

Laffont Competition National Finalist: Abigail Raiford

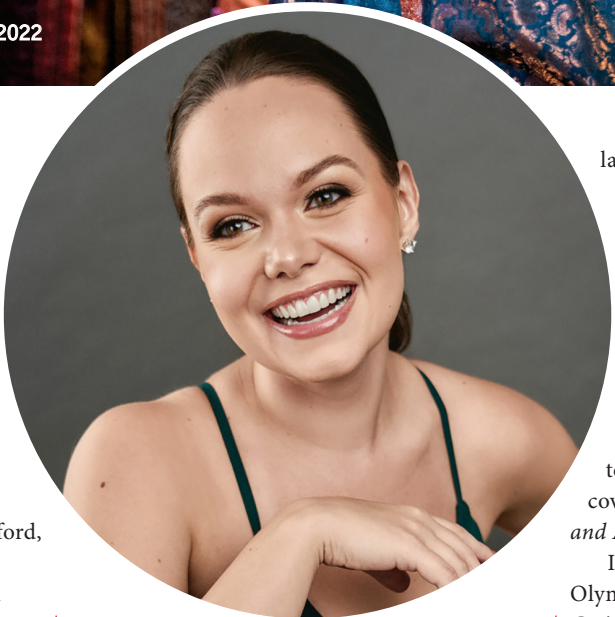
As Elvira in *L'Italiana in Algeri*, Tulsa Opera, 2022
Shane Bevel Photo

Abigail Raiford was in high school when she knew she wanted to sing opera.

"On a trip back from New York, Mom and I watched the film *Becoming Traviata*, which was about Natalie Dessay's production of the opera... I just remember sobbing by the end—'Mom, this is really what I want to do.'"

Raiford grew up in a musical home. Living in New York City, both her parents were classical singers. Her father, Steve Raiford, sang tenor with New York City Opera and New York Grand Opera; her mother, Judith Pannill Raiford, performed as a soloist with choral, orchestral, and chamber ensembles. It was natural that their daughter Abigail fall into music as well.

When Raiford was nine years old, her parents boldly decided to move from New York City to Tulsa, Oklahoma. But this was only the beginning of Raiford's journey as a musician. She was very involved in both band and choir; she served as drum major for three years in the marching band and as a flute player. In choir, she was a six-year all-state and all-district choir member. Her mother had accepted a position as music faculty at the University of Tulsa, where Raiford later applied—and was accepted—as a Vocal Performance major. It was there that she initiated into the Sigma Gamma



chapter of Sigma Alpha Iota.

When it came time to apply for grad school, Raiford really wanted to broaden her horizons beyond Oklahoma. After applying at eleven schools across the country, and receiving auditions at several of them, she returned to her roots in New York City. At the Mannes School of Music, she earned a Master of Music in Vocal Performance under the tutelage of Amy Burton. Within six months of graduating in 2019, her career had already taken off—she was accepted as an Apprentice Artist with the Sarasota Opera. But when 2020 hit, life completely changed. The COVID-19 pandemic cut the season short, canceling the

last week of performances. But Raiford has a positive attitude about the sudden change in plans. "I appreciated having the time to just figure things out and set myself up well," she says. In that time, she built her website and social media presence, making plans for when the stage would open again. When performances began again in 2021, the Sarasota Opera invited her back as a resident artist. She returned to sing the role of Second Witch and covered the lead role of Belinda in *Dido and Aeneas*.

In the years that followed, she sang Olympia in Davies' *Pinocchio* and Despina in *Così fan tutte* with the St. Petersburg Opera Company; she was a Bonfils-Stanton Studio Artist at the Central City Opera in Colorado; she covered the role of Giulietta in Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* with Teatro Nuovo. She started working with a new teacher during this time as well, Virginia Grasso, which she says "kickstarted such a good period in [her] career." The industry agrees—Raiford has received numerous awards and recognitions over the past five years, including the Opera Index Award from the Opera Index Vocal Competition; an Encouragement Award at the Camille Colato Awards; and was first place and "audience favorite" at Opera Tampa's D'Angelo Young Artist Vocal Competition. But the shining moment in her career to date was

being a finalist in the Metropolitan Opera's Laffont Competition.

According to the Metropolitan Opera, the Laffont Competition "is designed to discover promising young opera singers and assist in the development of their careers." It's open to singers from ages 21–30, so Raiford knew the window of opportunity was short. "I didn't really feel ready to start applying until I was twenty-five," she admits. Participation used to be first come, first serve, but they switched to a prescreening process the year she started to apply—which she didn't pass the first couple times. But in subsequent years, she won the Tulsa District and then fourth place at Midwest Regionals. It wasn't until 2025, the year she was to turn 30, that Raiford made it to the semi-finals in New York.

She recalls going backstage at the Met for semi-finals, which was three days after her thirtieth birthday. "I had been to the Met once before through the stage door for a competition, but hadn't been to the rehearsal halls or checked anything out backstage." When she was younger, Raiford had watched *The Audition* more times than she can remember. This documentary follows the Metropolitan Opera's National Council Auditions—the competition's name at the time—from semi-finals to the finals. "I wanted that experience so badly!" she says. She remembers thinking the night of the semi-finals, "This is my last year to do it. I really want this to happen."

Her childhood wish would come true: Raiford advanced to the finals in the Laffont Competition.

Finals week was an experience she'll never forget. She had the opportunity to work one-on-one with everyone there, from coaching, styling, and connecting with the other finalists. She recalls being one of the first performers to arrive the day of the concert, and just walking the hallway by herself to her own dressing room—with her own name plaque on the door. On her way to rehearsal, she heard "the Musetta laugh" from *La Bohème* coming from the stage. "Wow," she remembers thinking. "I am at the Met!" It was all these details that made the experience real. Another memorable moment was during the actual performance: Raiford's longtime coach, Doug Han, was in the audience. The moment the stage lights

came on, and she was visible on stage, she heard his enthusiastic "Brava!" from the balcony. It was a voice she could never forget. "Being at the Met was such a powerful experience and changed my life in so many ways," Raiford says. "I've met some wonderful people through it, and done some really great work from it. Ever since then, I've been going, going, going!"

For anyone considering a career in opera, Raiford says, "If you're just getting started, and you're seeing how you feel about it, listen to as much opera as you can!" Start with modern operas from the 2020s and work your way back. Recordings exist from the pre-microphone era, and while those recordings are primitive, you can still pick up on things and trace the origin of the genre. It's also essential to find a team of people to support you, both friends and teachers, to guide you in the right direction. And most important—do your translations early on! If it's not in your native language, going word by word is essential to understand the work. It helps to learn the music faster, and absorb into the body and brain better. For Raiford, this has worked every time.

The question of "what's next?" is more a "what's *now*?" Immediately after her experience at the Metropolitan Opera, she made her Carnegie Hall debut as soprano soloist in Taylor Scott Davis's *Magnificat*. She got second place at the Jensen Foundation Competition, and fourth place from the Giulio Gari Foundation. She returned to Teatro Nuovo to sing Lisa in Bellini's *La Sonnambula*, to wide acclaim from The New York Times and OperaWire, among others. She premiered White Snake Project's newly-commissioned opera *White Raven, Black Dove*, originating the role of Peristeri. While she was still with White Snake Project, the Met asked her to return for a two-week workshop of a new opera they were commissioning. She has traveled to New York, Boston, Maine, Florida, and Philadelphia, will return to the Tulsa Opera in the spring, and will spend this coming summer in San



As *The Farmer in The Seasons*,
Opera Philadelphia, 2025
Steven Pisano, photo

"The soprano Abigail Raiford, in the often overlooked role of Lisa, was the standout on Sunday. Silvery and resonant, her voice could easily be heard above the chorus."

—The New York Times —

"Soprano Abigail Raiford sang with ravishing sonority and a beautiful sheen, offering proof that Bellini doesn't always need to be sung softly and supplely."

— NJArts —

"Raiford displays a powerful, luxurious soprano voice, as well as a wonderfully comic way of weeping, as the woebegone Elvira."

— Tulsa World —

Francisco at the Merola Opera Program. From her dreams of opera in high school, to the Metropolitan Opera competition, Raiford only has bigger and grander plans for the future.

Abigail Raiford continues to be an active SAI member with the New York Alumnae Chapter. She is a recipient of the Sword of Honor, Rose of Honor, Collegiate Honor Award, and the Career Performance Grant. To follow her career and learn more, visit her at www.abigailraifordsoprano.com and on Facebook and Instagram at [@abigailraifordsoprano](https://www.instagram.com/abigailraifordsoprano).