

## Artist Enclave Interview – Opera Singer Colleen McGrath by Brian Lynch

When and why did you start singing?

I took my first voice lesson at age 12. My mother was the director of an arts center at the time and my sister and I took just about everything that was offered there at one time or another. I'd already had seven years of classical piano and loved music, but felt the piano was not my instrument. I couldn't express fully with it and I wasn't always motivated to practice. With voice it was different. The addition of lyrics and drama really completed the musical picture for me. It became clear very quickly that voice was exactly the right instrument for me and by the time I turned 15, I knew I would pursue singing professionally.

Do you play instruments in addition to singing?

As I mentioned, I studied piano for a long time, 12 years, but sadly my skills have disappeared. Recently, I began learning guitar to use in my early-childhood music classes, but truly enjoy playing it otherwise. It's such a terrific way to accompany yourself and so portable!

What was the first song(s) you learned?

I think some of the first music I sang was at home and at school and church. I remember singing This Land is Your Land and Kumbaya, some other wonderful children's songs by Mary Lou Walker, lots of Simon and Garfunkel, Peter, Paul and Mary, Broadway show tunes – generally whatever we were listening to at home. Mom listened to the Texaco broadcast every Sunday at a decibel teenagers are made fun of for using, so it's fair to say opera was drilled into my brain from an early age, although I wouldn't have copped to liking it as a kid.

The first song I learned in my voice lesson, however, was "Nel cor piu non mi sento" by Paisello. It's one of the songs from the book most used in teaching young, classical singers called 24 Italian Songs and Arias. The music is all from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and has been compiled by Schirmer. Almost all opera singers begin with songs from this book. We affectionately call it the 24 dippy ditties, but truly, it is a good tool for beginners as the songs promote legato singing and help students work through the basics of sound production in a safe vocal range.

Are there other musicians in your family? If so, what are their musical interests and abilities?

Both my parents are amateur musicians. They both participated in community theater and volunteer choirs. We were dragged to loads of concerts of all types, art openings, and more. It would have been hard to escape being influenced by that in some way. My sister is very visually creative and a great dancer. I got the music bug.

Which famous musicians do you admire? Why?

So many, and of many different genres. It takes so much to create a career. You have to be much more than good at your chosen instrument. You have to be a marketer, a politician, an actor, and a constant student. Most people we can name as famous have worked incredibly hard and have also been gifted with that extra little bit of luck that everyone needs to cross over from professional to famous.

I love musicians who are unique to themselves. Pavarotti, Callas, Moffo, Gruberova, Tibaldi, Pons, Hampson, Domingo, Flemming in my own genre. But also singers like Bing Crosby, Rosemary Clooney, Madonna, Prince, Simon and Garfunkel, Dave Matthews, Bob Dylan, Dolly Parton. Anyone who ends up defining a genre has really done something special.

[Which famous musicians have you learned from?](#)

All I listed in the last question as well as Kathleen Battle, Cecelia Barttoli, Dawn Upshaw, and many, many more. I learn from every singer, as each performer, good or bad, can help you evaluate your own vocal production, sound, or show you what works or doesn't vocally or on stage. Every performance is an education.

[Who was your first teacher? Other teachers?](#)

Deborah Montgomery was my first voice teacher. She still teaches at Ithaca College, a very well renowned music school. I was lucky to begin with her. She really put the basics in place for me and prepared me well with a solid foundation to work from. James Douthit was my next teacher and he likewise challenged me and helped me move forward vocally and as a musician. He is now the chairman of the music department at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York.

The two most influential teachers since then have been my current teacher, Ruth Golden, and the teacher I had through graduate school and beyond, Sheila Fiumarello. Both promoted not only healthy singing but truly understood how to take a singer to the next level and then the next beyond while preserving and enhancing the uniqueness of the voice. I feel lucky to have had such wonderful teachers in my background.

[What are your fondest musical memories? In your house? In your neighborhood or town?](#)

My favorite is of my father and "the boys" singing barber shop quartet music once a week in our living room. His friends would come over just around my bedtime and I'd hear them singing away while I brushed my teeth, etc. Then my sister and I would come downstairs in our nightgowns and they'd sing us "Goodnight, Ladies" before heading up to bed. It always made me happy and made me feel very special.

[Were you influenced by old records & tapes? Which ones?](#)

Sure I was. I have to admit, I was late to the opera party, though. My first favorite records were of Sean Cassidy and a bunch of Broadway musicals. Anything I could sing to.

It wasn't until college I began to really learn about the golden era singers and my world changed then. My first attempt at delving into that world was compilation tapes of the best singers. All the ones I mentioned already, Callas, Moffo, etc. My collection of recordings of operas in full only began as I started role studies and needed to learn more than just an aria or two. I prefer recordings of live performances when I can find them. There is a genuineness to what's happening musically and the unplanned for mistake here and there. It's good to hear how singers handle those things. And too much gets filtered or sorted through in studios today.

Who are your favorite musicians? Groups? CD's?

Oh geez, let's see. Yo Yo Ma, Itzhak Perlman, Luciano Pavarotti, Joan Sutherland, Maria Callas, a slew of friends and colleagues you'd never have heard of, Michael Jackson, ABBA, Simon and Garfunkel, Sarah McCloughlin, Adele, Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, Cyndi Lauper's Memphis Blues CD, Dolly Parton's Little Sparrow CD, Dusty Springfield, Rosemary Clooney, Peggy Lee, Bing Crosby. Lord, there are way too many to name.

Have you been in competitions? Any prizes?

I competed as a young professional singer for several years and placed in a few competitions, but chose to focus on auditioning for full scale opera instead. Competition takes a great deal of time and money as there are application fees and travel involved. Many singers focus entirely in that direction and make an early career out of placing and winning competitions, but for opera, it is not as helpful a career step as it is for instrumentalists, so I chose to stop pursuing them after a few years.

Do you perform in public? Please describe those occasions? Concerts, radio, TV?

I do. but far less than before. For 15 years, performing was my job. Now I've transitioned to teaching early childhood music and I love it. Helping young children reinforce their innate love of music and encourage their over-all development through it is incredibly gratifying work and I have truly found another passion in teaching early childhood music.

There is nothing like being part of an opera. I love using music to express the thoughts, feelings, comedy or tragedy of a character. There's a whole other level of expression possible when you add notes to words. And I love the collegial aspect to working on a show and creating something new together. Even doing the same opera many times over, each production is different, the cast is different, the conductor and director bring new ideas to the same show. My energy feeds off the other performers, the conductor and the orchestra. Their feed back to me too and then to the audience. It's pretty magical. Not to mention the amazing clothes and wigs!

How do you handle mistakes during a performance?

Keep going!!! Deer in headlights is never a good look on anyone. If it's an informal concert, I might make fun of myself to the audience a bit after the set is finished but truly, the best rule of thumb is to just keep going and try not to let anyone know you messed up. A few will, a few

may not unless you tell them you did. But audiences are surprisingly forgiving when you just move forward and give a performance your all.

Do you get nervous before a performance or a competition?

Absolutely. Always have, always will. I was never good with nerves and it was something I battled for a long time. Finally, in graduate school I seemed to figure out the formula. Prepare like your life depends on it, then let go and stay in the moment once you hit stage. I was more likely to make mistakes if I continued to think about what was next rather than just make music and allow the character to take over.

What advice would you give to beginners who are nervous?

“Let go and let God.” I’m not religious but that phrase works just in its intention. Basically, at the time of performance, leave your worries behind. Prepare. Then trust you have prepared the best you can, at least for that moment. Then decide to let it go and have a good time. If you do, the audience will too. And do not give your nerves a name. It doesn’t do you any good to continually tell yourself how nervous you are. It can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. So just accept your nerves, and do your best to leave them stage left during the show.

How often and for how long do you practice?

When I was singing professionally, I practiced six days a week for one to two hours a day. When you’re staging a show, you’re in rehearsal six hours a day, but of course you don’t sing fully all six hours. We do what’s called “marking,” not using our full voices to preserve them for a run-through at the appropriate moment.

What do you practice - exercises, new songs, hard songs, etc.?

All of that. I warm up my voice with a series of breathing and vocal exercises beginning with easier ones and working toward more challenging. Then I begin by working through some old repertoire. Sometimes, starting with a piece of music you sing really well helps prepare you to sing a newer piece. It helps settle my voice. Then I move on to new music. By the time I sit down with a new piece, I’ve listened to it or played through it, translated it and made some musical choices about it. Then I plunk out the notes so I know where I’m going and dive into learning to sing each phrase correctly. Once done, I begin trying to make music with it. Usually, I enlist the help of a vocal coach, someone specially trained to help singers achieve the best musical outcome, observe standard norms and all the musical markings we like to skip over when given the chance. ;-)

Do you teach music?

I do. I teach an early childhood curriculum called Music Together. It’s based in the idea that all children are musical and that musicality only needs to be fostered in early childhood for children to be able to become adults who sing in tune and can clap a beat; something many Americans can’t do since our culture has given up communal music making. I teach parent/child classes

and have many classes running in local preschools as well. You can find out more about it all at [www.youandmeandmt.com](http://www.youandmeandmt.com).

I also have a small private voice studio where I teach professional or professional level singers. More information about it can be found at [www.coloraturasoprano.com](http://www.coloraturasoprano.com).

What else would you like to say to our readers?

I would simply encourage them to take part in live music somehow, whether it be as a participant or as an audience. I have never met a person who says they don't enjoy music. Most of us listen to it every day without thought about how much it adds to our lives. Music is an emotional outlet, a community builder, a resource, entertainment, so, so many things. Don't forget to stop and listen once and a while.