

ARTS IN NEW ENGLAND

Making a living on the competitive church-music circuit

A soprano and a composer share their struggles and successes.

By Colin Fleming | APRIL 27, 2014



ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Sarah Moyer, a singer in the Boston area, performs some 200 times a year.

IF YOU SPEND much time in Boston, you're spending a decent chunk of your life in the company of people who took a lot of years to be able to do a special something not a lot of other people can do. We see it when David Ortiz hits a grand slam or when an MIT physicist dreams up a theory that just might explain the origin of the universe, and we see it in all sorts of smaller and quieter ways. Into that last category falls a particular kind of musician that's big in these parts: the church performer.

Boston is a great hotbed of classical music, and it's all there, ripe for the listening — and often for free — in any one of dozens of area churches. But when you're sitting in the pews, immersed in whatever you're immersed in, there can be a tendency to take the musicians around you for granted. You don't always consider, say, how tough it is to make a living as an artist, especially when your venue tends to let people in for free on Sundays. And you don't always think about how difficult it is to succeed in a field that requires you to be able to bounce from one singing gig on Newbury Street, hop a Green Line car and bang out another in Newton, before zooming back to Harvard Square for the final performance of the day.

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That's the way it is with Sarah Moyer, a sprite of a woman with a bright — and big — soprano voice who sings 200 or so times a year, often for several performances in a single day. We met at the Starbucks in Brookline's Washington Square, where she sat with me, nursing a cold, something a singer who lives by singing alone has to just power through.

“My parents kind of pushed me on the stage as a kid in Oklahoma,” says Moyer, who's 27 and lives in Brookline. She ended up loving it, and by eighth grade had resolved to be an opera singer, even though some people thought she was too small for the job. To help pay the bills, she worked at this Starbucks until last year, when she was finally able to cobble together enough gigs — “calls” in the classical musicians' parlance — to make it as a full-time artist.

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Moyer is funny and quick-moving, a Peter Pan figure with a Protestant work ethic. Schooled at New England Conservatory, she's also a tireless networker and her own built-in publicist. “I'm a slave to e-mail,” she says, “and even to Facebook.” And while the ghost of Mozart might do a double take over such a pronouncement, that's part of the job description these days. Chops — formidable though they may be — are not nearly enough. There is also the art of the hustle, the ability to compete, to spread the word about yourself without looking as if you're trying too hard to spread the word.

“And things can get catty,” Moyer says. “It's a small world. And sometimes you have to go along to get along.” Without naming names, she describes one music director who kept telling her she was singing a part wrong. She'd tried giving the director what he wanted, but he kept saying it was wrong. Now thoroughly confused, she got to the performance and sang the way she had on the last try — this time it was right. “So, you never know. But I think you have to

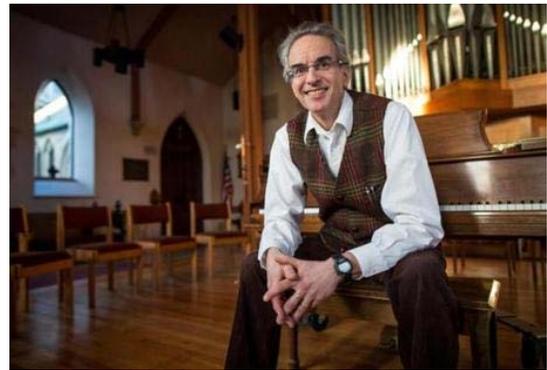
be confident. Know what you do,” she says. “If someone else gets a call you didn’t, you try and get the next one.”

Moyer is a veritable master at call acquisitions. And when I head over to Marsh Chapel at Boston University on Ash Wednesday to watch her perform as one of eight paid members of that choir, it’s easy to see why. She’s the kind of church singer who will rock your sacred-music world.

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SINGERS CONSTITUTE the majority of the area’s church musicians, simply because choirs tend to have more members than instrumental sections. But the rarest jobs of all might just be for the composers, people who write music that gets played along with the Bach, Handel, and Mozart material.

One such composer is Andrew Clarkson, director of music (and the organist) at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Brookline. At 54, Clarkson looks both debonair, as if he’s primed to talk about editions of Mozart’s Requiem, as he did with me, yet sporty, someone you’d want to get a beer with and settle in for a night of convivial conversation. This married father of two from Natick also is an outlier, a composer who entered this scene in a less than traditional way.



ARAM BOGHOSIAN

Andrew Clarkson is director of music and organist at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Brookline.

“I was in a think tank [on conflict resolution] after going to Harvard College,” he says, “and later I was a consultant helping people manage their differences without violence. But I had loved [jazz pianist] Errol Garner’s music growing up.” In college, Clarkson would play the piano in the dorm, and, as he describes it, “things kind of went from there.” Jazz was eventually replaced by an interest in writing classical pieces, and his knack for that eventually helped him land a part-time job as a church music director.

When an artist takes a risk — such as leaving behind more lucrative careers to go all in with one’s art — some doubt is inevitable. “It’s still in the back of my mind,” Clarkson confides as we sit in St. Paul’s chapel. This from a man who wrote a piece the year after the 9/11 attacks that was singled out in *The New York Times* when played at a choral festival commemorating the 10-year anniversary. Why on earth would there be any hesitation at this point in his career?

“Our society puts so much emphasis on money, and it can be that your self-esteem gets wrapped up in those kinds of ideas,” he says. “But what I’m doing here, I feel like I’m being honest with myself, even if there’s a kind of lack of convention with those societal norms.”

I ask him if his family supports his endeavors, celebrates his successes. I mean, I say, you write works of music that are performed for rooms full of people, music that adds something to their lives and their spiritual experience.

“Yes, people are supportive, but there’s always this little last thought of — hold on a second . . .”

Stepping out of the chapel, his soft footfalls echoing down the transept, he returns a couple of minutes later with a CD he made called *A Celebration of Hymns*. Clarkson is self-taught as a composer and perhaps feels a greater onus to prove himself. Listen to the CD or watch — and hear — Clarkson in action at St. Paul’s, and he is doing the right thing with his life.

“I know it’s more my worries, my stuff, than actual reality-based stuff,” he says. “That’s the nature of composing, though, isn’t it? You’re wrestling with what it is you’ve written, and how good it is, how good you want it to be, how well it goes over.”

The last pre-dusk rays of sunshine make a trellis-like pattern on the floor between us, as we both enjoy a few moments of what any good composer, from J.S. Bach on down to collegial Andy Clarkson, knows is essential to music, art, and shared moments: the gentle silence before music — organized sound — resumes.

ONE THURSDAY EVENING, I attend a sight-reading party at the apartment of a friend of Sarah Moyer in Allston. Sheet music is handed out, vocal arrangements are worked on, mistakes are made. A female Boston terrier named Moose makes the rounds, hopping up on the four singers in attendance. A tuning fork is deployed. Fajitas are eaten, beer is drunk, performances come together.

Throughout the night, there is shoptalk, including whether a particular performance counts as a solo for resume purposes. Opinions are offered on “pay to sing” programs, in which singers dish out serious money for the privilege of performing with a given choir and studying with a better-known musician. Some tidbits are disseminated and put into mental storage should they be relevant for future calls. European opera houses, for instance, are known to take more chances with younger singers; the houses are often older and smaller than US venues, so there are fewer tickets that need selling.

In one stressful moment, Moyer and one of her colleagues receive information that they're both booked to audition for Boston Baroque on the same day at the same time. It will all work out eventually.

Soon, the talk turns to economics. "A regular church gig pays anywhere from \$55 to \$155 a call," Moyer says. "A solo gig is \$100 plus, but you can do a recital with a local college that might be \$2,000. The average cantor is \$100 to \$125, being a section leader with a volunteer chorus is \$75 to \$100." Then there are a single woman's everyday expenses, rent and food and an Internet connection for promotion, plus things like the Healthworks membership to stay fit and even a special haircut, which doesn't come cheap. She's a performer, she says. "Self-image is a part of my career, too."

No one gets into this line of work to get rich, but there is still a wealth of ambition here. On a Lenten Sunday, I visit Clarkson's church in Brookline. I'd hoped to see him conduct Moyer and other choir members in Mozart's Requiem. But another opportunity had come up, and Moyer had to drop out to chase it. Her career choice means she has to make difficult decisions — everyone else does, too, so no one holds it against her.

The performance is beautiful and unusual. "It's pretty rare that Mozart's Requiem is part of a church service, and not simply performed on its own," Clarkson says, noting the profound difference between a performance and "an offering." And even after listening to the work for the better part of two decades, I'm able to hear it anew.

The church is full of people seeming to share the same experience. Some are in attendance because they always go, others are here just for the Mozart, and, ideally, some are here looking to become engaged with a musical world not a lot of other cities have. A Boston blessing, then, for the religious and nonreligious alike, and a communion of the most musical kind.

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