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Days of demanding divas dwindle in classical world

GREENSBORO — Milk to bathe in during their hotel stay. Dom Perignon in the dressing room. Stretch limos. Picking up the tab for their posse.

Stars and their demands.

These aren't rockers; they're opera and Pops singers.

Rock stars may request and get what they want.

So might major classical singers — in fees and repertoire — who can bring in the crowds to big opera houses.

But it doesn't always work that way in the world of regional symphonies and opera companies, who lack big budgets and time to meet big demands.

"There are a lot of wonderful singers who are available for a lot less money and lower maintenance," Greensboro Symphony Orchestra music director Dmitry Sitkovetsky says. "Some are fantastic artists and the end result is worth it. Others, I don't think so."

To be sure, star power remains in classical music.

But in recent decades, some experts have noticed that the era of the difficult diva and divo has dwindled.

"Star power, to me, is someone who has charisma onstage and the audiences love," says Lisa Crawford, Greensboro symphony executive director. "But they are a different breed of star, and are much more aware of the necessity of making a good impression both onstage and offstage."

Experts attribute the change to a tight economy for the arts, competition for shrinking performing opportunities and increased public scrutiny.

"Singers are under much more press scrutiny than before, so that capricious behavior is far less tolerated today," says Evans Mirageas, an independent artistic adviser to major classical artists, opera companies and orchestras, including the Greensboro Symphony.

Derived from an Italian word meaning "goddess," diva originally meant a female opera singer of rare, outstanding talent.

Think Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland and Leontyne Price.

An opera singer's job is stressful. Their voice is their instrument, subject to the whims of the slightest cold, allergies and a life of planes and hotels.

And in every generation, some cope with fame better than others.

"We expect these women to be goddesses, and we cut them very little slack for having a bad day," says Mirageus, adding that he has seen more prima donna-type behavior from some tenors than from sopranos.

At UNCG's School of Music, budding classical singers learn that talent matters most, says Bill Carroll, chairman of the voice department.

And something else as well.

"You also have to be a congenial colleague, one who works well with others."

When you don't, you can end up like Kathleen Battle. In 1994, she was fired from the Metropolitan Opera for coming late to rehearsals and mistreating colleagues.

It was the first such public dismissal since Callas was fired in 1958.

Such stories can serve as cautionary tales to up-and-coming singers.

Says Australian soprano Rachelle Durkin, who is singing with the Greensboro Symphony this week: "If you are hard to get along with, you are easily replaced."

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Like other classical music organizations, the Greensboro Symphony hires guest artists more often by referrals, reputation and relationships, than from resumes and recordings.

That's how it tapped four soloists with Metropolitan Opera credits for this week's concerts: Durkin; tenor and High Point native Anthony Dean Griffey; mezzo-soprano Emily Golden; and bass Tom Fox.

They will sing Anton Bruckner's "Te Deum" and Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with the orchestra and 200 choristers.

Chances are good that they won't ask someone to pick out the brown M&Ms.

Sitkovetsky, the conductor, knows Golden and Fox well.

He had not met Griffey previously, but knows of his heralded performances with orchestras and opera companies worldwide.

Sitkovetsky met Durkin in 2004, when she substituted at a symphony rehearsal for a soprano whose plane was late. Impressed with her voice, he invited her to sing Saturday.

"When I hire someone," Sitkovetsky says, "I either know the person or know that we will get along."

Word about difficult performers can spread quickly in the small world of classical music.

Crawford recalls hoping to hire a popular Pops performer for a concert.

Then she heard that the singer had flown to another gig with an unplanned guest — and refused to get into the car until the organization paid for the person's first-class plane ticket.

That ended Crawford's pursuit.

In her years with the Greensboro Symphony and elsewhere, Crawford has entertained a variety of requests from performers, from stocking a dressing room full of their favorite foods to having a bottle of Dom Perignon chilling.

"If it's something that we can provide, and it's not going to break the bank and the talent is worth it, that's fine," Crawford says. "But a lot of artists say, 'I just need a bottle of water in my dressing room.' "

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