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A Conversation with Angel Joy Blue

Melissa Treinkman



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Soprano Angel Joy Blue discusses her operatic career and offers advice to young singers preparing for a career in opera.

“YOU ARE DOING A GOOD JOB.” Those are the words that opera singer Angel Joy Blue would have whispered into the ear of her younger self, if she had been given the chance. All too often, these simple words of encouragement get lost in a cacophony of critique and criticism, which is likely an inherent and unavoidable part of preparing for a major operatic career. She reflected, “That’s the main thing I want young singers to know. You are doing a good job. Keep going.” Angel’s kind and gentle nature, revealed in many moments throughout her interview, might not be what one would expect from an opera diva of her stature, but this is one of many ways she defies expectations. With numerous accolades, including two Grammy Awards and the esteemed Beverly Sills and Richard Tucker Awards, Blue’s honeyed soprano and poignant performances of many of opera’s most famous heroines have captivated audiences worldwide.

Angel grew up in Apple Valley, California, a town about ninety miles outside of Los Angeles. Her father, a pastor and a trained opera singer, was her first voice teacher and remains one of her most important musical influences, despite his passing. Angel reflected nostalgically, “I like to believe that he sees what I’m doing and that he is rooting me on from heaven.”

Angel attended the University of Redlands for her Bachelor of Music degree and then continued her education at UCLA, where she completed her Master of Music degree. Following graduate school, she was a member of the prestigious Domingo-Colburn-Stein Young Artist Program at Los Angeles Opera. A 2009 finalist of the Operalia competition, she won first place in the Zarzuela portion of the competition and second place in the Opera portion. From that point on, Angel’s career has skyrocketed and she has graced the stages of the world’s major opera houses.

In 2019, she opened the Metropolitan Opera’s season starring as Bess in Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. The recording of this production would win Angel her first Grammy award for “Best Opera Recording” in



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2021. In 2023, she won her second Grammy award for “Best Opera Recording” for her performance in Terence Blanchard’s new opera, *Fire Shut Up In My Bones*. The opera is notable in part for being the first opera by a black composer ever performed at the Metropolitan Opera.

A very special moment in Angel’s career occurred in 2022, when she returned to the stage of LA Opera for the first time since she had been in the Young Artist Program. Performing the title role in the opera *Tosca*, she recalled an astounding surprise she received upon entering the stage for the first time: “The audience applauded when I came onstage—that has never happened to me before!” Angel described the moment exuberantly and said that she was so taken aback by the unexpected adoration from the audience that she nearly forgot her first line in the opera.

When asked about dealing with performance anxiety, Angel recalled her debut as *Aida* at the Royal Opera House and revealed that her faith is her biggest tool in managing nerves.

I’ll be real with you. I got down on my knees and I prayed. And I just asked. I asked the Lord to help me. I did everything that I could do. I learned the music. I practiced with my teacher . . . I practiced with my colleagues. I know the blocking. I know the staging. I understand the character . . . It’s out of my hands now. Now what I do is, I just trust that God is with me and I go onstage and just do what I do, and I pray that he’s with me as I do it. That’s how I get rid of my nerves. Without it, I can’t go onstage because I don’t want to go on stage alone. I want to go onstage with him.

Angel also shared openly about dealing with the inevitable disappointments that arise in a singing career. “When I’m disappointed, I let myself feel disappointed. But I can’t stay there . . . the upsets are part of life . . . learn from them and move forward.” Her faith also plays a role in helping her navigate disappointment and she continually trusts in what she views as God’s plan for her. In one instance, she did not get a role that she had really wanted and was naturally quite disappointed. Yet serendipitously, a different and remarkable opportunity emerged, one she wouldn’t have been able to accept had she secured the initial role she had set her sights on. Disappointment can also come from within, and Angel advised:

A big component of not just singing, but of life, is to allow yourself grace and to give yourself mercy. We have to allow ourselves a bad performance. Every performance is not going to be the greatest performance ever. I’m always

going to give 100%, but I mean, if I’m in the 90 to 95% range, that’s okay too. If I’m in the 85% range that day, that’s okay too. I’m human and it goes with the territory.

Angel made big news in 2022, even outside the opera world, when she withdrew from her scheduled debut with Arena di Verona, in protest of the company’s use of “blackface makeup” in a production of *Aida*. She wrote on social media at the time, “The use of blackface under any circumstances, artistic or otherwise, is a deeply misguided practice based on archaic theatrical traditions which have no place in modern society. It is offensive, humiliating and outright racist. Full stop.”¹ When asked how she felt about the situation nearly a year later, she said simply, “I said what I meant, I meant what I said, and I don’t resile from what I said. I firmly believe that was in my heart. Each person has to do what they feel is right for them. And we all have to live by our own conviction.” Many singers and opera administrators praised Angel for her courage in denouncing a harmful operatic tradition that thankfully, is happening less and less on operatic stages. In closing, Angel shared her dream for the future of opera:

My dream and my goal for the future of opera is that we continue to love and cherish this great art form and that we lift each other up and that we don’t tear each other down. I think it’s a good thing to genuinely be happy for other people, to really try to be happy for others. And so, I’m hoping that I can keep that spirit of joy—the spirit of “gioia” in my singing. I hope to bring that to opera, and I hope that we all bring that to opera in some way.

How fitting that, like her namesake, Angel Joy would make it her mission to disseminate joy. Readers are reminded to scan the QR code found at the bottom of this article to view an edited portion of the live interview with Angel. You can also visit her website to learn more about her: www.angeljoyblue.com.

NOTES

1. Javier C. Hernández, “Soprano Withdraws From Opera, Citing ‘Blackface’ in Netrebko’s ‘Aida,’” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/15/arts/music/angel-blue-anna-netrebko-blackface.html>

Melissa Treinkman is an assistant professor of musical theatre vocal performance at the University of Southern California, where she teaches applied voice and vocal pedagogy. She earned a Doctor of Musical

Arts degree from USC and was the recipient of the Thornton Vocal Arts Outstanding Graduate Award.

Dr. Treinkman has presented at the NATS National Conference, the PAVA Conference, the Association of Popular Music Education Conference, the Fall Voice Conference, the Northwest Voice Conference, and the Voice Foundation Symposium. Her publications can be found in the *Journal of Singing* and the *Journal of Voice*. Dr. Treinkman was the 2020 recipient of the Voice Foundation's "Sataloff Award for Young Investigators," and was the first researcher to win the award in the category of vocal pedagogy.

As a mezzo-soprano, Treinkman has sung with Chicago Opera Theatre,

Sarasota Opera, Opera North, Utah Opera, and Cedar Rapids Opera. At Los Angeles Opera, she sang in the featured ensemble for the GRAMMY award winning production of *The Ghosts of Versailles*, performed the role of the Vendor in *Carmen* and performed the role of a Noble Page in *Tannhäuser*. She is also a regular member of the LA Opera Chorus. www.melissatreinkman.com



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