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Dramatic Destination

Christine Goerke, who endured a troubling vocal crisis during her days as a Mozart and Handel singer, is now one of opera's most exciting dramatic sopranos — and is singing better than ever. She makes her Lyric Opera of Chicago debut as Strauss's Elektra next month. BARRY SINGER reports.



As Handel's *Alcina* at New York City Opera, 2003
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[As Eboli at HGO in 2012, with Scott Hendricks \(Rodrigo\)](#)

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agner's Ortrud with Adrienne Pieczonka (Elsa) in 2009

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riadne in 2011

: 2012

It is every opera singer's nightmare; Christine Goerke lived it wide awake. She was thirty-four years old and an ascending star — a winner of the Richard Tucker Award just two years earlier, in 2001. Her lyric soprano was opulent, her technique secure, her musicianship expansive, expressive, elegant. She loved Mozart and Handel, and their operas seemed to love her right back. Things were good. Then one day in September 2003, she woke up to find her voice was no longer her own.

"I was doing *Alcina* at New York City Opera," Goerke recalled recently, with still palpable horror. "Suddenly I couldn't get my breath right. I couldn't situate my voice inside me. I couldn't breathe. I've *never* had trouble breathing — I have breath for days. But I couldn't find my voice. It was uncomfortable. It didn't feel right. I tried to work my way through it, but it was just wrong. And finally I thought, 'Okay, I broke it.'"

New York magazine's Peter G. Davis gave a blunt assessment of what he heard:

Christine Goerke is one of our brightest young lyric sopranos, and her past work, in Handel particularly, has been brilliantly on the mark. Here, as *Alcina*, she sounded thin and out of sorts on opening night, unable to project the sorceress's flashing volatility and jealous moods as she gradually loses her magical powers over the one man she truly loves. Goerke must have quaffed one of her own potions during intermission, since her energy level rose markedly in Act II, but by then it was too late.

Fallen goddesses are an operatic mainstay, but the loss of a divine voice is an excruciating reality. It would take Goerke two years to right herself — two years of diminished, demoralizing singing on the opera stages of the world. "It wasn't just difficult because it happened, it was difficult because it happened publicly," she acknowledges. "I had been going gangbusters. It was embarrassing. When I'm on a stage, singing, it makes my soul feel light and happy. But I became terrified. I knew I wasn't right. I *knew*, and I know that other people knew. Yet I had no idea what was wrong. Finally I thought, 'I don't want to feel this way. I'm so proud of what I've done up to now — I don't want to walk away and feel bad about it. But maybe I should just stop.'"

That she didn't is the happy beginning to an unfinished story and not the ending to a tragedy. "I was dating the man who is now my husband — he was a construction worker who had not even heard an opera before he met me," recalls Goerke — "and he said to me, 'I don't think you can quit. You eat and breathe this. And people would miss you.'"

That the problem might be in her throat did not cross her mind. "I knew it was purely a technical thing. There was no need for doctors," she maintains. "Something about the technique I had been using was no longer working on my body, and I had to find someone who could help me figure it out or I was going to quit."

Salvation finally presented itself in the memory of a master class Goerke recalled taking years before with the soprano Diana Soviero, another former Tucker Award recipient, who was now a respected teacher. "I'd loved what Diana had to say, and I'd loved that she wasn't taking any B.S. from anybody," Goerke laughs. "So I thought, 'Well, I know Diana can handle my personality. That's a huge part of it. Do I bring a lot of B.S. to the table? It's entirely possible. Hopefully I bring more good things to the table, but maybe a little B.S.'"

Goerke sang for Soviero. Or rather, she tried to sing. "I was so tied up in knots, I couldn't get through two notes," she remembers. "And Diana said, 'Honey, I don't know why you've completely cut off from your support, but that's gonna stop *now*.'"

Goerke groans. “It hadn’t dawned on me. Basically, my voice had gotten so much bigger so much sooner than I’d expected that I had cut off my breath and was singing higher and higher to hold onto my lyric coloratura technique. I was singing almost entirely from my throat because my chest felt so awful. The minute I went back down there with Diana and restored the connection, my voice grew to twice its size, and in three months it was bigger than that. It all just happened far sooner than I expected.”



As Chrysothemis at Washington National Opera, 2008
© Karin Cooper 2012

Goerke grew up on Long Island. Her initial instrument was the clarinet, her initial ambition to teach high-school band. “Then I went off to the State University of New York at Fredonia and found out that my clarinet playing stunk!” notes Goerke gleefully.

She is still clearly a Long Island girl, with a big voice and a booming personality — a diva with little pretense and lots of volume. “They were so much more taken with my voice at Fredonia than they’d been with my clarinet playing,” she proclaims. “So I decided I was going to be a choral teacher instead, though I’d never sung at all. Eventually I ended up at the State University at Stony Brook on Long Island, where I finished my B.A. studying voice.”

Goerke began auditioning avidly for young-artist programs. In 1993, she was accepted at Glimmerglass. “I auditioned for them, and they made me the cover for Fiordiligi in *Così*. I had the best summer. And I

thought, ‘I can do this.’” The following year, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis took Goerke into its apprentice program, selecting her to cover Patricia Racette as the lead in *Iphigénie en Tauride*. “It was awesome!” Goerke crows. “*She* was awesome — so generous. I fell in love with the whole business watching everyone there work. It just made my heart happy.”

That’s when Goerke first told her father that she wanted to be a professional opera singer. “He proceeded to have a heart attack. He made me swear that if I wasn’t supporting myself in some way, shape or form within five years, I would go back and get an education degree.”

That same summer of 1994, Goerke received a telephone call from Gail Robinson at the Metropolitan Opera, offering her a spot in the Met’s Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. “*I* almost had a heart attack,” recalls Goerke.

She describes the three-year program as a safe haven. “My colleagues were Nathan Gunn and Stephanie Blythe, Michelle DeYoung and Sondra Radvanovsky, Tony Griffey. We found our way together, taught by people who were the top of the field, who had worked with all of the great singers and conductors, who knew where every pitfall was in every piece and how to get around them. We had language classes, diction classes. But the thing that struck me the most was having access to rehearsals — sitting off to the side and seeing the folks I had put on a pedestal screwing up left and right. ‘My God, they make *mistakes?*’ I thought. As a kid, you strive for perfection. That’s what students do, you learn things perfectly. Watching these rehearsals, I learned that it’s never about *not* making mistakes. You’re always going to make a mistake — it’s live, and it’s human. Watching these people, I learned how to fix those mistakes on a dime. They were astonishing at it! It gave me permission to start trying to perform and not just be a student.”

Once Goerke was set at the Met she sang for the Richard Tucker Foundation and, in separate years, won the Tucker Study Grant and Career Grant, before taking home the organization’s largest prize in 2001. “The amazing thing about the big Tucker award is that you don’t know you’re being considered for it,” she points out. “You don’t audition for it. You just get a phone call. Where was I when I got mine? Japan. Barry Tucker called me at some ungodly hour and said, ‘Hi. It’s Barry Tucker.’ And I said, ‘Hi,’ and he said, ‘How’s it going?’ and I said, ‘Good,’ and he said, ‘You’ve won.’ I had to think for minute — what had I won? And then I said, ‘Holy shit.’”

Goerke’s early career was triumphantly steeped in Handel and Mozart, but she always knew that Strauss and Wagner and the words “dramatic soprano” were her destiny. The technical collapse of her voice blasted her Wagnerian future into the present tense.

“I had to start auditioning again,” she exclaims. “I’d never had to audition when I was singing Mozart and Handel. I understood. But I did have to wrap my head around it. I was terrified. I had to prove myself to everybody, prove that I had fixed myself. I’d have to be stupid not to know that folks were talking about me, so I had to get out there and let them know that I wasn’t finished, that I was just changing, and sooner than expected — ‘This is my new repertoire. This is what my body now wants to sing. What do you think?’”

Goerke’s first role in her new realm was Chrysothemis in *Elektra*, conducted by Seiji Ozawa at the Saito Kinen Festival in Tokyo in 2005. “Who gave me the job?” Goerke asks. “Who took the *big chance?* Seiji. If I had another kid and it was a boy, I’d name him Seiji.”

The opera world beyond Ozawa has since been persuaded that Christine Goerke’s vocal troubles are behind her. Her transition from Mozart and Handel to Strauss and Wagner is pretty much complete. Her successful La Scala debut in June 2006 came in the title role of *Ariadne auf Naxos*. She sang Gutrune in

Götterdämmerung, with Edo de Waart in Sydney, Australia, and with John Mauceri in Los Angeles in 2005, and again in March and April of 2006 for Robert Wilson in his radical restaging at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris. In 2009, she sang Ortrud in *Lohengrin* for Houston Grand Opera, and in the spring of 2012 she returned to Houston for Eboli in the French-language *Don Carlos*.



As Elektra in Madrid, 2011
© Javier del Real 2012

This fall, Goerke makes her Lyric Opera of Chicago debut opening the company's season in the title role of *Elektra*, a role she sang for the first time at Madrid's Teatro Real in 2011. "I remember singing Chrysothemis somewhere with Debbie Polaski as Elektra a few years ago, and we were literally waiting on the floor of the stage during rehearsals, lying there in the dirt and just talking, and Debbie said to me, 'You know, you're not going to be doing Chrysothemis much longer.' And I said, 'Why — am I awful?' And she said, 'No, you're just louder than all the Elektras I know.' I staved Elektra off until I was forty-two, which was still a couple of years sooner than I'd wanted to do it. But it fits. Debbie was right.

"All the big stuff is coming now," Goerke continues, much more quietly. "I have *Ring* cycles on the books — down the road. The only one I'm allowed to talk about so far is Houston Grand Opera, which will be mounting its first-ever *Ring* beginning with *Das Rheingold* in 2014. Patrick Summers is conducting, and I'll be singing Brünnhilde. I have some separate *Walküres* over the next few years. I'm going back to Covent Garden, not this fall but next fall, to sing Elektra. I've done Mozart there, but never Strauss. I'm going back to Paris, I'm going back to Madrid. It's all really big-girl stuff — Magic Helmet stuff."

Goerke pauses for a breath — a great big, deep one. "People have wanted to use the 'dramatic' word on

me for years, and I was terrified of it,” she admits. “I would not use it, even when I was already starting to sing it. Lately, though, I have finally started to use the D-word. I just can’t say it. Because it is final. You don’t get to say that once and then go back. Once you say it, that’s it. You’re done.” □

BARRY SINGER’s *new book*, *Churchill Style: The Art of Being Winston Churchill*, *has just been published*.

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