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Exploring Voices

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### Mini Ethnography

Traditionally exclusively enjoyed by a select few, opera is now widely admired, gaining some of that admiration through its elite standing, but mostly because of the intense training and expertise needed to perfect the craft. Opera singers push themselves to the extremes of what voice is capable of and that is what makes it perfect to explore in this course. Becoming a talented singer of any kind requires a lot of work, but classical singing is some of the most difficult and performers are often pushing the limits, not only vocally, but physically and emotionally as well. This extreme dedication to the craft can be traced all the way back to its origins, demonstrated best by the practice of castration. Parents were willing to physically alter their children in order for them to be able to sing the unsingable and become even more renowned for their voices. Although nothing that extreme happens anymore, classical singers push themselves in different ways. Take Juliana Snapper, for example. She takes the already difficult and boundary-breaking practice of opera and makes it even more challenging by bringing it underwater. This extreme aspect of the craft has always fascinated me and I have had the opportunity to train in it myself. Combining the knowledge of my own experience and the knowledge I have accumulated over the past week, I intend to explain why this art form is so incredible.

In addition to my own experience in voice lessons, I also had the opportunity to sit in on a more advanced singer's lesson, as well as listen to an interview with a professional soprano. All of these sources were incredibly enlightening. The interview between ethnographer, Lauren Vanderlinden, and soprano, Naomi Merer, brought the more emotional aspects of opera to my attention. Opera is a performance centered around feelings. Especially when it is performed in a language that one is unfamiliar with, the acting of the performers is very important. The performers need to embody their characters which is something that I had often overlooked because I viewed opera as a singing-only type of performance and that traditional acting was only found in plays and musicals. It was interesting to hear about Merer's acting techniques and how she distances herself from a character. While the interview provided insight into the emotional side of opera, the voice lesson with Dr. Isabel Bayrakdarian and Terra Giddens showed the technical side. Both are equally important in being a successful classical singer and it was nice that we had the opportunity to explore both parts in depth.

Being able to view opera from multiple perspectives gave me a much deeper understanding of the craft as a whole. The singers talked about how difficult opera is physically and I was able to clearly see that in the lesson. Giddens had to hold her body a certain way and maintain that posture and breath support throughout her entire performance as well as making mouth and facial distortions that contributed to the different tones of the song. Dr. Bayrakdarian demonstrated the intense vocal control needed for classical singing as she led Giddens through tough warm-ups and gave her different gestures to indicate what about her performance needed to improve. Teaching requires specialized knowledge of the craft and of the individual voices that are being instructed in order to give the singer the proper techniques and tips that they need

to use their unique voice to the best of their ability. Participating in this culture requires immense control and the ability to adapt. Opera singers must do what does not come naturally, but train themselves to make the unnatural, natural. The techniques needed to have that classical sound require expanding the ribcage to provide support, even when there is no air left in the lungs, the larynx and tongue must be relaxed, and the soft palette and eyebrows have to be lifted to provide a round sound. The singer, in addition to having incredible control over their body and voice, must be willing to acknowledge the way their voice needs to change over time. Merer spoke about her own personal experience with vocal changes and how her voice ultimately decided for her that she was a soprano. All of the singers that I had the opportunity to observe and speak to had been training their voices for over five years. The amount of discipline that occurs to keep a voice healthy and thriving for that amount of time is extremely impressive. I have only had classical training for about a year and a half and even in that amount of time, my voice changed and developed so much and it was incredibly tiring to persist with proper technique even when I felt like it was too difficult. I have such admiration for these classically trained performers who have dedicated their lives to this culture and to making it a more accessible and widely enjoyed craft.

To conclude, my perception of opera and classical singing was broadened throughout the course of this assignment, and even though I am a singer, I am still in awe of the amazing things that voices are capable of with enough training and practice. I did not really encounter too many challenges in researching this culture since I had already been introduced to it at a young age, but it was fascinating to learn more about its history and evolution and how it is still a thriving art form today.