

# Being An Opera Singer Made Me A Better Lawyer

By **Gerard D'Emilio** (August 30, 2024)

*In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email [expertanalysis@law360.com](mailto:expertanalysis@law360.com).*

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Ten years ago, I was standing on stage at the Glimmerglass Festival in upstate New York singing the role of Rocco the jailer in a scene from "Fidelio," Beethoven's only opera. Just a few feet to my left sat Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a well-known lover of opera.

Every summer she'd travel from one music festival to another, usually lecturing about legal themes in various operas — with the festivals staging those scenes for dramatic effect. And it happened that "Fidelio" was one of Justice Ginsburg's favorite operas.



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Afterward, I had the honor of meeting her, thanking her for her service and her inspiration, and telling her that I had a bit of a legal passion myself, having been a double major in vocal performance and political theory at Oberlin College. Little did I know that that passion would soon become my career.

When I started law school, the admissions director told me that former musicians typically thrive in the legal profession. I've had some time to think about why that is. Here's how being a former opera singer has made me a better attorney.

## **Punctuality**

Fifteen minutes early is on time — that was the rule for all rehearsals when I was a singer. If you showed up on time, then you were late. I follow the same rule in my legal practice, and it serves me well.

Showing up to hearings early ensures you don't miss something, but also gives you a chance to settle in, speak to the courtroom staff, and better prepare for argument or presentation. The same goes for client or business meetings — punctuality evinces preparedness, organization and intentionality.

## **Memorization**

This one may sound superficial, but I've found it crucial to success. As a singer, I needed to retain large amounts of information — not just words, but notes and rhythms, too. That the text was often in a different language than English only made it harder.

Likewise, I might need to retain multiple scores at one time, as I might be both completing one role and preparing for the next. That muscle memory has carried on into law.

Now, instead of scores, it's cases — the facts, the holdings, the implications. It's more than one case at a time, and it's memorizing how those cases interact, and how that interaction affects the arguments I'm making and the ruling I'm hoping to elicit from the court. It's an

undeniable leg up to retain more information than opposing counsel and be able to call on that information at a moment's notice.

Similarly, retaining information over time — remembering a case years after I used it for the first time — makes briefing and argument that much quicker and more cost-effective.

### **Practice, Practice, Practice**

As the saying goes, practice makes perfect — and it's as true in law as it is in music.

As a singer, I'd rehearse for weeks on end, hours every day, perfecting a role and ensuring that it was deeply ingrained in my body and voice. It was a way to make sure I'd be comfortable, could focus on the vocal pyrotechnics often demanded by most operatic works, and guard against distractions should something go awry in the middle of a performance.

In law, I dedicate the same amount of time and focus to briefing and argument.

For instance, before my first appellate oral argument, I poured weeks into crafting my argument and studying (even memorizing) the record. When the time came to present to the panel and field their questions, I felt confident and poised — a reflection of diligence and practice.

We ended up winning that appeal, too. And even if my oral argument didn't clinch it, I don't think it hurt.

### **Creativity**

This shouldn't come as a surprise, but musicians tend to be creative types. We like thinking outside the box and trying new things. Those proclivities serve us well in the legal field.

While some attorneys are highly specialized, others — myself included — are simply litigators, open to take on a challenge, no matter the legal area it touches on.

If we weren't willing to step outside our comfort zone — either in our preferred field, the way we work, or how we tackle a case — then we might stall out or even burn out. Creativity keeps the practice of law fresh and invigorating, and it enriches the work you do, no matter how redundant.

### **Spontaneity**

Spontaneity is the sister to creativity, and it's important in a profession that frequently asks you to think on your feet. You can prepare for days on end, show up early and have everything exactly the way you want it — and then the universe throws you a curveball.

I first experienced it in music: someone forgets a line, but the orchestra keeps on going; a costume piece breaks, but you're on stage in the middle of an aria; you're understudying a role, and while you've watched rehearsals, you've never had to actually perform the part — until now. Flexibility and spontaneity are important, if undervalued, aspects of performing music professionally, and the same goes for law.

Fielding questions you didn't think of before, replying to arguments in a response brief that were unanticipated, adapting to case or client developments you couldn't have expected — sometimes you have to trust your gut and your instincts and simply address the question or

issue at hand.

## **Razzle Dazzle**

Let's face it, people like shows for a reason. Audiences are glued to the spectacle on stage, the technical prowess, and even the humor and hijinks. I'm not ashamed to admit that I loved the roar of applause when I'd finish a scene or an aria — it's intoxicating.

While I'm not often eliciting the same reaction now, I still think lawyers should remember that a little panache might go a longer way than they'd expect.

Judges often carry high caseloads of civil and criminal matters; if they don't have judicial clerks, then you're just hoping they've read (let alone remembered) your brief. Lively writing or engaging oral presentation — within the bounds of ethics and professionalism, of course — might make your matter more memorable, and your arguments more persuasive.

Law can sometimes feel cold and even robotic, but we're all human in the end, judges and lawyers alike. So long as your work doesn't devolve into antics, a little razzle dazzle can be the difference between a grant and a denial.

## **Confidence — It'll All Come Together in the End**

We've all been there: hours before a filing deadline or the night before a hearing, wondering how it's all going to come together.

In music, this is almost an intrinsic part of the process. You might be in "tech week," where you finally put a production on stage and start incorporating lighting and costumes. But you're only days before opening night, and as the night drags on, the cues keep changing and the blocking suddenly seems out of place, you start to think the show will never come together, and everyone will have to wing it when the curtain eventually goes up.

But somehow, inevitably, it all comes together — the magic of theater takes over, and by opening night, it's as if the show's always been a well-oiled machine. I've seen that happen time and time again, and in its own way, these experiences have given me the peace of knowing things are going to work out, no matter how daunting it all might seem in a given moment.

And as they say, the show must go on. One way or another, the brief will be finished and filed on time, the hearing will happen and the world will keep spinning.

## **Conclusion**

Reflecting on my journey from the stage to the courtroom, it's clear that the skills I honed as an opera singer have profoundly shaped my legal career. Punctuality, memorization, dedication, creativity, spontaneity, showmanship and confidence have all played a vital role in my success as an attorney.

These principles have not only made me a more effective lawyer, but have also brought a unique perspective to my practice. My background in music continues to inspire and guide me, proving that the disciplines of art and law are not as disparate as they might seem.

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