



If Love Be the Food of Musick

by Zoe Vandermeer

Some singers are not in a position to be hired by opera companies. Perhaps you are finding that your physique isn't right for most roles in your Fach such as a 40-year-old soubrette, a 6-foot-tall, lyric soprano, or a very heavy coloratura lyric mezzo. You can find much more success in your singing—once you get away from others' expectations and create your own niche.

Are you looking for ways to create more performance opportunities? Do you have unique gifts you aren't using fully in the operatic roles that are best suited to your voice? Do you thirst for something special in your career? Do you enjoy long-term projects? Are you experiencing limited finances and, simultaneously, abundant creativity?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, creating a one-person show on a shoestring budget may be for you.

Here are some suggested requirements for creating a successful one-person show:

- A strong desire welling up from within to create something unique designed specifically for you.
- A belief in yourself and in your artistic self.
- Vision and flexibility.
- Organizational ability, including the ability to pull together a team, if needed.
- A love for talking with people.
- No bashfulness about self-promotion.
- Willingness to dedicate a lot of time and energy to the project.
- Some funds, but not necessarily a lot. (Keep it simple! You can always add more dollars later.)
- A high skill level.
- Friends who can provide emotional support.
- A good massage therapist and other health

professionals.

- Library resources.
- The 5 P's: Passion for singing and the arts, Positive attitude, Professional demeanor, Preparedness, and Patience.
- A good entertainment lawyer, if you are going to be using a composer's original material for performance, broadcast, recording, and sheet music. (Option: Check out Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts in New York and California.)
- Stamina for a full-length production on stage, and stamina to work behind the scenes, making it happen.
- A technically and emotionally supportive voice teacher and vocal coach.

Doing Something Different

In 1995, after several years of preparing and performing the coloratura operatic repertoire,

I wanted a change. I was looking for a way to build my performance opportunities, and a way to cross over to a different audience. Most of all, I wanted to create an original artistic work flexible enough in concept that it would navigate well in opera, theatre, and concert hall.

What? Create a new genre? Well, almost. I have certainly performed the work in concert halls, museums, historical sites, and theatres!

Here's How It Started

I wanted to build a concert program composed of my favorite songs, arias and poems from the Baroque period. I wanted to create a concert that called upon more of my talents, such as playing the Baroque harp and harpsichord, acting, and composing. As I began to organize the material, I noticed that if organized it in a certain order, the music would tell a story about love.

"Aha!" I thought—and realized that what I really had was a one-woman show. The portability of the show appealed to me. And one-woman shows are definitely less expensive to put together than a full-blown

production. My costumes fit inside my harp and harpsichord cases, and I didn't need sets, other than a table and a few chairs.

Research

I began to research women who lived during the 17th and 18th centuries who might have been familiar with some of the Italian, English and Scottish repertoire I had chosen. I went to Scotland and spent many hours in the National Library of Scotland at George IV Bridge in Edinburgh. At last, amidst the musty smell of "olde" books in an extremely quiet library filled with people, I discovered the story of Jenny Barsanti, a singer and actress at Covent Garden from 1762-1766.

Jenny's father was an Italian musician who migrated to the "Athens of the North," as Edinburgh was known in the early- to mid-18th century. Her mother was from Edinburgh. I was interested to learn that Jenny studied voice with the famous music historian Charles Burney. She also married an Irish earl in the late 1760s. He died just a few years later, after which she married the stage manager of a theatre in Ireland, where she performed,

did the bookkeeping and sewed costumes—a woman of many talents.

Themes and Costumes

Jenny Barsanti was truly an inspiration. I decided to write the show as if I were Jenny working in a theatre that was able to succeed on a shoestring budget. I wanted a show that was entertaining, varied, and thought provoking, a show that was both a controversial commentary on the plight of women in the 18th century and beautiful. Like Jenny, I sewed many parts of my costumes, although some of the historical replicas were so complicated that I employed the help of a fabulous seamstress in San Francisco.

I wanted to know exactly how it felt to live as a woman in that era. I was outfitted with a modern copy of a 1772 corset, tight bodices, and, for a portion of the show, a 1779-style polonaise [a dress featuring a tight bodice, cut away at the waist to expose an inner skirt]. Since I was working on a tight budget myself, I wasn't able to afford a complete copy of Jenny's attire, which would have run somewhere from \$10,000-\$20,000!

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performs *If Love Be
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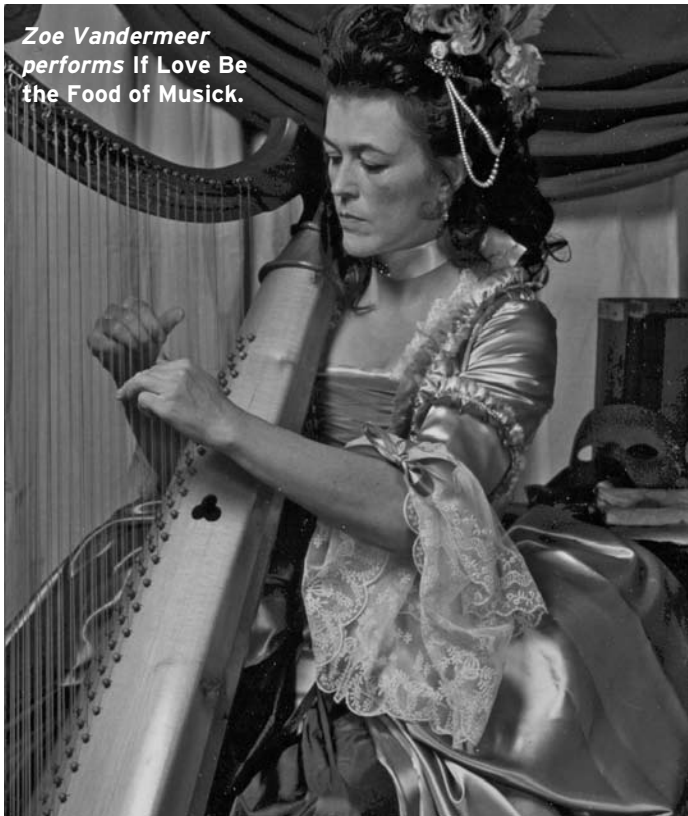


photo courtesy of Zoe Vandermeer

The Story

Patterned after the pastiche style of John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, my show, *If Love Be the Food of Musick*, is a tale of love, betrayal, revenge and madness, set in Bedlam in 1782. Bedlam was the place in England where the inconvenient—both insane and sane—were taken and stored.

The exhibit on Bedlam at the City of London Museum some years ago was both astounding and depressing. Many husbands needlessly condemned their wives to a nightmarish existence in this place. Bedlam was also a place of spectacle: Visitors could view the inmates from a balcony, much as we now go to the zoo.

A Story Within a Story

The character "Anne," played by Jenny Barsanti (played by Zoe Vandermeer), tells the tale of a woman who attempts to maintain her sanity within the horrors of Bedlam by replaying her love story gone wrong over and over. In this way, she creates a safe place for herself, a refuge. For Anne, the true story of her life becomes a vision, a dramatization verging on hallucination. Dreamlike, one scene blends into another through the provocative use of texts and music. Anne relives her story every day, and over time, she attracts many spectators to come see her "show." The real audience plays the role of these spectators.

Music and Texts

Some of the composers include Henry Purcell, Handel, Giovanni

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Paisiello, John Blow, Michelangelo Rossi, John Dowland, and Scots composer James Oswald. I took texts from a variety of sources such as poems, letters, and plays by John Dryden, Aphra Behn, and others.

Dialects

I had to determine the primary dialect of my character. I chose the traditional RP [Received Pronunciation] English (BBC) for the bulk of the spoken text. I delivered the highlights of Scottish songs and poems in a Scots dialect most akin to "Glaswegian." I worked with dialect experts in San Francisco and Scotland. The Scots dialects were challenging, to say the least!

Development of the Show

After several performances in Europe and the United States as a two-act, 105-minute, one-woman show, the project began to develop into a larger version, a chamber opera/drama. Although I can still perform the work as a one-woman show, I have learned that many venues want to see more than one person on

stage for a theatrical work. In response, several characters—once unseen or merely alluded to—have become roles. Further, I invited a few more musicians to perform, so that I didn't have to play and sing everything.

The last performance of the show in San Francisco featured Katja Rivera as "The Nurse/Inmate," Andrea Murray as Anne's sister "Beatrice/Inmate," [and myself as] "Anne/Jenny." I also was the harpist, harpsichordist, and a dancer. The show was complimented by a Baroque flute and Baroque cello. Scottish bagpipes began and concluded the show. To accommodate the larger ensemble, I replaced several pieces of music from the original version with other selections that had the same meaning and mood.

Both versions of the show begin with a Scottish folk song, followed by the famous 16th-century monody "Ancor che col partire." They end with a Scottish folk song and my own original composition based on "Ancor che col partire," which expresses the sentiment: "To part now only makes our return that much sweeter."

Stage Requirements

To be more versatile and available for different types of venues with different budgets, I chose to have a setup that requires nothing but a few chairs, a table, room for the ensemble and reasonable lighting. I have also performed the show in its one-woman version with complete stage lighting, which is ideal but not always practical for the venue, or for the artist's budget. I created the costumes so that they would function much as the scene changes would. In the larger version, "The Nurse" announced the scene changes to the audience (the spectators in the balcony at Bedlam).

Success

What does it mean to be successful? One person's sweater, tossed in the Goodwill pile, is another's treasure.

What's most important is that artists do as much as they possibly can, both in their inner world as well as their outer world, to make the show as successful as they know how.

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If the world at large falls in love with the work, great. If it doesn't, artists still know that they have a great show and can continue to move forward with getting it performed in as many venues as possible.

The key here is not to give up. It's easy to get depressed when you're working on such an involved artistic endeavor. During those times, artists inevitably reevaluate the meaning of their work, their life, the importance of music, and so on. Take a walk. Go see a movie. Get together with friends. Or just cry and get it over with, so you can move ahead with your heart's desire: to be the most you can possibly be as a singer, as an artist, as a visionary.

As far as the "success" of my show is concerned, I have given many performances in Europe and the United States, and have had a bounty of reviews, articles, interviews, press, radio airplay and radio interviews. Am I making a living at it? How many singers are paying all of their bills by singing? Is it worth it to do a show of this magnitude? Each of us must decide for ourselves.

As for me, I wouldn't have it any other way. I have created a show that I love—and it inspired me to write and compose a much larger production, *Zoe's Musical Fairy Tale, Upon A Time*. Most importantly, I have had the opportunity to delve deeply into the center of my being as an artist, searching for the truth, facing my fears and sharing my discoveries on stage.

Summing Up

- Know yourself, your strengths and weaknesses. Love what you do.
- Determine if creating and performing a one-person show is for you, and why.
- Identify your market before you get too involved.
- Establish a game plan, timeline, budget, team, and of course, the purpose and theme of your show.
- Experiment with styles of music, presentation, and format. Choose a style, a story, and a theme that showcase your specific talents most.
- If you are writing the lyrics and/or music, get going now! If you are only starring in the role, develop your team of writers and composers. Many talented writers and composers who are not known, or not well-known, would love to collaborate on a big project like this, for not much money. Check out the American Composers Forum, conservatories, ASCAP and BMI.

Additional questions

What types of stages, stage requirements, and tech crew will you need? What expenses will you incur, and who will pay for them? Do you want to tour? How portable do you want the show to be? What types of props are absolutely necessary? How important are the costumes? Do you want a show about an already existing person, a fictional character from a book, or one of your own making? Is becoming a non-profit organization worth considering, or becoming fiscally sponsored by a non-profit organization? (That's another topic!)

Zoe Vandermeer is a coloratura soprano, Baroque harpist, composer, recording engineer and producer. Her show, If Love Be the Food of Musick, has been performed in festivals, museums and theatres in Spain, Scotland, New York and California. Write to Zoe at: zoevandermeer@aol.com, www.zoevandermeer.com and www.livesoundstudios.com.

