

Songs through Silence:
Donald Braswell's Impossible Dream
By Doreen Lee

*"Ed ho sentito nel silenzio una voce dentro me."
(And in the silence I heard a voice inside of me.)*
~Paolo Limiti

When Donald Braswell took the stage on June 27, 2009 to perform as a soloist in a concert with the Symphony of the Hills in Kerrville, Texas, few knew what to expect. A majority of the audience consisted of locals anticipating a night of classical and crossover music. The orchestra members, no doubt accustomed to accompanying classical vocalists, went into that performance like they would any other. However, when Braswell's soaring tenor leapt effortlessly through the *leggiero* passages of "Di' tu se fedele" from Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*, even those who knew his story found it difficult to believe that there was a time during which he could not even utter a sound. Before the

night was over, he would go on to captivate the audience with his interpretations of popular standards, including classics from Bobby Darin and Sam Cooke. Even the orchestra members found themselves swaying to the music, enjoying the change of tempo and at times becoming as mesmerized as the audience itself.

Braswell had finally come full circle. The Juilliard graduate and protégé of Franco Corelli, the Prince of Tenors, was once known and praised for his leading tenor roles as Cavaradossi in *Tosca*, Rinuccio in *Gianni Schicchi*, and Pinkerton in *Madame Butterfly*; but at the height of his career, he saw his dreams shattered in the disastrous few seconds of a hit-and-run automobile accident that destroyed his voice. The journey back to his rightful place in the spotlight accompanied by a full orchestra took almost fourteen years, but once again, Donald Braswell achieved his quest, this time exuding the deep passion of an artist matured and tempered by the agony of loss.

The Rise to Stardom and the Catastrophic Fall

In late 1995, as his trembling vibrato resonated through the aria "Addio, fiorito asil" ("Farewell, Flowery Refuge") from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, Donald Braswell, though he did not know it at the time, was also bidding "addio" to his career as a premier operatic tenor. It had been five years since he graduated from Juilliard, and he was quickly



Braswell speaks to the audience while conductor Jay B. Dunnahoo and other orchestra members watch from behind.

Photo courtesy of James Adams,
Symphony of the Hills

becoming an international star whose musical brilliance would soon equal that of Pavarotti, Carreras and Domingo. But success, no matter how promising, can be taken away in an instant.

That moment of adversity came for Braswell while bicycling through Wales. He was hit by a car and, as a result, suffered substantial damage to the soft tissues of his throat. Medical professionals declared, because of the type of injury sustained, that speaking would be a challenge and singing would be out of his reach.

Braswell was devastated. Having grown up surrounded by music, he had never imagined life in silence. His parents, Don Sr. and Jane, were Broadway performers who met on the set of *L'il Abner*. "For me, classical music was very much engrained in me from early on, and I wouldn't listen to anything else from the time I was a child," Braswell stated. "So by the time I was seven or eight years old I was performing in a lot of the things that [my parents] were doing...so it just sort of felt natural that I would one day go into the music field in some capacity...I still remember the first smells of the theater, and feeling those lights as a child on that stage, and hearing that rush of sound from an audience...it was a world that I just understood – it was a world where I felt at home."

Shortly after college, his wife Julie persuaded him to apply to Juilliard, a school with an acceptance rate of roughly 6%. He did it only to humor her, thinking admission was impossible. Julie and his family weren't the only ones to recognize his talent as Juilliard not only accepted Braswell but also offered him several scholarships, including the prestigious Enrico Caruso Scholarship.

Thus began the journey that would take the boy-next-door from the tranquil hills of Texas to international stardom. His achievements both at Juilliard and on the stage earned him a grant from the Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation, entitling him to study with the renowned Franco Corelli. Braswell credits Corelli for making him the musician he is today: "When I first worked with Franco Corelli, I didn't know what to expect. There was this mystery about the way he taught voice that no one would talk about for some reason. I think it was because Corelli didn't really *teach* voice. He showed singers where it came from, and how he *felt* the music and *why* he felt the music and how [the music] kind of created itself within him."

From Corelli Braswell would learn not only to deliver music, but also to create it with a passion. That passion, coupled with his versatile lyric-dramatic tenor voice, made him the perfect lead for many classic works from Puccini, Verdi and Donizetti. He would go on to tour the world for several years before the drastic moment that made his world collapse.

A Period of Silence

In a television interview in December 2008, Braswell stated it was only after his accident that he understood what it meant to experience depression; it consumed him for nearly two years while he lived in the silence that had been forced upon him. Despite this, he yearned for a way to express his anguish in the most natural way he knew – through music. He composed numerous songs, including "Look At Me" (which he has recently performed at several concerts and dedicated it to the homeless). The song captivates the listener precisely because of its touching and powerful simplicity: "Look at me," the poetic voice begs of the audience, "I really am somebody." He reminds us that underneath the sorrow that he must bear, music was thriving and fiercely fighting to be set free.

While he was mute, however, there was no instrument that could liberate the music within him. It was then that Braswell began to realize that, despite the grief he was going through, he had another source of happiness – his family. His first child was born in this time, and he named her Aria. In March 2009, Braswell told Diane Bliss of Detroit PBS: “An aria is the love song, the place of expression and emotion in an opera. I named her that because, when I didn’t have a voice, Aria was going to be the voice for me. She was my song when I didn’t have one.”

Eventually, Braswell learned to take the accident that stopped his career and turn it into something positive, gaining a new attitude towards life. “When I was a professional opera singer...I was regarded as a very successful artist,” he would later recall. “The gift that I had been given, I assumed, was for me to gain whatever I could in *my* life, for *me*. [...] After this happened, and my child came along, and I looked into the eyes of that child, I realized...it really wasn’t about me *ever*.” Within the following few years, he and his wife had two more children. Since he no longer could tour the world, he was able to play an active role in nurturing his three daughters. His family moved from New York back to his childhood home of Texas. There, he took on various jobs, including designing swimming pools and selling cars, and for a while, the Braswells would live a quiet life. But inside, the music never died; Braswell continued to dream that one day his children would be able to hear him sing, to understand the marvel of his previous career.

The Journey through *America’s Got Talent*

Years later, against all odds, a glimmer of light penetrated his world of musical darkness, when he slowly began regaining his singing capabilities and realized that his dream might not be lost. He took on performance opportunities with regional groups and his church in order to strengthen his voice. When the time was right, it was Julie who, like before, put him on a path that would take him back to the world of music – where he deserved to be. In 2007, when the third season of NBC’s *America’s Got Talent* was searching for new competitors, Julie sent in an audition video on her husband’s behalf. In September of that year, he was called to Dallas for a preliminary audition. In a 90-second performance, his life would be changed...again.



Braswell engages the audience during the Pops portion of the concert.

Photo courtesy of James Adams,
Symphony of the Hills

When he announced that he would be singing Josh Groban’s “You Raise Me Up”, laughter could be heard from the audience and boing ensued. By the end of the song, the

entire audience was on their feet cheering – unanimously chanting to send him to the next round. Upon hearing Braswell’s audition, Groban told radio personality Billy Bush, “What a voice!...to hear [his] story...obviously he’s got full pipes going now...I’m sure he’s going to have a wonderful career!”

Following that successful audition, Braswell did advance, but not for long. To the outrage of the viewing public, the judges soon failed to move him to the Top 40, and Braswell – thrown off his musical career for the second time in his life – went back to his previous job at the car dealership, thinking that singing was simply not his destiny.

Fate would have it otherwise. When a wild card spot opened up in the Top 40 (in the summer of 2008), Braswell was one of the eight contestants selected for a chance to return. The American public was impressed by his ability to turn the audience around during his first audition; they were also awestruck by his powerful voice and the grace with which he handled himself on stage. For these and other reasons, Braswell enormously connected with the television audience and managed to captivate millions of viewers with a mere 90-second performance and was voted back into the Top 40. He went on to become a finalist where, thirteen years after being told that he might never speak normally again, he won fourth place amongst 250,000 contestants. During the season finale, NBC showed a video from Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, congratulating Braswell on his rendition of “Music of the Night” from *The Phantom of the Opera* and expressing the wish to work with him in the future.

His experience on *America’s Got Talent* gave Braswell the opportunity to explore new genres of music. The show’s producer, Simon Cowell, encouraged him to sing “Unchained Melody” at the finalists’ concert at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. Braswell, still holding on to his classical roots, was at first skeptical. Nevertheless, he trusted Cowell’s judgment, and today “Unchained Melody” is one of his signature pieces, garnering a standing ovation at every concert, including his sold-out show four months later at the Las Vegas Hilton. Now this classically trained singer performs a variety of genres, including pop, rock, soul, and even impressions of some of the Greats, such as Elvis, Dean Martin and Robert Goulet. At the same time, he still remains loyal to the people who followed him through and before *America’s Got Talent*; his concert is never complete without a classical crossover piece from the likes of Mario Frangoulis or Andrea Bocelli.

Changing Symphonic Music

Since his return to the music scene, Braswell had mostly performed both classical and popular pieces with a four-piece band. However, when he worked with music director Anthony Bazzani and arranger José Irizarry in preparation for his concert with the majestic Symphony of the Hills, the result was an evening of unanticipated musical enchantment. Amongst the night’s many surprises included a tribute to Ennio Morricone, a piece titled simply “Ennio”, a collaboration between Bazzani the composer and Braswell the lyricist. This was but a small portion of the night’s eclectic medley. The orchestra might be based in a small town, but it is definitely world-class; the violinists even began strumming their instruments like a guitar to enhance the flavor of the Pops portion of the concert. Fully exploiting the other’s talents and versatility, Braswell and the symphony took the audience on a seamless musical journey from 1832 (Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore*) to the present. They brought out the best in each other, and Braswell proved that it is precisely there, in front of a full orchestra, that he rightfully belongs.

A little over a year has passed since Braswell was discovered by millions on *America’s Got Talent*. Curiously, when he was voted back to the Top 40, he chose to sing “The

Impossible Dream”, the celebrated magnum opus from *Man of La Mancha* composed by Mitch Leigh and Joe Darion. Reaching one arm to the cheering audience, he boldly belted out the last line of the song, vowing to “reach the unreachable star.” His rendition of this song (one of the greatest hits sung by critically acclaimed Robert Goulet) prompted Vera Goulet to offer her accolades and support. The piece, which would eventually become the official song for his International Fan Club, seems to perfectly describe his journey; twice in his life, Braswell had been thrown off a career in music, but he fought back relentlessly.



Braswell, moved by the emotions and message of the song, treats the audience to Sam Cooke’s “A Change Is Gonna Come”.

Photo courtesy of James Adams,
Symphony of the Hills

Now, having successfully launched the 2009-2010 season for the Symphony of the Hills, Braswell continues to contribute his talents to the new trends in orchestral music. He is currently planning a Pops tour that will give him the opportunity to perform with symphony orchestras around the continent. Recently, he has teamed up with the genius of composer and conductor Tim Janis in preparation for his second studio album. Not only is Janis writing vocals for Braswell to accompany his existing pieces, he is also creating new arrangements for Braswell’s own

composition, “In Those Eyes”, a song which he dedicates to his wife. Janis’s soothing symphonic music encompasses elements from various genres – a characteristic that greatly complements Braswell’s own eclectic repertoire. On November 27, Braswell will take part in Janis’s upcoming PBS special, *Believe in Dreams*, in Carnegie Hall. A biography is also in the works for publication in 2010. Through all that he has experienced, Donald Braswell is indeed living what was once an “impossible dream.”

Orchestras interested in scheduling Donald Braswell for his Pops tour should contact:
Bookings@DonaldBraswell.com.

For more information on Braswell, please visit: www.donaldbraswellfanclub.org.
For more on the Symphony of the Hills, visit: www.symphonyofthehills.org.

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