



Becoming an Opera Coach: A Conversation with Dorothy Randall

by Catherine T. Corcoran

Before degrees in collaborative piano existed, a pianist and singer decided to pursue the career of vocal coach to merge her many loves. Read about her singular journey of learning a profession right in the trenches.

The path to becoming an opera coach is rarely a straight one. It's not a profession that is often talked about among young pianists, and most coaches seem to discover it while on their way to doing something else. Once hooked, however, they find that the rewards of the job are incredible.

No one knows this better than Dorothy Randall. I caught up with her backstage at the San Diego Opera, where she is principal répétiteur, for a conversation about the path that led her to the opera coaching profession. Like many of today's coaches, Randall never formally studied opera coaching, or even accompanying. She was an undergraduate music education major with a piano emphasis, then later studied drama, choral conducting, and voice.

"I did some accompanying, but not a great deal," she says. "My school had no opera. The final year, they decided to do an opera workshop. They conned me into playing, which was fine except I wanted to sing too. I finally had to put my foot down and said, 'Okay, either I get to sing at some point or I won't play.'" She laughs at this. "I wasn't really interested in opera, per se, until I suddenly made the connection between 'Oh, music, which I love. Hmmm, theatre, which is my other love. Hmmm, let's put those together!'"

But it wasn't until she was in her early thirties that Randall discovered opera coaching. After several years of teaching public school choral music, singing small roles in opera and musical theatre, and performing in opera choruses, she decided to attend the American Institute

of Musical Studies (AIMS) program in Graz, Austria. Voice teacher Herald Stark encouraged her to consider coaching.

"I had gone to study with him in San Antonio because I hadn't had voice in years. And he was on the faculty at AIMS. He said, 'Honey, I think you should be an opera coach. You play piano, you've studied voice, you're interested in theatre—you should do this, and you might have a chance to conduct if you work in a small house in Germany. You should go to Graz.' God rest his soul and bless him for it." After her first year as a student, she spent three more years at AIMS as a staff accompanist and another two years as a faculty member.

After AIMS, Randall moved to Vienna, where she worked as an audition pianist. "After I had been in Graz for two

summers, I moved to Austria to learn the language and to give singing a shot—the latter a short-lived attempt! Early on, an American singer contacted me to accompany her agent audition. While I was waiting for her to arrive, the agent secretary told me I was not needed, as they had their own pianist. Not wanting the singer to think I had deserted her, I said, ‘Fine, I will leave when my singer gets here.’ Not five minutes later, the secretary came back and said, ‘Our own pianist is not available today. Can you play for everybody?’ And that’s how I ended up with the job! A complete fluke!”

During her time in Vienna, Randall studied German at the Goethe Institute, played everything that came her way, and absorbed as much knowledge as possible. “I went to the opera on average five nights a week in standing room, ten schillings a performance [about 75 cents at the time]. The Staatsoper, the Volksoper, symphonic and choral concerts, recitals, films—I went to everything I could. A self-schooling.”

Her next step was Italy, where Anton Guadagno recommended her for a position on the music staff of the Arena di Verona. “Nothing like starting at one of the biggest companies in the country, having never done the job of répétiteur before, and speaking only a handful of words of the language,” she laughs. “That’s not the way I would necessarily recommend someone to start. But there you are! And I wasn’t young—I was 36 at that point.”

When asked how she felt about her level of preparation, she laughs. “I didn’t have the vaguest clue! Language was a beast! I didn’t quite know how to prepare an opera score, other than basically learning the notes. Now, of course, I know how much more is involved: figuring out how to make the music really work, letting go of the feeling you must play every single note, working out what is most helpful to the singers, and how to make a percussion instrument sound more like an orchestra.

“And there’s the challenge of reading a conductor’s mind—and sometimes

in another language! Much of that just comes with experience. You have to figure out where their beat is, guess where they begin in staging rehearsals, how much help they want you to give the singers. Those things you have to learn by doing, since conductors are all different. There’s no training for that, other than doing it.”

Since those early days in Europe, Randall’s career has taken her to every possible coaching environment. Currently, she spends her year on the road, traveling between her positions at San Diego Opera, Chautauqua Opera, regional opera houses like New Orleans and Grand Rapids, and her hometown of San Antonio. Depending on the year, she might also have engagements at other opera houses, give masterclasses at colleges and universities, or coach privately.

When asked what type of education she would recommend for a young

person who is interested in becoming an opera coach, she thinks for a minute and says, “We all come at it so strangely. I mean, nowadays there are collaborative piano programs and if that’s what you’re really interested in, go for it. Other than that, go for a piano degree and learn as much as you can. Learn languages, learn voice, learn everything. Go into as broad a spectrum as you can and involve everything. You can do that in a collaborative piano degree. I guess it just depends on where you are.”

And what other advice, besides educational, would this coach give?

“Travel, read widely, learn languages, be curious, listen attentively. Attend everything you possibly can. Go to plays, go to operas, go to the movies, see those Met broadcasts. Play for as many singers as possible, in auditions, lessons, recitals. Go to voice studios and talk with voice teachers. Make your own opportunities.

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Top: Randall (center) in a New Orleans restaurant with Vale Rideout (left) and Buddy Courtenay (right).
Bottom: Randall sporting bunny ears that soprano Sylvie Valayre put on Randall's head during a *Tosca* rehearsal.



Go be in a play or an opera chorus. Find out what it's like to be on the other side of that coin. If you've never 'trod the boards,' never sung in public, find out what it's like to stand up onstage as a singer/actor. It's a different perspective and a bit of a wake-up call. I loved it."

I tell her that in my conversations with coaches, I have found that their backgrounds and career paths are incredibly diverse, and she agrees. "All over the map! There is no GPS!" she laughs. "There is no one path. We all have our different ways of coming at it.

A lot of my colleagues did not work in Europe; it was sheer luck that I did. One of my colleagues did folk music [and] experimental theater and is very active in contemporary music. She had a totally different path than I did, yet neither of us has a master's degree. A lot of my colleagues do, many in applied piano.

"For example, the Chautauqua music staff, eight coaches in all, come at this from any number of directions, with different backgrounds, different skill sets. One loves contemporary and early music, another is our English diction coach, two prepare the choruses, another does German rep, three are especially good at French, I do a lot of the standard Italian rep—but in addition, we all play recitals and coach whoever walks into the studio on whatever they want to sing! Our so-called 'specialties' came out of our diverse educations and experiences."

When asked what she finds most rewarding about her work, Randall lights up. "There's just nothing like it, nothing like opera for taking all of the intensity and expressiveness of the voice, the physicality of the performer, the collaboration of all the forces onstage and offstage and in the pit, and putting it all in service of something larger than life and expressive to the *n*th degree.

"And I love working with singers—I just get the biggest kick out of them," she continues. "They are some of the most interesting and exciting people on the planet Earth, as are my colleagues in the coaching profession. Because I'm not generally involved in the performances, except for Mozart or Rossini where there are recitatives to accompany, my job is about the process rather than the product. The give-and-take, the collaborations with singers, conductor, director—the collaboration necessary to bring the opera to life is fresh and stimulating with each new production. When I revisit a score, I try to bring more to it than any earlier production, perhaps adding extra lines, better articulations, more instrumental colors. And there are still so many, many scores I've not yet laid hands upon!"

Coaching does come with some frustrations, however. "I may have a point of view in my preparation of a score which doesn't always line up with what somebody else wants," Randall explains, "and being wed to your own opinion can be problematic for all concerned. Now I realize that it is not up to me, as a 10-fingered orchestra, to try to put my own interpretation forward! The conductor conducts me as he will the large group of musicians, and it is up to me to bring his musical ideas into sound. But one of the great delights comes when there is a collaborative effort with conductor, singer, director—any of which can involve me. I love that. I don't want to be boss, I don't want to 'drive the bus,' but I do like it when I can be involved in it in an active way."

On the relationship between coach and singer, Randall says, "Well, that varies on the situation, but it has to be based on mutual respect and a willingness to collaborate. I start masterclasses by saying, 'Can we please consider this a non-masterclass? After all, I'm still learning too. I'd like to be able to offer you something which will help you based on my own experience, but I also want to learn from you, too.'

"A good coach finds ways to problem-

solve. If a singer has a particular challenge—vocal or musical—I need to identify the problem, communicate to them what I am hearing, and offer suggestions to help them solve the problem or improve upon a skill. Tools to improve not just at that given moment, but something to take home that they can continue to work with and better their performance. If all they do is achieve a quick fix when they're in the studio, I've failed miserably at my job. The singer is an artist as well as I am, and recognizing this and appreciating one another is what creates a very satisfying relationship."

Randall says that certain personality traits have helped her for this career path. "Sometimes being too stupid to know that I couldn't do something," she says, smiling. "I wasn't exactly fearless, but I was foolhardy starting out. A healthy sense of curiosity is a wondrous thing and can lead you down so many paths."

"I can't say I personify all the things that I think make a good coach," she continues, "but some [which] I think are important are being open, being flexible enough to accept someone else's ideas in addition to formulating your own, being well informed over a broad spectrum of subjects, and being eager to learn. It seems to matter less whether you are an extrovert, an introvert, or at whatever point you fall on that spectrum, than possessing a vital curiosity, willingness to work with someone else, respect for another person, a positive and encouraging attitude, and a real love of what you are doing."

And what about personality traits that hinder a coach?

"Being rigid, stubborn, or generally uncooperative can be problematic for all concerned. Being consistently negative, having to be right all the time, or denigrating someone who has come to you for assistance—all these cause problems on any number of levels. Not having some sense of wonder at what we do or not delighting in the process of creating and re-creating. Really, if you're not enjoying yourself, don't do it!"

Randall pauses for a moment and then adds, "After all, we are so incredibly fortunate to be able to go to work and make music with talented students, our colleagues, and friends. In any one given day, we can be intellectually and emotionally stirred, exhilarated, touched, illuminated, entertained, challenged, or amused. For me, even the worst imaginable day in an opera house is better than the best day anywhere else. Truly, there are times in rehearsals when I've said silently, or even occasionally out loud, 'Thank you, God! I love my job!'"


Catherine T. Corcoran is a doctoral candidate at Teachers College-Columbia University, currently working on a dissertation about the opera coaching profession. She holds a bachelor of music degree from the Eastman School of Music and a master of music degree from Arizona State University. A San Diego resident, she teaches piano at California State University at San Marcos and is a staff accompanist at Grossmont College. 



photo by Lisa Kohler

Congratulations to Warren Jones, winner of *Classical Singer* magazine's 2010 Coach of the Year award.

Jones received the award at the 2010 Classical Singer Convention in New York City. For more on Jones, see "Keeping up with the Jones" in the April 2010 issue.