That changed the song completely. When I sang it from that perspective, the piece became real for me and for the people who heard me sing it.

Center Stage
We all had been working hard on our art songs in our lessons, coachings, and master classes, as well as on our own in the evenings, so we were excited for our first recital at the end of the second week. I felt a lot of pressure, as I was chosen to perform first. Mine was the first voice the audience would hear, so I would set the tone for the whole evening. This time, as I drew on all my hard work and preparation, I sang my art song with confidence. Even my classmates, who already sounded so good on the first day, sang at a new level. The recital was a great success for all of us.

The next week was busy, with both a recital for opera scenes (I performed a scene from The Marriage of Figaro with two of my classmates) and the honors recital, which would feature both art songs and opera scenes. When Ms. Oxberry announced who would sing at the Kennedy Center for the honors recital, I crossed my fingers. I prepared myself not to hear my name called, but then she announced that I was going to sing my art song. When she said that my opera scene partners and I would also perform, I couldn’t stop smiling.

On the day of the recital, I took the train to the Kennedy Center. After a brief run-through, it was time to start. All the performers took their places and Ms. Oxberry began to speak to the audience about the program and the recital. When I heard, “Here now is Yazid Gray,” I felt as though my heart were going to burst out of my chest. I had been chosen, again, to be the first performer. I walked center stage, explained what my song was about, and then sang the song I had prepared so thoroughly for three weeks. As I took my bow and heard the applause, I couldn’t believe that I had just sung at the Kennedy Center—me, the guy who was afraid he might not make it into the program.

I left the Opera Institute not only a better musician, but a stronger person. I learned how to carry myself in a professional manner, to be open to trying new things, and to own up to my talent. I met so many great young singers who I know will be my friends for life. I met professionals who are big names in the opera world, who were so generous with their insight, advice, and encouragement. Every person working in this program was committed to helping us understand what it takes to become an opera singer. Now, more than ever, that is exactly what I hope to do.

Yazid Gray is a senior at Northwest High School in Germantown, MD, where he is an active member of the honors chamber choir, student director for the drama department, and co-president of the International Thespian Society. He performs a range of genres of music around the state of Maryland and Washington, DC. Yazid has recently been auditioning for colleges—“Toglietemi la vita ancor” is one of his main audition pieces—and plans to major in vocal performance.