

Alumna Interview | Sun-Ly Pierce VAP '19



At the end of October, the VAP had the chance to interview alumna Sun-Ly Pierce, VAP '19, and talk about all things rehearsal, performance, and transitioning from grad school to a blossoming career. Pierce recently returned to the Hudson Valley for a performance of *Rodelinda* at Hudson Hall, and when asked about her experience with the production and being back in the area, she explained that it was a bit of a full-circle moment for her.

“The director, R.B. Schlatter came into my life first through the VAP. He spoke when I was a student, when he was doing his production of *Mother of us All*. He came to our Professional Development Workshop and spoke to us about his journey and that production in particular and I remember bookmarking him in my mind as someone I wanted to work with at some point.” She recalls that “At one point last year he messaged me on Instagram about a cool project that he wanted to do and asked if I would be interested in being a part of it. We ended up meeting and having a conversation about it and then deciding to do it.” Laughing, Pierce says she “tried to play it cool” but eventually did tell him that she remembered him speaking to her class and that he was someone she had wanted to work with for a long time.

“It feels Bard full-circle to have him brought into my life through the VAP and then to come back and do a project with him in the Hudson Valley, so close to Bard. And to do [*Rodelinda*] with a member of Bard faculty, Teresa Buchholz, was amazing, and so the production was an incredible learning experience.”

Delving further into the production itself, Pierce says she “loved the cast and [the production] really challenged me in the ways I hoped it would. Being familiar with Schlatter’s work, and how he approaches a piece, his conception of it, it really challenged me in a lot of important ways and I enjoyed it a lot, and I’m really grateful for the experience.

Speaking about her experience, we got the chance to discuss her favorite parts of the production and what it was like being back in the Hudson Valley in a professional capacity. This gave us the opportunity to discuss the importance of being a good colleague and working with wonderful people. Pierce recounts that “my favorite part of the production, for sure, was the people. I’ve found that oftentimes there are going to be issues or obstacles to overcome in any job. Oftentimes the music will save you if you love the music, but who among us gets to only perform music that we absolutely love?” And while Pierce admits that she “absolutely loved this music”, speaking more broadly about a career in the performing arts, she shares her experience in that **“I’ve found that in any gig, the thing that saves any piece for me no matter what the circumstances are, are the people, and I loved the people that I worked with. The performance schedule was so intense, I don’t think it would have been nearly as enjoyable or possible had the people we were working with not been such wonderful colleagues, and passionate, generous people as well as artists.”**

We then shared a laugh about being back in the Hudson Valley and adjusting to the early darkness, and lack of Uber rides. Laughing about how remote it is, and sometimes even spooky, Pierce speaks fondly of the fact that

because of these things “it really allows you to focus on the task at hand and really surrender yourself to whatever work, or study, or discipline you’re trying to give yourself up to.” She describes being back, especially in the fall and working on this production as “a gift.”

Bonding over the adjustment to darkness, Pierce tells us about her home base in Houston, Texas. “I’ve been living here for three years now, and I have a feeling this will be the base for the foreseeable future. Not only do I love Houston now that I’ve been able to enjoy it post-pandemic, but it’s convenient to travel in and out [for work.]”

Which brought us to the discussion of the pandemic and how Pierce navigated graduating from Bard, completing the Houston Grand Opera Studio program, and then building her career all during this difficult time for the world. Pierce humbly states that “for me, a lot of it was about perspective.” She shares her strategy that focussed on taking time. **“I took a lot of time off. I took a year off between my undergraduate and graduate degree. I took a year off and worked at Bard before coming to the HGO studio, and that was all very purposeful and specific because I really believe in pumping the breaks and the idea that what’s for you is not going to pass by you. Wherever you are at any given time is where you’re meant to be and if something doesn’t work out, it’s because something better is coming along that is what you’re supposed to be doing.”** She shares that every decision she has made, be it an audition, or work, has all been made with a specific goal and intention in mind.

Pierce attributes where she is in her career to this mindset, stating that she viewed her situation during the pandemic at HGO, including distanced coachings amid all pandemic guidelines, as an opportunity. She recalls thinking “I’m going to use this time [at HGO] to work on as much repertoire as I want, focus on my voice lessons, so that when the time comes and I have more responsibilities, and have to do main stage performances, I really feel like I’m ready to go. Because **I think the biggest thing that catches people off**

guard as they slowly move through these steps, as you reach each new echelon, there’s a whole new set of pressures and new things to navigate that can distract you from why you’re really there, which is to work on yourself, work on your artistry, your musicianship, and your voice.”

We then got the chance to discuss the pressures of a career in music, for which Pierce offered her personal insights and some advice. “Regardless of whether or not people talk about it, that pressure once you start doing any kind of work professionally, whether it’s a young artist program or as a guest artist, every day is an audition. Every day that you sing matters. And as much as we’re human, every moment counts and you want to be prepared for that pressure vocally and mentally.”

Sharing some advice she received, Pierce tells us that “people underestimate the power of their own momentum. I remember someone once told me, once you’re out there and you’ve hit the ground running, you can’t go back. You can’t go back and fix things in your voice, you can’t go back and really focus on your musicianship in the way that you can when you’re in a young artist program or in school. And they were right.” She goes on to describe how a career in music is a “marathon, not a sprint” and that as work leads to more work, it’s important to stay organized and take time when you can. She also cautions that burnout is very prevalent in this industry, and that taking care of yourself mentally and vocally from a young age is key.

Speaking of all things balance, Pierce gave us a look into how she finds balance in her career now that things are moving at a fast pace. “It is rare [when] I’m on a gig that I’m not spending time outside of rehearsals learning another piece. But I know that that can’t be every gig. For example, before I came to *Rodelinda*, I was doing a gig in New Orleans doing *The Marriage of Figaro*. So in the mornings I would work on *Rodelinda* and then I’d go to rehearsal and do *Figaro*. However I knew that *Rodelinda* was going to be a big sing, and very involved rehearsal process, so on this

gig I told myself I wouldn't do any music study outside of that." Pierce advises that it's all about knowing yourself and your process and then planning accordingly and well in advance. And while sometimes things don't go according to plan, having that foundation in place allows you to work quickly and efficiently when need be.

She goes on to credit her time at Bard to learning these foundational skills. **"Among the plethora of other things Bard gave me, they really taught me how to juggle a lot of music at the same time and learn music very quickly if need be."** Pierce shares that this skillset came in handy during *Rodelinda* when she misread the cut list and realized in the moment she'd have to sing *Vivi, tiranno*, "It's so embarrassing, but in between the scenes I went down and quickly learned it, and had to borderline sight read it in front of the orchestral group and everyone, and make up ornaments, but I could not have done that without Bard. Bard teaches you the art of the cram. And I cannot believe I missed it, but that's why those skills are important." Laughingly, she reminds us to always look closely at the cut list.

Continuing on, Pierce remembers her time at Bard fondly stating that, **"I truly believe that Bard crossed all the Ts and dotted all the Is for me. For sure the cram, and the importance of preparation because I've always told myself, I may not be the best singer in the room – most often I am not – I might not have the most amazing voice, or be the smartest singer in the room, but I refuse to be the least prepared."** And I pride myself in terms of being a good colleague and always being prepared. Even in those moments when I missed something on the cut list, it was tough, but I am proud of the fact that I was able to throw that together and just do it and learn it when we were days away from opening. Bard really showed me that preparation and consistency is the key to success.

It doesn't matter if you have one great day of singing, what matters, and what always struck me when I was in Houston were the singers who, every single day, were ready to go. Maybe they

have to mark, but they're never marking their intention, they're never marking their acting, and they're always consistently in good vocal shape, always consistently prepared, and those are the people that companies want to work with."

When asked about her favorite part of the Vocal Arts Program, Pierce says, **"When you're at Bard, part of the beauty is that you're in this small group, and you really become like a family, and you gain such a deep appreciation for what each person has to overcome in order to show up and do their best work that day. Bard really helped me gain an appreciation for the many different forms of your best, and that the human voice is crazy, it varies day to day, and Bard helped me appreciate that 95% of singing is singing when you're not feeling your best."**

As a final piece of advice, Pierce reiterates that "consistency and preparation is key, and really and truly being a good colleague. At the end of the day it's a people business, and as much as we want the arts to be about your life's passion, it is a people business." She cites the production of *Rodelinda* as an example of this. "R.B. would not have been able to this production had he not already created such strong, meaningful relationships with the other people who contributed to it. And I don't mean the cast, I mean the entire set was built and donated to him for free because of a relationship that he had with this company that does high rises in New York City."

Giving us one final message, Pierce simply offers that, **"It's so important to be kind and patient with everyone who's involved. It's a collaborative process. At the end of the day the people that you're with are the people you'll be working with for the rest of your life and it's important to be generous and patient with the people around you."**

Keep up with Pierce's journey:

Website: <https://www.sunlypiercemezzo.com/>

Instagram: @sunly_pierce