



Randall Scotting

Countering the Narrative with Countertenor Randall Scotting

BY JONATHAN BLALOCK

Randall Scotting, countertenor, shares his experiences with balancing his career in the United States and in Europe, his commitment to weight training, and his new song album featuring lute and folk song.

photo by Stephanie Girard

As someone whose physique doesn't fit the typical countertenor mold, how would you describe your health routine and how do you balance exercise with singing?

I realize it's a little unusual to be a tall countertenor with a muscular build, so I know I break the mold a bit. Honestly, weight training and exercise help keep me singing pretty. There's a lot that carries over from working out into my singing. They go hand in hand for me now, and I generally aim to work out around six times a week.

At first, I was hesitant to really dive into weight training. I was worried that as a singer, it could make me too tense. I found the opposite to be true: I felt more connected to my support and "in" my body after a couple months of weight training. My coloratura runs also felt much easier.

For me, there is a ton of connections between a gym routine and singing. I always spend about 10 minutes stretching my whole body before I work out, which is like warming up and doing vocalizes to make sure the voice is ready to be put through its paces. While weight training, I must be realistic about what I can take on, how much weight you can press in a healthy way without hurting yourself. This is like singing the right repertoire for your voice, knowing your instrument and what's best for you in that moment.

Also, the time I spend at the gym every day is focused; I want to work hard and make progress every time I go, but I realize it's a marathon, not a sprint. The same is true with singing: the progress can be slow, but as long as I am moving forward and polishing new roles, singing nice high notes, or excelling with some new music, I feel accomplished.

You also must know what your current challenges are and then be willing to work on them consciously, over time, to reach a result you feel good about. Being patient and knowing you can't achieve that result overnight is a big challenge for me.

I wasn't always a gym-goer. Doing research for my PhD in London I wasn't very active, I just sat all day. I got so out of shape I'd get winded walking up a flight of stairs. That was a truthbomb sort of moment around that time that prompted me to seek a trainer and I haven't looked back.

How do you balance your career stateside with engagements in Europe? Do you prefer the European model or American? If you have a favorite, why?

I wish I could say there was a real logic and plan behind how I structure my singing jobs. Honestly, I take the appropriate gigs when they come, and hopefully it all

falls in line. Occasionally they do overlap, and any singer will tell you it's frustrating to work so hard to arrive at a position where you're receiving offers and then to be forced to decline one because the dates conflict. However, at this stage I feel less focused on balancing a "career" but, rather, I concentrate on fostering the relationships with those musical allies that have believed in me and helped me get to this point.

I do hope that my projects and performances keep building to places where I can both share an artistic experience with an audience and be musically fulfilled. As a countertenor, I think you have to cast a wide net. It wouldn't be possible to only sing in the United States, for example; there just wouldn't be enough opportunities. I have worked hard to establish myself in the United States as well as England, and I'm just now finding a foothold in Europe.

Sometimes, it really is just about being in the right place at the right time. In 2019, I was covering at the Royal Opera House (ROH) in London for Britten's *Death in Venice*. After the opening-night performance, I walked on to sing the remaining four out of five sold-out performances and a BBC broadcast. It was a beautiful David McVicar production with a cast of singers I have looked up to for years, including Gerald Finley and Mark Padmore. It felt like a fairytale story, and I was so grateful

the ROH had trust and confidence in me in that moment. These performances really put me in front of people in the industry and ended up leading to more great work.

Regarding the US versus EU, I don't think too much about a separation between the models. Of course, if you're singing Fest in Germany, that's a very specific situation—but Fest rarely happens for countertenors. It's unfortunate, because there are many enticing things about a Fest contract: being in one place, having an opera house invest in you and give you several roles, time to develop your ability and experience, and a steady paycheck. For most American singers, it's really a hustle to get hired consistently and achieve any sort of reliable performance schedule. I still haven't put down roots in any one place, which has led to a lot of wonderful opportunities in the US and abroad, but also carries with it a certain amount of uncertainty in other ways.

Could you tell us how your artistic vision came together for your song album?

It was born out of the pandemic, really. We all found ourselves with the carpet pulled out from under us, but still wanting to create. I had watched some of the YouTube performances, and they felt a touch miscalculated. I wanted something that would challenge me, feel artistically



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elevated, and live on past the pandemic. I was scheduled to do a recording with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE) in London in July of 2020, which was postponed. So, I was back to zero and plotting a way to create music regardless of the next wave of COVID restrictions. The path of least resistance seemed the smartest plan, and I determined that an intimate album involving only three people could work: just me, the lute player, and an engineer.

The result is an album called *Lovesick*, and it's made up of 17th century lute song and folk song repertoire that I've wanted to delve into for a long time, but never really had the opportunity until the pandemic. Exploring heartbreak and solitude felt right for that time, and I must mention that it's my distinct take on this repertoire. It's music that



Scotting performing as Heliogabalus in West Edge Opera's production of *Elagabalus*, 2021

photo by Cory Weaver

comes directly from my family's roots, so it was compelling to explore the historical soundscape of my English grandfathers and my Welsh grandmother. Along with what you might expect from this period—Dowland, Lawes, Blow—I included four beautiful songs by Purcell, some little-known tunes in Italian and French, and several folk songs from Scotland and Wales that tie it all together.

The lutenist on the album, Stephen Stubbs, is someone I have admired for many years, and I was thrilled that he was up for it. We were only one week into rehearsals for a production of Stradella's *San Giovanni Battista* when the pandemic shut everything down. I could tell we would work well together, so when the Stradella production

was cancelled, it just felt right to continue some type of collaboration with this *Lovesick* album. Steve was beyond wonderful to work with, and I'm very proud of the result. I'm so excited for it to be released next year.

What drives you most as a performer, and which of your upcoming projects excites you the most?

In performance, I'm most driven by the opportunity to share some deep human emotion with an audience. I also revel in a variety of projects. It forces me to stay truly open and see the world with fresh eyes. I think I'm most excited with the upcoming recording projects, where I can show



photo by Philip Newton

the world exactly what kind of artist I am. The OAE album has been many years in the making, so it's just very exciting to have it finally coming together in October. I've been working a while to get here, and I can't wait for what's in store down the road!

What are you excited to share with young singers?

Besides performing, over the past several years, I've become interested in helping guide young singers who've come from small towns or homes without much access to music and culture. Growing up in rural Colorado, there weren't a lot of role models in the opera world for me—nobody that seemed close enough to learn from and to



whom I could direct my questions about the career and music in general.

My hometown was wonderful in many ways, and it really shaped who I am as a person, but "opera singer" was not an occupation that made sense to people there. Nearly everyone in my town thought singing was something you did in church on Sundays, and that's about it. I knew deep down that I wanted to be performing, but it was difficult to dream big enough to even realize I could possibly be

an opera singer. Even though no one in my family was musical or even artistic, really, I was lucky that my parents were generally supportive of my interest in music and performing.

I eventually learned I wanted to have a life in music, but I was well into my 20s before I dared to think that music could be a career. It took many years and a lot of hard-earned experience to gain that perspective. So, in addition to just offering advice, I'm providing access to particular performances or recording sessions for younger singers.

It's important to me to try to provide opportunities in music for people from backgrounds who may be missing this type of exposure. It's a new thing for me to offer this, but I'm excited to see where it can lead. I had a few important mentors along the way that helped guide me, and I would love to fill that role for others.

Find out more about Randall's performing at www.randallscotting.com

Jonathan Blalock has sung with The Santa Fe Opera, The Dallas Opera, Washington National Opera, Des Moines Metro Opera, The Pacific Symphony, Memphis Symphony, PROTOTYPE Festival, and Opera Hong Kong. He currently serves as Individual Giving Officer at The Atlanta Opera. For more info, see www.jonathanblalock.com. **CS MUSIC**