



The Ever-Evolving World of the Classical Singer

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Since the first surviving opera of *Euridice* by Jacopo Peri was performed in 1600 in Florence, Italy for a Medici family wedding, the classical singer has faced many changes, challenges, and opportunities. The art form quickly spread across the globe and has played a dominant role in history up until the advent of the microphone. Then a shift to “popular” music and singing became more commonplace.

In the ensuing 400 years since the first opera, classical singers have dealt with many changes and challenges including, different languages and styles, the use of castrati, larger orchestras, longer productions, more complex music and stories - putting greater and greater demands on the voice and the individual.

We will focus on four singers from the 1950’s to the present and explore their challenges and contributions to classical singing and the global community. Leontyne Price, a true opera “diva” in every sense of the word, she is also a civil rights activist and leader. Andrea Bocelli, the world-renowned classical and popular singer. In addition to Andrea’s immense talent and popularity, he has a philanthropic organization that helps countless people in need throughout the world. Hui He, an in demand soprano originally from China is continually breaking barriers as being the first Asian soprano to perform many leading opera roles. She is also an inspiration and role model to Asians and underrepresented minorities. Baritone David Serero is carving out a career for himself as a classical, musical theater, contemporary singer, philanthropist and humanitarian. He is originally from France and is of Moroccan descent, and he has a close bond with Morocco. His family left Morocco due the rising Arab-Jewish tensions during the 1960’s. One of his passions is to preserve and highlight the history of the Jewish people of Morocco.



Leontyne Price is one the most influential classical singers of the 20th century. Born in 1927 in segregated Mississippi. Her father was a carpenter and her mother was a midwife who also had a beautiful voice. Like many singers, Leontyne sang for church choir and was stand out form a very early age. She had the support of her family and financial benefactor Mrs. Alexander Chisholm to further pursue her passion for music.

She rose to fame after attending Juilliard and being cast in a touring production of *Porgy and Bess*. She was then a mainstay for NBC Opera, where her productions were not broadcast in the southern United States due to her being an African American. In 1961 she made her Metropolitan Opera debut to a resounding success and became a “prima donna” of the Met performing in over 200 performances during the next 24 years. Including her inaugural production of the “new” opera house in 1966. This is not mention all of her other leading roles in opera houses throughout the world.

One of her most often performed roles at the Metropolitan Opera House was the title role of Guiseppe Verdi’s opera *Aida*. She was the first African American portray the role at the Metropolitan Opera House.

She retired from opera in 1985 but continued to perform in concert and recitals until 1997. In addition to her incredible talent on stage she is a philanthropist and proponent of civil rights. For her efforts, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964. In addition, she is an avid supporter of the United Negro College Fund. Her television commercial for the organization helped increase donations by over 250% between the years of 1984 to1989.

Having fought racism throughout her career and life, Ms. Price offered these following words of wisdom on social issues and the arts.



On Race

1. “If you are going to think black, think positive about it. Don’t think down on it, or think it is something in your way. And this way, when you really do want to stretch out, and express how beautiful black is, everybody will hear you.”
2. Be black, shine, aim high.
3. Accomplishment have no color.
4. I am here and you will know that I am the best and will hear me. The color of my skin or the kink of my hair or the spread of my mouth has nothing to do with what you are listening to.
5. The way I was taught, being black was a plus, always. Being a human being, being in America, and being black, all three were the greatest things that could happen to you. The combination was unbeatable.
6. All token Blacks have the same experience. I have been pointed at as a solution to things that have not yet begun to be solved, because pointing at us token Blacks eases consciences of millions, and this is dreadfully wrong.

On Performance

7. Once you get on stage, everything is right. I feel the most beautiful, complete, fulfilled. I think that’s why, in the case of non-compromising career women, parts of our personal lives don’t work out. One person can’t give you the feeling that thousands of people give you.
8. ...we performers are monsters. We are a totally different, far-out race of people. I totally and completely admit, with no qualms at all, my egomania, my selfishness,



coupled with a really magnificent voice.

9. I have never given all of myself, even vocally, to anyone. I was taught to sing on your interest, not your capital.

10. For a long time the only time I felt beautiful – in the sense of being complete as a woman as a human being, and even female – was when I was singing.

11. A healthy sex life. Best thing in the world for a woman's voice.

On Success

12. If you're not feeling good about you, what you're wearing outside doesn't mean a thing.

13. If I do have some success, I'd like to enjoy it, for heaven's sake! What is the point of having it otherwise?

14. The ultimate of being successful is the luxury of giving yourself the time to do what you want to do.

15. I prefer to leave standing up, like a well-mannered guest at a party.

16. You should always know when you're shifting gears in life. You should leave your era; it should never leave you.

17. Who I am is the best I can be.



On Art

18. Art is the only thing you cannot punch a button for. You must do it the old-fashioned way. Stay up and really burn the midnight oil. There are no compromises.

19. We should not have a tin cup out for something as important as the arts in this country, the richest in the world. Creative artists are always begging, but always being used when it's time to show us at our best.¹

Another famous singer and global sensation is Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli. He was born on his family's farm in Tuscany in 1958. He was diagnosed with several disabilities at birth, many of which involved his eyesight. Andrea was eventually diagnosed with congenital glaucoma. After an accident playing soccer, he lost his eyesight completely at age 12. He was always passionate about music and studied many instruments along with singing. At the age of 14, he won his first vocal competition singing the famous Neapolitan song, "O sole mio." He went on to become a successful singer, businessman, and philanthropist.

While his blindness has kept him from a prolonged operatic career he has performed with most major symphonies and orchestras throughout the world. In addition, he has received countless accolades and awards. He has also bridged the gap with classical and popular singing, which in turn has helped introduce more people to classical singing.

He is famous for his concerts offered every summer in the Italian countryside. These events draw huge crowds and are often used as fundraisers for his philanthropic organization aptly named the *Andrea Bocelli Foundation "Empowering People and Communities."*

¹ "On This Day: 90-Year-Old Leontyne Price's Wisdom on Race, Art & Success," David Salazar, <https://operawire.com/on-this-day-the-wisdom-of-90-year-old-leontyne-price/>, (April 18, 2019)



It's Mission and Vision Statements are below:

MISSION

Our mission is to empower people and communities in situations of poverty, illiteracy, distress due to illness and social exclusion by promoting and supporting national and international projects that promote the overcoming of these barriers and the expression of their full potential

VISION

“I strongly believe that love does justice. And it is for this simple reason that we are all responsible for building a better world. Since love energizes faith, the opposite must also be true. The amazing lives we have been gifted offer us the privilege, opportunity, and responsibility to give the less fortunate a better future and opportunities.” Andrea Bocelli²

His organization does incredible work throughout the world. They are still helping Haiti and Puerto Rico recover from their natural disasters along with helping to provide water and fight poverty in the most underserved countries. In addition to the monetary support, Mr. Bocelli founded a children's choir named “The Voices of Haiti.” The choir is made up of 60 young students (ages 9 to 15) and tours the world. The positive impact and the educational opportunity the choir provides for the children's lives is life changing. After a recent performance in Miami Mr. Bocelli said “What we are giving them today is [a chance to] broaden their gaze, to know a different world. Art and culture are human rights.”³

² “Mission and Vision,” <https://www.andreabocellifoundation.org/who-we-are/mission-and-vision/>, (April 24, 2019)

³ “Andrea Bocelli Shares the Importance of the Voices of Haiti's Children's Choir,” Lianna Scahffner, <https://oceandrive.com/andrea-bocelli-shares-the-importance-of-the-voice-of-haiti-childrens-choir> (April 24, 2019)



He Hui is one of the most in demand sopranos today. He Hui is from China and has been performing at major opera houses all over the world in recent years. He Hui was raised in Ankang, a city in southern Shaanxi province about 110 miles south of Xi'an, the ancient capital of China. Her interest in Western music was encouraged while she was in high school, and she attended the Xi'an Conservatory of Music, where, as a young student, she was deeply moved by listening to a recording of Puccini's *La Bohème*. She majored in Western operatic vocal performance and remained at the school as a singing instructor after receiving her undergraduate degree in 1994. In 1995 He Hui made her debut as a leading actor in Shanghai as the mezzo-soprano Dorabella in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. She soon switched to singing soprano and sang the title role in Verdi's *Aida* at the inaugural event of the Shanghai Grand Theater in 1998.

He Hui's breakthrough on the international stage came in 2000 when she placed second in the Operalia singing competition (founded by renowned tenor Plácido Domingo), held that year in Los Angeles. In early 2001 He Hui and Domingo gave a joint concert in Shanghai, and, later that year at the behest of Domingo, she sang the role of Aida with the Los Angeles Opera and then the character Liù in Puccini's *Turandot* with the Washington (D.C.) Opera. In April 2002 she won a Verdi vocal competition in Busseto, Italy (Verdi's hometown, near Parma), after having performed the title role in Puccini's *Tosca* in her European debut (in Parma) two months earlier.⁴

She has since become known for her command of Verdi and Puccini roles, but this was not always the case as casting directors of many leading opera houses were hesitant to hire an Asian soprano. She did not make her debut as Aida with the Vienna Staatsoper until 2008 and the Metropolitan until 2010. On both of these occasions she was the first Asian person to portray the role in these venues.

⁴ "Artist of the Week: Hui He," Francisco Salazar, <https://operawire.com/artist-of-the-week-hui-he/>, (May 1, 2019)



Ms. Hui continues to break barriers for Asian classical singers following in the footsteps of famed Korean soprano Hei-Kyung Hong who has been a staple at the Metropolitan Opera House since 1982 when she won the National Council Auditions.

In addition to an illustrious singing career, He Hui is passionate about sharing her talents, good fortune with others and working to improve racial relations. She has remained on the faculty of Xi'an Conservatory of Music and gives masterclasses and workshops throughout her native China and all over the world. She is inspiration for many Asian classical singers and is encouraging Asians and all minorities to follow their dreams.

The final singer we will talk about today is baritone David Serero. David is from France and is of Moroccan Jewish descent. He sings classical, Broadway and jazz music. Again, another singer that brings classical singing to broader audiences worldwide. Some of his operatic roles include Escamillo, *Carmen*, Rigoletto, *Rigoletto*, Canio, *I Pagliacci* and Dr. Malatesta, *Don Pasquale*. In addition to singing with several orchestras and symphonies all over the globe.

Born in Paris in 1981, David Serero started his career in musicals and theater in New York City. In 2002, David Serero discovered Opera and in 2004 he moved to St. Petersburg, Russia to study at the Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory. That same year he made his operatic debut singing Scarpia in *Tosca* and Germont in *La Traviata*. David then received an invitation to be part of the prestigious Young Soloists Academy of the Mariinsky Theater founded by Valery Gergiev and directed by Larissa Gergieva. He became the first "non-Russian" to be part of the Academy. In 2006, David Serero made his European debut singing Escamillo in *Carmen*, his now most signature role, at the Brasov Opera in Romania. David Serero received the high distinction of "Ambassador of the city of Brasov" from the Romanian government for his debut performance. As said earlier, he has since performed in many countries throughout the world in opera houses and concert stages including France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Russia, USA and Israel.



He is also a very generous philanthropist, humanitarian and avid supporter of Jewish causes. Establishing himself as a "People's Artist", David Serero organizes and participates in several concerts and galas in order to raise funds for Humanitarian organizations throughout the world such as the UNICEF. Like his mentors, David is not content to use music to just entertain people, although he is quite a dynamic performer. He uses music to bring people together, to bridge the gap between the races, and to heal the human heart. David is also an active defender of Human Rights.⁵

David Serero is the founder of Forbidden Talents (www.forbiddentalents.com), which promotes through a series of concerts and events the work of artists who were forbidden by the Nazi regime. Including famous Jewish composers such as Weill, Zemlinsky, Ullmann and Bohuslav Martinu. Mr. Serero presented the tribute concert for the 50th death anniversary of the Czech composer Bohuslave Martinu at the Centre Tchèque in Paris with the support of the Martinu Foundation Prague.

In support of his Moroccan Jewish heritage, in February of this year, 2019, Mr. Serero made the largest donation of Moroccan Judaica artifacts ever donated to the Moroccan Jewish Museum in Casablanca. David is also the founder of the 1st Opera Festival of Morocco being held in 2020 and will feature music by Jewish composers.

In the ever-evolving world of the classical singer there are constant changes, challenges and opportunities. The classical singers we have examined, Leontyne Price, Andrea Bocelli, He Hui, and David Serero are all examples of classical singers who have navigated the changes with grace, faced and conquered their challenges head-on, and made the most of the opportunities presented to them. In addition to sharing their incredible vocal talents and wealth, they are compassionate and charitable human beings working to improve mankind and our global society.

⁵ "David Serero," <https://www.operamusica.com/artist/david-serero/#biography>, (April 30, 2019)



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