

UW-Stevens Point: Athletic mindset propelled vocal performance major

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What do football and Figaro have in common? At UW-Stevens Point, the answer is Chandler Benn.

Music has been important in his life. His mom, Becky, sings, and his dad, Tim, has played in bands. Both were strong influences on Chandler, who grew up in Amherst Junction, Wis. He began piano lessons at age 3 and continued through high school, where he also was in choir and musicals. He received top honors in state solo ensembles and was told he had a naturally operatic voice.

Benn chose UW-Stevens Point so he could remain near family. He knew it had a good music program, but he hesitated to declare the major. His only clear choice was to play football. The standout running back was part of the Amherst Falcons football team that won three high school state championships in 2015-17.

He initially studied business. "It took me a year to realize pursuing what you love, you can't always make decisions with money in mind. That will come with your success," Benn said.

He contacted Music faculty Matthew Markham and Susan Bender to explore music. They asked the baritone to sing a classical piece – and barely let him finish. Voice performance was his new major.

"He had a great voice, a natural gift, so much musical ability," said Markham, also a baritone. He helped Benn develop technique and cultivate discipline.

Benn's athletic success drove his musicianship. He cited former Pointer Football Coach Greg Breitbach: "All we have to do is get 1% better every single day. Small steps, small successes every day in the long run are exponential. I took that 1%

better mindset into my musicianship. When I solely focused on music, my career exploded.”

Benn sang lead in both operas UW-Stevens Point staged in 2022 and 2023. He played an incorrigible playboy in Don Giovanni, and an innocent beggar in The Old Maid and the Thief. He was set to play Frank in Die Fledermaus when COVID-19 halted live performances on campus.

The love of opera develops over time, Benn said. “Not a lot of people appreciate it like I do. The depth of emotion the music holds is unparalleled to anything else I have heard.”

He introduced friends to opera. “They go to the shows not knowing what opera is about. It’s opened a cool bridge between people who may not have had the opportunity to enjoy classical music like an opera. That’s something I’m really proud of.”

His daily regiment is disciplined, as it was for football: Cardio and weight training – so he’s fit and looks good on stage for the roles he plays — vocal warmup, music practice for 2-3 hours and language study. Most operas are in Italian, German or French, so learning languages is critical, Benn said. “One of the first things you learn in voice is studying diction.

“It’s immensely important to take care of your instrument, your body. Overall health is important, eating healthfully, drinking plenty of water,” he said.

Among his achievements, Benn is a national semi-finalist in the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) competition and won the senior men’s category of the Wisconsin NATS competition. He has won various music scholarships and received the Chancellor’s Leadership Award.

Benn graduated May 20 with a bachelor of music degree in vocal performance. He has a full scholarship to pursue a master of music in voice performance at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, one of the most renowned music programs in the country.

This summer, he will sing Figaro in The Marriage of Figaro, a 3.5-hour Italian opera, with the International Lyric Academy. He will perform in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Vincenzo, Italy.

And he was cast as Count Danilo, lead in *The Merry Widow*, at Indiana University this fall – before he even begins his master’s program. The university has the second largest opera stage in the country, Benn said. “It was an honor just to audition there.”

He has big goals. “I strive to be the best opera singer in the world.”

It’s rare to have a baritone like Benn come through UW-Stevens Point – or any university, said Markham, who has seen his passion and focus grow over the last four years. “The size of voice, the instinct behind it, and the regiment he follows every day, he is so determined. He will work to go as far as he can.”

Benn’s athletic ability adds another dimension, Markham noted. “There’s a certain competitive, fearless, primal animal energy when he is on stage, and he is a team player. He has a magnetic presence that keeps the audience engaged.”

UW-Stevens Point has been a great place to grow as a musician and person, Benn said, and Markham has been key to his development. “He demanded excellence.”