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Nancy Steele Brokaw '71

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Finding His Voice

After singing at one of music's great venues, Kyle Pfortmiller '92 keeps focused on his family and the future.

Story by NANCY (STEELE) BROKAW '71

This past New Year's Eve, Kyle Pfortmiller '92 opened at the Met, the most famous opera house in America.

Think Super Bowl, or Nobel Prize nomination, or however else one defines a career apex. That's the Met — the Metropolitan Opera in New York City — a venerable institution dreamt of by opera students the world over while they are singing scales in dreary practice rooms.

Pfortmiller sang the role of Marquis d'Obigny in the Met's month-long run of Verdi's *La Traviata*, a work so popular that even those who swear they don't know a thing about opera might unwittingly be able to recognize a snatch or two. Directed by Willy Decker, this production was edgy and modern, using a palette of black, white and red against a curved back wall adorned with a giant clock.

While it likely put off more traditional-minded opera buffs, the production won praise in the New York press and also filled seats. Re-envisioning classics such as *La Traviata* is one way that companies like the Met are pulling in a younger generation of season-ticket holders. Performers such as Pfortmiller are another.

Forget the "park and bark" style where performers simply stand while they sing. Young audiences want a full theatrical experience. They want superlative voices, of course, but also compelling productions where they are pulled into the story by expressive, versatile, even athletic singers who can also hold the stage as actors.

Pfortmiller is all that.

His roles for New York City Opera (NYCO) include Georges Bizet's *Carmen* and Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*, in which Pfortmiller exhibited "sturdy comic chops that are rarely the domain of opera performers," *Variety*'s David Rooney wrote. Of his NYCO performance in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, Marion Rosenberg of *New York Newsday* wrote, "Vocal honors go to baritone Kyle Pfortmiller ... who has a dark, buttery sound and a personality that pops off the stage."

Pfortmiller has won acclaim across the United States, and also Europe, with a repertoire that includes the title roles in *Don Giovanni* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. Of the latter role, Opera Online reviewer Paul Walkowski wrote, "Pfortmiller's voice packs a wallop and, coupled with a strong and darkly handsome stage presence, [it] sets this singer apart whenever he is on stage."



Pfortmiller performs as the poet Hajj in *Kismet* with the Utah Festival Opera. The singer is in demand around the country for both opera and musical-theatre roles. (Photo courtesy of the Utah Opera Festival)



Pfortmiller as Marquis d'Obigny (above, seated) with Violetta (Marina Poplavskaya) and the Metropolitan Opera Chorus in Verdi's *La Traviata*. Performing at the Met, he says, "is really living the dream." (Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Company)

He's also comfortable in non-operatic roles, from Billy Bigelow in *Carousel* to the Pirate King in *The Pirates of Penzance*. While it used to be risky for an opera singer to admit to a musical-theatre background, Pfortmiller says he is pleased to be "straddling both worlds."

They are busy worlds. Pfortmiller lives in New York with his wife Laura (also a singer) and daughter Alana, but is booked for roles across the country several years in advance. The time away from home adds up. Between the autumns of 2009 and 2010, for example, he was on the road a total of 26 weeks.

"I married a saint," Pfortmiller responds with an easy laugh when asked how he balances work and family, adding that it comes down to knowing your priorities.

"What I *do* is sing. What I *am* is a husband and a father," he says. "We talk and Skype every day when I'm gone. And the upside is that when I'm between gigs, I get to be a stay-at-home dad."

Performing at the Met, in his own backyard, "is really living the dream," he says. Pfortmiller will appear there again this spring in a production of Strauss's *Capriccio*, starring celebrated soprano Renée Fleming.

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Growing up in Elgin, Ill., Pfortmiller's interests mostly centered on baseball and basketball. He started singing in high school and became more serious about it after sustaining a basketball injury.

During his first year at Illinois Wesleyan, he recalls sitting down with a yellow legal pad and "listing all the things I liked — math, English, science, music — and started thinking maybe I'd be a pharmacist. Then I wrote down what awards I'd won in what fields and I realized I'd done the best in music.

"Then I asked myself if I could envision myself doing music for the rest of my life and being happy, and the answer came back: Yes, I could."

Although he didn't come to IWU with the plan to study opera, it turned out to be a fortuitous choice. The School of Music counts among its graduates many successful opera performers, including renowned soprano Dawn Upshaw '82. Pfortmiller's potential to join that group was not immediately obvious, however. His voice teacher, IWU Professor of Music Linda Farquharson, recalls, "When Kyle first started studying, his voice was so soft I could barely hear it above the piano."

"But," she adds, "he was diligent and he practiced. He was always curious and for a singer that's really important. He was curious in all areas, including how his voice works. I'd call him a scholar-singer."

It was only later, while pursuing a master's degree in voice from the Manhattan School of Music, that Pfortmiller says he realized "how amazing my IWU training had been. Most students had to enroll in some remedial classes such as theory, music history or sight-reading, but I was allowed to take whatever courses I wanted right away."

At Illinois Wesleyan, Pfortmiller was also cast in several stage roles, including Top in Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land* (an experience he recalls as "frightening and wonderful") and the wolf in Seymour Barab's *Little Red Riding Hood*. But his biggest breakthrough as a performer came at the School of Music's annual Henry Charles Memorial Concerto/Aria Competition. Pfortmiller sang Figaro's "Largo al factotum," one of the most difficult baritone arias, earning thunderous applause that prompted the conductor, Associate Professor of Music Vadim Mazo, to invite him back on stage for an encore.

Even after winning the competition, Farquharson says Pfortmiller was "never a divo, the masculine form of the word 'diva,' and was always very humble, always encouraging to the people around him."

In his senior year, he completed what Farquharson calls "the best use of an independent study I've ever seen." Pfortmiller learned to sing Peter Maxwell Davies' *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. Lasting 30 minutes, the score requires a vocal range of five octaves as well as an arsenal of extended techniques such as articulated breathing, overtones and *sprechstimme* (speech-singing).

When he took on the challenge, Farquharson saw her student's passion more clearly than ever. "After that," she says, "I knew he had a career ahead of him."



Pfortmiller and his wife Laura at their daughter's second-grade "moving up" ceremony.

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What would you like to ask Kyle Pfortmiller? That was the invitation given to students during a rehearsal for the School of Music's spring performance of the opera *Dido and Aeneas*. Among the students' questions later passed along to Pfortmiller: How much do you practice?

His answer: He generally devotes an hour of practice for every minute of music he's performing; more if the material is new to him. That can be difficult with the demands of six-hour rehearsals and family time. "I find myself memorizing things on the subway," he says.

Practice is much more than getting the vocals right, Pfortmiller adds. He recalls the time he informed a voice teacher that he was ready for a particular performance. The instructor replied, "Turn up the heat in your apartment, put on a wool sweater, then a wool coat, get on the treadmill and sing it again. If you can do it, you're ready."

In fact, Pfortmiller often takes a three-mile run several hours before a show to help focus his body, voice and mind. "Most of my roles are quite active," he says. "Recently I sang a role where I got to stand still for 16 bars and I thought, wow, I haven't done that in a while."



Pfortmiller played Nathan Detroit last year in *Guys and Dolls*. (Photo courtesy of the Utah Opera Festival)

Another of the music students wondered what Pfortmiller wishes he knew when he was her age.

"If you really want to do this," he says, "you have to be as confident as you can be about who you are and what you do, you need to be as humble as you can be, and you should never take your colleagues for granted because they are your allies. Everyone you work with will be the most talented from their particular school, but they are not your competition; they are your network."

Beyond that, Pfortmiller advises students to "leave no stone unturned. Take any class you can get in acting, movement, ballet, and when you find yourself on stage, learn everyone's part, not just your own. And then listen, listen, listen."

And is he concerned about the future of opera? "The economic downturn hurt some companies," Pfortmiller admits, "but those that weathered the storm are seeing good turnouts."

That success doesn't surprise him. "Opera is an experience unlike any other," he says. "It's a place that's not only live theatre but a convergence of all the arts — singing, acting, costumes, set — and, unlike almost any other type of vocal performance, no microphones.

"The audience is really seeing athletes. From the back of the stage to the back of the house is often a sixth of a mile, and the singer has to get there, his voice jumping over as many as 100 musicians in the orchestra pit, all while occasionally wearing 15 pounds of wool."

Given that the male voice typically doesn't mature until around age 35, Pfortmiller is just hitting his vocal stride. Still, he's taking nothing for granted. While performing at the Met is "the biggest stamp of approval there is for other companies looking to hire you," he says, "the opera business is one in which you can't rest on your laurels. "

Not that he would have it any other way. Whatever the challenge, Pfortmiller is set on exceeding expectations at home, in practice and on stage. It's a straddling, juggling sort of life — perhaps a bit more complicated than the one he envisioned as a first-year IWU student pondering career options on a yellow legal pad. But Pfortmiller confirms his younger self was dead-on with one prediction: It's a life that's made him very happy.