



Paul McIlvaine and Karen Myers Rhodovi perform at Sotto Sopra.

## WHEN YOU SING FOR *Their Supper* The Art of Performing in Restaurants

BY RACHEL A. ANTMAN

Singing in restaurants can be a great gig—you can make money, try out new repertoire, and often eat for free. But it isn't without its challenges too. Find out how to appreciate the perks and navigate the difficulties here.

**S**easoned singers are used to performing in less-than-ideal conditions. Performing in restaurants, however, may be the ultimate test of mettle: distractions abound, including loud talkers, servers carrying platters, and the proximity of the audience. I spoke with several singers who perform regularly in restaurants to learn how they cope with such distractions and make the most of these unusual opportunities.

### **Distractions**

Loud talkers, the interviewees agree, are major distractions.

“Some audiences are very attentive, quiet, and respectful. Others seem to talk louder the louder we sing,” reports soprano Jennifer Gliere, who sings weekly at Caffè Tacì Opera Nights (at Papillon Bistro and Bar in New York City). “Especially on evenings where we have big parties, the evening tends to get more raucous as time goes on and the wine flows.”

Tenor Paul McIlvaine—a regular at Sotto Sopra’s monthly opera night in Baltimore, Maryland—takes a firm stance against loud talkers, who are the exception rather than the norm but nonetheless “obnoxious.”

“I’ve learned to deal with this by walking right up to the table for my high note, which usually quiets them down!” he explains.

His soprano counterpart, Karen Myers Rhodovi, is another adherent of this technique. “We have a bit of fun taking advantage of those arias where you can saunter up to the table and use your voice as a strategic silencing weapon,” she says. “You might say subtlety is not our strong suit.”

Tenor Victor Khodadad of New Camerata Opera, which performed monthly at Machiavelli restaurant in New York City, warns against



Charles Coleman and Jennifer Gliere perform at Caffè Taci.



Laura Whittenberger performs at the Victor Cafe.

competing with the talkers. “In these cases, trusting your technique and not trying to push your voice over the din is paramount,” he says. Another way to save your voice is to use a microphone to introduce songs and arias (but not while singing), as Myers Rhodovi and McIlvaine do.

Additional distractions arise from the meal service. New Camerata’s Barbara Porto, a soprano, views these as a test of focus and commitment. “If you can float that high B-flat and embrace your colleague while a plate of gnocchi is rushing by you, you know you’ve got that music down pat!” she says.

Singers who do double duty as servers require extra focus. “I think it goes without saying that singing is hard when you’re expected to run around as a server/host/busser/bartender,” says Brenna Markey, a soprano/server on the opera-in-restaurants circuit.

That said, there are benefits to such arrangements. “As an employee, it’s really nice to have a restaurant job where I get to sing and listen to my coworkers perform,” says soprano Laura Whittenberger, a bartender/performer at the Victor Cafe in Philadelphia.

The nearness of the audience is yet another distraction. “On an operatic stage there are lights in your eyes, and

very often you can’t see the audience at all,” observes tenor Erik Bagger of New Camerata. “It’s easier to lose yourself in the character. In a restaurant performance, your audience members are a foot away from you, looking up expectantly as you negotiate your high notes. Getting used to that unique pressure, and not letting it get in the way of your portrayal, is a great skill to acquire as a singer.”

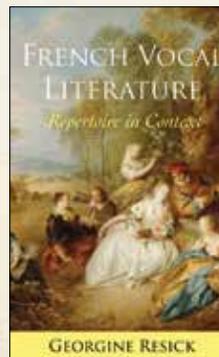
Some singers welcome the proximity. “There is something very satisfying about performing to people up close and personal rather than [in] a concert hall or [on] stage,” Markey states. The proximity also promotes engagement among audience members. “Many have told us how it really enhanced their experience,” says mezzo-soprano Eva Parr of New Camerata, “and that seeing opera in such an intimate setting really changed their perspective on [the genre] entirely.”

To contend with these distractions, singers devote their attention to their arias, scenes, and characters. “We are engulfed in the spirit of the music,” says baritone Charles Coleman, who sings at both Caffè Taci and monthly opera nights at La Rivista restaurant, also in New York City. “It’s all about the music. And no matter how your crowd is, you’re still touching the heart of somebody out there.”

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### Perspectives from a Restaurant Owner

Opera nights at Donatello Italian Restaurant in Tampa, Florida, which feature singers from Opera Tampa, stemmed from the suggestion of a friend who was working at the company, recalls owner Gino Tiozzo. Tiozzo agreed to a one-time experiment, which was so well received that the restaurant made it a quarterly and, eventually, monthly event. The response of customers, Tiozzo says, has been "overwhelmingly positive." Staff members, too, enjoy the evenings. Some of the more outgoing among them even join in on such numbers as "O sole mio."

Tiozzo describes the evenings as a lot of fun and "a great success" and is considering adding more opera nights to the schedule. Quite an encore for a one-time experiment!

Whatever method you use to cope with the distractions, one thing is clear. "Nothing will rattle you at an audition after you are able to master the restaurant environment!" says baritone Stan Lacy of New Camerata.

### Rewards

Despite the challenges, the singers I interviewed love performing in restaurants. "We consider these opera

nights an exceptional opportunity to serve as ambassadors for opera," says Myers Rhodovi.

McIlvaine agrees. "My greatest joy and satisfaction is when patrons (new to opera) come up to me and say that they did not want to come to hear opera, but did so because their spouse or significant other insisted they come," he says. "They then tell me how much they enjoyed the evening

and that they think they will attend a fully staged opera in the future."

His colleagues echo these sentiments. "I really like getting to see people experiencing opera for the first time," says Whittenberger. "Some people have never heard it live before dining here." Coleman also welcomes the opportunity to perform for first-timers: "It's great to be an influence."

Some performances lead to additional opportunities. For example, New Camerata's performances at Machiavelli not only expanded the group's fan and donor base, but also resulted in additional gigs. The latter is also the case for Gliere, thanks to her performances at Caffè Taci.

Another benefit is the opportunity to practice in front of a (typically) supportive crowd. "When you audition, you want to feel

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connected and energized—but sometimes you don't get the experience of performing your aria in front of people ahead of time," Markey points out. "Singing in a restaurant gives you that chance and is a great place to try new things."

Porto agrees. "It's a great, relatively low-pressure environment in which we can test drive new repertoire."

Finally, there is the food. Some singers enjoy a free meal before their performances. "I always claim to the audience that our other job is to 'test' the food for purity and wholesomeness," quips McIlvaine. "This always draws a snicker from the audience."

### Suggestions for Success

Here are some of the ways you can ensure that your performances in restaurants are memorable and enjoyable.

#### *Prepare the Rep*

You need to know opera's "greatest hits," says Gliere. It's also helpful, however, to have a few numbers that are "off the beaten path," advises Whittenberger. Show tunes, too, can add to a program's variety.

#### *Set the Scene*

Introductions to pieces help audience members appreciate them. "Having a little blurb prepared beforehand to describe what's happening in the scene can really help listeners enjoy the piece more," notes Whittenberger. McIlvaine and Myers Rhodovi suggest introductions that include anecdotes, history, or funny performing experiences.

#### *Be Flexible*

Assess the audience and choose your repertoire accordingly. "I read the room," says Gliere. If there are groups of Germans, Russians, or Italians, for example, she'll make a point of singing something in that language.

"I also read the general atmosphere," she continues. "If people are loud and not paying attention, I will do one of two things: sing a piece that encourages them to get involved or something very quiet and intimate in an effort to remind the audience that there is a performance going on."

Last but not least, don't forget to enjoy yourself. "We all got into this at one time because it was fun," Lacy says. "It does keep you from taking your art too seriously!"

*Rachel A. Antman is a communications professional and mezzo-soprano based in New York City.* ©

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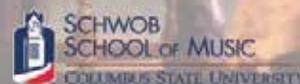
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