

CAREERS

THE MOMENT

Turning Points in 5 Extraordinary Careers

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SPECIAL REPORTS

Introduction



For many notables on the business and artistic sides of the business, achieving career success has been a foreseeable, linear progression. But for others, the path has been far less predictable. It is their stories that we have assembled for this Special Report—of five individuals whose extraordinary careers were achieved on a path filled with wrong turns, lucky breaks, crises of the psyche, or all of the above.

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Each article in this issue is also found on our website, MusicalAmerica.com, in the [Special Reports](#) section.

Some can point to a single moment that their lives changed. After nine months of not practicing and using her violin lessons as talk-therapy sessions, [Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg](#) vividly remembers the day that teacher Dorothy Delay told her, “You need to bring me one movement of a violin concerto next week or I’m going to kick you out of my class.” Delay’s threat “scared me out of my paralysis,” Salerno-Sonnenberg tells Wynne Delacoma. Several months later, she became the youngest individual ever to win the Naumburg Competition.

Others unwittingly zigzagged from one field to another until finally finding their right niche. [Carl Tanner](#) was as jewelry maker, then a truck driver, then a bounty hunter. Now he’s a famous tenor on international opera stages.

Still others got lucky, by taking a flying leap and landing not just safely but right on the mark. As he tells Keith Clarke, [Nicholas Kenyon](#) was midway through a highly successful career as music critic for *The New Yorker* and the *Times* of London, when he decided he had nothing to lose by interviewing for the lofty position of controller of Radio 3—with no management experience. He got the job; now he is running the Barbican, Europe’s largest performing arts center.

Choreographer and longtime Paul Taylor dancer [Takehiro “Take” Ueyama](#) tells Rachel Straus about the baseball career path he was on before he discovered break dancing. In his interview with Rebecca Schmid, [Håkon Kornstad](#) describes how his life as a jazz saxophonist changed when a friend dragged him to the Met Opera. Now he combines his tenor sax with his tenor voice in an act called “Tenor Battle.”

However each of these individuals may have achieved their “extraordinary careers,” it’s safe to say that it wasn’t without perseverance, courage, and buckets’ full of sweat equity. I hope you enjoy their stories as much as I have.

Regards,

Susan Elliott
Editor, Special Reports

From

Humble

Scribe

To

POWERFUL

Arts Honcho

Sir Nicholas Kenyon was the music critic for *The New Yorker*. Now he is managing director of Europe's largest arts center, the Barbican.

By Keith Clarke



After graduating from Oxford, Nicholas Kenyon created a healthy career as an author and journalist. In addition to being the official music critic of *The New Yorker*, he wrote an estimated 300 articles a year for the *London Times*, before moving on to the *Observer*, in 1986. Despite what he calls his “surprisingly flourishing collection of freelance writing jobs,” he decided, in 1992, to change direction. Feeling that he had “nothing to lose” by trying, he interviewed for the controller job at BBC’s classical music and drama network, Radio 3 and, to his surprise, got it.

From there he moved to become chief of the BBC Proms from the 1996 season and in November 1998 added the role of directing the BBC’s millennium programming. Since October 2007 he has been managing director of Europe’s largest multi-arts and conference venue, the Barbican Center in London.

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In the middle of a highly successful career in journalism, you suddenly applied to the BBC to become controller of Radio 3, a poacher turned gamekeeper. Why?

After criticizing people for years [as a critic] for doing something badly, there comes a time when you feel the need to do it yourself and risk being shot down. I didn't even remotely expect to get that job—there were other people around with *far* more experience. On the other hand, it was an absolutely critical moment for Radio 3, because Classic FM [the UK's first national commercial radio station for classical music] was about to start and many feared it would completely decimate Radio 3. People better qualified for the job may not have wanted to be associated with that danger.

“The first scary aspect was being thrust into the public spotlight, becoming a subject for the press rather than part of the press. The second was actually doing the job.”

Tell us about the “moment” you made the decision to make a change. Was it an “epiphany” or a gradual decision?

It wasn't totally sudden. I had put together some festivals in previous years, including Mozart Now at the South Bank Center, which won an award, and I had been increasingly involved in planning programs on Radio 3. I had ideas, and I did not want to become an increasingly frustrated old music critic. Plus, the previous controller of Radio 3, John Drummond, had encouraged me to consider it and I think mentioned me to some in the BBC as an outside possibility.

Were you nervous about going on the interview?

No, because I had nothing at all to lose. If it didn't happen, no one much would know and I'd just go back to another week at the *Observer*. I gave them my idea on one side of one sheet of paper, which was essentially that Radio 3 could change radically without sacrificing quality or its commitment to live music. It was a clear, simple manifesto; we discussed it thoroughly. I felt it went well, but

I had no idea what the competition was. I had a call that afternoon, and it was on the news that evening. The first scary aspect was being thrust into the public spotlight, becoming a subject for the press rather than part of the press. The second was actually doing the job.

It must have been a huge life change, going from the world of free-lance to the “corporate” arts sector.

It was, and I was ridiculously under-prepared. The BBC is a huge organization (well, it was then), which has the aim of supporting creative activity, so there was a basic framework of support [for my ideas]. But what I realize now and didn't then was that we were actually embarking on a massive cultural change at the network, and I really hadn't a clue how to do that—except by relying on superb colleagues and hoping the ideas took root.

Because I had never run anything, BBC sent me on a high level management course with other top-level new executives at the London Business School. We all described our different situations, and when he heard my story, our tutor just looked rather puzzled and said “Hmm, it's a very strange appointment.” Very reassuring.

So I learned by doing. As they say, “Experience is a wonderful thing which enables to you to recognize a mistake when you make it again...” And we made plenty of those. But eventually it became clear we could change. . . . We redefined ourselves and I think a lot of that flourishes today.

“I didn't even remotely expect to get that job—there were other people around with far more experience.”

And what about taking over the Proms?

That was huge too. I had never run a festival of that magnitude before; for me it was impossible to do Radio 3 as well in tandem as John Drummond had before I arrived. I so admire my successor Roger Wright for continuing to do both today—I suspect he is a far better delegator than I ever was.

What is your advice to young people who want to work in the arts?

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To acquire many different skills by having as many different experiences in as many different organizations as possible, because it's only by observing and seeing and understanding how people do things that you can begin to do it yourself.

You wear a number of other hats in the arts world in addition to the Barbican job—how is your work/life balance?

I don't think I'm very good at time management, but what I am good at is not letting work totally take over my life. I have a great family and now a grandchild as well, there are plenty of other things to get involved in. Also I do enjoy doing bits of writing, like the Faber pocket guides. They provide a completely different mental stimulus.

How do you maintain your famously sunny outlook?

I don't want to be unrealistically cheery, but there is not much point doing a job in the arts unless you enjoy it and unless you are bringing some enjoyment to others, because that's what we're here for. 

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How EDNA LANDAU

Made the Move Into

ARTIST MANAGEMENT



Charles Hamlen and Edna Landau, 1981

In her May 2, 2013 *MusicalAmerica.com* blog, [Can you plan to be remarkable?](#), Edna Landau, of Ask Edna fame, discusses how she got her start in artist management, using her own story to illustrate five key steps in developing a successful career. She writes:

"The year 1973 was a major turning point in my career. I was completing my master's degree in musicology at the City University of New York and also my fifth year of teaching at the High School of Music and Art. I very much enjoyed teaching, but I wanted to bring my professional focus to a job that would bring me closer to performing artists. Could I have then predicted that during the next 40 years I would discover the exciting and rewarding world of artist management and be privileged to become managing director of the world's biggest international agency? [Landau co-founded IMG Artists.] Absolutely not! However, as I look back, I can see how certain key decisions propelled my success in moving to the next level.

1) Fight to realize your passion. My first job in artist management was as assistant to the director of Young Concert Artists. YCA wanted a full-time person. I convinced them to let me work part-time so that I could be home a bit more with my one-year-old son.

2) Learn everything you can wherever you are. I convinced the director, Susan Wadsworth, to let me attend YCA's annual international auditions and the annual trade conference in New York, even though my job was purely clerical. This taught me about the industry as a whole and ignited my passion for booking concerts and helping artists develop their careers.

3) When you're ready for a change, take the plunge and associate with the best. Since there was no opportunity for me to book concerts at YCA, I joined forces with Charles Hamlen, whom I met at a trade conference. He took me into his six-month-old management firm and with our mutual ideals and much hard work, we began to secure engagements for a roster of relatively unknown artists and to build a favorable reputation for ourselves as Hamlen/Landau Management.

4) Don't be afraid to ask for help. When you need to capitalize your business or embark on a new project, all you need is to believe completely in your idea, think of everyone you know who might help, and put a compelling and accurate financial proposal together. People want to be part of a growing success story. These realizations kept Hamlen/Landau Management going during some very challenging financial times.

5) Always keep an open mind. Charles Hamlen and I never really knew why the sports conglomerate IMG, whose clients in those days included Martina Navratilova and Arnold Palmer, would want to acquire a very small artist management firm with substantial debt and an insignificant profit margin. But we never dwelt on that. We saw a chance to pay back all of our investors, grow our business, and to learn from experts in client management (albeit in sports) on an international scale. When Itzhak Perlman became our client in 1986, we knew we had made the right decision." 

A CAREER Crisis with a HAPPY Ending

A web of doubt short-circuited Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg's path to success—until her teacher found a golden carrot.

By Wynne Delacoma

Among the world's top-ranked violinists, Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg is as comfortable on major classical music stages as she is shooting the breeze with Big Bird on TV's *Sesame Street*. She plays genre-defying music with artists like the Brazilian-born guitar duo Sergio and Odair Assad and serves as music director/concert master (and de facto conductor) of the New Century Chamber Orchestra in San Francisco.

Born in Rome to a musical family, Salerno-Sonnenberg started playing the violin at age five. When the family emigrated to the U.S. in 1964, it was already clear that this eight-year-old was fearsomely gifted. She was enrolled at the Curtis Institute of Music and ultimately at Juilliard, where she studied with the famed teacher Dorothy Delay. In 1981, at the age of 20, she became the youngest musician ever to win the prestigious Naumburg Competition.

If that sounds like a smooth path to success, it wasn't. For reasons she explains below, her career nearly ran off the rails in 1980. She stopped playing the violin for nine months. She was stuck—"paralyzed," to use her word—in a web of self-doubt and apathy. Until one day, DeLay read her the riot act. It would prove to be the turning point of her career.



When did you begin to have doubts about your future as a musician? Why did they arise in the first place?

When I was young, the instrument was chosen for me. I was forced to practice. My mother would say, "If you don't practice, you can't go out and play." I obeyed.

When I was about 17 or 18, I began to wonder if playing the violin was what I really wanted to do. Plus, I was wondering if I was even good enough. That was a huge factor—not just do you want to do it but can you do it? And beyond that, what do you actually want out of life? I was feeling kind of lost.

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So it was a real career identity crisis.

Yes, and there was this other thing: because I was a DeLay student, it was assumed that I wanted to be a soloist. We were all sort of brainwashed into thinking that. That really scared me—paralyzed me—which is not my nature. I am such a go-getter and a doer and a planner, and here I was frozen. It was a really tough time.

“Because I was a DeLay student, it was assumed that I wanted to be a soloist. That really paralyzed me.”

How did you deal with the problem?

I stopped playing—for nine months! But I continued going to lessons; Miss DeLay was a unique teacher in that she was able to reach every student on his or her level, speak the language he or she understood. Clearly she saw that I was going through a lot of stuff.

In a way, she was kind of my mother; we would talk and talk and talk. Until one day she had had enough. She said, “You need to bring me one movement of a violin concerto next week or I’m going to kick you out of my class.”

At that point, to even get a G Major scale ready in a week would have been a challenge, let alone a movement of a violin concerto. I just kind of laughed at her. But she did not laugh back. She looked me in the eye and said, “I’m not kidding, Nadja. If you’re going to waste your talent, I don’t want to be a part of it. This has gone on long enough.”

I had great love for Miss DeLay. Her threat scared me—scared me out of my paralysis.

That’s all it took?

No. Dorothy DeLay was a brilliant woman. She knew exactly what she was doing. She timed it perfectly. “Oh, look what’s happening in two months,” she said. “The Naumburg Competition.”

A huge incentive, no doubt.

Yes, but I also believe that she had gotten to the point where she thought, “[Nadja] needs a kick in the ass. She needs to prove to herself whether or not she can do this for her own future.” I came back a week later with a movement of a concerto. I was playing the violin again;

it was awful obviously, but I was playing. At that lesson, she said, “Okay, let’s get your fingers back into shape. And let’s get an answer to this question you’ve been asking yourself for so long. Let’s put an application in for the Naumburg, and if you can make it to the finals of this international violin competition, I think you’ll have your answer. What do you say? Is this a plan?”

And that’s what we did.

I read in your book [*Nadja, On My Way*] that you jumped back into the fray with both feet.

The Naumburg Competition was, for me, the test of whether I was good enough. I made a decision to start again, to save my life. I immersed myself in practicing. I didn’t do my laundry. I lived on fried sausages, a pint of peanut butter/chocolate ice cream, and a gallon of Coca Cola every day. I was nuts. I was completely obsessed with getting back into shape and doing well in the competition.

“[Dorothy DeLay] looked me in the eye and said, ‘I’m not kidding, Nadja. If you’re going to waste your talent, I don’t want to be a part of it. This has gone on long enough.’”

And then you won!

I was shocked. I couldn’t wait to tell Miss DeLay.

So it would be safe to say that winning the Naumburg represented a milestone—a turning point—in your career.

Of course, because, suddenly, everything was clear. Playing the violin was what I’d do with my life. My life work had truly begun. 

from Ask Edna

A Successful Switch

How WQXR's GRAHAM PARKER Rose to the Top

In her March 7, 2013 blog, [Taking the Next Step](#), Edna Landau describes how Graham Parker, classical radio station WQXR's general manager and VP, came to work in broadcast media after a successful career in orchestra administration. She writes:

"I have always had great admiration for people who stay in the same job for long periods of time and who feel no need for change. Typically they are in an environment where their contributions are valued, they have a voice in developing new projects, and they are appropriately rewarded financially. However, I have seen others who stay in jobs that increasingly make them feel unhappy and unfulfilled because they think that they only know how to do one thing, they wouldn't be happier somewhere else, or they lack the courage to try something new. Contemplating this subject, I spoke with Graham Parker, general manager and vice president of WQXR. Before he came to the station four years ago, he was executive director of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. He hadn't been looking to leave Orpheus and always assumed that even if he did change jobs, he'd remain in the orchestral world.

Then one day, an e-mail from Laura Walker, president and CEO of New York Public Radio [which had just purchased WQXR], arrived in his inbox totally out of the blue. When he first glanced at the job description, he saw some responsibilities for which he felt well qualified and others that would be new to him. He talked it over with trusted colleagues and ran by them a few statements he planned to make in his interview.

Initially, some were quite skeptical, but they ultimately became convinced. This gave him the courage to take the next step, even though he had never worked at, let alone run, a radio station. He did have artistic, financial, board development, and strategic planning experience that was relevant to the position and that, in the end, mattered more to his employer.



In addition, having developed new initiatives for Orpheus such as commissioning new music and launching live broadcasts from Carnegie Hall on WNYC, now the sister station of WQXR, Parker seemed the perfect candidate for the new visionary leader that Ms. Walker was seeking. She laid down the challenge of expanding the station into a multi-platform media company and he enthusiastically embraced it.

I asked what advice he might give to others contemplating a new career direction. He said it was a good idea to not give undue significance to every word of a job description and to concentrate instead on the capabilities you do have that could prove attractive to your prospective employer. He indicated that he loves hiring people "out of skill set," even though it takes courage to do so.

He also said that if someone wants to get into a new field, he should have the courage to reach out to people who might be of help. "Everyone will be happy to let you buy them a cup of coffee and if you prepare your time with them wisely, they will generally be more than willing to help you make new connections." He stressed that relationships are key, and that everyone is well advised to stay in touch with people. Sage advice. 

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From **TRUCKER** to **BOUNTY HUNTER** to... **OPERA** Singer?

Carl Tanner always knew he could “make a big sound,” but he never thought much of it, until he nearly killed a guy



Many people end up on a different career path than they started on, but your change from bounty hunter to opera singer—and a tenor at that!—was pretty radical.

Well, I did study violin in high school and college, although I never studied voice. I knew I could make this big sound, but I just never explored it. I did sing once or twice in front of friends and they were like, “that’s weird.” But we all mostly listened to country music.

I wanted to please my Mom, so I just figured I’d get my degree and then go do exactly what I wanted.

Which was?

I really wanted to be a jeweler. When I was in college, I’d apprenticed on Saturdays with a guy in Winchester, VA. I worked for free just to learn the craft.

After I graduated, I came back home and opened up my own booth at an antique mall for about a year. But I wasn’t making any money. So I went to drive a truck for a moving company.

Carl Tanner took violin lessons as a boy growing up in Virginia, and even through college at Shenandoah University. But, he says, his heart was never really in it. After school, he set out to become a jeweler and, to make some extra cash, got licensed as a semi-trailer truck driver. When that still kept him only barely at poverty level, he tried bounty hunting. Here he talks about his transition from professional tough guy to professional opera singer.

A far cry from being a jeweler!

Maybe, but I loved it. I had no boss. I got to see new places, people’s homes. But I was still only making about \$450 or \$500 a week, which wasn’t enough.

A friend of mine told me about a former green beret he knew who was a bounty hunter and was looking to hire someone. I had heard about bounty hunters, but I wasn’t really sure what they were, so I asked the guy what he did.

“He said I sounded ‘just like that Plahseebo Domino guy.’”

What was his response?

He told me “we pick up criminals.” He said I’d have to get trained to use a gun. I don’t believe in guns—I was probably the only redneck kid in Virginia who didn’t—but I had to learn anyway.

So you walked around with a gun?

Actually, I carried three. One was a sawed-off shotgun, but it was never loaded. I used it just for intimidation purposes. When I sang

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at the White House, George Bush called me the “Barney Fife of Bounty Hunters.”

So how did you go from being a jeweler, truck driver, and bounty hunter to being an opera singer?



Tanner is captured as Radames, in *Aida*.

It was pretty simple. I got shot at when I chased a guy, and then he jumped out a window to his death, committing suicide. I felt really bad about that. I was getting weary of bounty hunting anyway, because it was getting increasingly dangerous. As long as you do it, your number's going to come up.

Around that same time I was driving my truck and I was singing along with *Tosca* on the radio—I think it was Domingo at the Met. And this lady pulls up beside me and says, something like, “you know you're just wasting your calling by driving your truck.”

Seriously?

Seriously. We were stuck in traffic, and my window was down. Then she just drove off—disappeared. That same day, when I got home, my father said pretty much the same thing. Maybe we were all listening to the same broadcast, because he said I sounded “just like that Plahseebo Domino guy.”

You mentioned earlier that your truck-driver boss was also on your case to pursue voice.

Yeah. It all happened about the same time. People kept telling me that I had this gift, and he just forced the issue by telling me he was going to fire me anyway. So I bought a bus ticket to

New York for \$27. I didn't think about it. I found a youth hostel between Eighth Avenue and Broadway on 38th Street. But I had only brought \$100 with me, so I ended up on the floor of a friend's place. I got a job as a telemarketer for a moving company.

How did you end up at Asti's? [Asti's was a legendary restaurant on 12th Street where many singing waiters got their start in the Big Time.]

I was wandering around the Village one day and walked by this restaurant that was playing opera. I mean, how often do you hear opera coming out of a restaurant in the Village? So I went in to check it out. The place was dead—maybe four people. One thing led to another, and I ended up singing for the owner because he said he might hire me to sing on weekends, for \$15 a night. I sang “E lucevan le stelle” from *Tosca* and the place just froze. When I finished, the guy says, “That was amazing. Where have you been and where are you from? There's a place called Asti's on East 12th St.” I was [working] there by the following weekend.

So you must have had some training prior to this, no?

Yeah, I had apprenticed at WolfTrap the summer I was 18. But that was about it. This was like ten years later.

OK, then, back to the magic moment.

When I sang at Asti's, this guy races up to me after and says [in a British accent], “Do you know who I am?” and hands me his card. I say no and he tells me to look at the card. It's Richard Gades, which I immediately pronounce “Gades,” so he says, “call me Richard. I am from the Santa Fe opera—we'd like you to come and do an audition for our apprentice program.”

I only knew the two *Tosca* arias and *O Holy Night*. When I handed the pianist the music for *O Holy Night*, she laughed.

I bet she stopped when she heard you sing it.

Yes, and John Crosby [founding general director of Santa Fe Opera at the time] said, “The arias were OK, but you really have something there with the Christmas song, and I don't like Christmas music. Come out to Santa Fe this summer.”

continued on p. 12



How did you prepare for the apprenticeship?

I hadn't sung in ages, I didn't really remember how to read music. I wasn't a good musician—I played the violin for about 10 years, but it may as well have been 10 minutes. I was really terrible.

Then I remembered there was a voice coach, Gerald Brown, from Shenandoah. He was based in New York and he only charged \$25 an hour. He had to teach me everything about music, all over again, from scratch. But he was very encouraging.

What was Santa Fe like for you?

As soon as I got there, I knew I was not the same as everyone. A lot of people are raised on classical music and plan for a career in it. But I wasn't. I was raised on country music. Plus, I was older than everybody else. I was almost 30 by then.

How did that make you feel?

Terrible. I thought, "Oh my God what am I doing here? This is ridiculous." But I knew that what I lacked I made up for in other ways. I knew I could make a great sound, but I didn't know what I was doing. The others had a knowledge of how to use their voices, but some of them didn't have really great voices.

I was determined to catch up. To do something really well, you have to really, really work at it. And I did. That summer I got an agent and started getting real gigs. I was ready. 

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The *Musician* Turned **ADMINISTRATOR**



In her November 21, 2013 blog, [The Road Unexpectedly Taken](#), Edna Landau uses the career path of Shauna Quill, executive director of the New York Youth Symphony, to demonstrate the not-uncommon phenomenon of an arts organization executive who has serious musical training, if not aspirations, in her background. She writes:

“It is no secret that a large number of today’s most successful arts administrators at one point studied an instrument, voice, conducting, or composition but moved on in a different direction. Not one of the many individuals I know made this choice out of feelings of inadequacy or, even worse, failure, yet it is still comparatively rare for music school or conservatory students to be exposed to their stories and the joy they experience in their current careers.

Shauna Quill, executive director of the New York Youth Symphony, is a shining example of someone who has leveraged a multiplicity of skills to serve with distinction in each of the positions she has occupied in the music industry.

I first met Shauna when she was associate artistic administrator at the Aspen Music Festival and School. (She later moved into the artistic administrator position.) We were also in touch when she became executive director of University of Chicago Presents, where highlights of her tenure (2007–2011) included the UCP’s first-ever music festival, dedicated to Olivier Messiaen, and “The Soviet Arts Experience,” a 16-month interdisciplinary celebration of artists’ responses to the Politburo.

In September 2011, she may have surprised some people when she accepted the top administrative position of the New York Youth Symphony. My own curiosity prompted me to invite Shauna to lunch, at which time the impetus for her move became clearer.

Before joining the work force, Shauna Quill was a flutist who studied for a year at Columbia University and then transferred to Carnegie Mellon University, where she studied with Julius Baker and earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Music Performance with

University honors. While in Pittsburgh, she rehearsed and performed in the Pittsburgh Youth Symphony every Sunday for three years. Her original plan was to obtain a master’s degree at Carnegie Mellon, but after experiencing four years of performance-related injuries, she decided against it.

Her first jobs were as a paralegal, and then as an artist and publicity manager with Herbert H. Breslin, Inc. When the NYYS position opened up, Shauna saw an opportunity for a more balanced personal life than she had in Chicago. Plus, she had warm recollections of spending six months in the NYYS Chamber Program while a student at Columbia University.

Today, the symphony offers tuition-free participation in five programs (orchestra, chamber music, composition, conducting, and jazz) to its players who are between the ages of 12 and 22. It has over 5,000 alumni, five of whom are currently trustees. Each of the NYYS’s orchestra programs at Carnegie Hall and Queens College every season includes a world premiere of a work written by a composer participating in the symphony’s First Music Program.

And Shauna has added a series of workshops on topics such as Careers in the Arts, Preparing for Auditions, and the Alexander Technique. She explained to me that in her view, “the goal of the youth-orchestra experience is to create musical citizens, not future conservatory students.” It would seem that this goal should be 100% attainable with such a caring and inspired leader at the helm.” 

The **SHORTSTOP** *Who Slid Into* **CHOREOGRAPHY**

By Rachel Straus



Takehiro "Take" Ueyama was on the road to professional baseball until his team lost the nationals. Then he discovered Michael Jackson, the Moonwalk, and, much to his dismay, wearing tights.

Takehiro "Take" Ueyama fell in love with baseball as a boy growing up in Tokyo, but when his team didn't make it to the Big Time, he knew he had to find another passion. Thinking he was signing up for lessons in break dancing, he ended up in a modern dance class, where a visiting choreographer ignited an entirely unexpected passion. After supporting himself as a bartender, he moved to New York, aced the audition for Juilliard, and ended up dancing with Paul Taylor for eight years. Now, the 47-year-old choreographer has his own troupe, TAKE dance, to essay his big, bold, east-meets-west style. Here, Ueyama describes how 13 years of playing baseball helped shaped his artistic vision.

Tell me about your life as a baseball player.



I played from the time I was four. Every Japanese boy wants to become a professional baseball player. I was pretty lucky, because I had the right physique and I could run fast. I got very serious about it; from age 13 to 16, I trained every day—for hours and hours.

By the time I was 17, I was on a high school team that had played against about 200 teams, one from each region of Japan. We qualified for the quarter finals of the national league championships at Koushien. It's a big event—the gateway to a professional career—and about 50,000 people attend. It's even televised.

My position was shortstop, which requires a lot of throwing, and my shoulder had started bothering me. I knew it might one day stop me from continuing to play, but I didn't focus on that. I just wanted my team to win so we could get into the nationals. When we

lost, we all cried so hard, because we knew we weren't going to play baseball together ever again. Many of us had grown up together.

Did you ever think you'd take up dancing?

Not really. I knew I needed to find something I felt passionate about, since I had stopped playing baseball. I found a job as a bartender in Ginza, one of the most expensive areas in Tokyo. After Michael Jackson's song *Billie Jean* came out, kids in Japan started break dancing. [Take would have been about 17 at the time.] I remember imitating Jackson doing the moonwalk. My friends and I would meet in the street and copy, improvise, and invent moves. One day I saw that a class called "New York Dancing" was being offered at a studio run by Tatsuo Mochizuki. I thought Tatsuo was going to teach break dancing, but he taught New York modern dance, such as the Martha Graham and José Limón techniques. [Mochizuki was a onetime member of the Kansas City Ballet who had studied at Juilliard.]

I didn't like modern dance or ballet, and the first day I wore tights was awful, but I kept on going to Tatsuo's classes because he was interesting. He had a great sense of humor. He took me to

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artists' hangouts and bohemian spots, places unknown to regular Japanese people.

What made you fall in love with dancing?

I took two classes a week with Tatsuo for about five years. I was probably one of the most frustrated dancers in his studio because at the time, Japanese male dancers looked to Nureyev and Baryshnikov as models. I admired them, but ballet wasn't for me.

Then, when I was about 19 years old, [Graham-based Juilliard teacher and choreographer] Kazuko Hirabayash gave a workshop at Tatsuo's studio. Taking Kazuko's class shocked me. Her movement went through my spine like an electric jolt. I felt a deep connection with her speed, her dramatic style. I fell in love. I began to get serious about dance. When Kazuko came back to Tatsuo's studio a year later, I told her that I didn't fit in with the Japanese dance scene. Kazuko said, "Why don't you come to New York?"

So I did, just to study with her. She suggested I also study ballet with Alfredo Corvino, so I took two of his classes every day, Monday through Friday, that entire summer.

"The first day I wore tights was awful."

How old were you when you finally auditioned for Juilliard?

I was 24. Kazuko really prepared me for it. At the audition, I spoke no English, so I couldn't communicate. I couldn't fill out my application form. But I got it in! Kazuko smoothed the way. She is like a mom to me.

Can you point to a single moment where you knew your life had changed?



Take oversees rehearsal for his *Salaryman*. PHOTO CREDIT: Kokyat

My life changed the day I left Tokyo to start my education at Juilliard. From the Narita International Airport, I took a plane bound to New York. I knew I wouldn't be coming back to Japan. From the airport tarmac, I could see my family waving from the terminal window. They were crying. At that moment, I realized I had to do something important with my life. I couldn't just go to New York to have fun. Those tears from my family were huge for me.

When did you become interested in Paul Taylor's choreography?

My third year at Juilliard, I danced in Taylor's *Esplanade* (1995). Every time we rehearsed the piece with Linda Kent [a onetime Taylor dancer on the faculty], I was so happy. I thought, "Oh my God, if I can dance this all the time, I'm going to be the happiest person ever." *Esplanade* came naturally to me because of baseball. There are these huge slides in it. When Linda first introduced us to the slide section, I was running like a baseball player. Today, I use a lot of slides in my repertoire. People think they are from Taylor, but they're not. My slides are from baseball.

After eight years dancing with Paul Taylor, I realized that I wanted to be like him. Taylor controls everything: he makes his own dances and works with dancers of his choosing. The year I left the company, I choreographed my first work. I was 35 years old. Two years later I founded TAKE Dance.

What is the major difference between baseball and dancing?

In sports, you either win or lose. It's never good to make a mistake in a dance work, but that doesn't mean that it won't be performed right the next night. In baseball, your mistake can cost the team the game.

What has been your family's reaction to your dance career?

My parents have always let me do whatever I wanted to do. They never questioned my direction. When I performed in China with the Taylor company, my father and brother came to see me dance. My father boasted to his friends about me. After I left for New York, my mother opened her own business [a Karaoke bar]. She felt inspired by my independence. ma

A MAGICAL Moment at the MET

By Rebecca Schmid

Jazzman Håkon Kornstad thought he had found his niche—until he discovered opera.



Norwegian jazz saxophonist Håkon Kornstad had a healthy career as a band leader, sideman, and soloist, with some 40 recordings to his credit in all three capacities. Then, four years ago, he discovered opera, and was “blown away.” Currently, he’s managing to juggle his newly uncovered operatic tenor with his jazz-saxophone tenor in a new act he calls “Tenor Battle.”

We were curious to know, as he put it in a recent TED talk, “how a healthy guy playing the saxophone and making a living out of it would suddenly start singing opera, at the age of 32— from scratch!—when my jazz career finally had started moving.” Kornstad is currently completing his master’s degree in voice at the Academy of Music in Oslo. This month, he sings the role of Ferrando in Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*.

What happened? Your jazz career was doing just fine.

It might sound strange, but I had recorded three solo albums, and it struck me that I was following other people’s ideas about solo sax rather than what I really wanted to do. Jazz is a language, and you can get stuck in it. I was constantly on the same free jazz circuit, in the same clubs. I realized that if I was going to be really honest with myself, I would have to sing.

I had sung briefly with a band in the past, just background vocals, and people noticed I had access to a high falsetto. At the time, it occurred to me, “Maybe I could be good at this,” but it didn’t really progress from there.

So what gave you the final push?

I was in New York to play gigs and get some inspiration. A friend spontaneously asked me to go to the Met. I thought, “opera—OK, the smell of moth balls and Chanel No. 5.” I had been once in 1997, but I was so jetlagged that I feel asleep. This time, I was really blown away by force of it. The singers seemed to make the whole room tremble! I believe it was *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci*. James Levine was conducting.

I think I had been wanting to sing for a long time but couldn’t find a style I could identify with. And suddenly here was this breathtaking sound.

That week I went back to the Met three times. I thought this was a new hobby. A couple weeks later, I met an opera singer who I wanted

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to play saxophone with. But once we started, I realized I wanted to do what she was doing—sing opera. I knew I had to follow this track. I wanted to become an opera star.

She was your first teacher?

No, she picked up the phone and called Pamela Kucenic, who is one. Pamela said she could hear a significant instrument in there, which was of course inspiring. She trained me as a baritone. Then I went home to Norway and did all of her exercises. When I came back a few months later, I was a tenor! She told me if I wanted to be an opera singer, I had the possibility to do so.

And so you decided to enroll at the Academy of Music in Oslo.

Right. I think I was their oldest student, ever.

What was your audition like? Were you nervous?

Not really. At that point, like many fresh singers, I thought I could sing anything. I remember auditioning with an aria from *Fanciulla del West*, which was kind of heavy for a tenor. But it actually went really well. Then I started school; as you learn, you realize how little you know.

I felt like a rebel; I would say no to jazz gigs and just study opera all year.

What happened to your jazz career?

At first I thought I would lose gigs—I stopped playing sax for many months. Then I started thinking I should at least try to combine my own jazz improvisations with singing. I did a concert, and the response was good. And then things started coming along that were far more attractive than before [as a strict jazz artist]. I played a solo project in Wigmore Hall and together with Joshua Redman. To apply for leave from school to play gigs like that was kind of funny! This summer, I play solo at the Spoleto Festival USA.

How do you find the opera world, compared to what you've been used to?

As a singer, you are told what to do and what not to do. I am not used to that from jazz: There is a sort of a rule that you can play however and whatever you want. It's also more important to be an entrepreneur

in jazz. You need to think about where on the shelf you want to put yourself, what kind of niche you want to fill. You can't do that in opera until you find your own true sound. I am actually really welcoming all the guidance. Perhaps once I get my opera together I will feel as free as I do with jazz.

What about the performance aspect?

I had been on a stage thousands of times, but only with a saxophone. It was interesting to feel how awkward everything was without holding an instrument. For my first staged production, a small role in *Salome*, I went back to the stage at school every night just to get used to walking across it.

What do you envision for yourself in the years to come? To sing on the world's great stages or do your own thing?

I have tried not to be specific about my dream. It is basically to always follow my inner instincts. I want to pursue an opera career but have learned that it works best to be open to whatever happens. 

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