



Fortissimo: Backstage at the Opera with Sacred Monsters and Young Singers

William Murray

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H. L. Mencken declared that “the opera is to music what a bawdy house is to a cathedral.” It was not meant as a compliment, but to William Murray, former New Yorker staff writer and aspiring opera singer, a bawdy house is an apt metaphor for the opera: a place of confusion, high and low drama, fleshly pleasures and raucous song.

In *Fortissimo*, Murray follows twelve young singers in the Lyric Opera of Chicago’s training program, the prestigious Opera Center for American Artists, through the 2003–2004 season. In the course of the year, these singers attend countless coaching sessions, inspiring master classes, nerve-racking auditions and grueling rehearsals—and finally perform with some of the most celebrated names (and spectacular egos) in opera, from Samuel Ramey to José Cura and Natalie Dessay. While chronicling their progress, Murray offers an insider’s look at the different aspects of the opera world that influence a young singer’s success, a world filled with temperamental maestros, ambitious directors, old-world tradition and sacred monsters.

Weaving recollections of his own days training in New York, Rome and Milan in the 1950s with the personal and artistic struggles of the young singers in Chicago today, Murray lays bare the staggering ambition and relentless will required to achieve a career in the arts. As he writes, “Becoming a successful opera singer—stepping out on a huge stage to try to fill the house with your voice, to bring an audience of thirty-six hundred people to its feet—is as risky in its own peculiar way as embarking on a career as a matador. You can triumph, you can struggle to survive or you can perish from your wounds.” *Fortissimo* is a delicious tale of rising talents, angst and heartache and small triumphs, and the music that inspires it all.

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