



# Singing My Heart Out

By Elisabetta Russo

I grew up in a small coastal town in southern Italy where there was nothing except farmers, fishermen, and a landscape of expansive vineyard fields and fragrant olive trees. We had two high schools but no colleges, no universities and, by all means, no entertainment whatsoever. My father was the first CPA in town, ever. We had just a few stores and no infrastructure to mention. Nothing.

But it was a peaceful place to live and grow up. Or so it seemed until two failed kidnapping attempts shook all my beliefs and left a deep mark on my life. Bewildered, I sought shelter in music and isolation. I started taking piano lessons even though I already knew my greatest passion was singing. Back then, I sang pop music and all kinds of children's songs.

When I turned twelve, my father brought home a magazine and a CD of *Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi. Its beauty impacted me emotionally. For more than a month, I cried every time I heard this sad story of

two lovers buried alive in the vault of an ancient temple. This marked the exciting beginning of the most important development of my life: My love for opera.

I was fully convinced that this dream would become a reality. But first, I needed a teacher. A nice voice is not enough. You have to audition with opera singers to find someone who will take you under her wing. This is when I learned that at twelve the voice and body are not mature enough for opera training. If you damage your vocal cords so early, you will not recover; you're done. An opera usually lasts for three to four hours. The repertoire is extremely difficult for adults, let alone for a child.

Women usually begin studying at sixteen. Four years seemed like such a long time to wait. I felt discouraged but knew that singing wasn't something I could turn away from. My parents tried to persuade me not to take this path. They assumed that this was just a whim and told me that I didn't





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have any idea about the challenges of such a career. They knew it would be a difficult life, full of risk, disappointment and uncertainty. Always touring meant that I would be far from home, far from them. Besides their concerns about what my life would be like as an opera singer, they also didn't know how to help me make this dream a reality.

It is difficult to understand how I fell intimately in love with opera without ever having seen one live performance. Although I grew up in a household where music was greatly appreciated, no one in my family had ever studied it. At Sixteen, I finally set foot in a theater to attend the famous and breathtaking Verdi's Rigoletto.

Then, it took a few tears and a lot of loving and "persuading" talks, but I did manage to convince my father to take me for private weekly music lessons outside of the city, three hours away, to be exact. During those long drives, my father and I bonded deeply over our love of music. We discussed sacrifices and the desire to emerge from a poor southern Italian society with so few opportunities.

After high school, I moved to Rome, auditioned for and made it into the prestigious Santa Cecilia Conservatory, one of the most elite music schools in Europe. This led to many other distinguished Academies in Italy where I had the chance to study with the best professionals in the field, like

Concert in memory of the former Consul General of Italy in LA, Antonio Verde; Conductor Luigi Grima, Orchestra Discantus Ensemble; Basilica San Giovanni Maggiore, Naples, Italy; September 5, 2021



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**America, the land of opportunities, honored me with the Best Female Vocalist award at the HMMA.**

Renato Bruson, Renata Scotto, Alberto Zedda, Edda Moser, and Oscar winners, like Ennio Morricone and Nicola Piovani.

Working with film composers was the most wonderful training for me. The connection between visual imagery, emotions, and music gave me great freedom to explore my sound through the infinite nuances of my soul. And this, I believe, provided a more complete and fascinating way to express my feelings.

I started touring all over Europe, both studying and performing in distinguished opera houses and concert halls. I fell in love with chamber music and embarked on new challenging journeys, by singing in both German and French while specializing in contemporary classical music.

The year 2011 marked a turning point. America, the land of opportunities, honored me with the Best Female Vocalist award at the Hollywood Music in Media Awards. This illustrious organization set up a few interviews and social events for the nominees and later for the competition winners. During this time, I had the chance to sing with



Photo credit © Edward Gonzales

With pianist, Vladimir Khomyakov;  
DuoRusso recording "Le chemins de l'amour";  
Palm Springs; December of 2021

famous artists and meet with managers and producers for independent record labels. I also sang for the Indie Thursday festival at the Renaissance Hotel (now Loews Hotel, next to Kodak Theater). Then, I went to Chicago for ten days where I auditioned for a few opera companies. After that whirlwind of activity and excitement, I returned to the US two summers in a row, to audition and contact agents and opera houses.

After two years of bouncing between Rome and Los Angeles, dealing with a few wrongly booked and missed flights, I finally landed on the prestigious Hollywood Paramount Pictures stage. In 2013, I got a call from a manager who asked me





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to sing with Andrea Bocelli and David Foster, for a Father's Day fundraising event organized by the Simin Hope Foundation. No rehearsals, or specific directions, only a big opportunity. I snapped it up quickly.

At that time, I was already singing in Italy and around Europe, but not continuously. Here in the US, my early days were greatly brightened by red

continental leap. I left my country, family and friends behind and moved to the City of Angels.

The reality of this adjustment kicked in pretty quickly. Living in LA was expensive. And I felt lonely. The language barrier seemed unbearable. But I had come this far. I didn't want to give up.

It is said that when music meets generosity, amazing things happen. This is so true. I participated in special events for non-profits and charity organizations such as Caterina's Club, California Hospital Medical Center Foundation, Desert Arc, Saint Pio Foundation, UKRO Foundation, Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind, and the Los Angeles Virtuosi Orchestra. These experiences gave me the greatest joy and fulfillment I've ever felt.

In 2014, I founded a duo along with renown and acclaimed pianist Vladimir Khomyakov. Together, in 2015, we won the Beverly Hills Chamber Music Competition, rapidly establishing ourselves as one of the most sought-after ensembles in Europe, Asia, and North America.

carpet experiences, meeting celebrities, being interviewed, and giving performances in famous venues for important occasions. It was time to make that

But it wasn't enough. I didn't have a real agent, so after engagements ended, I had to start all over,



Photo credit © Ryan Young

Singing the National Anthem, South Bay Lakers game, Los Angeles, 2018









With Bruno Serato, president and host of Caterina's Club Annual Gala;  
Marconi Automotive Museum; Tustin, CA; 2016

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↓ auditioning and looking for other opportunities, continuously. Jobs came and went but rent and expenses were a constant.

I wanted to get in touch with the artists who performed in the city and try to collaborate with them. But how? It was hard to tap into the opera world. There were fewer opportunities here than in New York. Still, I didn't want to go anywhere else. I needed to build my opera connections. But I didn't even have the money to go to the opera. It's quite expensive. So I resumed my passion for writing and worked freelance, reviewing shows for a local Italian-American newspaper. This worked

well. I got to attend the best performances in town, for free. I got great seats and best of all, I could now meet, interview, and get to know famous artists personally. I became acquainted with the most amazing singers and conductors in town.

It was then that representatives of the Italian government asked me to sing at the Staples Center to celebrate Italian Heritage Night. After that, they asked me to perform at the residence of the late Consul General of Italy in Los Angeles, Antonio Verde, to welcome the now former Ambassador of Italy, Armando Varricchio, to the United States.

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I sang on stages and theaters like Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, The Colburn School, The Beverly Hilton, Italian Cultural Institute, Millennium Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, and at the International Fashion Week Show in New York, during the most glamorous time of year. I was a vocal coach for the National Children's Chorus of the United States of America. I managed and organized their tour in the most beautiful Italian venues and cities.

And that brings me up to the present, to the Covid-19 pandemic, which destabilized people's lives. Because of the lockdown, music switched from social events to a personal experience. It gave me relief, helped me feel less alone, and provided

me hope that our lives will go back to normal sometime soon.

Now that the world is slowly opening up and music is somehow becoming part of our daily life again, my wish is to return to my career and inspire healing from the painful wounds caused by the pandemic. I understand this kind of loss on a deeply personal level.

Two years ago, my beloved father died from cancer. These were his last words to me: "Never stop singing. Fly high and I will always fly next to you." I made that promise and will forever cherish his words by honoring his memory the best way I know: By singing my heart out.

New York Couture Fashion Week, 2015, Carlton Hotel



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