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They idolize the opera

Cincinnati auditions draw 25 talented singers who hope their voices will earn them a paycheck

By Janelle Gelfand
Enquirer staff writer

The heavy snowfall arrived at rush hour on Thursday last week. But that didn't stop at least 25 opera hopefuls from slogging through snow, creeping traffic and slippery hills to Xavier University, where Cincinnati Opera held auditions in Edgecliff Hall for its summer opera season.

As the first major snowstorm of the season fell, the company expected 50 singers from all over the country to try out for the chorus, the opera's resident ensemble and bit parts in four operas. Throughout the evening, singers who were not stranded - as one California singer was in her Kenwood hotel - straggle in, one by one, shaking off snow.

"This is the first time I've ever seen snow!" says Brandi Samuel, a soprano from Los Angeles.

The snow was compounding the stress for these singers, who travel from city to city in the United States and Europe, competing for a handful of parts during "audition season" - November and December. Between casting calls in New York and Cincinnati, Cincinnati Opera's jury of four will hear close to 500 singers. Only 12 will be chosen for small roles; about 50 more for the chorus. On this night only one, Wayne Tigges, will learn for sure that he'll have work in Cincinnati.

"Basically, we're hearing anyone brave enough to weather the storm," says Evans Mirageas, the opera's artistic director.

Outside the closed doors of Long Recital Hall, one can hear someone singing Musetta's waltz ("Quando me'n vo") from "La Boheme." Singers line the hallway, pouring over their musical scores in partial concert dress. Nora Graham-Smith, 24, a soprano who lives in Hyde Park, transforms herself on the spot from parka and boots to black cocktail dress, glam pin at the waist and high heels from an "audition bag" that is always packed.

In the basement, Nikki Boxer, 26, of Aspen, Colo., is stretching and bending like an athlete.

"It's incredibly hard. I get sick to my stomach before every audition," she says.



ZOOM

Craig Ruttle / The Enquirer

Viewed from behind the judges' table, Wayne Tigges of Chicago sings, with Carol Walker accompanying. About 25 people auditioned at Edgecliff Hall on the campus of Xavier University. Tigges was the only one who won a job for the coming opera season in Cincinnati.

More photos:

• [Photos: Opera Auditions](#)

AMONG THE HOPEFULS

William Bennett of Chicago, Nora Graham-Smith of Hyde Park, Brandi Samuel of Los Angeles and Kay Suzanne Welch auditioned for opera spots. None received any promises.

Information about Cincinnati Opera's Summer Festival season and how to obtain tickets can be found at

This is no "American Idol" show. It's serious business that these singers - some of them pushing 40 - have been getting ready for virtually their entire lives. In an ultra-competitive world where only a handful become bona fide stars, these singers just hope to make a living on the opera stage.

"It's cutthroat," says bass-baritone Tigges, 32, a graduate of the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music who lives in Chicago. He has just returned from a European audition tour, including a huge audition in London for 40 opera companies.

Inside, Mirageas, Marcus Kùchle (director of artistic operations), chorus master Henri Venanzi and Naomi Hoyt, education and outreach director, sit behind a long table facing a slightly raised stage, where accompanist Carol Walker sits ready at a grand piano.

Soprano Soon Cho, 29, begins a florid aria by Bellini. The CCM student from Seattle nails it. Mirageas and Venanzi share a look with raised eyebrows. The judges are pleasant, smiling.

"Excellent; thank you very much."

Next up, Samuel unleashes a powerhouse voice in "Cruda sorte" from Rossini's "Cinderella." Standing in a long black gown, hands clasped, she fills the room with magnificent sound.

"It's interesting - in about 10 seconds you can tell a voice that is major - about 10 seconds," says Mirageas, during a break. "With Wayne, we heard the first eight bars and we all just sort of looked at each other and said, 'You can sing the rest of the aria but it's not necessary.' "

Those were easy decisions. But how will the jury ultimately winnow out a few dozen from 500?

"My ears are bleeding," admits Mirageas.

Now Graham-Smith takes a turn with a steely, cut-to-the-bone rendition of "Give him this orchid" from Benjamin Britten's "The Rape of Lucretia." The judges look vaguely interested, and ask for a contrasting aria. She gives them a fluffy one from "La Perichole" by Offenbach, tossing her hair flirtatiously, hands on hips.

"She could do that somewhere right now," Venanzi observes, as she leaves.

Suddenly, everyone looks out the window, where four men are pushing Graham-Smith's car, stuck in a snowbank. There's no time to worry about her for long, though. Two baritones, Kelvin Chan, 28, and Jeff MacMullen, 30, are waiting in the wings.

"Every man I get for the chorus is a big plus," Venanzi says out of the side of his mouth.

Finally, it's Boxer's turn. She enters, now in a short black Marilyn Monroe-style dress and launches an aria from "Manon" followed by "Come scoglio" from Mozart's "Cosi fan tutte."

The judges whisper, "I like her." "Do you want to hear more?"

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WHAT THE JUDGES HAD TO SAY

"Can't you sing something bright and cheerful on such a dreary night?"

"Her voice is so much different than it used to be. It's too heavy for her, but it's a good sound. Certainly, for the chorus."

"Thank you for coming all this way to sing. Fire the pianist, by the way!"

"The mediocre ones are the most painful."

"I'd like to lighten her up."

"It's a lovely legato, not a powerful voice, but a lighter-weight baritone. But the top needs a bit more organizing."

"She's a natural."

"He's from Tecumseh, Mich. Where in the hell is that?"

"Bravo! (That's the first time anyone went sharp tonight. Hmm.)"

"How long have you been here? (I just wanted to see how good her English is.)"

"One of the things that pains you is a singer who has worked very earnestly and has to be told no."

"When you hear people over several years, and when you first met them they were really talented and interesting people. They come back and just get worse and you feel, oh my God, what has this person done to themselves?"

"But can he dance?"

"We all get extra points tonight."

Janelle Gelfand

How important was the dress?

"I thought about it a lot, but when I saw it in the store I said, this is it. You want to look attractive; elegant but sexy, because looks are part of it," Boxer says. "It's theater. But you have to be comfortable. Singing has to be first and foremost."

Outside in the hallway, two 19-year-old singers from CCM, Jennifer Brown and Rebecca Mongeau, have arrived to audition for their first-ever professional gig in the chorus. Until now, Mongeau's summer jobs have been at Graeter's.

Boxer puts on her coat to leave, looking relieved.

"This round of auditions I felt like everything went pretty well. In one audition I had, (the judges) were talking very loud while I was singing. At one point they burst out laughing at some joke. I thought, this audition's going great!" she says. "There's a million young sopranos, and by the time you're in your 30s if you stick with it and you're somewhat successful, you can keep going."

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