



photo by Devon Cass

Good Reasons to Sing

BY AMANDA KEIL

Camille Zamora leads a unique singing career by helping others. Read about her path to establishing a non-profit and how she manages to balance that with an international singing career and her personal life.

To perform is to give yourself entirely to what you are doing: inhabiting a role, making music, communicating with the audience. Paradoxically, singers need to be a pretty selfish breed in order to have a successful career. Self-promotion, beating the competition, and building a reputation does not leave too much room for generosity or, in some cases, even kindness.

“You have to have the soul of a butterfly and the skin of an elephant,” says Camille Zamora, a singer whose reputation includes her generosity offstage as much as her acumen onstage. “You have to be so vulnerable to make art,” yet tough to withstand auditions and long odds. But shortly after launching her singing career, Zamora and fellow soprano Monica Yunus followed their giving instincts and founded Sing for Hope, which connects singers and other artists to meaningful volunteer opportunities in underserved communities.

Zamora hasn’t let her interest in service keep her from singing. She and Yunus are in their “meat years in our singing,” Zamora says, and both sing internationally. So how does a Juilliard grad find space in a competitive career in opera to lead a non-profit that serves hundreds of people?

Zamora’s parents were in the Peace Corps, and she grew up with a sense of service. But she always questioned how she would reconcile that impulse with a singing career. “Monica and I didn’t set out to start a non-profit,” she says. But when they looked around for a way to do their art in a meaningful voluntary setting, they found there wasn’t a “large-scale, volunteer-service, artist Peace Corps that’s in schools and hospitals and homeless shelters” with specific opportunities for musicians and artists.

“There is something about the human voice,” Zamora says over sushi in Sing for Hope’s brightly painted midtown New York offices. Zamora witnessed the power of singing when she comforted a friend as he was dying in a Houston AIDS hospice. “What I love about going into a hospital is that it is a moment when you just get to have a soul of a butterfly,” she says. “There’s something so centering about

Camille Zamora (right) as Ilia with Sandra Piques Eddy as Idamante in Boston Lyric Opera's production of *Idomeneo*



photo by Charles Erickson

singing for someone who wants that peace. It's almost been a necessary part of my diet as a professional singer."

From its official founding in 2006 as a project between two friends, Sing for Hope has grown into a \$1.2 million dollar organization that connects more than 1,000 artist volunteers to service opportunities at dozens of community partner organizations. Volunteers sing at patient bedsides and at public concerts in healthcare facilities as well as teach music and the arts to underserved children.

In 2010 and 2011, Sing for Hope received a flurry of press coverage for its Pop-Up Pianos program, which brought 88 pianos to various New York City neighborhoods for two-week residencies, encouraging spontaneous music making and interactions between community members. Each instrument was tuned and monitored by volunteers (with tarps for rain) and decorated by artists ranging from Isaac Mizrahi to Olek, better known as the knit bomber. The program was on hiatus this year while Sing for Hope strengthens its educational and concert programming at the schools, healthcare facilities, and senior residences that provided permanent homes for the last batch of pianos, but the pianos will pop up again in summer 2013.

Part of the reason for Sing for Hope's success is its appeal to everyone involved: singers have a meaningful volunteer oppor-

tunity they can participate in on their own terms, hospitals and community organizations can offer a low-cost treat to the people they serve, donors can feel good about it, and the public programs such as Pop-Up Pianos provide a community benefit and keep the organization in the spotlight.

Zamora and Yunus leveraged their professional connections to other singers to build support for their project. Musical colleagues who are interested in using their art to support worthy causes perform as volunteers for fundraisers that support Sing for Hope's programs and other community organizations, and artists frequently donate their services in design and photography. From the beginning, Sing for Hope has also attracted attention from numerous high-profile stakeholders. Renée Fleming and Plácido Domingo are on the board,



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2012 cast of *Sing for Hope's* annual AIDS Gala at Houston's Wortham Center: (front row, L to R) Monica Yunus, Kenneth Merrill, Michael Slattery, John McVeigh, Camille Zamora, Devlin Browning, Timothy Jones, Hanan Alattar, Krysty Swann, Brandon McReynolds; (back row, L to R) Benjamin Wayne Smith, Ty David Lerman



photo by Tim Barosh

and the annual Sing for Hope gala has drawn support from the likes of Martha Stewart and Ann Ziff, chairperson of the Metropolitan Opera.

There's no secret to landing such high-level mentorship, says Zamora. "Be authentic about who you are and ask," she says. "People love to help." Still, Zamora and Yunus work tirelessly to broaden the circle of support for their work. "We joke that we are like dogs with bones," says Zamora. "Anyone who spends any time around us knows it's only a matter of time before they get attacked." What is likely most appealing about Sing for Hope is that it is not a promotional effort for singers but a way for artists and art lovers to give back to the community. At the same time, "I don't feel Sing for Hope would have the meaning it does have if we weren't also going for it as singers," Zamora says.

When it comes to the difficult job of raising support for a non-profit, "we are blessed by our naiveté, and people are amused by our gusto," Zamora says, though many of the happy accidents that support Sing for Hope's success came from some combination of luck and initiative. Passing by an unused ware-

house in her neighborhood, Zamora inquired about it. The owner turned out to be a big arts fan and let her use the 7,000-square-foot space as a workshop for Pop-Up Pianos to be tuned and decorated. Snacking on a Chobani yogurt one day, Zamora read on the container that

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they donate part of their profits to charity. She e-mailed them and won a grant.

Zamora's charitable work has created its own performance opportunities. After the death of her friend in Houston, Zamora organized a small concert to benefit the hospice where he had stayed. That performance grew into an annual tradition that has become one of the nation's largest AIDS fundraising events and is now

co-presented by Houston Grand Opera. Zamora still performs on the program, and her longtime commitment to the event continues to interest the press. "It has given me a fair amount of Google hits," she says, "and it's very identified with me."

Zamora's singing career has included the tried-and-true training grounds such as Glimmerglass Opera and Aspen Opera Theater, as well as performances farther afield, such as *La voix humaine* with Auckland Opera in New Zealand and solos with the Harare International Festival in Zimbabwe. Closer to home, Zamora has enjoyed recent successes with her debut as Anna Bolena at Houston's Opera in the Heights and her performance of Queen Europa in the acclaimed production of *Die Liebe der Danae* with the American Symphony Orchestra. She gravitates toward slightly unusual projects, such as a longstanding interest in zarzuela repertoire and collaboration with Joshua Bell and Sting on a musical mediation about Robert and Clara Schumann. As Sing for Hope has become more professionalized, Zamora has been able to step back from the day-to-day operations to focus on her career.

"It seems to me that 10-20 years ago, if you had made certain strides in your career, you were going to be OK. I do think that now you have to be constantly developing your career," she says, noting that her career has two sides—a dot-com and a dot-org. "Both are necessary to my spirit."

"Whether I'm thinking about my opera career or Sing for Hope, you want people to respond to some sort of message that resonates," she says, noting that it's important for singers to think about their own brand. "As a lyric soprano in one of the most crowded of Fachs, one of the questions I often ask myself is 'What are the things that I can do that are uniquely me?'" A Sing for Hope board member has been critical in creating a unified brand for the organization, ranging from its logo to its website to its messaging. Whether for-profit for yourself or non-profit for a cause, "you want to create a world that

Zamora with Sing for Hope co-founding director Monica Yunus

people can get excited about,” Zamora says.

Zamora concedes that leading a non-profit in the current economy is not an easy business, even with Sing for Hope’s publicity and connections. But she feels that because all singers are unique, there is room for everyone to find success if they stay true to what makes them unique as singers, artists, and people. She also encourages people with entrepreneurial impulses to seek out partnerships and take advantage of the many non-profit service organizations, such as Fractured Atlas, Creative Visions Foundation, and The Field.

In between gigs and her Sing for Hope ambassadorship, Zamora finds time to be mother to an eight-year-old son, Landon. Her family actually completes the “three-legged stool” of her working life, supporting her work in unexpected ways. He was born not long after she finished her graduate work at Juilliard, a time when “the



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Artist Adam Suerte paints a Brooklyn-themed piano for Sing for Hope.



photo by Katlyn Moncada

logical thing would have been to be pedal to the metal with my career.” She was able to get her career off to a good start and found that having a baby “forced me to get serious about technique,” she says. “OK,

I was up all night, and have to sing a concert. How do I trick my body into thinking I had a gorgeous eight hours of sleep?”

Zamora also found that stepping back from work and transferring all her dreams

onto Landon wasn’t good for him or for her. “I would be an unhappy, icky person if I were not pursuing singing professionally,” she says. The perspective that comes from being a mother also enriches her mission of service, making her feel even more strongly about “being an advocate for people who can’t advocate for themselves.”

Having a varied career as well as a family can be a challenging performance. “I think I would have had a more singular focus on my career if it weren’t for [Sing for Hope and motherhood],” Zamora says. “But I think I bring an artistry now that is just incomparable to what I had before this chapter in my life.”

Amanda Keil freelances as a fundraiser; writes for Classical Singer, OPERA America, Bachtrack, and her blog, thousandfoldcho.com; and performs with her Baroque company, Musica Nuova. ©



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