

Interlochen Classical Voice Intensive Final Report

By Justice Rawlinson

The Interlochen Classical Voice Intensive is a week-long summer program at Interlochen Center of the Arts that specializes in improving technique, audition skills, and overall knowledge of classical voice and opera. High school students do not get much experience with opera besides just simply singing the repertoire, so this is an incredibly unique opportunity. While my time spent at Interlochen was full of opera and singing, it was also full of challenges, lessons, and things I will carry along with me for the rest of my life.

One of my first challenges was opening up and getting to know other people. When I am surrounded by people I know and are comfortable with I have a hard time shutting my mouth, but when I am surrounded with people from all over the world I have never met before, it is so hard for me to talk to them. I never know what to say and get so worried they will think poorly of me. Shortly after I got off the plane, we all sat down in the lounge area in the airport waiting for the bus to pick us up. Everyone else got on their phones, so I did the same. For a solid fifteen minutes, I didn't say a word to anyone. It was so stressful just sitting there. While the environment around me was silent, my mind was so loud. I kept wishing someone would just talk to me first until I realized everyone else was wishing the exact same thing. After this hit me, I decided to compliment the girl next to me. I complimented her crocheted keychain and told her I crochet; the compliment led to more conversation. We sat next to each other on the bus ride there, where I learned she was from South Korea. It was so interesting learning more about her experiences and where she was from. This bridge of not talking to anyone to making conversation with one person set me up for success for the rest of the week; I was so much more comfortable and willing to talk to people I did not know. I made friends from Colorado, Texas, Michigan, Georgia, California, New York City, Florida, Kentucky, Azerbaijan, and so many other places around the world. All of these people live so far away from me, but something in me says I will see most of them again somehow.

Another challenge I faced at Interlochen was getting comfortable with the phrase, "I don't know." This seems like such an easy and simple thing to say or think, but it became something I had to be with a lot. I am not going to act like my current environment in Carterville, Illinois doesn't challenge me enough to not say "I don't know," but at Interlochen it was on such a different level. It was like I knew nothing (an exaggeration, but that is how I felt). For the first few days, I felt as if I was not meant to be there. I was falling into the mindset of "everyone else is so much better than me" or "why am I here?" I struggled with this until one of my friends said, "if I'm being honest, I was really intimidated by you during the placement auditions." She was referencing the auditions we did on the first day to place us with our instructors, studio classes, and chamber groups. These auditions were in front of everyone. When she first said this to me, I found it weird and surprising because I felt the exact same way during her placement audition. This made me realize everyone is nervous and doesn't feel like they should be there. They may be thinking this in different ways, but they are still thinking it. I made sure I kept this in mind every time I thought I was not good enough or should not be there. We were all there for a reason; we were all meant to be there.

"Singing is like baking cookies and bringing them to a party, no one is going to be like 'these cookies suck why would you bring them?' It is the same idea for singing. We are all here

because we want to hear you sing, not to say ‘you suck at singing, why would you sing?’” This is a quote from my primary instructor, Dr. Brown. She is one of the kindest and most welcoming people I know. I never felt unsafe asking a question around her or simply admitting I did not understand the material we were learning. Dr. Brown said this because she knew we were all scared for our closing recital. She talked about how vulnerable singing is; you are literally using your body as an instrument and allowing others to listen. Everyone at the recital was there to see a loved one perform; they are not there to judge. This simile is something that I will carry with me every time I perform.

A lesson I learned not from a challenge but an observation was to be authentic. I learned this from two of my instructors, Professor Dutton and Professor Sloan. They were always so down-to-earth, approachable, and humble to the point that you would have never guessed how accomplished they were. This is so valuable to me as a student and a teacher because it makes learning easier. If someone is stuck up or intimidating, everyone is scared to ask questions or mess up, but with Professor Dutton and Professor Sloan, this was not a problem. This is how I aspire to be.

My greatest accomplishment during this program was getting out of my comfort zone. This is something I do constantly to grow as a person, but out of all the times I have traveled more and more out of my comfort zone, Interlochen was definitely one of the most impactful. The first part of Interlochen that pushed me out of my comfort zone was sharing a relatively small living space (specifically the restrooms) with a group of about twelve people. I am a scout, so I go tent camping very frequently, but cabin camping was very new to me. All of the students stayed in a cabin with eight bunk beds, two showers, two toilets, and four sinks. The showers were the most stressful part of the cabins; there was nowhere to put your clothes while you were in the shower, they were so small, and sometimes they would be freezing cold. While I did not particularly enjoy the showers and general living conditions, it was good for me because I won’t always have a good shower or a good bed. Something else that was uncomfortable at first but I overcame was singing in front of amazing singers (my peers and instructors). This is something I have always struggled with as a musician, not just specifically singing. I always get so scared of judgment or not being enough, but during Interlochen I learned how to deal with these thoughts and put them aside. Do I still have these thoughts? Yes, but I have better control over them now because of support from my peers and instructors. The last thing that pushed me out of my comfort zone was talking to people. I willingly put myself in a situation where I was surrounded by people I didn’t know; I do not live anywhere close to them, had to make conversation with those people, and had to make connections. After the first day hump, I would say I thrived in that environment, and I am proud of that.

The faculty and students added to my experience in many ways. The faculty provided a warm, supportive, and nurturing environment, making it easy to learn and grow. They were all so knowledgeable about classical voice and provided amazing feedback. The students brought an excited and welcoming energy, always ready to learn. My favorite part about my peers was how outgoing they were and how they would cheer for others after performances. This helped me get through the fear of singing in front of a bunch of really talented singers I did not know (I was actually really excited to sing instead of dreading it). What the instructors and my peers brought enhanced my experience, making it more memorable and special.

Another aspect of the program that drastically enhanced my experience was the location. Interlochen got its name by being placed between two lakes, Green Lake and Duck Lake, making it the “interlock of lakes.” These lakes are very visible from most of the campus, and even when they are not, you can still see the trees and wildlife, so you always have an amazing view. I really enjoyed the lakes because most lakes we have in southern Illinois are muddy and brown, but the lakes at Interlochen are clear. You can see pretty much everything in the water when you are at the beaches. I loved just looking at the lake; they had an area where you could eat your meals and just be outside and have an amazing view of the lake. These moments where I could space out and just think saved me from homesickness (I don’t typically get homesick, but there were definitely times I missed my family, shower, and bed). The sunsets were easily my favorite part of the day. The way the sky would turn pink and then reflect onto the lake was one of the most beautiful things I have witnessed. Also, being in the woods created a summer camp type of feeling, and I loved it so much. I have so many fond memories of my friends and me walking through the woods and just talking. The environment in the outdoors made my time there wonderful; without the lakes and woods, the experience would not have been as memorable.

The summer camp aspect of Interlochen did make it so much more enjoyable. During the rare times we weren’t in our classes or practicing, we could do crafts, play pickleball, walk by the lake, and so much more. I did enjoy how we were always moving when it came to the program, but these little moments of stress-free activities were good for me to decompress and have a moment of rest.

Overall, I felt very prepared, especially when it came to the pieces I brought. I would even go so far as to say I overprepared my repertoire, mainly because I was so stressed about getting all of my music memorized, and one of my pieces was my first time singing in German. I ended up getting everything memorized and ready to refine, but I only sang one piece for the entire program. The area where I did not feel as prepared was the living conditions. Michigan was a lot colder than I thought it would be. I looked at the forecast beforehand, and the highs were seventy every day, so I brought a lot of shorts, a couple pants, and only one sweatshirt to sleep in. I did not account for how we would always be by a lake, so it would be colder than the forecast for the entire town. This also became a problem at night because the cabins were not heated. I thought two blankets, a sweatshirt, and pajama pants would be enough to stay warm at night, but it was not. I have been winter camping in a tent multiple times where it is literally snowing outside, but none of these nights winter camping even compared to the nights at Interlochen. Something I thought about during those cold nights to make me feel better was I would rather be unprepared for the cold than the actual program, and I still stand by that.

For future Garwin students, I would not recommend this program for the Garwin scholarship, but I would highly recommend this program outside of Garwin. This is because the Interlochen intensive summer programs are too short. If you were to go to Interlochen, I would suggest a longer program (maybe a three or six-week program instead of the one-week intensives). Another reason I would not recommend this program for the Garwin scholarship is that you are not staying in a college. You do not get the same experiences you would get from a college campus, like staying in a dorm, walking the campus, college food, and more. I believe these little things are important to have the college experience or preparation that Garwin is

looking for. All of this does not discredit how wonderful Interlochen is, however. Interlochen was one of the best musical experiences I have ever had. I gained so much, whether it be musically or socially. If you have the opportunity to go to Interlochen outside of Garwin, I would suggest you take it.

Interlochen changed my views and plans for the future. Before I went to this program, I was really only thinking about one or two colleges as options for undergraduate degrees. I thought this because of my abilities and what I thought I could achieve, but the instructors made me realize I need to dream bigger. They convinced me that a lot of schools that I thought were out of reach are very obtainable. Along with this, I have explored more options when it comes to undergraduate and graduate school. I would like to pursue a double major in music education and vocal performance; originally I was just planning on music education for my undergrad. Composing has also piqued my interest more after this experience. I have always thought that composing would be something that stays on the side, nothing serious, but now I view it as something that could become a career at some point if I want it to be. I am very thankful for this wake-up call because now I will not be short-changing myself.

I staff a camp in scouts called National Youth Leadership Training (NYLT), and at this camp we tell "The Starfish Story." To summarize this story, a man is throwing starfish that have washed up on the shore back into the ocean. Another man asks him why he is doing this because there are thousands of starfish along the beach. The man picks up a starfish and throws it back into the ocean. After he does this, he says "maybe I can't throw them all back, but I made a difference for that one." I had heard that story a lot before so it did not really resonate with me until after I went to Interlochen. I went into this program with so many big plans for my future, which I still have, but now I realize if I don't get my doctorate or teach at an amazing school, that is okay. Things change; I might not end up where I see myself in ten years. As long as I make a positive impact on someone that helps them achieve their goals and succeed, I will be content. Interlochen also showed me you will always end up where you are meant to be. When I was choosing programs to apply to, I was not really expecting to go to Interlochen. My mind was set on other places. When Interlochen was my final decision, I was very concerned about going there. I wasn't too happy with the cabin camping idea or how it was only one week, but then I actually went to the program and realized Interlochen was where I was supposed to be. I foresee this idea giving me comfort in the future if life does not go the way I have planned. I am so incredibly grateful for what Interlochen has shown me and how it has made me grow. I hope to have more experiences similar to Interlochen.

Thank you, Garwin Family Foundation, for giving me this opportunity to improve not just as a musician, but as a person.