

Singing with Breast Cancer & the Art of Adaptability

BY MANDY BROWN

Soprano Mandy Brown shares her experience with breast cancer diagnosis and the transformative power of adaptability, patience, and a supportive community.



Mandy Brown as Nanetta in Chautauqua Opera's production of *Falstaff*, 2013.

photo by Katie McLean

“You have breast cancer.” This is a phrase no one ever wishes to hear, yet it is one that permanently alters your life. In order to survive, your body must undergo combinations of surgeries, infusions, radiation treatments, and/or other medications. All of these have the potential to affect your beloved instrument: your voice. As a singer, facing this reality can be terrifying. Our identity as “singer” is so deeply ingrained that news like this can seem like the end of the world. Rather the opposite: it begins your training in the art of adaptability.

My cancer journey began when I found a lump during a monthly self-check. After breast imaging and a biopsy, I was diagnosed with Stage II breast cancer in October 2020. I had a bilateral mastectomy (amputation of both breasts), two reconstruction surgeries, a port inserted and removed, 14 rounds of chemotherapy, and 25 rounds of proton radiation therapy. I needed hormone therapy as well, which one can be on for 5–10 years, to starve any remaining cancer cells.

Once active cancer treatments (surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation) are done, cancer patients are never told that they are “cancer-free” but rather that there is NED, “no evidence of disease.” For cancer survivors, there is always a fearful question lurking in the shadow of your thoughts: “What if it comes back?” Unfortunately for me, mine did.

Fast forward to the summer of 2023 when I started having some additional pain symptoms. Unfortunately, it

can often take an irritatingly long time to get a diagnosis due to wait times for appointments, health insurance hoops to jump through, and a myriad of different scans that have to be done in specific orders. Meanwhile, your mind and emotions are in a constant state of heightened anxiety as you wait. In 2024, I was diagnosed with Stage IV breast cancer: my cancer had metastasized to my spine and left chest wall. Devastation doesn't really cover the depth of grief you feel when you receive the news the first time, let alone a second time.

Thankfully, throughout all of this, I have been surrounded by the love and support of my family, friends, colleagues, and community. When undergoing times of crisis, community is everything. After taking time to process the steep learning curve of treatment options and how the healthcare system works, I chose to be open about my diagnosis and what I was going through. It allowed me to focus my energy on getting through my active treatments, and to become a resource for cancer neophytes who have questions about what a cancer journey entails. My thought was (and still is) that if I have to go through something awful, I want to transform it into something helpful for others.

One of my most crucial support systems is six fellow singing friends and colleagues who are also breast cancer survivors (no evidence of disease) and thrivers (living with metastatic cancer). With them, I can speak about fears, concerns, and frustrations. These wonderful women give me

space to talk freely, offer encouragement during difficult moments along my journey, and even speak hard truths I need to hear. During a conversation with one of these women after my initial diagnosis in 2020, I expressed concerns over how the treatments would affect my voice and my singing career. She pointedly stated, "Do what your care team tells you is best. Your singing career won't matter if you are dead." A blunt delivery, but an extremely valid point—and an important reality check I needed at that moment.

My goal while undergoing cancer treatments was to maintain my voice and technique as much as possible. I pulled out my Vaccai, my Panofka, as well as favorite art songs, easier arias, and concert works. To adjust to my "new" body, I went to physical therapy and diligently did those exercises while also finding gentler versions of my favorite physical movements for singing, like yoga. These gave me the opportunity to refresh and adapt technique basics and to acclimate to new physical sensations due to changes in my body from active treatments.

The body is wonderfully resilient. Going through cancer treatments, you learn to listen to your body in a new way and trust that the singing technique you have developed over the years will still be there to help you as you are on the road to recovery.

Just because you are going through a health issue does not mean that you cannot sing well or are incapable of doing your job as a performing artist. That being said, there needs to be respect, honesty, and trust between you and your colleagues. But equally important is for you to honor those same considerations for yourself. When going through treatments such as surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and various medications, your body is going to be fatigued. Be wise in how you choose to spend your energy.



Mandy Brown, backstage as a soloist with Fairfax Choral Society, 2022.

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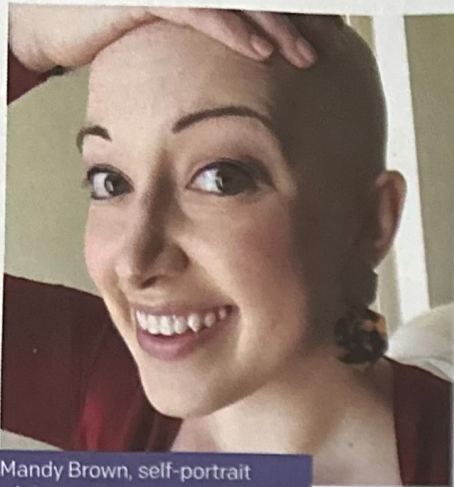
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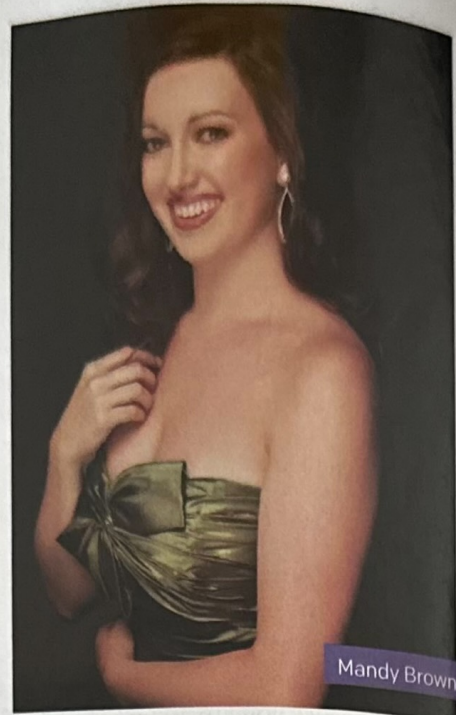


Mandy Brown, self-portrait while undergoing chemo, 2021.

Mandy Brown as Barbarina in Washington National Opera's production of *Le Nozze di Figaro*, 2016.



photo by Scott Suchman



Mandy Brown

photo by Roy Cox

Your energy does bounce back after you finish with active treatments, but it comes back gradually. Trust that your body remembers how to sing well, knowing it will feel more secure over time. Respect your body by giving it the time it needs to rest and heal. Be honest with yourself about what your capabilities are for performing at the moment, especially if you are in active treatments; better to under-promise and over-deliver than the other way around.

No two cancers are exactly alike. Every cancer and everyone's cancer journey are different. Some people are very open about their diagnosis. Other individuals choose not to share their diagnosis, for fear that people may view or treat them differently.

When I was initially diagnosed, I did not publicly share my news for two months, because I needed time to sort out a mountain of information about my treatment options. For a little while longer, I wanted my life to feel "normal." Ultimately, sharing my diagnosis was what was best for me, because I knew I would need the love and support of my community to get through the journey ahead.

Health issues should not be taboo conversation subjects for singers. In order to make these topics less of an automatic "gasp and pearl clutch" reaction, we have to talk about them more frequently. If being open about a health issue you are going through costs you singing opportunities, even though you are fully capable of doing your job well, then those are not likely the type of people you want to be working with anyway. You *do* have a choice as to which colleagues you surround yourself with.

My years singing and teaching have been richly filled with phenomenal colleagues who are kind, talented, responsible, and supportive of each other. Even as I go

through treatments, they engage me to perform with their ensembles and organizations. As a result, I continue to book full seasons of work. Because of our mutual trust, they know that unless I say, "I physically can't do this," I am fully capable and want to be asked to make music with them.

There were, however, changes that I needed to make. You do not "go back to before" once you finish your active cancer treatments. Instead, you make a new normal. While going through my cancer journey, I realized that I didn't really care what I sang, I just wanted to be able to sing. Period. So, I chose to shift my focus to concert and recital soloist work in addition to maintaining a private studio in the U.S., rather than continuing to pursue a full-time operatic career and moving abroad. As a singleton who is not independently wealthy and has a chronic illness, I realized that I needed more financial stability—and, more importantly, I wanted to be located closer to family.

You know your body better than anyone. Do those monthly self-checks (that goes for everyone, regardless of gender). If something doesn't feel right or feels different, don't shrug it off: go to your doctor and get it checked out! It is considerably better to have your doctor tell you there is nothing to worry about than for you to ignore it and have it turn out to be something serious. Be insistent and advocate for yourself.

Life can throw various forms of hardships at all of us. Allow yourself to grieve as those moments arise...and they will, more than once. But after you have allowed yourself to feel and process those more "uncomfortable" emotions, you have a choice: either to submerge yourself in grief, negativity, and hopelessness or to focus on what will help you.

Surviving cancer treatments is not just about physical adaptability, but mental adaptability as well. If you can adjust your mindset, you will fare far better and discover more joy along the way. Change is a constant in life. Through the years, our bodies will experience many changes (including hormonal shifts). As we embrace the physical and emotional "modulations" life brings us, our unique experiences shape us as people and as musical artists.

Advances in science and medicine improve the lives of cancer patients every day. Even though I have Stage IV breast cancer, I enjoy a full and rich life. I'm singing as a soloist with regional orchestras and choruses, programming and performing recitals, teaching my marvelous students, going on hikes, attending performances, hosting dinner parties, spending time with friends and family, traveling, and continuing to make fantastically awful puns and dad jokes. I am not the same person or performer I was at the beginning of this journey. The human and artist I am today has been refined through adaptability, patience, support from my community, mental fortitude, and persistence.

A cancer diagnosis is not the end of the world. You evolve. You survive. You thrive. And you find a whole new range of flexibility and adaptability. While cancer is a part of your life, it is not your whole story. You have many more songs to sing and much more life to live. Get to it!

Mandy Brown has put together a Breast Cancer Advocacy & Singer Resources page on her website: mandybrownsoprano.com. She is preparing to conduct a study for cancer survivors and thrivers to share their experiences with various breast cancer treatments. This will help give singers in active breast cancer treatments a better idea of what to expect, tips for their recovery, and a shared community.

Mandy Brown is a soprano and private vocal instructor based in the Washington, D.C., area. She has performed as a soloist with groups such as Washington National Opera, Chautauqua Opera, Opera Baltimore, Alexandria Symphony Orchestra, the Grammy-nominated Inscape Chamber Orchestra, Gourmet Symphony, the Washington Chamber Orchestra, the National Symphony Orchestra's Summer Music Institute, the National Orchestral Institute & Festival, and New Dominion Chorale. Brown's students have been accepted into prestigious collegiate programs, written and recorded albums of their own music, and performed at venues such as the Kennedy Center and the Music Center at Strathmore. She obtained her BM in vocal performance from Wichita State University and her MM in opera performance from the University of Maryland.

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