

# Her Voice Shall Be Heard

NADINE SIERRA, KNOWN AROUND THE WORLD FOR HER PRODIGIOUS TALENT, REFLECTS ON HER RISE AS AN AWARD-WINNING SOPRANO AND THE STIGMAS SURROUNDING OPERA

*By Kevin Kaminski*

As strange as it might sound, given that she's one of the world's most acclaimed sopranos, Nadine Sierra has found her voice. At age 32, the international opera star born and raised in Fort Lauderdale (her family later moved to Delray Beach so that she could attend Dreyfoos School of the Arts in West Palm Beach) has exceeded the promise attached to the accolades and accomplishments of her teens and 20s.

She's no longer just the youngest winner of the Marilyn Horne Foundation Vocal Competition (2007) and the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions (2009). Or the first-prize winner of the Neue Stimmen competition in Germany (2013) or the recipient of the Beverly Sills Artists Award (2018).

Sierra is a generational talent who not only can fill concert halls around the world in opera roles written by the likes of Mozart and Verdi, but who isn't afraid to add her voice when she sees wrongs to right and challenges to overcome.

This much became evident during a lengthy conversation with *Lifestyle* during which Sierra spoke out about issues plaguing her industry, concerns that were accentuated during the coronavirus pandemic. Among them, contractual clauses that relieve opera houses of paying artists when events are cancelled—even if the performers have incurred weeks of travel, rehearsal and living expenses.

It's clear, listening to her confident, empowered tone, that Sierra has come into her own. Despite a summer bout with COVID-19 (her mother and sister also tested positive) that left her out of breath and with a flutter in her chest connected to the mitral valve stenosis she's had since birth—both of which took months to disappear—and the devastating toll that the pandemic has taken on the arts, Sierra remains upbeat and optimistic.

On the eve of her first South Florida performance since taking the stage







**VOICE OF AN ANGEL:** Sierra performing (here and below) in New York at the Viennese Opera Ball in 2019

with Andrea Bocelli in Miami on Valentine's Day 2017—she's kicking off Festival of the Arts Boca (see sidebar) next month—Sierra spoke thoughtfully and passionately about her journey and her genre.

**Your grandmother was a talented young opera singer in Lisbon, but her father rejected those pursuits. Can you share that story and why it's so important to your career?**

My mother grew up seeing that my grandma regretted never having pursued her dream because, yes, my great-great grandfather wouldn't allow her. He felt that it wasn't an appropriate line of work for a woman. In those days, [female] entertainers had the stereotype of being, on the side, like a call girl or prostitute. And being victimized, mostly sexually, by men. So, I can understand where my great-great grandfather was coming from; he didn't want that for my grandma. He wanted her to be treated with respect, to have a husband and security.

But, yes, she regretted it. Not only did she regret never doing anything to challenge her talent, but she never had the chance to grow into her talent.

So, when I was 5 and already showing these huge signs of wanting to be a performer and always singing around the house, my mother made a promise. She would never do what my great-great grandfather did to her mother. She didn't [want her daughter] to always have that regret. I'm so, so thankful that she did that for me, because it allowed this perfect storm to take place in my life. And it shaped my life for the better.

I feel such sympathy and empathy for my grandmother for having lived a life without [performing]. But I'm thankful that before she passed away, about 11 years ago, she at least got to see the beginnings of my development in this career. She was so proud of my mother for

putting such belief and support and encouragement in me, so that I could live my dream—which was the same as her dream.

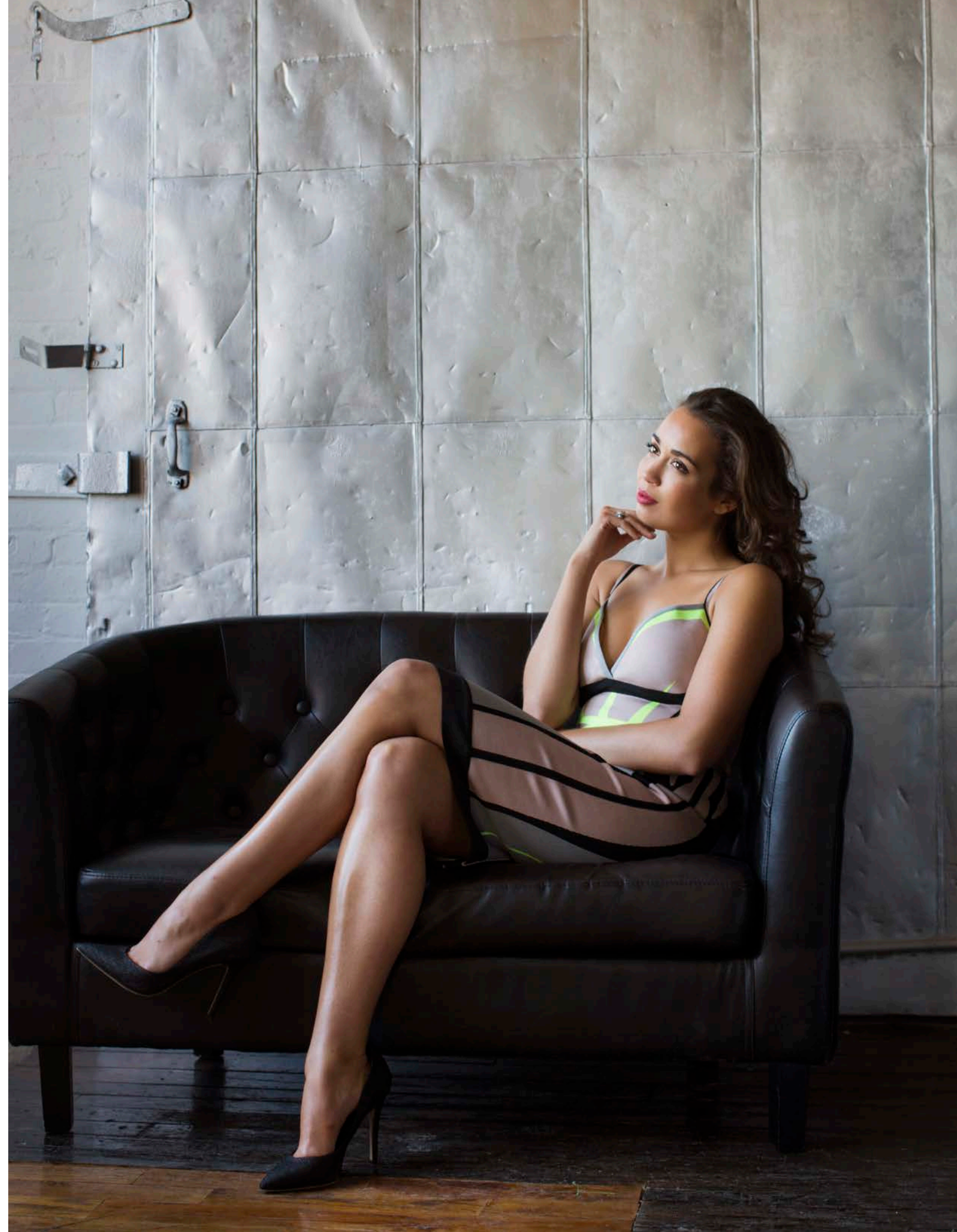
**As the story goes, your mom brought home a VHS copy of Giacomo Puccini's *La bohème* when you were a child. In retrospect, what was it about that opera that had such an impact?**

*La bohème* is like the quintessential introduction to what opera is all about, which is deep human emotions, how to deal with them, and how music can enhance, theatrically, what a person watching and listening feels for the characters. Also, it's how some of those events can be relatable; with *La bohème*, it's about being poor and struggling without the resources to help the people you love.

When my mom showed me that VHS, I felt like I literally woke up. Not just artistically, but as a human, because I saw so much beauty and truth to what that art form was. And I had to have it, no matter what it took, no matter how hard it was. I didn't care.

My mom warned me when I told her I needed to become an opera singer. She explained that I was going to have to sacrifice a lot of myself for the art form—because it's hard. It's the vocal equivalent of what ballet is to dance. She also knew that I'd probably have to sacrifice friendships and relationships, maybe even having kids. She knew all that was in my future if being an opera singer was my destiny.

But I'm totally grateful for her introducing me to opera





and waking me up that way. To this day, I feel so alive. If I lost that excitement at some point, or if I were to lose it in the future, I would stop. I wouldn't sing for the money or for the acclaim. That never really interested me. ... I craved the creativity part of it and the idea of, maybe, one day, reaching somebody watching me or listening to me the same way that VHS reached out to me.

**Were you listening to other forms of music as a youngster, or did you have tunnel vision about opera?**

I was interested in all forms of music. I was a huge Spice Girls fan when I was around 10. I was obsessed with Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey. But opera was like this special little gem that I somehow naturally understood. With pop and R&B, those aren't genres I could sing and feel comfortable. I'd feel out of my element. With opera, I felt like I belonged, like I fit in finally.

And I got bullied in [middle] school because of it. You know, kids were like, "Why do you like that? That's for old people. Ew, opera, it's so boring." Sometimes I felt bad because I thought, you know, maybe I'm a loser. Maybe I'm a dork because I like opera.

There were times I cried to my mom; I'd tell her these kids were making fun of me. And she said, "Listen, they might make fun of you now. But later, when you've developed, and you've found happiness in this pursuit, you're going to be the one laughing—because you'll have found joy in something that you can make a career out of."

And she was right.

**Coming out of those challenging middle school years, how important was it to be surrounded by other creatives at Dreyfoos School of the Arts?**

When I got to Dreyfoos, I literally felt relaxed. After the bullying, I felt like I finally was just a freak among freaks. You know what I mean? Everybody at Dreyfoos was so dedicated to their own individual



**When my mom showed me [a video of *La bohème* as a child], I felt like I literally woke up ... because I saw so much beauty and truth to what that art form was.**

**And I had to have it, no matter what it took, no matter how hard it was.**

thing, whether they were in communications or learning about film or theater or painting or sculpture. Whatever it was, people were in their own element—and they were so proud of it.

So, I felt like I could just be. I didn't feel ashamed. My friends were fascinated with what I did instead of judging me for it. ... On top of that, Dreyfoos was next door to Palm Beach Opera, and I would have after-school activities there and rehearsals. So, yes, I felt like I finally found a place where I could not only be a freak but be part of the circus.

**What is inherent to opera that produces such an emotional reaction in people?**

Let's just talk about the human voice. We are a form that doesn't use anything to amplify or affect the voice. We are the only source of how the sound itself is going to be produced, how it's going to come out, and how it's going to last throughout a performance. So, it's a very, very physically active way of producing music.

It's almost like primitive. Even being an audience member and seeing my colleagues, it's an unbelievable phenomenon to realize a person is capable of doing that. Of having the strength and courage to do that as a career. It's like a superhuman kind of thing.

I always think about that when I watch ballet dancers. How can you dedicate your whole life, every cell and fiber of your human body, to such a blood-sweat-tears kind of career? And yet, it looks so effortless and so beautiful.

And I think that's how people see opera singers a little bit. We're these vessels that, no matter what is happening around us, it's our job to keep that kind of superhuman ability going. And make it look easy. Make it look believable.

**Your voice is everything. What do you do to take care of it and exercise that muscle between performances?**

I've been with my voice teacher and my vocal coach for 19 years, since I was about 13. So, there's always been this constant, this trust between student and mentor. I've made sure to keep up those relationships because I know that they're the things that not only keep me singing well but singing even better. I never close myself off to learning just because I think I've reached *that level* and I don't need to learn anymore. That's quite stupid and very arrogant.

I'm also an avid gym goer, and I try to keep myself physically fit. I try to eat well. And I try to live happily. So, I guess it's healthy living combined with a healthy mentality.

**Looking back, is there a performance or a period of performing where you realized your life was about to change?**

It wasn't until the end of 2015 and into 2016. I had two huge debuts, one after the other. The first was my debut at the [Metropolitan Opera House in New York]. And then, early in 2016, I had my debut in Milan, Italy at *Teatro alla Scala* [La Scala]. I was doing the same role for both; I was singing Gilda in *Rigoletto*.

It was La Scala, especially, where I felt like my life had changed. I was the only American singing an Italian role in that production—and, of course, singing in a Verdi opera. Verdi, for the Italians, is a god. I was young, and I was scared. At La Scala, they'll boo performers if they don't like you. I had to focus on the idea that, OK, Nadine, if you just do what you love, and give it to the people with love, you'll get back something very, very precious. And that's exactly what happened.

It wasn't just the reaction to the performance. It was the experience. Internally, I felt the change within myself because it was so overwhelmingly beautiful. And I learned so much from that experience.

**Where have been your favorite places to perform—and what do they add to a performance?**

The Met [in New York] because

of the way it feels to sing in that theater. I always describe it as like you're singing in outer space. Because when you're on stage, and the lights are on you in this ginormous theater, you can't see anything past the lip of the stage. It feels like you're singing into infinity. That feeling is just incredible; it's an out-of-body experience.

With Paris Opera, it's because of the people, the audience. They are so into opera. Almost every performance I've ever sung in Paris, the show has been sold out. And that support, that energy you receive from the performer's perspective, it's so uplifting, and it gives so much life. ... The energy is like a drug. We get that drug from the people watching, and we want to give it back. That's what live performance is all about.

As for La Scala, it's also because of the unbelievable appreciation—and almost cult following—that goes with opera and audience. Having that intense appreciation for an art form that you've dedicated your whole life to? You can't put a price on that.

**You've spoken with great passion about breaking stigmas and developing the next generation of opera enthusiasts. How do you cultivate fresh interest when the perception is that it's tied to an affluent lifestyle and an older fan base?**

I've talked to a lot of people who will say opera is for an elitist group. It's only for the very wealthy, and even for only a certain race of people. But even pre-COVID, I felt that opera and classical music could be an art form for everybody.

Maybe my generation and the generation before me will be the ones who break down those barriers. We've been trying. Especially with my own fan base—and I've noticed a lot of them are quite young, actually—I've tried to keep myself, as an artist and as an individual, humble and relatable. I want them to know that even in an art form where everything seems glamorous

and expensive, the artists themselves are very down to earth. And they struggle, just like any other human being.

It takes time to convince people psychologically that opera isn't just for a particular group of people, and to not feel intimidated by it. And now, with COVID, it's just another challenge in that department.

**Why are the arts so important to the fabric of a community?**

Arts culture isn't just a way to satisfy a need for entertainment. It's another form of education—whether it's learning about our history, or [developing] an appreciation for creativity and where that comes from. It's about continuing to grow as human beings.

Without that culture behind us, it's like you lose a part of your humanity. You lose a certain joy. And we humans need that.

## Festival of the Arts Boca

The 15th incarnation of this annual cultural showcase (March 6-14) promises virtual performances by artists with Florida connections from locations all over Boca Raton. Each program will stream once on the Festival of the Arts website ([festivalboca.org](http://festivalboca.org)). Among the highlights:

- **March 6:** The festival kicks off with a performance at Boca Raton Airport by internationally renowned soprano **Nadine Sierra** and friends.
- **March 7:** Grammy-winning violinist **James Ehnes** (and friends) will perform from the Boca Raton Innovation Campus.
- **March 8:** Admiral **James Stavridis**, a retired four-star U.S. Naval officer, will talk about leadership during an interactive Zoom discussion.
- **March 9:** **Bruce Feiler**, author of seven New York Times bestsellers, will have an interactive discussion about his latest book, *Life Is In The Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age*.
- **March 13:** The Festival of the Arts Boca All-Stars, featuring musicians from the **Festival Orchestra** led by music director **Constantine Kitsopoulos**, will perform.
- **March 14:** The Festival closes with Grammy-winning jazz flutist **Nestor Torres** and his band at the Boca Raton Resort & Club.