

HEAD BANG



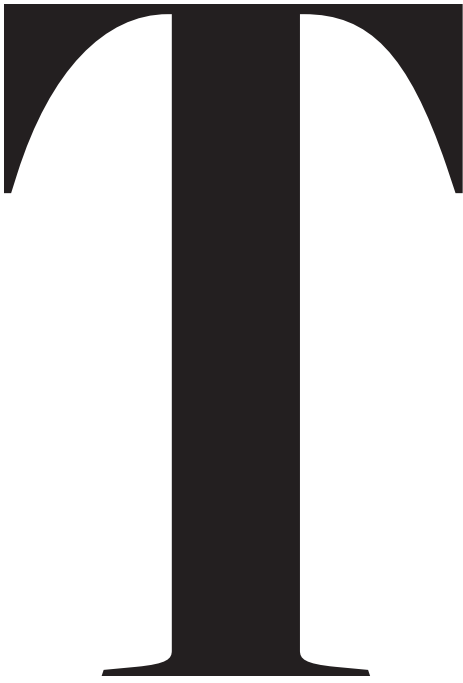
The divide between heavy-metal music and classical opera isn't insurmountable for OU voice professor Joel Burcham.

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN

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THE UNLIKELY CONVERGENCE OF ROCK GUITARS, MTV and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart led to Joel Burcham becoming a tenor, a teacher and a heavy-metal composer. Whether it's the screaming, energetic guitars of *Pour Some Sugar on Me* by Def Leppard or the dark drama of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the University of Oklahoma associate professor of voice and opera coach says the combination of seemingly disparate influences shaped him from an early age.

"I wanted to be a professional musician ever since I could remember, especially a guitarist," he says. "I thought that over-driven rock guitar was the coolest music I had ever heard. It was exhilarating. Whether my parents loved it or not—and they didn't—I did. And next to the

operatic classical voice, I think it is still the coolest."

As a 1980s kid growing up in the heart of Illinois farm country, Burcham idolized the guitar gods of heavy metal bands like Quiet Riot and Metallica. He immersed himself in rock music, listening to metal on the radio, watching music videos on MTV, and playing cassette tapes he received via a monthly club subscription. He envisioned himself one day fronting his own band; on lead guitar, of course.

"My love of music is directly linked to hard rock and heavy metal because I heard that first," he explains. "I was a hyperactive kid, and the hyper-energy of this music matched my own as a child, as well as my musical skill set and aspirations to be a performer."

When he saw the movie "Amadeus" in 1984, Burcham says he was transformed. Loosely based on the life of Mozart as told by jealous fellow composer Antonio Salieri, the Academy Award-winning period drama tells the story of a bitter rivalry set to Mozart's music.

"That movie changed my life," he says. "Mozart's works came alive and made classical music accessible to me. After that, I went on a classical music binge. I wanted to be an opera star."

Burcham's dream of fronting a rock 'n' roll band was put on hold. He became a front man of a different sort as a classical opera performer.

Sooners may have heard him singing incredible renditions of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at various sporting events, performing in operas staged at OU, and with the Oklahoma City-based Painted Sky Opera. In addition, Burcham has sung numerous roles

around the United States, including for the Utah Opera, Colorado's Central City Opera, Opera Omaha in Nebraska, Madison Opera in Wisconsin, and Tennessee's Knoxville Opera. He is also a prolific concert soloist and recitalist. His operatic repertoire is vast, and he speaks German, French and Italian.

Burcham also writes, performs and records original heavy-metal compositions under the name "Thlipsis" and has served as a vocal coach for local Oklahoma heavy-metal bands such as Locust Grove, Sign of Lies and Perseus.

This future balancing act between opera and rock wasn't always obvious. Burcham studied piano, sang in choirs and participated in school musicals while growing up. After earning both a bachelor's and master's degree in vocal performance, he spent two years as a music teacher for mental health facilities.

"I found the work to be exhilarating," he says. "However, the amount of paperwork you have to do in that field drained my enthusiasm and I knew I couldn't do it for a living"

Burcham pursued a doctorate in musical performance at the University of Wisconsin. During a residency with the Utah Opera and Utah Symphony, he paused his doctoral program for a taste of the sacrifices required to become a professional opera singer.

"At that point, I did not like singing because of what it was costing me in my personal life," he says. "I was married and knew I wanted a family. Opera life is lived out of suitcases on the road. I realized then the doors that have consistently opened for me have been in academia, so I returned to Wisconsin to finish my degree."

After six years teaching at the University of Colorado, Burcham arrived at OU in 2013. A decade later, he still loves his job. There's student recruitment; weekly, individual lessons with 15 students; plus a one-hour studio class, during which voice majors gather to perform and critique each other.

Burcham feels a great sense of fulfillment watching his students grow as they adapt his teaching methods and techniques to their voices. "There are tenors I've taught who are better than me, and I take great satisfaction when they do bigger things, as well."

First-year doctoral student and tenor Matthew Corcoran will be apprenticing this summer at the world-famous Santa Fe Opera, serving as an understudy for the lead role of Cavaradossi in "Tosca" by Giacomo Puccini.

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Burcham stars as Cavaradossi in the Painted Sky Opera production of "Tosca."

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"I would not have this huge opportunity without Dr. Burcham," says Corcoran, a Lowell, Mass., native. "He is on par with the best in the profession due to his knowledge, passion and love for teaching. Dr. Burcham has a way of conveying concepts and speaking to students that is respectful and helpful. Classical music is like Bordeaux wine. All the aromas and flavors develop—much like the voice—with age, and he is very skilled at teaching me how to shift what my voice is capable of doing."


Kayla Marshall, a Midwest City, Okla., master's student in musicology, recalls her first voice lesson. After a few scales, Burcham suggested her range was that of a coloratura soprano, the highest of all vocal ranges, rather than the soprano Marshall thought she was.

"I remember when I disagreed, he told me he was the professor, then handed me a book to read about it," she says. "He was right. Dr. B has a lot of respect for his students. When it's time for class, he usually has a grasp on how your day is going. Sometimes he says, 'We just need to sing.' I trust him, and he is preparing us to be as successful as humanly possible."

Burcham also gets to share his love for rock with OU students. He teaches a survey course, "Music in the Rock Era: Heavy Metal," geared toward non-music majors, and has inspired like-minded fans such as Corcoran.

"The best singers can do many different styles, and a well-rounded musician can change the timbre of their voice," Corcoran says. "There are different techniques used in death-metal screams, for example, that I can do."

Burcham still maintains hope that he can make a mark in the rock world, just as he has in opera. He continues to write and record rock and metal music and has plans to seek grant funding to produce an album, adding even more diversity to the OU School of Music and its voice program.

"The thrill I get from classical music and high-energy rock and metal is the same," he says. "They are both loud and, as a natural extrovert, the energy of both matches my personality—I get chills across my entire body and attack my operatic singing and training as if I really was a rock guitarist." 

Susan Grossman is senior program officer for Kirkpatrick Foundation in Oklahoma City and a freelance writer who lives in Norman, Okla.



Left: Burcham in "Le Tragédie de Carmen," produced by Painted Sky Opera.

Above: Joel Burcham teaching the OU course, "Music in the Rock Era: Heavy Metal."

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