

GUEST: QUINN KELSEY
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At the ‘ripe old age’ of thirty, Hawaii born-and-raised Quinn Kelsey has grabbed the ‘brass ring’ in the opera world—a major role at the New York Metropolitan Opera. A baritone, Quinn played Schaunard in the Met’s production of perhaps the most beloved opera of all time—Puccini’s *La Boheme*—which also reached a nation-wide audience on PBS’s “Great Performances At The Met.” It is just one of the highlights of a whirlwind career for the humble, soft-spoken, Native Hawaiian who attended Stevenson Middle School and the UH Lab School in Honolulu. We’ll sit down and chat with Quinn Kelsey about his journey from Manoa to the Met—next.

Aloha no, I’m Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. This episode of *Long Story Short* features Quinn Kelsey, who’s a rising star in the intensely competitive world of opera. Critics have described his voice as “a beautiful instrument notable for its flexibility and warmth” with a “honeyed timbre and an ability to plumb expressive depths”. Growing up in Honolulu, Quinn seemed destined to become an opera star. Both of his parents, Chris and Debbie Kelsey, are accomplished singers who performed in many Hawaii Opera Theatre productions. For Quinn, an interest in music was a given—a natural part of childhood.”

My folks actually met, singing a duet at the University. And uh, uh, I- I always love to say, you know, be able to brag and say, Oh, uh, my- my- my folks met in music, and you know, I get- I get certain kinds of music from my father, and certain kinds of music from my mother. And so-

How does it break down?

Um, well õ my- my mother studied- studied uh, piano, and- and she was the one who listened to a lot of classical music, and um, sang in church. And so I guess everything else, I got from Dad; um, folk and rock, and- and uh õ and um, and then, you know, I guess- I guess my general appreciation for music sort of- sort of um õ you know, smashed together with those two.

What was—what do you—what was your—were your parents singing when they met?

Oh, shucks. Was it Lei Aloha Lei Makamae, I think? Yeah; one that they still do. So [chuckle] there’s a lot of history in that. [chuckle]

So was the—the music appreciation for you effortless, or did they have to kinda say, Come on, let’s—let’s do your music now?

No, no; it- it- it was very much effortless. I mean, you know õ we- we are very much the- the- the tight knit family, because- because of our music. My sister and I grew up, and- and our parents together, with music everywhere. My mother was a choir

director, um õ she still. she. she. she is a choir director um, at the uh, at the Laboratory School, and she ha. sheç also a choir director at a Baptist church in Manoa. So õ as. as soon as my sister and I could. could carry a tune, it was, Oh, okay, now, now come and join Momç choir, or go. you know, go and sing there. And õ and um õ and my father sort of did that too. He. he was a member of. of the adult choir at my motherç church. And um õ you know, and then opera chorus came along, and my mother was the first one to go do it, because sheç the one who had the background. And. and then she sort of dragged my father into it. And um, as soon as my sister and I were old enough, we joined the chorus as well. And õ music was just õ it was. it was so common, common sense for us, you know, that we didnç think twice about it.

Any particular kind of music you liked when you were younger?

No, uh, you know, I. I õ I. I sort of pride myself when I. when I say that my. my type. my tastes were pretty eclectic from. from a very young age. Um õ you know, I õ uh õ definitely lots of Hawaiian music, growing up. You know, I mean, oh, I was talking to my father this morning about the old KCCN jig. jingles, you know, with. with Auntie whatç her name, and you know, chiming the every quarter hour or.

M-hm.

--whatever it was. So it was just õ there was just so much going on that, you know, we. we pretty much ran the gamut of all the different genres in music. And you know, I still enjoy them all. I like to say that õ music ha. music is sort of like a mood, you know, for me. That however Içn feeling at a. at an opportune moment, you know õ parallels with some kinda music. You know, and so thatç. thatç when Iç. Iç listen to õ

Punk rock.

Or something, you know. You know, working out; okay, punk rock and heavy metal. Or õ or õ relax, you know, soft jazz or. or you know, some kinda nice symphonic music. Çause I mean, it. it all just kinda fits into a specific moment.

There's no kinda music you just don't like, just hate to hear it?

Um õ [chuckle] I õ for whatever reason, I just havenç been able to õ get my brain around country western.

Really?

Sorry to say that for people out there who. who really enjoy it. I õ I. I õ I like a lot of different things, and uh, I donç know. I donç know; maybe itç just a specific kind.

But.

Well, it has a lot of themes like opera, you know. Just ... you know, the ... the deep sadness of the human condition.

Youç right; youç right

Lots of emotions.

Sure. So õ I donç know, maybe. maybe I need to give it another try.

[Laughs]

I have to admit that I am a neophyte when it comes to appreciating opera, and Quinn was very patient in explaining the rudiments of the art form to me—things like a singer's range. Quinn is a baritone, so he is considered for certain roles—usually NOT the romantic leads, which are traditionally written for tenors. Range

is not typically a choice one makes—it's something one discovers, and Quinn discovered he was a baritone at that awkward age known as adolescence.

ō it's just that age where the voice kinda sounds funny. It's because, you know, puberty is taking over, and the body's changing. But ō because I'd been singing at such a young age, my ō you know, the whole vocal mechanism ō um, I guess ō uh, began to mature or change earlier...funny story. I was um- there's a- there's a duet that my father and I sing at Christmas. And ō until my voice dropped, I sang at a range that was above his. And that's just what I knew. And somebody recorded it, and then I think the following year, my voice dropped. And so we had to get a new arrangement of the music ō and I- I- I began to get used to singing in the lower range. And then I saw the video, and I was going ō That's just wrong, there's something wrong about that; I don't do that anymore. You know, the- it didn't feel comfortable, because- because my voice had- had made that huge transition. I dropped from a boy soprano, all the way down to probably ō a bass, or a bass baritone, which is pretty low. And I stayed there for a while um, until I started um ō to begin actual, you know, formal training in- in uh, voice techniques and thing.

When did opera come into your consciousness?

M-m ō I guess ō well, um, as I say, my- my father- my father went uh, went into opera chorus um, after my mother; my mother dragged him into it. Um, and so that was about the late 80s. So my sister and I were finishing- were at the end or finishing uh, elementary school. And there just- there wasn't a whole lot of opportunity for us to get into opera. We- we would have expected to just follow Mom and Dad, and go sing with them in the chorus, but we were way too young.

What did you think of it when you heard opera? I mean, for some people, it—it's off-putting, it's hard to understand off the top.

Well, um ō we- we didn't understand everything about it, but- but we understood the music part of it. That oh, this is just music. You know, it's just notes, like everything else we'd do. You know. Um, you know, no, it's- it's not in Hawaiian, no, it's not in English with- you know, with uh, singing a hymn or something, but- but it's still notes. It's still notes, and it's still words, and we'd deal with the words later. But it's still music. And so-

Did you get a sense it was telling a story, or was that to come later?

That sort of came later. It was just that it was music, and it was- that's what we- that's what we knew how to do, and ō everything else- everything else just fell in. I mean, first of all, that it was music, and- and that's what we knew how to do, and so ō you know, it- it uh ō there- I mean, the appreciation for the actual art form came later. But right away, first of all, it was that Mom and Dad are doing it- doing this, so we should do it too.

By the time Quinn was a teenager, he had been exposed to all kinds of music. He had no idea he was destined for a life in the opera, until he experienced it for himself on the big stage.

ō one small realization was um, the first time I stepped on the stage at Blasidell. You know, and before then, you know, the- um, the symphony had always had school programs where all the public schools and all the private schools come in, you know, for a day or two and-

M-m.

--and you know, they play Star Wars, and they play Indiana Jones, and all that kinda stuff. And you go-

M-hm.

--Oh, wow, you know, I know that. And it- and it was- it was so exciting, because here's all this movie music, but it's- you can actually see them playing all the instruments. And um- then that's all I'd ever known of the Blaisdell, was the stage and the way it looked from the house. And- the- first day that- that we were um, we were at the Blaisdell after rehearsing at another hall- you know, to be able to walk out- walk out on the stage, and- take a look at all the scenery and everything, and where we were supposed to be, an- and just to have that perspective, looking out into the audience and remembering, Wow, you know, I used to sit up in the balcony over there, and- and how different it was. And- I don't know; I guess- I guess I was just- uh, from then on, I was hooked.

Didn't get scared of all the people looking at you, and what would happen if you made a mistake; nothing like that?

There- there- there was always- th- there was- there was a lot more of it, definitely, in the beginning. But- but that um- that uh, my sister and I had been- had been in front of audience, my folks and I, you know, we'd all- um, performed in front of people. So it wasn't that much of a- of a problem.

M-hm.

In fact, it was um, for a bunch of years from then on, until- gosh, probably- probably up until about five years ago, um- it was easier to perform in front of thousands of people, than it was to perform- for a group of- twenty or twenty-five.

Because you could see faces in the group of twenty or twenty-five?

Yeah; that was a lot of it. And- and you knew that there were a ton more people out in the Blaisdell, but that you were far enough away. [chuckle] That the open space was- you know, was enough.

M-hm.

So-

Well, when did opera become your number one dream?

Probably- probably at uh- in the middle or towards the- probably in the mid- in the middle of- of- of college. Um, that it was still- it was still sort of uh, just a- a novel- a novelty kinda thing through the end of high school and in the beginning of college, and- and then it- you know- probably about the middle of my undergrad, I- I- I realized that I had to- I had to really decide, well, what am I gonna do?

Were you majoring in vocal performance at that time?

I did. Um, I- I declared my major um, by the- the spring- it was either the spring of my first year, or the fall of my second. Um, I actually tried, because- because music is just, you know, so me, so us, I- I tried- I tried other things. I tried um, I tried visual art. You know, I love-

M-hm.

Um, I did a bunch of that in high school, and I really liked it. I had really great teachers. Um, I tried um, I tried marine biology, because you know, I love looking at fish tanks all day long. I could- yeah; I could do that forever.

[chuckle]

Um, you know, besides the fact that, oh, my gosh, we live in the middle of, you know, the biggest ocean in the world. Um õ I tried uh, I tried õ um õ um õ Hawaiian studies. You know, I have a huge respect and love for for my culture and everything that it's about. And um õ you know, just just to see if there's anything else, because there was a there was a part of õ of going into music that sort of felt like like I was shortchanging myself, that I was just kinda õ slacking, because I knew I knew that I had such a hold on it already.

M-hm.

So I I tried; I tried to just give other things a chance, just see if there was anything else that would that could be as strong as music. And there wasn't.

M-hm.

And so that that's when I said, Okay, you know, let's let's do this, and õ met with my advisor, and that was sort of the beginning of the end, per se.

And when did the opera part of the vocal performance come along?

It it came it came pretty pretty much right away. I mean, there was uh, there was a lot of classical music, besides opera, but that õ you know, there's um, you know, so many of the of the faculty uh, at the music department at the University, um, are are professional musicians themselves. And so there was just no way to to get away from it, you know. And um, until I came to University, I've seen so many of them on stage or in the pit, or backstage, and you know, was already familiar with so many of these folks. And it was just a matter of taking that next step and saying, Okay, this is what I want to do, and you know, finally being able to to um õ take advantage of those connections that I've õ sort of made already, growing up in uh, in opera chorus.

Isolated in the middle of the Pacific, Hawaii is not exactly the first place the world's leading opera companies would think to look for budding young talent. Fortunately for Quinn, Hawaii Opera Theatre created an apprentice program that eventually led Quinn to a job with the Lyric Opera of Chicago.

Um õ well, um, the Hawaii Opera Theatre started õ a program, uh, about the same time that I declared my major at the University. It was a small studio. Um õ I don't know how they were able to to latch onto all the all the list of of professionals that they did, but they did. And they I mean, they brought I õ I went to s the San Francisco program, because I I met them, I met uh õ I met Mark Morash and Rick Harrell. Rick Harrell was the director of of the Merola program in San Francisco at the time. So got to know them. Uh, they they came out uh, two or three summers. Got to know my uh õ my eventual boss at uh, the Chicago the Lyric Opera Chicago apprentice program, Richard Pearlman.

Through here at the Hawaii Opera Theatre?

Through here at the Hawaii Opera Theatre.

One thing led to another, and Quinn now finds himself near the top of the heap. When you hit the big time, were there—were people skeptical about this Hawaiian guy?

Of course. Who is he? You know, we've never heard of him before. You know, looking at my resume and oh, he studied in Hawaii, ooh.

[chuckle]

Oh, and it was it was um, it was refreshing, though. It was it was uh, it was scary, you know, it was it was um oh it was nerve- terribly nerve wracking. But that oh it um oh I guess it- it just oh it really just put- it- it just put this impression on me that, you know, well, you know, this is what you're gonna have to deal with. You know. This is- this is the kinda pressure you're gonna have to oh

The pressure to perform to a very high level, or the—the—the perception that if you're from Hawaii, you—you might not really get this opera thing?

Both; both. You know, that- that people will expect so much more.

M-hm.

You know, because you know, who is this kid, thinking he's gonna come in here and do that? And it wasn't al- it wasn't ever that bad. But th- there was- you know, there was that sort of undercurrent.

But you know, my experience um, with a television station that presents opera performances is that opera buffs are very exacting and discriminating.

M-m.

And uh, they don't have a lot of patience with imperfection. I mean, they—they root for you, but they want real high quality.

Well, they- you know, be- because- because it's- it's just oh you know, not just anybody can do it. You know, and oh and oh you know, I mean, I- I agree. Y- you- you- you want somebody that- you want somebody in the parts singing the roles oh that you can count on. You know, because- because it's not- it's not like getting up oh getting up in front of- in front of, you know, the Saturday night group at- at oh whatever little mom & pop bar or something to- for- for open mic night. You know, this is serious music, and if you do it right oh it's just this beautiful thing, you know. So I- I- I understand that they just- they get really picky, because- because they- they do understand what the possibility is for the outcome.

Quinn is an imposing figure onstage. One critic compared his physique to that of a professional linebacker. I assumed the power of Quinn's voice might have something to do with his build, a big diaphragm controlling his lungs and breathing. A newcomer to opera, I wondered if a large frame is necessary to excel in this field.

Are there any skinny opera singers?

Of course. And-

Who are really good?

And they- they oh [chuckle]. Why are you asking me this kind of question? Um, no, I- I- I know a handful of singers, um, a handful of colleagues who- who are just in really great shape, and they're- they're um oh they're learned- you know, they're- they're developed their technique, you know oh um, utilizing their- you know, their own physique, and-

Doesn't it seem to you—

--it works.

--though, that most are bigger?

Well.

An—and why is that?

Um, I've in in my own experience, uh, with with colleagues, with colleagues who who are, you know, bigger physically, um, because well, that um your body is is tuned to to being able to handle all the the you know, the bulk and the weight. And um you know, that that you have a larger lung capacity, you know, that uh, that your circulatory system has to be able to work to, you know, to provide you know, all the extremities and things with blood, so it's used to, it's used to your body is used to performing in you know, at that physical level. And and so, you know better better lung capacity is a great thing for singers to have. You know, when you when you know that you can have that you have all this extra breath, you know, and it helps it helps um it helps to know that that, well, you can hold this line out a couple more seconds.

M-hm.

--because this this will sound really good, or that you can give a line much more shape because you've got the extra air.

Do you do anything to develop your lung capacity?

Uh, it's it's it's all a part of training. You know, uh, certain kinds of warm ups, um just ways ways of of always making sure that you sing sing things a certain way. And it's just the it's more it's more so the kind of thing that you have to do, that you can't you can't study. I mean, studying studying, yes, in terms of, you know, working on a piece, and and always remembering to to prepare for that one phrase that needs the extra air. But that's that's about it; there's nothing that you can do outside of singing the actual music. But you know, that that uh, we have advantages like that, that uh that a more slimmer body style wouldn't. But I mean, you know, that's not to say that that the that uh, the slimmer person can't sing. You know.

New York City seems to be the home of so many public venues that represent the pinnacle of different performing arts. For the musician there is Carnegie Hall. For the stage actor there is Broadway. For the opera singer, there is the Met.

...the Met holds, what, four thousand people?

Right; about four thousand.

What's that like, facing the Met audience?

It was it uh it was magic. It was magic, uh.

Can you see faces in the crowd?

Some; some, if you know, if you get down close to the edge of the stage and.

Are you really looking, though?

No. But uh I mean, you know, that's it's it's it's the one company that so many singers aspire to. And uh I remember it wasn't the first day; it was the second day. Because at the end of the first day, uh, I went to get my my little badge, and it's got you know, it's got a little magnetic strip on it, because you can actually swipe it. Um, one door uh, one door takes you to the corridor that takes you down to the the dressing rooms. Which is nuts in itself, because you you walk

through. you walk through the corridor to the dressing rooms, and you're walking in the footsteps of Pavarotti, and all these other huge. Sherrill Milnes, you know, all these people who are just. you think of opera, and you know, you list these people. And here you are ò walking in their footsteps. You know, and the. the ò you know, all the. all the. the décor in the dressing rooms hasn't changed; it's all the same stuff. You know, it hasn't. I mean, they've kept it clean and they maintained it, but you know, they haven't overhauled it all, so it's all the same chairs and pianos, and bathrooms that. that all these big names used, and it. and.

Presence of greatness.

Oh, my gosh. And it was that second day when I. when. when I walked in, and nobody gave me a second look, because I just pulled out my badge, and I went, wh-sh-sh. And it was like they were saying ò

You belong.

Exactly. Ah, you know, the door. the door opened, so he must. he must belong here. And it was ò chicken skin. You know. I mean.

And did you feel, I do belong here?

I really did.

I'm this good.

Well, I. I didn't go that far, and I'm. I never will. But just. just that. just to know that, you know, you walk down a hallway, and ò people don't look at you if they don't recognize you. They just kinda look at you and, Okay, well. The same way the security guard said, Ah.

You don't like—you don't like the star treatment?

Oh, I. I. I lo. I love. don't get me wrong; I love the star treatment. You know, I. I love ò I love the Mr. Kelsey this, and the Mr. Kelsey that, and it's. it's. you know, it tickles me to no end. But um ò no, I've ò I've always considered myself very easygoing, and so I. I just. I don't like to make a big deal about it. So I. I just. you know, I don't. You know, I. it's ò it feels good, it feels good to be able to ò to know that my um ò my professional reputation is like this, and ò that I can. I can turn away an. and ò and uh, and so you know, I. I ò I always. I always sort of shrug it off when people say, Oh, well, you know ò you know, this and this, and this, and this. These reviews were so wonderful, and you know, we. we love listening to all this, you know. You know, did you hear what they said about you? And I always go, No, no; no, that's not me. Oh, yeah, it is. Well. Then I just. you know, I ò and I tell them. I tell them, I just. I let you enjoy it, and you. you say all you want, and thank you very much. And it's just. I just ò I don't ever want to be that person. You know, I don't want to be that person going, Well, well of course, yes, you know, where's. where's my first class ticket, and. you know.

You must work with a lot of egos.

Well, i. in. in the business, there can be a lot. Um, you know, I've. I've definitely seen a handful of them, you know, in the last ò especially in the last uh, five years.

You debuted at the Met. I mean, that's uh, that's a wonderful stamp, and you've been getting a lot of work. But um, how much do you worry about the future, and what do you—what do you hope the future will hold? What's the goal?

Well ò um ò five years ago, when I first moved to Chicago, I ò I didn't know what to think, you know. Uh, I. I knew where I had to go, I knew I had this job that I had to go

to, I- I- I knew I had to do things like find an apartment, and ã live. But you know, now, I can sit back and ã think about things like, oh, I donã know, moving back home to Hawaii. You know, that um ã five years ago, I ã Iãe- if youã have asked me, you know, you- when you- when are you coming back home, I really wouldnã have even been- even been able to have ã thought about it.

Why? Because you couldn't afford it? Or you had too much invested?

I- I knew- I knew- I knew I couldnã afford it. I knew ã I- I knew I couldnã afford to live at home, because nobody would- nobody would hire me, being that they would have to fly me from Hawaii to wherever they were- wherever they were.

But now, you can think about it; people would fly you?

Not now. But that I know- I know that there- you know ã it- itã out there, that- that it is plausible, that- that ã if nothing else, if- if I can maintain the- the level of success that Iã at now, uh, down the road ã maybe fifteen, twenty years, I might actually be able to ã you know, sit down and say, Okay, letã- letã go ã look for a place back home. You know. Um ã yeah; just so much has happened in these five years, I mean, that my eyes have just been opened so much to ã to ã working on these huge stages that I never thought Iã- well, I- I dreamed of getting to, but ã I mean, Chicago, the Metropolitan Opera, and San Francisco in one year, in one calendar year. You know, and I- and I- I go- I go home, and I- you know, I- I talk to my folks on the phone, and I- and we giggle and laugh about it, and you- you know, they say, Oh, you know, you know, this was- this was gonna happen. And Iã like, Well, sure, but ã itã happened in one year, and ã and whoã to say what- what- what comes next.

Quinn Kelsey lives in Chicago. He dearly misses Hawaii, but he doesn't mind Chicago's biting cold or the city's proximity to meaty opera roles. Here's wishing this rising young star from Manoa continuing success in the opera world. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. Mahalo to Quinn Kelsey and to you for joining me for this Long Story Short. A hui hou kakou.