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# Opera

Vienna's new 'Zauberflöte'  
Training the next generation:  
Muti and Zajick  
Wolfgang Koch—more than  
a Wagnerian



## DRAMA OUT OF A CRISIS

Brian Kellow visits Dolora Zajick's training centre

At the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices at the University of Nevada in Reno, perhaps the most important guiding principle is self-reliance. In 2006 Dolora Zajick, the reigning dramatic mezzo-soprano of our time, joined forces with Rosemary Mathews and Sara Agler to create a training centre that seeks to address a troubling void in today's opera world: the appalling lack of young voices being properly trained to sing Verdi and Wagner, as well as many of the crucial works in the verismo repertoire.

The scarcity of true dramatic voices has plagued the opera world for years, resulting in enormous holes in the mainstream repertoire simply because there aren't many people who can sing them. Today, anyone trying to assemble a first-rate cast for *La forza del destino* or *La fanciulla del West* or *La Gioconda* is bound to face daunting obstacles. Zajick has set out to replenish the stream of artists so desperately needed to make this repertoire spring to life. At the Institute, where I had occasion to be an observer for three days last July, there is enormous emphasis on healthy vocal technique. But the most consistent message is that singers must learn to embrace their natural, individual voices, to trust their own instincts, and to be on guard to prevent others from doing them harm.

Those 'others' range from managers desperate to fill a hole in their roster by pushing young singers into heavy repertoire that they can't yet handle, to voice teachers at some of our leading conservatories who haven't the patience or the skills to nurture dramatic voices, which generally require a far longer gestation than lyric voices. Many voice teachers are eager to establish a reputation for turning out polished singers who are essentially prêt-à-porter; that helps explain the current glut of lyric voices coming out of US conservatories. (Anyone who has covered a major voice competition can attest to this: there's often not a 'Pace, pace, mio Dio' or 'Vieni! t'affretta!' in sight, but you hear the piano introduction to Juliette's 'Je veux vivre' so many times that you'll start to get a little queasy.) The fact is that many budding dramatic voices often face an avalanche of discouragement along the way. Beatrice Benzi, a language coach at La Scala who has worked with Zajick's Institute since 2008, observes, 'When you're young, and all of your friends are singing Cherubino and Barbarina and Adina, and you're an Aida, you can feel very ... different. Dolora is good at helping young students work through all of that psychologically.'

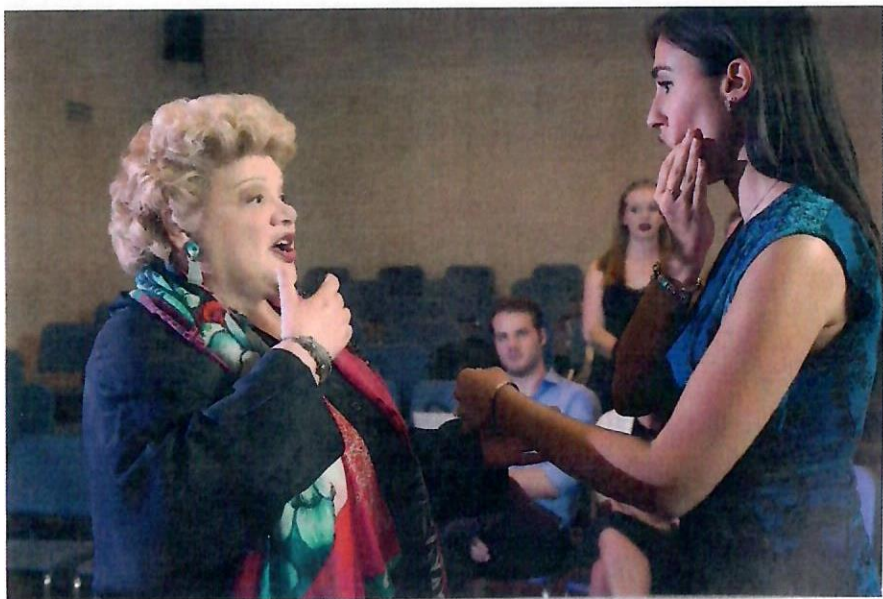
■ A true dramatic voice: Dolora Zajick as Azucena at the Met



Although Zajick strives not to generalize in a negative way about conservatories, she does admit that her relationship with the academic world is a bit uneasy. 'One problem we have with conservatories,' she says, 'is the inertia of too much baggage. There are good people in conservatories, but they are often bogged down by the people around them. So a good voice comes along, and the conservatory takes them, but the teachers have to take turns with respect to who gets the best students. And the student might get the bottom of the barrel. So what we tell our kids is, "You have to audition the teacher." We tell the students that they don't need to get into a school right away. Take that year and do an audition tour and try out all these different teachers. We have our ear to the ground, and we try to help figure out where the right place would be for each particular person.'

Zajick's passionate concern with dramatic voices finding their own path is rooted in her own past, as a student at the University of Nevada (where she studied with Ted Puffer) and at the Manhattan School of Music. 'Ted Puffer taught a very old-fashioned vocal technique,' she says. 'I was taught a very Italianate approach to vocalism. And in our music library, they had stopped buying recordings after 1962, so I wasn't hearing anybody modern. The most modern singer was Fiorenza Cossotto! So my teacher told me, when I was 22, that I was a Verdi mezzo. I worked in the music library, as a work-study student and all they had was Barbieri, Stignani, Simionato, Arkhipova, Ferrier. And,' she laughs, 'Dame Clara Butt, singing "There are fairies at the bottom of my garden"! I thought that's what everyone sounded like, and my teacher didn't say otherwise. I didn't really learn about all this until I did my first regional Met auditions. I finally got past the district level, and went to Los Angeles, and that's when people started saying, 'You're going to push your voice, ruin your voice, lose your voice, singing that way.' But I'm a very stubborn person. They couldn't convince me. Most of the people at the Manhattan School of Music didn't understand, but the right people did.'

■ *Zajick coaching the soprano Valentina Cotrone*



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Helen Vanni understood me. Lou Galterio understood me. Donald Hall, a diction coach, understood me. Richard Adams, the dean, understood me. They were the ones who encouraged me not to change the way I sing. And ultimately, it paid off.'

At 65, Zajick remains a touchstone among Verdi mezzos. There isn't one singer who has come along in the past three decades who can approach her searing vocalism as Amneris, Azucena or Ulrica. Of course, that shouldn't be the case—and that's a big part of the situation she seeks to redress through her work at the Institute, where this summer's enrollees included a number of promising dramatic mezzos. 'Verdi baritones are even harder to find than a Verdi mezzo,' she says. 'Dramatic coloratura sopranos, Verdi baritones, Verdi mezzos and a true *basso profondo*, I think, are the rarest voice types.'

The noted American Wagnerian soprano Luana DeVol joined the Institute in 2014, when Zajick was looking for someone to lead the Wagner section. DeVol came to her attention through her work with the American Wagner Project, presided over by John Edward Niles. The Institute has operated in partnership with the Wagner Project for several seasons, offering intensive role study and language classes for aspiring Wagnerians. Niles says, 'These kids need so much help. I can't begin to tell you the horror stories I've heard. They have them singing Monteverdi and shit like that!' DeVol remembers being acutely aware of the encroaching shortage in Wagner voices back in 2001, when she was performing at Bayreuth. 'There was an article in *Opernwelt*,' she recalls, 'in which René Kollo said that pretty soon we were not going to be able to present Wagner operas because there wouldn't be singers to sing them. And now you have a situation where singers have to wear spaghetti straps onstage, and the tenors have to be good looking. I found, as an opera director, that even I fell for it: if I had two voices of equal stature, I often went for the prettier singer on stage.'

DeVol returns to the theme of self-reliance. 'You have to sing in *your* voice,' she says. 'I was trying to get it into the heads of some of these people that they have to sing as lyrically as a lyric soprano. Good singing technique will allow your voice to develop and grow. You have to learn to sing Wagner with good Italian vowels, and how to handle the consonants. Think about Maria Reining singing Ariadne, very bright, very forward, with easy emission.'

How did we arrive at this point, with dramatic voices seemingly on the brink of extinction? 'We used to have lots of European voices that had that blunt, dramatic sound that maybe wasn't pretty,' says Danielle Orlando, of the faculty at Philadelphia's renowned Academy of Vocal Arts. 'People like Ghena Dimitrova and Vladimir Popov. I think it went out of fashion. Renée Fleming is the icon of our time, and even more recently, the Joyce DiDonato types. These are lighter instruments. That old sound went out of vogue. People now want something "prettier".'

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Sitting in on the Institute's classes in July was a revelatory experience. The three-week summer session had an enrolment of 25 in total, aged 15 to 36. They fell into several categories: Opera Discovery (ages 15 to 17, aimed at pinpointing dramatic voices early on); Intermediate (ages 18 to 26, a division primarily aimed at conservatory students); Emerging Artist (ages 24 to 36, for those who have finished undergraduate training but haven't yet launched their careers); Young Professionals (ages 28 to 36, reserved for those who have already made debuts or have management); and the American Project, which has no age limit.

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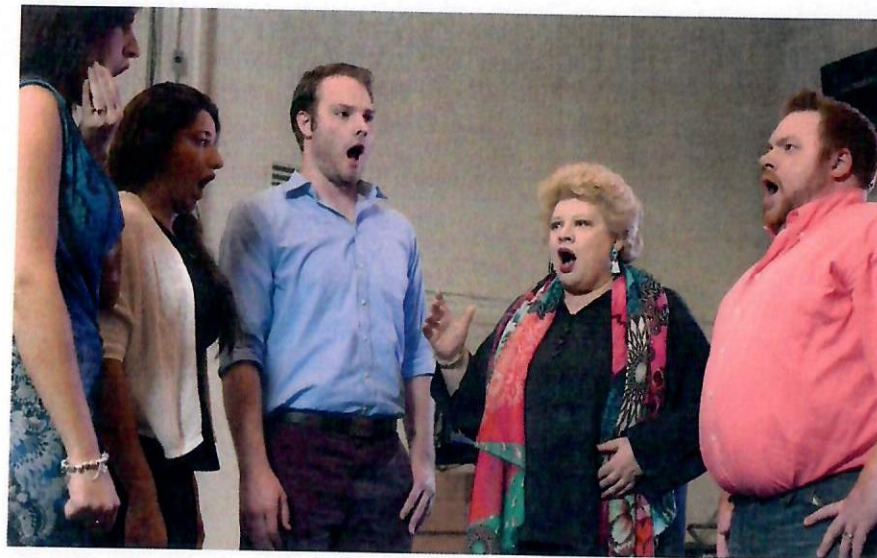
I attended an Opera Discovery class where three teenage students performed. At this stage, many high-school singers are likely to be told they are too loud to be singing in choir, and are encouraged to begin the destructive process of shutting down their naturally large voices. The Institute's students were put through their paces by the voice teacher Monica McCullough, visiting from the voice faculty of the University of Las Vegas. The revelation is the 17-year-old Russian Mariam Iosufi, who sang 'Che farò senza Euridice' sporting an astonishingly mature contralto sound. ('These voices appear earlier than most people think they do,' Zajick whispers to me in the classroom.) 'I understand what I should be doing,' complains Iosufi, 'but *it is not doing*.' 'That's why it takes ten years to learn how to sing,' Zajick replies.

In a group class, Zajick works on Princess Eboli's Veil Song from *Don Carlo* with four young mezzos. After exhorting them to listen to Ebe Stignani and Giulietta Simionato to understand how to negotiate some of the aria's tricky phrases, she adds some dramatic coaching. As Eboli sings of the veiled woman sitting under the twinkling stars, the young singer's focus starts to fade and she begins moving her eyes for no dramatic reason. 'Was it a shooting star?' Zajick asks, gently. 'Make sure you catch that star in your gaze and hold it. Let us see it.' One member of the group, Miho Asai, despite significant language issues, possesses a voice that seems ideal for Eboli.

The emphasis on group work yields impressive results; rather than being isolated in a practice room, students can watch each other, observe and learn. There is also very little evidence of sharp elbows; what evolves over the course of a few days is a supportive learning community. Zajick knows an enviable amount about the workings of both the male and female voice. In workshops, she consistently works to keep the students' voices resonating fully, always stopping them in their tracks when they begin to sing through their noses as they ascend the scale. The baritone Geoffrey Di Giorgio studies privately with Zajick. 'I've realized since I've been here what a true resonant sound is,' he says. 'I've heard people try to impersonate Robert Merrill and over-darken their sound and depress the larynx. In a small room, it may be great, but in an opera house ... good luck being heard over the orchestra.' The bass-baritone Eugene Richards credits Zajick with helping him 'not to over-sing the big things, like Wotan and the Dutchman. Dolora is amazing in dealing with the mouth position, the resonance. They've always been there, but she knows how to access them.'

In the bass-baritone group session, William Meinert, a gifted 22-year-old bass-baritone, works intensively on Olin Blich's big scene from Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*. Meinert possesses a superb instrument, and it is heartening to see that he doesn't beat himself up when his high notes aren't yet fully formed; he seems to have a quiet confidence that they will come in time. Patience is, of course, one of the hardest lessons for eager young singers to learn. 'At the beginning,' says Meinert, 'I was nervous to expose all my weaknesses to a room full of people who were older and more experienced than me. But it's interesting to hear the different challenges the others face when singing, and we get to hear it all since we're singing in the same room. It's especially pertinent because we're divided by voice types. I heard different problems that bass-baritones have that I may have as well.'

The training at the Institute, of course, isn't solely about the voice. I also witnessed a stage and movement class led by the British director Francesca Gilpin, whom Zajick met when she was playing Mrs Grose in Gilpin's production of *The Turn of the Screw* at Dallas Opera. 'What they need is stagecraft,' says Gilpin. 'Learning how to be on



■ Zajick with her students (l. to r.) Valentina Cotrone, Nina Zaziyants, Tyrell Wilde and Geoffrey Hoos

stage. How to be in your light and not be blocking someone else. How to work in high heels in a period dress. How to make a meaningful gesture.'

The Institute also offers extensive language coaching. I watched Thomas Muraco, of the faculty of the Manhattan School of Music, work with the soprano Jessica Faselt on the complicated recitative 'Don Ottavio, son morta!' from *Don Giovanni*. Muraco counselled Faselt on the fine balancing act between rhythmic musical precision and the natural flow of the Italian language. 'The rule is that the rhythm of the language takes precedence over the rhythm of the composer,' he says. 'You may be true to Mozart, but you have to be true to Da Ponte.' He cautioned her against weakening her final syllable on 'morta': 'There are no weak syllables in Italian.'

'They all need work in how to get them out of their American speech pattern and into an Italian speech pattern, and all the details that go along with it,' Muraco says the day after I observe the coaching. 'I would say that they all have language deficiencies in terms of not having studied the grammar. They've been learning both the tomb scene and the Nile scene from *Aida*. Two of them had learnt it sticking the rhythm of Verdi into the Italian, rather than understanding that Verdi has set an unstressed syllable on an important beat. But you can't stress it; you have to move through it. They have learnt it as if the rhythm on the page is the rhythm of the language. It's backwards.'

The prospect of synthesizing all of this information is mind-boggling, but I left the Institute certain that within ten years, Zajick and her colleagues will have deepened the talent pool of dramatic singers. One thing in particular that she said resonates days after I've left Reno: 'You may go to someone who has some valuable information but then gives you the wrong information. You need to learn to sift. You have to know what you're doing. And you must find your own way *humbly*, without confrontation with the big honking egos!' A fine summing-up of her own approach to her art, and an invaluable lesson for those singers who follow her.