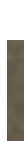
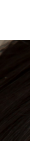
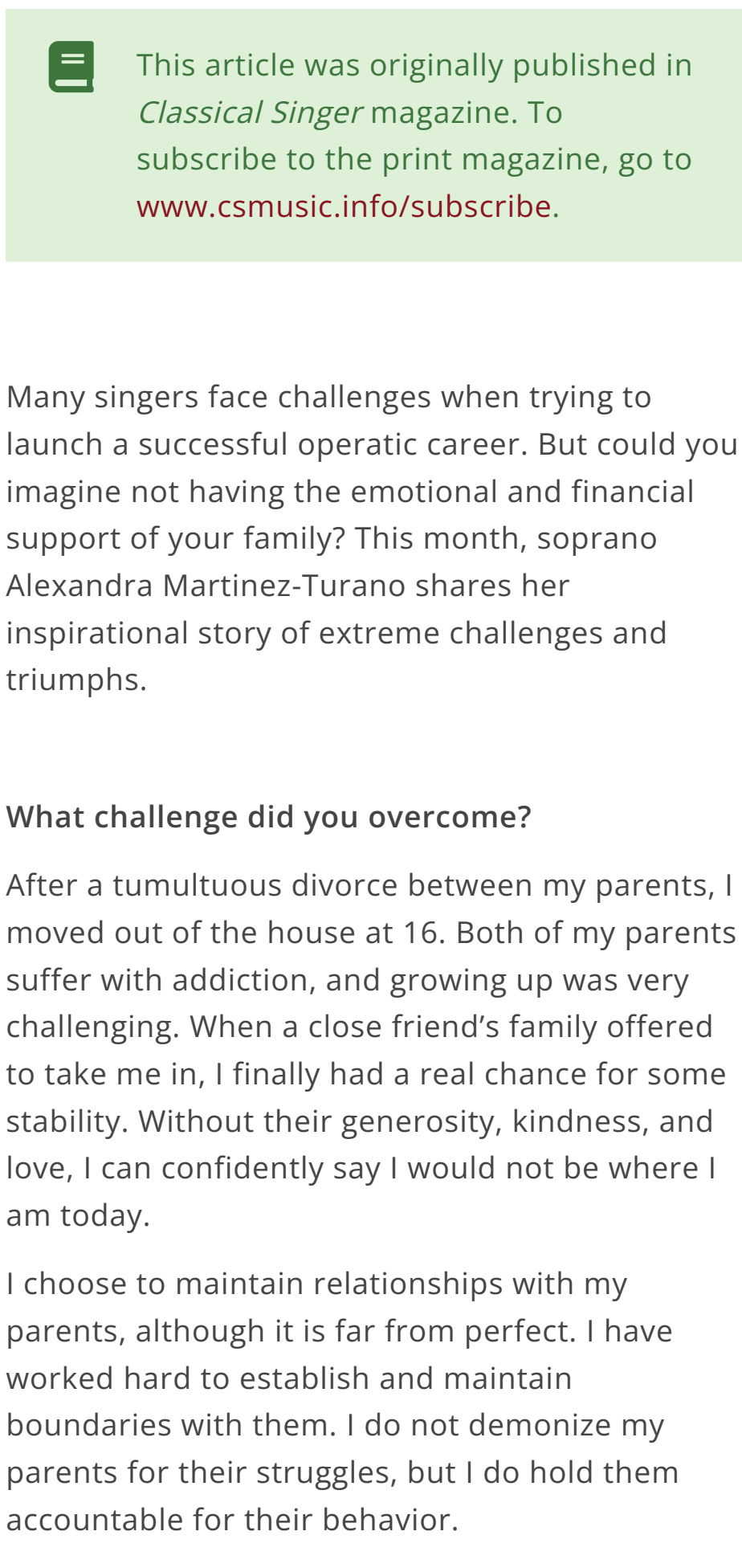


Overcoming Adversity : Alexandra Martinez-Turano the Larger-than-Life Soprano

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 MICHELLE LATOUR

When addiction and poverty are a part of someone’s story, survival becomes more of a necessity than achieving one’s dreams. One singer, however, shows that she not only survived very difficult family circumstances, but is now working in a field that provided strength and healing for her.



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Many singers face challenges when trying to launch a successful operatic career. But could you imagine not having the emotional and financial support of your family? This month, soprano Alexandra Martinez-Turano shares her inspirational story of extreme challenges and triumphs.

What challenge did you overcome?

After a tumultuous divorce between my parents, I moved out of the house at 16. Both of my parents suffer with addiction, and growing up was very challenging. When a close friend's family offered to take me in, I finally had a real chance for some stability. Without their generosity, kindness, and love, I can confidently say I would not be where I am today.

I choose to maintain relationships with my parents, although it is far from perfect. I have worked hard to establish and maintain boundaries with them. I do not demonize my parents for their struggles, but I do hold them accountable for their behavior.

The lack of support from my parents made navigating life very trying. At 15, I had to put a conscious effort into maintaining my emotional well-being and learning about finances, all the while trying to be a normal teenager. Fortunately, the arts in my public school served as a vital creative and emotional outlet.

How did it affect your singing?

Ironically, the adversities I faced growing up are what led me to a career in opera. I became totally enthralled with the emotional expression of opera because I desperately cherished the outlet. Opera is larger than life, and these big emotions I had in my personal life had a home in operatic texts. Singing helped me to feel free and uninhibited. It was a way for me to lean into all my emotions at their core and in the same moment escape my harsh reality.

As I pursued my dream, financing college, application fees, travel expenses, and all the myriad of expenses that go in to launching a career have been challenging. Sometimes the stress creeps into my voice but, ultimately, it keeps me motivated. I am able to deeply relate to the dramatic texts in opera because I have actually felt the depths of loneliness, the fear of not being loved, and the swirl of passion after finding real love and support.

How did it affect other aspects of your life?

It has impacted every aspect of my life! Dealing with addiction in any family is extremely difficult. I came from a lower socioeconomic background, so the possibility of rehab for either of my parents was not an option. One of the biggest emotional challenges was feeling extreme sadness, abandonment, and shame about my parents and their addictions. I coped by staying busy with extracurricular activities and used the arts as a way to express my emotions.

In high school, while some of my friends would be worrying about what's for dinner, I would stress about the potential of my parents getting arrested and remind myself that just because my parents don't necessarily care about my well-being, that doesn't mean others won't.

I am a first-generation college graduate, so navigating college was both a welcomed challenge and very difficult. There would be days I would cry for hours over something my parents did or a fight we had. I would still have to complete hours of homework and go to class the next day as if nothing ever happened.

Trying to keep up academically was difficult. I had no previous experience with opera. My first voice lesson was in my senior year of high school, so I obviously had a ton of catching up to do. But I loved learning and was always a successful student. In my college classes like music theory and piano, I knew I was smart enough—I just needed to work harder.

It's crazy to think that as a 17-year-old, I decided in one moment that I would dedicate my life to an unbelievably difficult art form. I had never even seen an opera in real life! I received many undergraduate scholarships and grants, so my tuition for my bachelor of music degree from the University of New Mexico was covered.

Graduate school was a different story. I took a gap year and worked full time at a law firm so I could save money for graduate school applications and auditions. I only had enough money to move to California and none for tuition and rent for my master's of music program at the University of Southern California. I took out significant debt to pay for USC, even with over \$20,000 in scholarships.

No one could offer me advice about applying for financial aid or help me figure out how I would ever be able to afford my own car, never mind tuition at a private university. I struggle with anxiety regarding my debt. [I've earned] income from singing, administrative work, and teaching. I've housesat, babysat, waited tables, taught voice and piano lessons, and done many other side jobs to make ends meet. Juggling all of these responsibilities can be extremely stressful, but I am making it work.

How did you overcome it?

Many individuals believed in me and were willing to offer their love and support. I've always had a strong sense of self-confidence and I consider it to be a blessing and a key to my success and survival. I eventually used this confidence to begin confiding and relying on adult mentors and friends to cope with my familial struggles. This was vital on my path to mental health and stability.

I had three wonderful grandparents who did all they could to help me. They also struggled in dealing with my parents and their addictions. Despite this, they did what they could to help and support me.

Both of my grandmothers didn't graduate high school. They are a constant source of inspiration for me to achieve all that I can with passion and dedication. I know they sacrificed so much for me, my brother, and their other grandchildren.

There are a handful of people I like to call my “board of directors.” I consult these people for all things career and singing related but, over time, for personal matters, too. In this business, there are always so many opinions from what you should wear to what you sing. It can be completely inundating.

I knew that I needed to surround myself with people I trusted implicitly and who had my best interests at heart. This group of people has grown over time, and I am so grateful to have them in my corner.

I also learned to prioritize. For instance, small obstacles such as criticisms from people whose opinions I don't really value, not getting that one gig, or getting the 30th “no” for a summer program cannot weigh me down emotionally. Big demons, however, are attacked with gusto—like financing a cross-country move or approaching contract negotiations with diligence, strength, and rigor.

For all my struggles, I know my problems could be a lot worse. I've learned that life is more beautiful when you can come to the table with your honest, most authentic self. Before every audition I say to myself, “This opportunity is a gift. If the hardest thing you have to do today is sing, consider yourself lucky.”


In many ways, my background is also my biggest strength. It's taught me that you have to be your own advocate. If you want a certain result, you must do everything in your power to make it happen.


I am a huge proponent of open and honest communication and self-awareness. I work out and attend therapy regularly. I treat exercise and therapy like I do a voice lesson or coaching. They are just as important as flawless French diction or the perfect vowel shape. The journey to mental health and stability is just that, a journey. Some days are better than others, but the practice of well-being takes dedication and diligence.

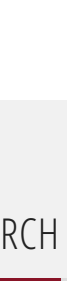
Anything else you would like to add?

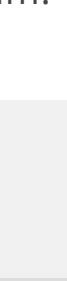
It is a little scary sharing my experiences, but I hope it may reach another aspiring singer and can serve as a story of hope and possibility. I want to be measured by my talent, skill, and performance abilities. I never want to be given an opportunity because I have come from a disadvantaged background.


You can learn more about Martinez-Turano at alexandramartinezturano.com.

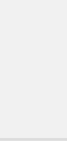
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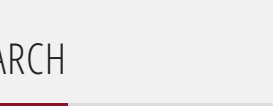
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Michelle Latour

Dr. Michelle Latour is active as a teacher, singer, writer, and adjudicator and lives in Las Vegas. She has been on the full-time faculties at several universities. She is currently a voice faculty member for the Italian-based summer program, The International Opera Performing Experience and owns a private studio, the LATOUR Voice Studios. You can visit her at www.thelatourvoicestudios.com, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.