



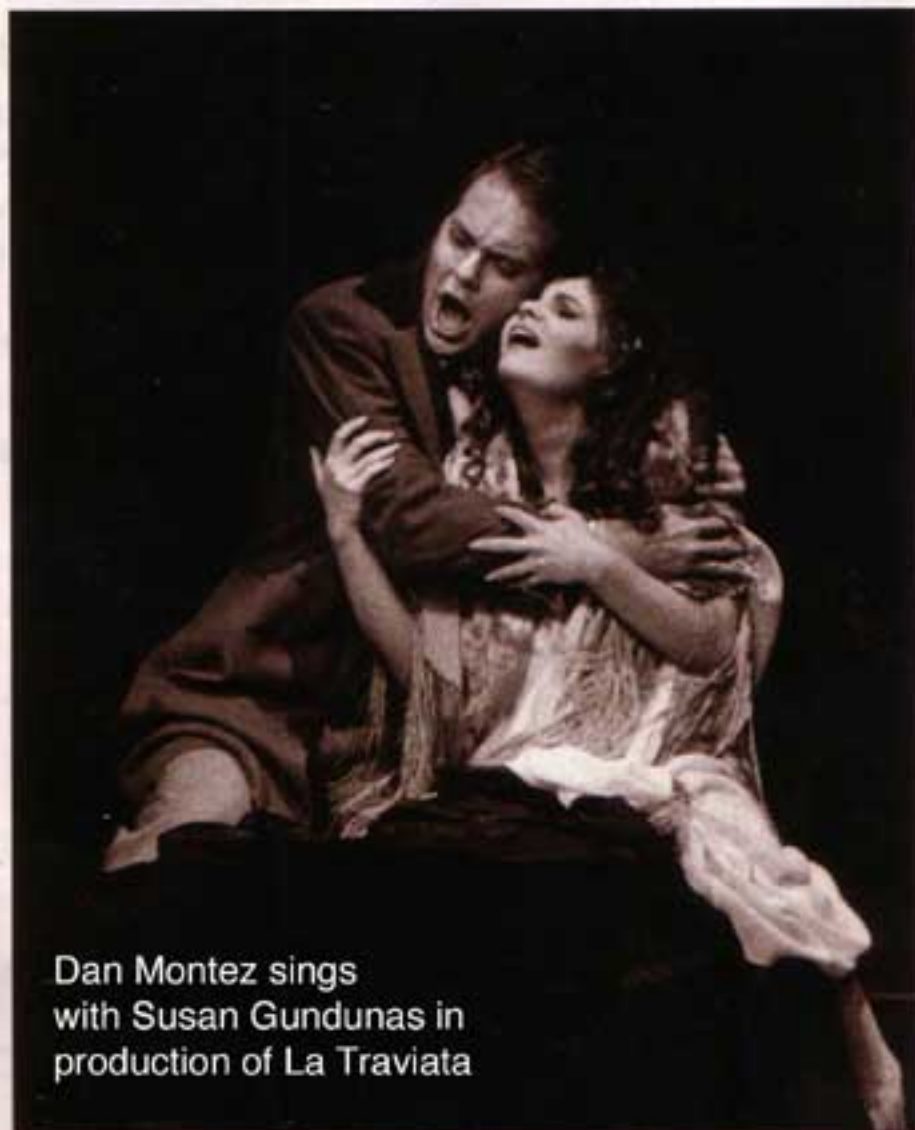
Constantinos Yiannoudes and Joshua Farrell in Taconic Opera's production of *Madama Butterfly*.

photo courtesy of Taconic Opera

Taconic Opera's Dan Montez: *One Dream, Many Roles*

by Cristina Necula

A modern-day pioneer, Dan Montez began Taconic Opera eight years ago. Montez' dedication to his family led him to leave behind a traditional singing career and look for alternate ways of making a living while still being actively involved in opera. His regional opera company is making this ideal a reality for other singers, too. Read what Mr. Montez looks for in singers he hires, what advice he has for singers—including avoiding negativity and how to set goals—as well as how he manages all aspects of his opera company, from artistic direction to marketing.



Dan Montez sings
with Susan Gundunas in
production of *La Traviata*

Tenor Dan Montez is general director of Taconic Opera, a resident opera company he founded eight years ago. "A true labor of love," the company continues to delight New York's Westchester County audiences with classic favorites—like this season's *Barber of Seville* and *La bohème* as well as the occasional rarity, such as next year's *Mefistofele* (by Arrigo Boito)—all of which Montez is directing.

After giving up a flourishing operatic career to raise his children, Montez decided to make his dream of creating a resident opera company a reality. Inspired by Opera San José and its founder/general director, mezzo-soprano Irene Dalis, Taconic Opera strives to promote the advantages of resident-opera while offering many singers the opportunity to gain stage and repertoire experience in paid performances.

A self-taught entrepreneur, Dan Montez is also a writer, composer and conductor, as well as an exceptional voice teacher whose successes with difficult vocal cases confirm his outstanding pedagogical abilities.

Tell me about your philosophy of teaching.

Every student has to be taught differently. Some are more visual, others more aural, some are good imitators. Each one comes in with a different set of problems and baggage, as well as many positive things. So, as a teacher, I think you have to let go of the things that are already in place.

I remember, after getting my high notes, I sang for this teacher who took me up very high and then said: "Oh, my! I am not going to touch your high notes." I really respected that. He was a great teacher who recognized that I already had my high notes and he left them alone, not to ruin them. We worked on other things.

Do you find that you also have to be a very good psychologist when you teach?

Yes. Ninety percent of performing is psychology. So many singers lose the connection to whatever it is they're singing because of too much stage fright.

I used to have a horrible case of stage fright. I'll never forget the first time I sang in public. I had just started voice lessons, and I choked. I was so afraid and shaking so badly! Later, I talked to psychologists. I read books on self-image. I did biofeedback. I did everything I could to try to figure out why I was afraid. It took me a long time.

You can get the intellectual answers from others, but you have to arrive at your own answers yourself. I came to realize, in a nutshell, that love and fear cannot co-exist. If you are afraid, it's because you can't love your audience. You wish they weren't there.

Interesting point. Then why would you sing, if you can't love your audience?

Because you love music. A lot of people love music, but they just don't want others to hear them! It's a funny dichotomy. Intellectually, they know that they want to sing in front of people, but they are so afraid of being judged. A true lover—someone who really knows how to love—doesn't care whether people accept their gift or not. As a singer, you have to learn to love not only your audience but also yourself. ... A lot of singers don't because they are such perfectionists, and that can get in the way of singing. You have to be willing and able to make mistakes.



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Dan Montez rehearses with Kerry Grubel.

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There's also not enough to be said for singers getting up on stage again and again and again! This can be a problem with the Young Artist Programs: These kids get in there and receive all this training, but they're not doing any big roles. Real training is what you can get through the Fest contracts in Germany. I lucked out at finding a true resident opera company like San José.

Do you dream of seeing more resident opera companies in the United States?

I do. When Irene Dalis started her resident program in San José, I was sort of a guinea pig—the first tenor she ever hired as resident. I had the opportunity to do all the leading roles all year long, and stayed there for a number of years. As a resident, you can have a real life and be a well-rounded person.

Singers—especially Americans—are on the road so much that it's hard for them to be part of a community or to have a family. I am a big fan of resident opera, and I wish America would become more like Europe in that sense, so that singers don't have to travel so much, so that there's no pressure for the flavor-of-the-month: bringing in a new star each month to titillate our audiences. In Europe, the audience has a relationship with the singers who live in their city. You know: "My singer who lives in my city."

I understand you are fluent in several languages.

Yes. Languages make you better as a singer and as a human being. They offer an understanding of your place in the world. I lived in Portugal for a couple of years. I did music research in operatic and art song literature in Portuguese. Portuguese and Spanish are my two best languages.

Tamara Tsoutsouris and Tom Roche in Taconic Opera's production of Tosca.



photo courtesy of Taconic Opera

Going back to stage fright, how do you work through the fear of audiences?

It is very personal. You really have to get to know yourself and understand that everybody is imperfect, and that it's OK. You have to learn how to love yourself and others despite the imperfections. The personality of a singer is almost by nature obsessive-compulsive. You're such a perfectionist, you have to get every note.

When you're auditioning in New York City for companies, you'll hear a hundred singers in a row that do not make mistakes. They get every note, their diction is perfect, *everything* is perfect! The way the company decides who to hire is not based on whether the singers hit the notes or not. It's based on how they decided to interpret the score, and that is a whole different animal.

There has to be a part of a singer's personality that tries to be as perfect as possible, but then there has to be another part that has to let go of that perfectionism and allow the singer to make mistakes. So, you need to be two different kinds of people. A real artist is not just a technician; he or she has to let go of technique sometimes.

Sometimes imperfections can be very effective, more so in opera than in anything else, because you're portraying a character. You're transmitting real emotions that will

affect how you color your voice. Every performance should be a little different.

I understand you also take on problem cases for voice lessons—you don't shy away from people who have vocal problems and you can actually perform miracles. You have a student who began with you in her 60s, and you brought out her voice, enabling her to perform. Many singers in their 50s and 60s get discouraged because they still want to sing, but stereotyping and discrimination play against them. What are your thoughts?

The woman you mentioned wanted to sing her whole life but needed to make a living. She had a business and was a registered nurse, so she had no time. When she retired, I got a phone call. She said: "My whole life I've wanted to sing. Can you teach me?" So she started at 65!

She didn't know how to sing very well, but she began practicing almost two hours a day. She's now sung at least 50 arias in public, and the woman sounds fabulous! I've actually given her comprimario roles in my shows at 70, because she is amazing. It's true that a lot of women's voices start deteriorating at 65. We were very lucky with her that her voice didn't.

You've also had a few tone-deaf students.

Yes. I have taken on people who can't hear pitch at all.

How did you deal with them?

Pitch can be taught. I just worked with them. It took six months just to get them to hear pitches. I had to be very patient. They've both ended up singing in public. They developed vibrato, support, and high notes—everything that anybody else can do.

I just don't believe in the idea that you have to be born a singer! I think there's a certain amount of inborn talent you need to have, if you want to be a professional opera singer. Your brain has to be wired in a certain way. But I believe anybody can learn how to be a good, solid singer, provided they have the personality to work really hard.

Some personalities just don't want to learn how to sing. The technical restrictions are not the obstacle that gets in the way of most people. I don't care how badly you sing. If you have the willpower, that kind of a clench-your-fist and grit-your-teeth, I'm-going-to-learn-this-no-matter-what mentality, you'll do whatever you want in life, as far as I'm concerned.

I believe in people's infinite potential to be and do anything that they want to. If you want to be a physicist, you can do it!

So, you would not discourage singers who are at a later stage in life but still want to sing and to perform, and might even have a local career?

No. Not at all! Oh my goodness! If you really

“I’m also a big believer in writing your goals down on paper. Always start with the end in mind—where you want to go—and then create 10 ways to get there.”

want to do it, if you’re willing to practice and you want to work, then go for it! You can do it! At any age! There’s no doubt about it.

What is your advice to young singers?

Number one: Stay away from negative people! Don’t hang around with singers who like to criticize other singers all the time. You’ll notice in colleges, there are these little groups of singers who like to hang around in the hallways to criticize the stars. Criticizing becomes a pastime, and instead of focusing on how these singers got there and what they did right—which would actually make the “critics” get better—they focus on weaknesses. So what if so-and-so cannot act? I want to know what that star is doing that I’m not doing as a student.

I might have alienated some of my fellow students along the way by not hanging

out in the hallways and engaging in these conversations. I tried to make friends with people who were already singers, [who were] doing what I wanted to do for a living, so that I could pick their brains and see how their minds worked.

You have to separate yourself just a little bit and stay positive. You also have to be a risk taker and learn to ask for what you want along the way. Block out criticism of any kind, and don’t believe people who say you can’t do whatever it is you want to do.

That goes for professional critics as well. If you’re reading the newspapers and believe the good reviews you get, you also have to believe the bad ones—so you shouldn’t believe either one; you just need to know for yourself where you are. If the critic said something valid, then you take it and you change. If you wake up the next morning and a million people are reading

The New York Times and hearing what an awful singer you are, don’t worry about it! It doesn’t matter.

I’m also a big believer in writing your goals down on paper. Always start with the end in mind—where you want to go—and then create 10 ways to get there. Let’s say I want to sing at the Met. So, I think of 10 different places I might be right before I’m asked to sing at the Met. What might be happening in my life? And then go backwards again and consider 10 places you might be right before each of the other ten. Start with the end goal and come towards yourself, rather than beginning from where you are.

You can practice all day and focus on your short-term goals, but you should always have the long-term goals in mind—and always surround yourself with positive-minded people!

You wrote a book on how to deal with negativity.

I did. It’s a book geared mostly towards college students. It’s about not believing people when they tell you that you can’t do

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Dan Montez at the rehearsal of *The Magic Flute*.



photo courtesy of Taconic Opera

things, and about trying to decide what you want to do and what you want to be.

It is separated into two parts. The first talks about all kinds of negative influences, which can even come from family, friends, colleagues. The second half focuses on the different kinds of risks that you will have to take.

I'm actually working on about six other books right now: one on stage directing, another on singing. I like to write. But I am so busy that I'm not too good at finding publishers!

When people audition for your company, what do you look for in a performer?

Besides the voice, I'm looking for strong acting abilities. I believe that opera is a hybrid of both art forms: music and acting. Opera was never intended to be just about the music. In some places, it has become just that. You get two people singing a love duet, on opposite sides of the stage, without any interaction with

one another; it's completely unbelievable, and there's no acting taking place at all.

We're not going to reach our public that way. We have to tell a story that can help people grow. Art is not there to just be worshipped. I think art is only a vehicle to show us *what* to worship! So I want to see somebody who is committed to and understands their characters at any given moment.

People take eight years of voice lessons—and eight days of acting training! Then they come in and it shows; they're as stiff as a board. I'd rather have people miss notes but at least be a character, be someone that's real, that the audience is going to relate to. The visual aspect is also part of acting. I think you should look similar to the character you're playing.

The idea that an artist's life is chaotic ...

It's the wrong idea. I think you have to know what you're living for. I know people who have tried to marry themselves to the art form, but

they're not well rounded.

In my life, my family has always come first. We've got three kids who are now 10, 6, and 3. One of the reasons I stopped traveling as a full-time opera singer was to raise them. I know many wonderful singers who just couldn't be on the road and raise their children at the same time. My hat's off to them.

I think we're losing a lot of talent, especially great American talent, because there are no performance opportunities for great singers who have families, [no] opportunities to be hired in a resident opera company. Some of the greatest singers I know have families. They are not putting themselves out there—and there's so much they have to offer artistically.

When you raise a child, you learn something about life that you just didn't know, and it adds something to your art. Children are not for everyone, but interacting with other humans on a regular basis is part of life. You have to have real relationships and a real community to understand and live life in some real way.

How do you manage to run your opera company in addition to teaching 20-25 students?

It's crazy! I conduct and direct every show. As a singer, it's nice to be in the director's chair and know that what goes on on-stage is really your responsibility. I have a great conductor who, like me, is low-blood pressure; we're both intense but we don't lose our tempers.

What about the business side of the company?

It kills me! I'm an artist. I would love to be just artistic director and find a business manager for my company. But I'm willing to do this without being paid.

But you do pay your singers?

I pay all the singers and the union orchestra. We create a really good product that would cost other companies five times the budget we have! I am fortunate to have 20 people who are all volunteers, in every administrative facet of the opera company. Most of my time is spent administrating, and it's not what I'm best at. I had to learn how to be a businessman. Irene Dalis from the Opera San José is an artist and a businessperson. She's one of the best business people I've ever met. I was inspired by her, but when I tried to do it myself, I felt like: "Oh, my gosh, how does she do this?"

“I believe that opera is a hybrid of both art forms: music and acting. Opera was never intended to be just about the music. In some places, it’s become just that.”

What do you find the most difficult on the business side?

I don’t like to ask for money! I believe in the art, but it’s sort of against my nature to ask. I wanted to earn the money! So I really focused on ticket sales, to begin with—but high art can’t survive without generous donations.

I learned how to write grants, how to design a website, how to use Photoshop and Quark Express, so I can do all my print media myself. I taught myself along the way how to deal with the tax forms, insurance, bookkeeping. I am looking for the right person who might be willing to suffer for a year with me until we get things going, but I don’t know if I can find any business manager who would agree to that, because people expect to be paid, and rightfully so.

Why did you choose Yorktown as the company’s location?

There was no opera company in Westchester County. I was living close by, and that helped. San José had it easier because it’s a huge city. All we have is teeny towns around here, so I’ve got to get all of them supporting this! If I wanted to move to a bigger city, the cost would kill us right now.

We’re only 20 minutes north of White Plains [the capital of Westchester County], so now we’re trying to get White Plains people to come up here. But it hasn’t been entirely successful.

This company has been a true labor of love for the past eight years. The good thing is that we’ve never had to borrow money. Everything we earn goes into what we put on stage, so no

debts. I’d love to be paid after eight years, but I just can’t right now! So, I teach to pay the bills and support my family. But I believe in opera and I have a vision for my company, which is worth fighting for.

[For detailed information about the Taconic Opera, please visit www.taconicopera.org.]

Cristina Necula is the director of Alumni Affairs at Purchase College, State University of New York. Also a freelance writer, singer and songwriter, she has performed in concerts and recitals in Austria, Italy, Romania and was featured in the French-Austrian TV miniseries Princesse Marie. In New York, she has sung at Carnegie Hall and Merkin Hall, and toured the United States with the National Theater of the Performing Arts. Her articles have been published in Opera News and the German magazine Das Opernglas. She can be contacted at Cristina.Necula@purchase.edu.



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