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Center Stage

Kate Tombaugh '07 shares highlights from her unexpected career in opera.

Story by SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07

Kate Tombaugh '07 has loved music all of her life. But even she didn't imagine that she would one day become an opera singer.

She was involved in operas at as a School of Music student, "but even that took a bit of coaxing from my professors," Kate says. "Prior to college, singing was a very regular part of my life, but classical music was a much newer concept for me to grasp. I had always tried to view music's role in my life responsibly; I enjoyed it and wanted it to always be a great part of my life, but never imagined I could make a career in it."

But Kate has, in fact, made a promising career out of her vocal talents. Her burgeoning professional path has taken her around the country and the world, and she returned to Illinois Wesleyan in November to help guide music students who want to follow in her footsteps. Her visit included a guest recital and a speech during the School of Music Convocation.



In November, Kate Tombaugh visited IWU for a guest recital and speech during the School of Music Convocation.

Kate decided on a varied repertoire for her recital program, ranging from songs in Italian, French and German, including classics by Mozart and Brahms, to what she calls a "sassy newer English set" by living composer Gary Schocker, whom she met and performed with last year.

The most memorable part of her IWU visit was meeting student musicians. "I found them to have a great curiosity and a thirst for learning that is rampant at IWU and fostered in its classrooms."

In turn, she provided direction to those looking to create a career in music. "I could give a relatable explanation about the auditioning process, applying for programs, looking into graduate schools, beginning professional jobs, all because I am in the midst of it right now," she says. "I

wanted the students to believe they have the power to begin forming their careers right now and I wanted to give them some tools to do just that.”

Her advice? Be on time, network with others and audition relentlessly. “I tell people who are down with the constant auditioning not to lose hope,” Kate says. “My audition with Utah Opera occurred 15th out of 16 auditions during a two-month period while constantly traveling while going to school fulltime while working several part-time jobs and with a fairly busy performance schedule.”



Kate Tombaugh will play the role of Papagena in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, beginning in January

graduate programs she had recommended,” Kate recalls.

Kate has had a fast-paced life since graduating from IWU four years ago. A few months after graduation — while holding down a variety of jobs in Bloomington, including teaching voice and waitressing — she auditioned for the Metropolitan Opera National Council and took first place in the competition’s district level. She then advanced to a regional competition in Chicago, where she placed third. More importantly, while there she connected with the competition’s head judge, who challenged her to think about a future career in vocal performance.

“That night after the competition was done I went home and started thinking, ‘I just might actually be able to do this,’ and I stayed up all night applying for the

In the next year, Kate jumped headfirst into the world of opera. She took her first professional job with the Opera Theatre of St. Louis, where she was a Gerdine Young Artist; traveled to Graz, Austria, to participate in the American Institute of Musical Studies Festival; and began her master’s degree work at the University of Cincinnati’s College-Conservatory of Music.

During the 2010-2011 season, Kate sang as a resident artist with the Salt Lake City-based Utah Opera, portraying Sandmann in a production of Humperdinck’s *Hänsel und Gretel*. She then served as an apprentice artist with the Santa Fe Opera, where she performed the role of Dorabella in Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*. In January, she begins her role as Papagena in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* with the Santa Fe Concert Association.

As a mezzo soprano, Kate says she sees plenty of opportunities for herself in the field. “There’s a longevity for mezzos in opera: lots of different kinds of characters, from cute young girls to old ladies to witches,” she says. Plus, opera comes with a built-in learning opportunity; singers are

expected to know French, German, Italian and English, plus tackle more challenging languages —from Russian to Czech — as they advance.

Kate says she's using knowledge from both her Wesleyan majors — English and music. “It incorporates my love of literature,” she says. “And yes, all those English classes analyzing literature have helped immensely! In opera, not only are you dealing with composers of all nations, you delve into the classic stories, poems and literature of all those nations.”

For now, Kate is taking her career one day at a time. “My life in music has already allowed me opportunities I never expected. That's the beauty of it all,” she says. “The end result isn't always clear, but it's my belief that you can never regret giving yourself fully to your dream.”