



Expat Michèle Crider on Living Abroad

by Kathy Kuczka

American soprano Michèle Crider now makes her home in Switzerland while managing an international career. Read about the obstacles she faced after first moving to Europe and what advice she has for singers considering the move now.

Born in Quincy, Illinois as the ninth of 10 children, Michèle Crider started singing as a toddler in church. Today, she is a world-renowned dramatic soprano singing in opera houses around the globe. Audiences at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and La Scala in Milan—as well as the state operas houses in Vienna, Munich, Berlin, and Hamburg—to name a few, have had the opportunity to hear and see Crider perform signature roles such as Aida, Amelia, Cio-Cio-San, and Tosca.

She also enjoys success on the concert stage, appearing with orchestras including the London Symphony, Vienna Philharmonic, and the National Orchestra of Paris.

Crider studied voice at the University of Iowa and attended the Zurich Opera Studio. Today she lives in Switzerland with her husband and two daughters.

In this interview, she talks about how persistence partnered with hard work and a little luck has blossomed into a prolific career.

After your studies at the University of Iowa, you came to the Zurich Opera House. What was it like coming to Europe to live?

The first day I arrived in Zurich, I thought, “I’m not going to make it over here.” I was in tears over learning the language. Then a friend said, “You can quit and go home or you can put yourself to work and learn this language.” And since I’m not a quitter, I learned.

That wasn’t the last time your persistence was challenged.

I stayed in Zurich after that year and auditioned, 17 times—no job, no job. I came back to the States and said, “I don’t want to sing anymore.” I had done

a masterclass with a teacher when I was at the University of Iowa, and my mother phoned her in Indiana and told her I wanted to quit singing, and the teacher said, “She may not do that. She needs to be on a plane here by the weekend.” At the same time, the teacher entered me in the Geneva International Music Competition. And she worked with me every single day. I stayed with her for two weeks, passed through the first round, and went on to win the competition. After that, I returned to Europe.

And that created a natural transition to your career on the European stage. A lot of singers choose to move here to audition with the hopes of finding full-time work. Is that a good idea?

There are more opportunities here, more opera houses—but more people to fill those roles and more competition. With the East open, you’ve got great

singers coming from there, waiting for opportunities. I think it's great because it makes you a better singer. If you get your foot in the door and you continue to sing well, you can do it. It's always wonderful if you have a great and supportive agent behind you, but you have to sell yourself. They can only do so much. Most singers have more than one agent. Wherever the job comes from, the important thing is that you're working.

As a performer, do you sense more governmental support for the arts in Europe than in the U.S.?

You know I'm not sure how many houses are subsidized in the U.S. Most in Europe have taken a grave turn. It's become quite tight all over. I think when the government has so many demands, one of the first programs to be cut is the arts.

You have two children and you are singing major opera roles all over the world. How do you manage that?

I have a very good support system!

Do you encourage their musicianship?

My daughters are very musical, and I'm very proud of that fact.

You are well known for your roles as Aida and Amelia—you have performed those dozens of times. How do you deliver the same role again and again in a way that's interesting both to you and to the audience?

I appreciate the opportunity that I have to do my interpretation. You must learn how to sing every piece in different ways. You do sing what the composer has written—but, for example, I've been singing "Un ballo" for many years now and have to keep reinventing it, and this is good for me.

What do you do to keep your voice in shape?

I vocalize every day and still take voice lessons. When I'm on the road, I vocalize in the hotel room. On performance days, I try to get to the theater early so that I can

warm up my voice and body completely. I make a recording for every time I sing, for every time I open my mouth. Because who has the most critical ears? You, the singer. How else do you learn? You have to listen.

How do you prepare for a performance?

I try to keep to myself. I won't answer the phone. There are too many distractions. You may have to isolate yourself. Even a taxi ride from the airport can throw you for a loop.

Was there a particular performance you consider a turning point in your career?

I've had many turning points, but one in particular. I was in a fest position in the Stadttheater St. Gallen in Switzerland, and I sang "Un ballo" on a Sunday. I got a call Monday morning from the Vienna State Opera House. They said, "We know you sang 'Un ballo' last night, but would you consider singing it again?" I said, "Sure,

Crider as Amelia, Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*, Metropolitan Opera, 2007



photo by Beatrix Schiller/Metropolitan Opera

Crider's Holiday Perspective



What is it like spending holidays on the road, in Europe as an American, and how do you cope with that?

As an American living in Europe during the holiday season, most of the time I'm traveling. Sometimes it is a bit hectic to arrange things or to try and provide the necessary presents, for example, for Christmas or birthdays. Christmas is celebrated on December 24 in most European countries. I usually perform on December 23 and arrive home on December 24. I prepare Christmas and enjoy my short visit with my family, because mostly I have to perform again on the evening of December 26. It is a very lonely time of year to be away from your family and friends. If I must stay where I work because of a tight working schedule or because of great distances, my family comes to visit me.

Do you have a favorite holiday memory to share?

I had the wonderful opportunity to sing at the marvelous Metropolitan Opera House, as I have done in years past, but this one was special. It was Christmas time! I was in my great rehearsal stress, in the production of *A Masked Ball* and thinking of preparations for Santa Claus for my family who was arriving on December 23. I wanted to have everything perfect for them: Christmas tree decorated, presents wrapped, cookies baked—and not forgetting the turkey! All alone to manage, I thought, "I will do all this after the opening performance."

So much to do and, of course, on top of it I got the flu. After the final dress rehearsal I went to the doctor to receive the necessary medicine. On my day off, I stayed in bed and then opened the next evening. It went well. Only a few days left for preparing for Santa Claus. I managed it just in time with my last bit of strength. My family arrived on the morning of December 23, and I heard my girls calling, "Mama!" Joy filled my heart, and I forgot all the stress. After performing on December 24, we all celebrated a true American Christmas on December 25.



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anytime." They said, "How about tonight?" I said, "Tonight?"

Their singer was sick. I was in bed having my coffee. I had to take a taxi to the airport in Zurich. I got there and the plane had already left. I was set to take the next one at 2 p.m., but it was canceled. The next plane was leaving at 4 p.m. It flew to Geneva and then to Vienna. I arrived in Vienna at 6:10 p.m., and the opera started at 7:30 p.m. I got there and a police car rushed me to the opera house. I thought, "No one will ever believe this."

We got to the opera house. I went upstairs and they started piling on the blonde wig, and the costume was too big and the shoes were too small. They showed me the picture of the stage. I went to the bathroom and warmed up for about six or seven minutes. I talked to the director to find out if we had cuts and if we had a Riccardo or a Gustavo—of course, the tenor's name changes if it's the Swedish version. And we went on. For every scene, they came up to me with a picture [of the set]. I sang, and it was great—absolutely fabulous. I took the curtain call and the applause was overwhelming. I thought, "This is cool!" That's how I made my Vienna debut and got hired for the next season.

So, it helps to be flexible and to remain calm—no matter what the circumstance.

As a great singer once said, when you're out on the stage there is no one who can help you at this moment. Your technique is there to support you. Sometimes when you're sick, you rely on your technique, and that's OK. That's why you have it.

At the core of your repertoire are the great Verdi roles. It's easy as a young singer to get excited about performing the heavier rep.

The problem that we all have is that we want to make our voices bigger than they are. We're going to fill the room. We want to show them how we sing. At the end of the day, we're only pushing against the instrument and the body, and it's really not interesting. By doing that, you're breaking your instrument. You have to be kind to yourself, and your instrument is a reflection of you. Young talents are starting out singing Tannhäuser and Isolde at 22 years old.

You must protect your instrument to give yourself the chance to learn your technique and feel comfortable with the instrument and with yourself. Know what you can do and start your career. So many singers don't take that time and they learn about it too late and have to regroup every five years. For females especially, your body is constantly changing and you really have to be in tune with what's going on in your body.

Speaking of the body, it seems that now more than ever in opera size matters.

You have to decide what your love is and what your passion is. Is it worth not being hired to do the production because of your size? I have decided to lose weight and I feel wonderful. It was important for me to do so because it makes singing much

Crider with singer and writer Kathy Kuczka



easier. Do it for yourself! I also have two children. I want to be around and active for them as long as possible.

When you're crossing the Met stage doing Aida and she goes around the back of the stage and climbs the steps, you have

to come down and be fit to sing an aria. Those are all elements you don't think about. I applaud everyone who can do this job, because it's a very difficult and demanding one, but very gratifying.

What career advice do you have for today's classical singers?

If you had to learn everything, it would be too hard. If you're gifted—and there are some that are just born to do this job—then follow the road map. God has a plan for us all.

Read more about Michèle Crider, including upcoming performances, at her website: www.michele-crider.com.

Kathy Kuczka is the director of music and worship at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church in Alpharetta, Georgia. An award-winning journalist, she spent years covering news for CNN. As an actress and a singer, she participated in the American Institute for Musical Studies in 2008 in Graz, Austria. She is a freelance writer and contributes regularly to several travel, religion, and arts publications.



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