

Tamara Stein

Soprano

Can you tell us a bit about your career to date?

I was a child TV presenter before I was cast in a TV film whilst still in primary school. It was a good experience, but I noticed that TV wasn't my thing after all. I discovered, and fell in love with opera as a teenager and, despite strong family resistance, I organised my own singing lessons for which I paid with various jobs fitting around school.

After I finished school and to appease my mother, I started working in the financial sector whilst studying singing and acting privately. For a while I worked as a 'career temp' and performed both in opera and straight theatre. I loved the variety of touring in a Shakespeare play one month, then singing in an opera by Mozart the next, as well as preparing and performing song recitals followed by plays by contemporary authors like Frayn or Stoppard.

Due to this extensive experience in theatre and opera I was cast in a play where an opera singer was needed and met someone through whose contacts I was able to fulfil a long-time wish to perform in cabaret. I created my own operatic cabaret diva, Baroness Tamara von Stein zu Leitershofen, and gigged for a few years introducing opera to unsuspecting audiences.

In my late 20s, while I was fulfilling a busy artistic schedule, I became very ill. Initially, I was ignored by the medical profession until I was diagnosed with severe Myalgic Encephalopathy and fibromyalgia in my early 30s, which progressed rapidly to a point where I was unable to look after myself and my survival was not certain anymore. My life stopped completely and my mental health took a severe knock.

I managed to keep a lid on the worst thoughts by dabbling occasionally in semi-pro opera companies for a few years. After three years being basically bedbound and nearly another three years of being housebound, I auditioned for the TfL busking scheme and was accepted. I figured it would allow me to have a something to work towards, but if I couldn't turn up to do my pitch, no one was let down. The TfL busking team was very supportive and encouraging. Performing gave me a massive boost and "I love that we come together with members from the other unions and so meet people from different fields in the creative industry."

helped me greatly to manage the pain and other physical and mental symptoms of my illness.

The response of people was in general very positive. After years of staring at the ceiling, I felt I was part of society again. It also made me join the Musicians' Union - for me a big step in not giving in to a debilitating disability. Through busking I had many wonderful experiences with passerbys from very different backgrounds. Sometimes, you serenade fresh love, sometimes provide a vehicle for tears of worry or frustration to run freely, sometimes you help to commemorate someone's anniversary that otherwise would be lost in the day-to-day rush. Occasionally, my singing offers a glimpse into another world or transports people for five minutes or even an hour. The connection between the listener and me is immediate. There are no expectations on either side. It is a crumb of humanity snatched unexpectedly out of a busy schedule. Communicating in music is a form of 'time-bending'. It is powerful, maybe beyond our comprehension.

Due to my condition I have been self-isolating since the March 2020. However, lockdown has had benefits to people with long-term conditions who are housebound. This is something my friend, composer Esther Hopkins, who is also invisibly disabled by a chronic illness, and I worked into an aria for Spare Tyre's 'Signal Fire'- Beyond the Shield'. This inspired us to try to create more work like this and we started a YouTube channel, which can be found via: Linktr. ee/estherandtamara





>>Snap**shot**

Tamara Stein



What do you like most about your work?

For me art is communication, creating a connection by sharing moments that are more felt than understood. Busking is perfect for me because I particularly love a small, diverse audience who can get really close. The feedback is immediate and obvious, and I love that. I can connect to people, who are often from other cultures. I have had many experiences where people who don't share a common language with me have still managed to share their experience of the moment through facial expressions, mime and even dance.

What are the biggest challenges of maintaining a freelance career?

You never know where the next pay cheque is coming from. You always have to be willing to try something else. I think you have to be independent, disciplined and flexible. You really need to be your own biggest fan. All of these things are challenging.

Have you added new work/skills to your portfolio over time?

Over the years I have learned to be a TV presenter, actor and opera singer. I have studied contemporary dance and Shakespeare. I've learned languages as an opera singer and of course I have had to learn business skills including business planning for funding.

What is the biggest challenge of learning the skills that you need?

With my health issues, getting out of the house can be a major issue so the fact that the FEU Training workshops have gone online this year has been a real benefit to me. Also, the fact that they are free is outstanding. Business courses that are generally available are not usually a good fit for a creative freelance, whereas FEU Training workshops are specifically tailored to our needs.

What FEU Training courses have you attended?

- Build your creative brand to win work
- Get started on Instagram
- Mobile video kickstarter

What are the most important things that you've learned?

The 'Build your Brand' workshop was great. It not only

"I have been really impressed by the quality and I have recommended them to others."

reminded me that as creative freelances, we are also a business, it helped me think and focus on what I really want to do. For the first time I was really clear about what I wanted and how I was going to achieve it.

It's all about the audience for me and the workshops have helped me explore new avenues to perform. The 'Build your Brand' workshop inspired me to create online music with my friend, so we created our YouTube account to create a shop window to showcase our work.

I am going to take all that I learned on this course and use it to create a solid business plan. This workshop was so in depth and I was so excited by the end of the day by all that I had learned.

While I have missed the connection I get from busking, I feel that the workshops prepared me to work in the current climate and have given me the skills to connect in new ways in non-ideal conditions.

What has encouraged you to attend FEU training sessions?

I thought the topics of the workshops were relevant and had great themes. This is such an invaluable resource. The quality is so good, if I had to, I would pay for the courses, and they are targeted at exactly what the members of the four unions need.

The courses going online has meant that I am able to join the training when I just couldn't have managed to attend in person due to my illness. This had been a lifesaver for me, especially now when I have to self-isolate for the foreseeable future. I have been really impressed by the quality and I have recommended them to others.

I love that we come together with members from the other unions and so meet people from different fields in the creative industry. To be honest, when I am on stage as an opera singer, I have more in common with actors, than for example a trombone player in the pit, so this mixing is very welcome and exciting.

I think FEU Training is marvellous and I wish I had found you earlier.