There is a worst-case scenario for a singer who dreams of a big opera career — failure, after years of study, tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars of investment, and the emotional manipulation of unscrupulous teachers and institutions who dangle the prospect of success while cashing the checks of aspiration. With a vast imbalance between the numbers of young people who enter conservatory or university training programs and the limited numbers of jobs that await them in the professional opera world, it can seem that this scenario is an orchestrated plot, an inherent evil of the music-educational complex, which needs warm bodies, tuition money and the naïve zeal of young acolytes to keep the system functioning and solvent. The basic logistics of training an opera singer — the need for conservatories to have a full orchestra at hand, the cost of hiring coaches and teachers, and all of the ancillary theater, language and drama advisors — seem designed to mimic the cruelty of the Ayn Rand jungle: a few will flourish at the expense of crushing all the rest.

Those in the business of molding young singers certainly acknowledge the crisis of opportunity for newly minted singers and the harsh job reality they face. And they are well aware that the bad state of the economy over the past five years may be making the situation worse. “I think it has been a problem for a very long time,” says Dona D. Vaughn, artistic director of opera programs at the Manhattan School of Music. “The people who succeed are a very small proportion of the people who are coming out of our music schools.”

“That’s not a new thing,” agrees Michael Heaston, director of the Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program at Washington National Opera. He adds, “The situation is exacerbated as a result of the economic crisis. We’ve had more companies close down, more companies reduce seasons.” That means experienced singers are snapping up what were once entry-level roles, and entry-level singers are scrambling for fewer gigs. And as opera companies cut their budgets, aspiring singers bear hidden costs. Some companies, which once set up shop in New York for a week to audition young singers, now expect those singers to travel to them and shoulder the costs (though OPERA America’s new National Opera Center is helping to ameliorate this). An enormously expensive profession to enter is only getting more expensive.

But is the system fundamentally flawed? Does it knowingly grind young talent in its maw just to reward a few lucky survivors? PHILIP KENNICOTT analyzes the supply-and-demand problems facing today’s music schools.
Many professionals say that there are indeed deep problems — among those being the lure of false expectations — but not at the institutions where they teach. Other admit there is a lot of sadness and hurt in the profession but don't see any-thing particularly exceptional in that. Many professions weed out the less talented and ambitious, and part of life is realizing where your real strengths lie. The most thoughtfull profession-als acknowledge all of the above, and something else — that singing is and always will be existentially fraught, full of para-adoxical demands and contradictions, requiring irrational sacri-ifice and sturdy, hard-nosed pragmatism at the same time. From people who need enormous inner resources yet must rely on the cars and instincts of others to survive and make smart decisions.

"That—argument—doesn't—hold—up9" — says —worldm “— says— able—even—if—the—student—doesn't—proceed—to—a—musical—career9

"That doesn't mean he would quit. “I love to sing, and I hope I wouldn't have stepped if it hadn't worked out quite so well. There is something enormously satisfying about expressing yourself in this way."

If Boyer hadn't managed the transition to graduate-level training at Curtis, he likely would have ended up in a large, muso, talent-rich pool of singers for whom the way to success is more cutthroat, complex and capricious. Thirts in a world of day jobs, small gigs at enterprising chamber-opera compa-nies and continuing education with teachers and coaches, sometimes within larger, less elite conservatories and universi-ties, and sometimes understandably in the sink-or-swim world of learning through doing.

Pursuing a singing career can be a spiritually exhausting and financially draining existence. Working with a vocal coach and teacher — essential to learning new repertoire and develop-ing the voice — can cost hundreds of dollars a week. In a young-artist program, these costs are generally covered. Out-side of such a program, the burden falls on the singer. And that burden may continue through his or her professional life-time.

"An artist is never fully formed," says Heaston. "It goes into a full career path as a singer is to accept that you are living a life of continual education. If they are looking at one or two voice lessons a week, if they have a major role debut coming up, that's very expensive. If you are working with top people, you could spend $175 an hour for a top voice lesson."

"I don't know a lot of singers who are making a full living from singing," says Philip Shneidman, founder of the Little Opera Theatre of New York, which focuses on intimate pro-ductions of neglected and rare reperture. His company thrives in large part because New York is home to singers who are still building careers role by role, who haven't grown dis-couraged because they didn't glide effortlessly from under-graduate vocal lessons to star billing on the great stages of the world. Some say that smaller companies such as Shoemaker's are precisely the reason we shouldn't fret too much about the seeming embarrassments from our young singers.

"The benefit right now is for the over-supply of singers and the relative paucity of professional engagements in the estab-lished opera world is that these artists are creating their own opera infrastructure," says Scola, who counts dozens of small companies in New York, Boston, San Francisco and other established musical centers. These companies not only nurture new singing talent, they present a standing chal-lenge to larger, establishment opera houses to be more adven-turous, more rigorously theatrical and more attuned to younger and novice audiences.

This leads to a troubling, but poetic, sense of the larger opera ecosystem — that it does indeed thrive on the excess zeal of young singers, that their hopes and dreams are indeed a kind of fertilizer for the health of the whole enterprise. But as you talk to people in the field, the one thing that becomes fuzzy and ill defined is the premise of that worst-case scenario, the very idea of failure.

Sally Gaylick is director of the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project, which since 2008 has been trying to get a statistical sense of what people who studied the arts think about the education they received. Her surveys cover all the arts, includ-ing music. And the results are surprising. Despite the miser-able chances that an aspiring musician will have a successful performance career, most people who studied music don't have negative feelings about their education. More than 50 percent of responding alumni who listed music-performance as their major considered their education to have been excel-lent or good.

"What the SNAAP data points out is that there are lots and lots of different reasons that people want to get arts degrees, and they ultimately use those skills in different careers," says Gaylick.

This isn't surprising — it's not surpris-ing that many musicians who once dreamed of performing now maintain happy and productive careers teach-ing, or serving in arts administration or fields completely unrelated to the arts.

What is surprising, in a way, is that we — people who love arts — worry about the idea of failure so much. Learning to sing well is no different from learning to read Latin, or parse the problems of philosophy, or diagram sentences in the polit-cal debates of the eighteenth century. Very few people in the broad-er humanities consider it a failure of the discipline that most philosophy majors aren't sitting in the forums teaching the youth of America the dif-ference between substance and empty form. The hard path that all young singers face leads to failure only in the minds of people who define success as a very limited way.