

EXPERIENCE—VALERIAN RUMINSKI, PHILADELPHIA A GLOBAL CITIZEN OF OPERA

Valerian Ruminski ‘set a course to achieve something that would lead to travel and the ability to share the truth of this great Buddhism far and wide.’

I was adopted and raised by a Roman Catholic, lower middle-class family, as an only child. I grew up in Upstate New York, near Buffalo, and my father died when I was 10.

At a young age, I had some interest and an aptitude in music, singing in a boys’ choir and learning to play the organ. I listened to Big Band records and conducted symphonies to the records on my parents’ hi-fi.

At 19, I went to Alaska to work in the fish canneries, earning money to finance a music career. Pop music was foremost on my mind.

After seven months of hauling halibuts and sliming salmon, I drove to Los Angeles with visions of becoming a professional musician. Yet all the while, I had a question in the depths of my being crying out to be answered. I had always believed that there was a defining equation “out there” to guide us toward fulfillment, but I did not know where to look or whom to ask.

For two years in Los Angeles, people approached me in the street a number of times, asking if I wanted to chant to be happy. Frankly, I thought they wanted to sell me drugs. But finally as I walked home one evening from my job selling shoes, I was asked again to go to a Buddhist meeting, and with a sense of adventure, I agreed to tag along.

That evening in September 1988, I felt I had found what I had been envisioning for the last few years; it made sense. Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism agreed with science and with reason. It was practical and powerful.

I began to chant that week bearing my dream in mind. SGI President Ikeda described the purpose of chanting as something with which we can realize our dreams, and at the same time, polish our inner selves to become great people who achieve Buddhahood in this lifetime. Young and idealistic, I committed to using my Buddhist practice as a crowbar to pry open the door of my dreams.

I wanted a career in music, but in what capacity? Being a songwriter, keyboard player and singer who sang in different styles — pop, nightclub, opera — I didn’t know in which direction to turn. I changed my legal birth name of Martin Matthew Ruminski to Martin Matthews, believing it was a better stage name and would aid me in my quest for fame.

I chanted to connect to the right musicians, made phone calls and shopped my tapes around, but nothing happened. This was the start of a personal upheaval; I felt my time in L.A. was being wasted. Still I chanted for the right things to happen because I believed this practice would put me on the correct path.

I considered moving back to Buffalo, even though my friends thought me crazy to trade sunshine for snow. I had a gut feeling and I was practicing hard, so I knew it could not be a coincidence. Then an old friend, a teacher from high school, called. Amazingly he offered me a position in the Buffalo Opera Chorus, singing in a staged production of *Carousel*. He hinted that I was wasting away in L.A., that my talents were going untapped. Even though the position paid little, I took him up on the offer. This was a turning point in my life, entirely due to my Buddhist practice.

After singing in the chorus of *Carousel* and a number of operas, I was introduced to the artistic director of the company who said he could help train my voice and develop my opera career. I enrolled in the nearby State University where he taught singing in the opera workshop at school and slowly developed my voice with the aid of another teacher. In time, this person turned out to be the person I had been chanting for, the mentor for my career.

Other singers around me became immersed in head and ego games, falling victim to vanity and misguided thinking. They worked with teachers with whom they did not connect. I felt fortunate to be able to use my practice to open my mind and see things for what they really were; I was not wearing rose-colored glasses. I had found a musical mentor, just as I had found a spiritual/life mentor in Daisaku Ikeda.

But my environment was bearing down on me. My Buddhist practice began to slip. I had to help my grandmother in her final days as her battered body deteriorated from a mastectomy, hysterectomy and colostomy. On top of this, I had car, school and girlfriend problems. My teacher had plans for me, which I only half believed in; I had lost the will power to believe in myself.

Four years of college passed, and my teacher wanted me to audition for and attend the Academy of Vocal Arts (AVA) a four-year, full scholarship, opera-intensive program in Philadelphia. My Buddhist practice had faded to a mere blip on the screen. I wanted to audition, but I was weak in manifesting my determination with daimoku every day; my life force was low.

Singing two arias, my audition for AVA was successful. But in order to graduate from college, I had to perform a recital. If I did not navigate it well, my hopes for an opera career would be ruined. I wanted to graduate so much that my Buddhist practice rose from the ashes to reestablish itself as a driving force in my life. My recital was successful.

I was determined to thrive at AVA. I was contacted in the summer of 1995 to receive a new Gohonzon. I had ignored the schism between the SGI and the temple. But that summer, things were explained to me. It was eye opening to say the least. As I was preparing to enter the AVA, I received my new Nichikan-transcribed Gohonzon, and I felt something had changed in my life. I had a deeper, more inspired attitude toward my practice. With this renewed spirit, I made a determination to set a course to achieve something that would lead to travel and the ability to share the truth of this great Buddhism far and wide. I wanted to be the global citizen that President Ikeda speaks of.

I began to practice more seriously that summer. I started to take my study of my voice seriously too. Until then, I had never devoted any introspection to my growth as an artist. I had always approached my singing as if I were working at Burger King. I began to ask the crucial questions that needed asking about the regions of my voice that needed work. There was a whole practical approach to singing that I had previously ignored. I had begun to utilize wisdom in learning how to train my voice.

When I moved to Philadelphia to study at AVA, I was full of anxiety. Would I be good enough? What would I actually have to do to succeed? I chanted that the artistic director at the Academy would be the right influence in my life and that my new voice teacher would know the correct path to take for my voice. I did not want to be another casualty in the opera business. I knew too many singers with not enough fortune and/or wisdom who had chosen the wrong voice category, the wrong teacher or sang the wrong way for too long and lost out in the long run. Thriving in the opera world derives as much from being

in rhythm with the environment as with being in rhythm with yourself. It's crucial to be in the right place at the right time, all the time.

I began keeping a journal of my voice lessons, drawing diagrams and describing the sensations that I felt were correct in building my voice properly. My teachers believed that tension is a sign of improper technique. I was seeking ways of producing big sounds with a minimum of tension. I was searching for my “true voice,” much like a person practicing Buddhism, who seeks to find his or her true self—as a Bodhisattva of the Earth. To be in touch with the voice, a person must be in touch in some way with the self. Otherwise the product becomes a falsely produced “affected” sound that does not strike a chord in the listener. Sung music has the ability to pull emotions from an audience and a “true” sound will be more resonant, both sonically and spiritually, than a “false” sound. I prayed to the Gohonzon to raise this “true” sound from the depths of my life so that I could share a part of my “true self” with others.

At first I would lose focus of the requests of the maestro during the opera coachings. Not surprisingly, he quickly became frustrated with me. But I then began to chant to get in tune with him and his “language.” This was a humbling, long-term process. But eventually things improved and I was reviewed favorably.

My path was beginning to define itself. I was a coloratura basso cantante, a voice type that is considered more valuable than I thought. It was like being a unicorn. My voice category is one of the most sought after in the opera world. I had only to perfect the instrument to make a viable career possible, but this was easier said than done. My top range was shaky, I had trouble feeling the support of my diaphragm, my command of languages was weak and I had an awkward sense of stage movement—I had to work hard.

A summer opera program at the Chautauqua Institute in Upstate New York, not far from my home in Buffalo, accepted me and I would be apprenticing roles in four operas.

With permission I began holding introductory meetings of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in the small “religious affairs” office next to the Chautauqua post office.

Seven guests attended the first meeting. All were kind and courteous and asked many basic questions. I provided them with copies of the *World Tribune* with glossaries of the basics. I did part of gongyo and chanted daimoku for a few minutes before concluding the meeting. I felt so hopeful and wanted my efforts to help me grow as an artist.

Future meetings exploded into “events” I never expected. The largest meeting included more than 40 guests! I was the only SGI-USA member there, so I led gongyo, did the explanations and experiences, and using the *World Tribune*, encouraged the guests to practice. I was struck by the seeking spirit of these men and women, most of whom were over 50.

These efforts were a springboard to the future: I won first place in a small local Philadelphia voice competition. After consulting my voice teacher and supporters, I decided to honor my deceased father by adopting his name as my own. I became Valerian Ruminski.

During the 1997–98 season, every time I made some effort at an SGI-USA meeting, I would have a success at a voice competition. Between September 1997 and May 1998, I won five major voice competitions, taking first, second and third places. My winnings at that point totaled nearly \$15,000.

Still, I chanted sincerely to rise to the next level. I traveled to Santa Fe where I received great feedback for my role in *Salome*, all the while continuing to practice consistently

despite my tiring schedule. Having won an award for outstanding apprentice, I was invited to audition for a number of opera houses, including the New York City Opera at Lincoln Center. Eventually an agent heard me sing and put his trust in me, and I began to make plans to participate in more prestigious international vocal competitions.

My mother, who had been leery of my practice for 10 years, began to encourage my practice because she could see the enriching effects it had had on my life. I brought her with me to Poland and France for voice competitions, and our relationship improved. It was a joy to call her a month after the European competitions to tell her I had been asked to sing for the director of the New York City Opera. A few hours after that audition, after returning to Philadelphia, I received a call informing me that my audition had “knocked them out of their seats.” They felt I had a ripe future with the company.

My mother couldn’t believe it, but I told her that this is what I had been chanting for, for many years. I wanted to make my living as a musician, and here it was, being handed to me.

While all this was going on, I did my best to support my district as a newly appointed district young men’s leader, but my schedule left me with only infrequent opportunities to do so, usually singing an aria for members and guests alike. Before leaving for Italy, and another competition, that same director called me to inform me that I had been nominated for a special Outstanding Debut Artist Award from Lincoln Center, and that I would receive a cash award of \$5,000 to be presented to me by the legendary Beverly Sills. In both the SGI and my career, I was taking on larger responsibilities and influence.

In April 1999, I debuted at Carnegie Hall, was given a contract for the 2000–01 season of the New York City Opera for *Carmen* and *La Boheme* and made my way to the New Israeli Opera Company in Tel Aviv for a spring 2000 contract in *Rigoletto* and *La Juive*. I return to New York City for more appearances in *Carmen* and then will be added to the roster of The Metropolitan Opera as a new artist, and have been assigned to work on a new gala in May 2000.

I know with all my heart, that these events have not occurred without my Buddhist practice. It has been the powder keg sparking these triumphs and will be the rudder in my advancing journey into the world of opera and the world of humanity. I truly want to show to the world that I am an upstanding global citizen because I practice the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin.