



# Sing for Your Life: A Story of Race, Music, and Family

*Daniel Bergner*

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Ryan Speedo Green had a tough upbringing in southeastern Virginia: his family lived in a trailer park and later a bullet-riddled house across the street from drug dealers. His father was absent; his mother was volatile and abusive.

At the age of twelve, Ryan was sent to Virginia's juvenile facility of last resort. He was placed in solitary confinement. He was uncontrollable, uncontainable, with little hope for the future.

In 2011, at the age of twenty-four, Ryan won a nationwide competition hosted by New York's Metropolitan Opera, beating out 1,200 other talented singers. Today, he is a rising star performing major roles at the Met and Europe's most prestigious opera houses.

SING FOR YOUR LIFE chronicles Ryan's suspenseful, racially charged and artistically intricate journey from solitary confinement to stardom. Daniel Bergner takes readers on Ryan's path toward redemption, introducing us to a cast of memorable characters--including the two teachers from his childhood who redirect his rage into music, and his long-lost father who finally reappears to hear Ryan sing. Bergner illuminates all that it takes--technically, creatively--to find and foster the beauty of the human voice. And *Sing for Your Life* sheds unique light on the enduring and complex realities of race in America.

## **Sing for Your Life: A Story of Race, Music, and Family Details**

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# **From Reader Review Sing for Your Life: A Story of Race, Music, and Family for online ebook**

## **Caroline says**

Well done. Clear writing about technique and the artistry of opera. Very good sections on racism in general and how it affects opera singers. The difficult sections about Green's rough childhood seem to strike the right balance between communicating the pain and keeping sufficient journalistic objectivity.

A friend recently saw him sing and was very impressed. One can only wish the best for him.

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## **Jeffrey says**

There is a really fascinating story here, unfortunately this book misses the mark. The narrative style of switching between times is confusing and doesn't add anything to the story. There is a big leap that needs to be colored in quite a bit more than the stark transformation that happens. Also, Ryan Speedo Green's name is not even featured on the cover of this book. Sure could have benefited from some photos as well. All that said, the story of a young man being brought up with neglect and abuse in poverty stricken areas who becomes a performer at the Met is, as I said before, fascinating - even with my desire to have it fleshed out much more.

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## **Sarah says**

This is an inspiring, thought-provoking, and beautifully told story of a young, Black man from a tough background who manages to climb his way out of his state's worst juvenile detention center and keep going all the way into the very white, very elite, very exclusive world of opera. Ryan Speedo Green's story shows how such things as internal strength and perseverance, supportive mentors who don't give up, and even just the desire to rise above your family's circumstances can be powerful motivators in finding success, no matter how low you've fallen. Plus, this book also gives an interesting glimpse into the intricacies of training to be an opera singer. Apparently, success in opera is not just about having a good voice -- it's also about being well-educated and from a higher social class. Green did not have those benefits in the beginning, but he worked past them -- and worked and worked and worked -- until finally gaining the title of rising star. Daniel Bergner captures his story with a depth and sensitivity that keeps you hooked until the end.

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## **Minetta Smith says**

I wanted to love this book so much and I did love the underlying story. The journey of Ryan Speedo Green from a life of poverty and a dysfunctional family to singing at the Met is amazing. Unfortunately the writing of the story is disjointed and confusing. The author jumps from time frame to time frame and from character to character in each chapter. I found myself searching for a thread to cling to as I read. Wait! Who is that? Did this happen before the time in juvie or after? Now who was this person and how are they connected? Also, I think that having some photographs in the book would have been a great addition. I did google Ryan

and was able to hear some of his singing on youtube. I'm happy that he made it!

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### **Pamela Okano says**

He had never killed anyone, but if his life continued to deteriorate, it wasn't out of the question. He was just 12. He was incarcerated, some of it in solitary confinement, for threatening his mother with a knife. Today, 18 years later, in an art form traditionally the province of white Europeans and Americans, this 6'5" black man is winning rave reviews for his Colline in the Met's La Boheme. Before that, he wowed the crowds and the critics in Vienna. This book, authored by a contributor to the NY Times, chronicles his difficult (an understatement) youth, his decision to avoid where he was heading, including stories about the people who helped him along the way, and the sheer hard work it took to make him a budding world class opera singer, particularly since he hadn't even known he had any talent for singing until high school. It's a riveting and thought-provoking book, well worth reading.

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### **Rachel Pollock says**

The basic story of this man's life is great, uplifting, inspiring, makes me want to hear him sing. But the book itself is just weird. Why is this author writing it? Is he a friend, colleague, fan...who knows? And race is a big theme, yet the author never addresses or even acknowledges his own white man's perspective in narrating the story, despite the frequently discomfiting white-gaze lens through which he's observing.

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### **Enid says**

This was a very disjointed book- some bits were fascinating, and some bits really dragged. It was confusing in parts- the author would be discussing one incident, and then there would be a flashback to several years before, and then within the flashback there would be another flashback to another time, and then it would move back to the original flashback, and so on. I also wish the author had explained how Ryan could have arrived at the Met competition without being able to read music, after attending a high school where half the time he focused on opera, then college and graduate school- the conductor at the Met realized he couldn't read music within minutes of interacting with him- hard to believe no other teacher in those 10+ years noticed this flaw in his music education. In fact, his college and grad school years are not covered in this book- odd to ignore those 6 years after focusing in almost mind-numbing detail about some of the earlier years.

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### **Bill says**

Loved this story of how Ryan Speedo Green overcame poverty and a dysfunctional family life to become an accomplished bass-baritone at the Met. Inspiring message on how specific individuals can impact on a person's life. In case you didn't think it takes a lot of work to become an opera singer consider this; "(The) job is to figure out how to sing 36 pitches on...20 vowels, so six hundred combinations." As one who cannot sing a note I marvel at Ryan's mastering of the linguistic, musical, vocal and psychological challenges of operatic performance. I am also impressed by how he dealt with the implicit stereotypes among "liberal and

enlightened" opera lovers. Hoping the next time he sings 'Old Man River' it will be on his terms. Lastly, if you don't support musical education in our public schools, this book may cause you to revisit that position.

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## **Sarah Swong says**

Ryan Speedo Green was not destined to sing opera. Unlike most classical musicians, he is African American, and grew up in poverty. But even more unusually, he had no obvious musical talent for a long time. His voice was unremarkable in middle school. After getting into the Governors School of the Arts on a fluke, he nearly fails out of school because he cannot sing and cannot read music. He attends "mid-tier" conservatories. At the Met Competition, he struggles with basic technique: he cannot pronounce anything in Italian.

If most biographies of musicians focus on innate genius and artistic destiny, *SING FOR YOUR LIFE*—an astonishing, moving chronicle of the Ryan's life written by New York Times Magazine writer Daniel Bergner—offers a refreshingly new story of how artists might be made, not born; how talent might be cultivated as often as it is discovered; and most importantly, at a time when music is seen as an insignificant pastime, or at best a homeopathic remedy, how music might actually save a person's life.

Raised in southeastern Virginia, Ryan grew up in a volatile, often violent household. His mother, Valerie, is an imposing, beautiful, and often violent woman; his father, Cecil, is mostly absent throughout his childhood. Though Ryan vows with his brother, Adrian, never to turn out like their parents and never to hit a woman, their relentless exposure to violence as a means of conflict resolution and self-expression becomes too much to overcome. Ryan, too, becomes enraged, fearful, violent, disruptive, and uncontrollable as a child.

Throughout the book, Ryan perceptively describes the way that violence can so easily become a toxic, destructive form of communication for deeply hurt people like himself and his mother. When Ryan takes a knife and stares down Valerie, he says he wanted to "make her pay, hurt her for making me feel the way I felt.. I wanted her to fear me as much as I feared her, as much as I felt her wrath." As an adult, Ryan visits the juvenile facility where once stayed, and explains to the kids:

"[At this facility,] I felt so alone. I was the kid who fought everyone around me. I was the kid who cursed everyone. Whenever I got upset, I wanted to harm somebody. Somebody needed to feel how angry I was. Everybody needed to feel it."

Ryan is barely aware of music at the juvenile facility. Though he listens to the radio during solitary confinement, his life is dominated by his violent rages and an intense fear of his mother. Upon release, he vows never to return to the institution and searches for alternative paths. He latches onto what seems to be the opposite of juvenile hall—white kids.

Then, a fluke. He is accepted to the Governor's School of the Arts through a serendipitous connection. But he is unable to read or sing music, and nearly fails in his first year. Only in late high school, largely due to the voluntary, tireless extracurricular work of a teacher named Mr. Brown, does Green begin to develop a passion for music and a singer's voice. He attends the Hartt School and the University of Florida, "mid-tier" conservatories, for his undergraduate and masters' degrees. These are extraordinary accomplishments in a short span of time, but his later success still isn't inevitable. What happens?

"He is singing for his life," says Ken Noda, one of Ryan's beloved mentors at the Met Opera. Ryan has a rare, life-or-death sense of purpose and vision that most performers lack. How he evolves musically at conservatory is not discussed in the book, but Ryan makes it to the finals of the Metropolitan Opera's national voice competition at age twenty-four. Despite his shortcomings (pronouncing Italian), his undeniable talent and presence as a performer, both musically and theatrically, wins him the competition, which launches his international career.

What is special about Ryan is, first of all, that he is loved, as a person and as a musician, by his mentors. His mentors, Ken Noda and Brian Zeger, take him under his wing and excavate the superstar within him. They love him for the love he radiates towards all the people in his life, and for his extraordinary lack of entitlement to success. As a musician, Ryan has undeniable presence, power, and artistic originality that is very much embodied—he is a six-foot-five, three-hundred-pound African American man with a range, from bass to tenor. This unusual vocal range endows him with a wider coloristic palette; it serves as a metaphor, too, for the extraordinary range of life experiences that he brings to his expressive arsenal.

The point is that these achievements were far from preordained. What is miraculous about Ryan's story is that he was mostly a normal kid with average musical abilities. What is miraculous is that the world of classical music heard Ryan's voice, and responded with care and mentorship to his dogged will to survive and express himself. As a result he became not only a professional singer, but one of the best of his generation. His story is a truly inspiring rebuke to the unimaginative thinking that permeates the classical music world, which can often cling to essentialist ideas about musical greatness that prize inborn "genius" over the possibilities of greater art born of struggle, hard work, and pedagogical risk-taking.

SING FOR YOUR LIFE also makes it clear that it is lonely, and often painful to be a black man in opera. Ryan has disliked the song "Ol' Man River" since college, when he realized how much white people loved it. In a scene of Jordan Peele-level horror, Ryan sings "Ol' Man River" in a production of *Show Boat*, and he is shocked to see white audiences giving him the longest applause of his life. He is disturbed that the white crowds are cheering and crying in response to a song about white people putting black people down. The incident is a disturbing example of how white people can thoughtlessly use black people to assuage their guilt and, in doing so, think of themselves as being better than their ancestors; "Ol' Man River" is nominally supposed to remind us of the horrors of slavery, but outsized white joy turns it into a humiliating historical reenactment for black men that fetishizes the history of slavery. In one of the last scenes in the book, Ryan is asked again to sing the song, and unintentionally delivers a garbled, enraged interpretation that feels truer to his understanding of it. "Here was a room packed with well-meaning people who did not see him, who perhaps were incapable of seeing him, who possibly refused to see him, and who were eager to have him inhabit an object of pity," Bergner writes.

Even his mentors at the Met—who adore Ryan and transform him into the world-class performer he has become—occasionally struggle to talk about race in a sophisticated way. Dr. Kwak, the Met's resident ENT doctor, veers close to craniometry in his denial that race can say something significant about a singer's facial physiology and sound production. His teachers, and Ryan himself, say the solution to bias is to be twice as good as white peers—which may be useful on a person-by-person basis, but does little to make the classical music industry painfully aware of its whiteness. In other words, these remarks are less indicative of individual wrongdoing than systemic inexperience and clumsiness in talking about issues of race across the classical music industry.

Ryan has inured himself to being a rarity in the professional world; what remains profoundly unresolved is how he defines himself as a musician in relation to his family and his past. This is what makes the book profoundly moving--Ryan's struggle to square his past and present selves. For most of his adolescence and

young adulthood, Ryan used music as a way to escape his chaotic family life and steer himself on a path towards redemption. Ryan saw music as a matter of life and death, a passion that keeps the toxic forces of his past at bay. Now he longs to share his love for music with his family, but it's not without deeply human complications. Valerie visits him at the Met for the competition and for later performances, but Ryan finds her presence stifling; Cecil is proud and supportive but the father-son reunion is suffused with bittersweetness over so much lost time; he reconnects with his older brother but they occupy vastly different worlds. Watching Ryan attempt to unite his present and future (music) with his past (family), which for so long could not coexist, makes Bergner's book compelling on a universal level.

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## **Lora says**

I had a very hard time with the "voice" in this book. I know that author was trying to stay true, but it was often disjointed and hard to follow whose opinion or thoughts were being put forward. I was most confused about the author's voice. He seemed to sometimes pop in and out.

Aside from that, though, I don't think I've read a more complex discussion of race. Perfect example of why there is not one "solution" to move us forward in this journey. I ended the book knowing that Ryan Speedo Green is one of the strongest people I've ever read about. His journey from where he started to where he is going is amazing. I wish him every future advantage in life!

First I was amazed at how as a young child he could voice his need for structure even through the "bad" behavior and how much his grade school teacher made a difference to him. It really inspired me to want to be that person! His letter to her stating, "I know sorry won't do it. I am asking for you to be more strict because I need to learn to control my attitude," shows his incredible strength of self to want to change his situation. And "Thank you for not giving up on me." (53). I wished that every child could have a Mrs. Hughes who somehow knows how to love the child but also ask them to achieve for him or her own self. I think sometimes that we forget that children are only reacting to what we teach them. When he went after his mom he stated, "I wanted to make her pay, hurt her for making me feel the way I felt. The worst you could possible feel." All that frustration and anger at being helpless comes out in the book. His trying to work through his relationship with his mother and respect her is amazing! It could teach a lot of us about forgiveness and healing.

I loved all the discussion about opera and singing. I am familiar with some, but by no means an officianado. ""When a truly gifted singer attains the right technique, his whole body vibrates with the creation of this profound music." "Singing is the embodiment of inner beauty. There's a completely individual imprint that comes from within each singer."

I loved that he was not a savant and that the book shared his many failures and him picking himself up over and over again to get to the next level. "The Devil gets in your head and gives you a false report, tricking you when you're weakest, telling you you're no good."

This book touches on so many intense race issues. Social Darwinism, forced sterilization, Racial Integrity Act, Obama's election, affirmative action, diversity for diversity sake, etc., etc. "There's tribalism a social thing and an evolutionary thing; there's the comfort we feel with the kind of people we've been around since we were born, and, going back to the beginning, there's the whole survival aspect: those other people over there are competing for our food, and we've got to get out and hunt before they do, and be on guard because they're coming to steal our stuff...it's in the backs of our brains...it bleeds into every facet of our lives." (122)

There's a very raw discussion about trying to improve one's situation and "trying to be white". "...having to prove yourself to be human, to be equal, mentally, physically, socially equal...every other race came here by choice...We are the only race who didn't...There is nothing prouder to me than being African American. There's no race more special in the United States. We persevered...Being African American is the greatest gift God could have given me." (140). At the same time, he's not afraid to call out others. "I resent those people for displaying their inability to fix their problems and do something with their lives. For openly displaying their giving up. They represent every stereotype you can come up with...It's not okay." (280). Only someone of his background has the right to even state something like this. Because of his situation the discussion can be so raw and honest. I really appreciated that. He is an amazing person!! I loved the read.

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## **Betsy Berman says**

### **Singing for your life**

What an amazing story coming from such grinding poverty and abuse and achieving success on the Opera stage. Along the way we hear about racism, the magic and hard work needed to learn to sing. Go listen to Ryan Speedo Green on YouTube and then read this book!

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## **Karyl says**

I was part of a fantastic book club when I still lived in Virginia, and I still get updates for the books they've chosen to discuss. This is one of those books. I read the blurb and knew it was a book that I'd be interested in, and once I realized that Mr Green grew up in southeastern Virginia, close to where I spent a good portion of my childhood and quite a few years of my adult life, I was even more intrigued.

Bergner paints a very honest portrait of Green, a young man who was so troubled that he ended up in juvenile detention, and was frequently put into solitary confinement for his safety and for the safety of those around him. What I found quite interesting is the differing accounts of Green's childhood from both his mother and himself. Having a toxic biological mother, this really resonates with me.

But this isn't just the story of a young troubled boy who eventually becomes a resounding success in his adult life, although he achieves great things that are almost unbelievable to the boy he had been. There's also a pretty frank discussion of race and racism, both in general life and in the opera world specifically. Green discusses how he was mocked as a kid for speaking too properly, for even being interested in opera, and how he was called an Oreo as a result. He's very open about the fact that African-Americans who speak "proper" English are looked down on as people who aren't true to their heritage. And even being interested in opera, a very white art form, added more fuel to his tormentors' fire.

But he never let it sway him from his ultimate goal. Singing opera is who he is, even though the rudimentary basics of singing and reading music and foreign languages sometimes elude him. Regardless, he tries and tries and tries again -- anything to keep him moving forward.

What I wish Bergner had covered in more detail was Green's time in college and grad school. He had



pursued degrees in music, and yet, according to this book, had major stumbling blocks with the basics of singing opera when he was invited to audition for the Met. One wonders how that would even be possible.

That said, this is definitely a book to read if you enjoy books about people who have come from a terrible place to make something amazing of themselves. It can be difficult to read in places, especially for those who may have had difficult childhoods growing up. I wish Mr Green all the best, and I hope he continues to find success in opera.

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### **SibylM says**

I received a free copy of this book from the publisher via a Goodreads giveaway and the favor of an honest review was requested. I was so delighted to read this book! Ryan Speedo Green has an absolutely amazing story -- with still much to come, I am sure -- and Daniel Bergner does an absolutely wonderful job of telling the story. The book is truly suspenseful and really plunges you into each time and place it takes you to. Most of all you get to see the true tenacity and brilliance of Green, as well as the luck he had in finding some dedicated and caring teachers along the way. This book made me think about some old issues in new perspectives as well. Definitely recommended for anyone who loves opera -- though opera knowledge is \*not\* required to love this book!

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### **Kristina says**

Review forthcoming

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### **Kasa Cotugno says**

A rich biography relating the journey of Ryan Speedo Green from a volatile, uncertain future onto the stages of the Metropolitan and Vienna opera houses. His story reminded me somewhat of that of Dan-el Peralta as recounted in his memoir, Undocumented. Both were fortunate in catching the attention of people who could make a difference in their lives and were willing and able to spend their time and influence to motivate the success of these two remarkable young men. Green's struggle against the demons of his past and against race issues make for riveting reading. I don't know if the print edition contained pictures, but reading this remarkable book online allowed me to look up pictures and videos and have a more intimate knowledge of Mr. Green -- a charismatic, towering presence, with the most infectious smile.

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