

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i5.1904>

Sustaining Hybrid Cultural Identities: Education and Careers of Thai Classical Singers in Western Opera

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Abstract

This study examines how Thai singers trained in Western classical music navigate educational and career pathways that contribute to the cultural sustainability of opera in Thailand. Through performance documentation and semi-structured interviews with 46 professional singers—most of whom studied abroad but returned to Thailand—the research identifies patterns in training, mobility, and employment. While all but two participants held university degrees, a significant number pursued advanced studies overseas, particularly in Austria, often supported by scholarships such as ASEA-UNINET. The findings reveal the critical role of international education and funding in fostering access to global opera traditions, while simultaneously enabling artists to sustain and adapt these traditions within a Thai cultural context. This article situates Thai classical singers as cultural mediators who preserve and transform Western operatic heritage through local performance, education, and hybrid identity formation. It highlights how such artistic mobility fosters cultural resilience and reinforces the importance of inclusive policy frameworks that support the continuity of diverse musical legacies in a globalized world.

Keywords: Cultural Sustainability, Transcultural Opera, Educational Mobility, Thai Classical Singers, Arts Funding, Global Cultural Heritage, Hybrid Identity.

Introduction

Opera, as a global art form, is undergoing a transformation—no longer confined to its European origins but increasingly embraced as a medium for transcultural storytelling and identity negotiation. In Thailand, where traditional forms like *likay* continue to dominate cultural expression, there has been a notable rise in the appreciation of Western classical music and opera over the past few decades (Prawang 2021). This shift signals more than just aesthetic preference; it reflects evolving cultural sensibilities and the emergence of new artistic spaces where Thai heritage and Western operatic forms intersect. While Bangkok remains the central hub for opera, performances are increasingly being staged in Chiang Mai (Chiang Mai City Life 2024), Chiang Rai (Chiang Rai Youth Orchestra 2022), Hua Hin (Harrison 2018), and Phuket (The Phuket News 2015). Opera and classical music performances are no longer restricted to grand concert halls but are now integrated into luxury restaurants, hotels, and private events—an expansion that demonstrates both the fragility and adaptability of the art form within the Thai context.

Universities and music institutions have responded to this growth by expanding instruction in

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opera and Western classical singing. This institutional support has fostered a small yet resilient group of Thai vocalists who pursue careers in the Western classical tradition. These singers—many of whom balance performing with teaching—embody the concept of 'portfolio careers' (Bartleet et al. 2019), which reflect a sustainable approach to navigating precarious creative industries. Importantly, their journeys contribute to cultural sustainability by preserving and reinterpreting Western opera through a uniquely Thai lens. In doing so, they help sustain opera as a living, adaptive cultural form that transcends borders, while simultaneously advancing Thai cultural identity on the global stage.

This research seeks to document the experiences of Thai classical singers who were active between 2019 and 2024, focusing on those formally trained in and performing Western classical music. By framing their career development within a sustainability discourse, this study explores how these artists engage in long-term cultural preservation—not through static conservation but through dynamic adaptation, transnational education, and community-based performance. It investigates the ways in which global educational pathways, scholarship opportunities, and local performance ecosystems enable or constrain the sustainability of opera as both a profession and a cultural practice in Thailand.

The research is underpinned by the following research questions: how many Thai nationals currently have careers in Western classical singing within Thailand and internationally, and what are their educational and career pathways and opportunities? These questions guide the inquiry into the evolving nature of operatic practice in Thailand and its connection to global flows of knowledge, funding, and artistic labor.

With direct research on this topic remaining limited, this study draws from adjacent fields such as music education, cultural mobility, and identity theory to provide a holistic understanding of the professional trajectories of Thai opera singers. In doing so, it contributes to the broader conversation on how cultural sustainability is enacted through voice, education, and adaptive artistry—illuminating how Thai singers are not merely passive participants in Western traditions but active agents in shaping hybrid musical futures.

Theoretical Framework: Cultural Sustainability and Transcultural Identity Formation

This study is grounded in the interrelated theoretical domains of cultural sustainability, transcultural identity, and global educational mobility, providing a critical lens through which to examine the careers of Thai classical singers trained in Western operatic traditions. Together, these theoretical frameworks establish a foundation for interpreting how Thai classical singers function as agents of cultural sustainability, negotiating the global and local through voice, education, and professional practice.

Cultural Sustainability

Cultural sustainability refers to the preservation, evolution, and transmission of cultural heritage in ways that maintain its relevance across generations (Soini & Birkeland, 2014; UNESCO, 2003). It extends beyond the conservation of tangible artifacts to include living practices, oral traditions, and embodied forms such as music and performance. In the context of opera, cultural sustainability involves the dynamic interplay between global heritage forms—often rooted in Eurocentric canons—and local cultural expressions. This framework is particularly relevant in Thailand, where Western opera remains a niche form within a landscape dominated by indigenous traditions like *likay*. Thai classical singers engaged in Western opera thus act as stewards of both global and local cultural legacies, contributing to sustainability through

hybridization and adaptation.

Transculturalism and Hybrid Identity

Building on Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," transculturalism positions identity as fluid, shaped by continuous negotiation between cultural systems. Marwan Kraidy (2005) expands this through his theory of hybridity as a communicative strategy, whereby individuals blend symbolic resources from multiple traditions to create new cultural meanings. Thai opera singers, educated in Western institutions yet performing within Thai sociocultural contexts, exemplify such hybrid cultural agents. Their artistry emerges not as an assimilation into Western norms, but as a reconfiguration of those norms within Thai values, language, and aesthetics. This process sustains opera as a living form rather than a fixed import, and thus embodies the postmodern ethic of sustainable cultural evolution.

Educational Mobility and Global Artistic Labor

The international mobility of Thai singers is part of a broader trend in the global circulation of artistic labor, wherein education abroad serves as a gateway to professional legitimacy and transnational networks (Lo, 2018). The Erasmus Impact Study (European Commission, 2014) notes that cross-border education not only improves technical skills but also enhances adaptability, employability, and cultural competence. For Thai classical singers, international study—often in Austria, through mechanisms like the ASEA-UNINET scholarship—facilitates access to historically rich operatic training. However, their subsequent return to Thailand also underscores a form of reverse mobility where global knowledge is localized, further contributing to sustainable cultural practices in their home country.

Literature Review

Western Opera in a Globalized Context

Opera, once considered a strictly Western high-art tradition, has increasingly become a global phenomenon. As cultural flows intensify, opera has been localized in regions outside its origins, often adopting new meanings through hybridization (Guachalla, 2023; Vellutini, 2020). This global expansion challenges traditional aesthetic boundaries and invites reconsideration of how operatic practice is sustained and reinterpreted in non-Western societies. However, most studies have focused on institutional transformations in the West, leaving a gap in understanding how opera evolves in emerging cultural geographies such as Thailand.

Thai Music Education and Operatic Development

While traditional Thai music retains its central role in the country's cultural landscape, a growing appreciation for Western classical music, including opera, is evident (Prawang, 2021). Institutions such as Mahidol University have developed formal programs in classical singing, supporting the growth of Thai operatic talent (Laovanich et al., 2021). Yet, opportunities for performance remain limited, often confined to hotels, private venues, or small-scale productions. The July 2024 Madama Butterfly production, in which all lead roles were filled by non-Thai performers, exemplifies the marginalization of local singers. Research on Thai musical pedagogy and institutional constraints (Jocuns, 2021; Huxtable, 2022) further reveals systemic challenges that aspiring singers must navigate, reinforcing the importance of external pathways for development.

International Education and Artist Mobility

The decision of Thai singers to pursue education abroad reflects broader patterns of student mobility driven by professional, artistic, and identity-related goals (Haldimann et al., 2022; Nissen et al., 2022). Austria, in particular, emerges as a preferred destination, facilitated by scholarships such as ASEA-UNINET. Previous studies highlight the psychosocial and artistic benefits of international training (Bautista et al., 2021), while emphasizing the importance of supportive networks and inclusive policies (Salmi & D’Addio, 2020). However, most research stops short of investigating how these experiences translate into sustainable local careers post-return. The link between outbound educational mobility and inbound cultural sustainability remains underexplored.

Identified Gaps and Contribution

Despite an expanding body of literature on music education, artist migration, and identity formation, no prior study has systematically documented the careers of Thai singers in Western classical music or examined their role in sustaining operatic traditions. This study addresses this empirical void by mapping the educational and career pathways of 46 Thai classical singers active between 2019 and 2024. In doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive understanding of how opera survives and adapts in non-Western contexts, through the agency of artists who navigate, translate, and hybridize transnational cultural forms. It positions these singers not only as performers but as cultural mediators shaping the future of opera as a globally adaptive, locally rooted tradition.

Methodology**Research Design and Justification**

This study adopts a qualitative-empirical approach supported by mapping and thematic analysis, aiming to understand how Thai classical singers trained in Western opera navigate their educational and professional pathways in a manner that sustains both global and local operatic traditions. The design is informed by the need to document and interpret the lived experiences of singers whose careers exemplify cultural sustainability and transnational artistic labor. Drawing from grounded theory elements, the research generates insights into structural conditions (e.g., scholarships, institutions) and individual strategies (e.g., portfolio careers, educational mobility) shaping these trajectories.

Participant Identification and Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods. The author—an active member of Thailand’s vocal performance community—used professional networks and archival performance data to compile a comprehensive list of singers active between 2019 and 2024. The list was developed using performance records, online promotion materials, opera production archives, cultural venue programs, and social media announcements. Given the absence of centralized demographic data on classical singers in Thailand, this approach ensured contextual relevance and depth of access to participants.

From an initial pool of 71 individuals, 46 singers were identified who met the criteria of being actively engaged in paid classical performance (including opera, recitals, and formal event performances) during the study period. These singers also met Connell’s (2020) “peak” and “denouement” stages in her career typology, excluding those still in training or retired from performance.

Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 46 participants. Depending on availability and location, interviews were conducted in person, by telephone, or via online platforms. Each session ranged from 15 to 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded or digitally documented with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Interview prompts focused on educational backgrounds, international training, access to scholarships, professional experiences, teaching roles, and views on opera's sustainability in Thailand.

Performance data were triangulated with interview responses to confirm participant activity, performance venues, and educational history. This dual data collection method allowed the research to link qualitative narratives with a mapped landscape of Thai opera's institutional presence and frequency of productions from 2019 to 2024.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board under protocol number 2023/029.2301. All participants were provided with a detailed study information sheet and signed written informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all participant identifiers, and data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a hybrid qualitative-quantitative approach to provide both narrative depth and structural insights. First, all interview transcripts and supplementary performance records were subjected to an inductive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) method. Codes were initially generated based on recurring themes such as international mobility, scholarship access, hybrid careers (performance and teaching), local versus global opportunity structures, and cultural identity negotiation.

These themes were then grouped into broader conceptual categories aligned with the study's theoretical framework on cultural sustainability, transcultural hybridity, and educational mobility. Themes were refined iteratively through multiple rounds of coding and re-reading of the transcripts to ensure consistency and depth. Member checking was conducted with selected participants to validate emerging interpretations and minimize researcher bias.

To enhance analytical clarity, a participant matrix (**Table 1**) was constructed, inspired by Isaakyan's (2022) and Connell's (2020) formats. This matrix includes anonymized details such as gender-coded participant ID, voice type, funding sources, highest education level, country of international study (if applicable), and primary versus secondary career roles. This structured presentation allows for the identification of patterns across categories, such as the influence of Austrian scholarships on international career outcomes or the prevalence of teaching roles among those performing domestically.

Year	Opera Title	Composer	Producing Company	Venue	
2019	The Clever Sage	S. Sucharitkul	Opera Siam	Thailand Centre	Cultural
2019	The Honourable Prince	S. Sucharitkul	Opera Siam	Thailand Centre	Cultural

Oct 2020	L'elisir d'amore	G. Donizetti	L'elisi BKK	Thailand Cultural Centre
Dec 2021	Covido The Opera	K. Reyes & N. Reyes	Not applicable (n/a)	Video Production
Dec 2022	La Bohème	G. Puccini	Agalin & Terra	Agalin, Bangkok & Terra, Chiang Mai
Mar 2023	Così fan tutte	W. A. Mozart	College of Music, Mahidol University	MACM, Mahidol University
Nov 2023	The Telephone	G. C. Menotti	College of Music, Mahidol University	Room A407, Mahidol University
Sept 2023	La Cambiale di Matrimonio	G. Rossini	Bangkok Youth Opera	Nelson Library
Dec 2023	The Telephone	G. C. Menotti	Voicesense Studio	Bangkok Arts and Culture Center
Jan 13, 2024	The Story of the Long-Gone Animals	K. Reyes & N. Reyes	Thailand Philharmonic Orchestra	Prince Mahidol Hall
Jan 28, 2024	Madame Butterfly	G. Puccini	Terra	Terra, Chiang Mai
Feb 2024	Das Land des Lächelns	F. Lehár	College of Music, Mahidol University	MACM, Mahidol University
July 2024	La Bohème	G. Puccini	Pocket Opera	Sangita Vadhana Hall, Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music
July 2024	Madame Butterfly	G. Puccini	Royal Bangkok Symphony Orchestra	Thailand Cultural Centre
July 2024	Das Jati	S. Sucharitkul	Opera Siam	Thailand Cultural Centre
July–Aug 2024	Der Schauspieldirektor	W. A. Mozart	College of Music, Mahidol University	Room A407, Mahidol University
Aug 2024	Dido & Aeneas	H. Purcell	Bangkok Youth Opera	Sangita Vadhana Hall, Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music
Oct	La Bohème	G. Puccini	China National	Thailand Cultural

2024			Opera House	Centre
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Table 1. Participant Profile Matrix of Thai Classical Singers

This matrix serves a dual function: it provides demographic transparency and forms the basis for cross-case comparative analysis. For instance, it reveals that among the 34 participants who studied abroad, 20 received scholarships, with Austria emerging as a dominant training destination—particularly through the ASEA-UNINET program. Similarly, the table reflects that only five participants rely solely on performance as their income source, underscoring the prominence of teaching as a sustainable secondary profession in the Thai operatic landscape.

Quantitative content drawn from Table 1 was further aggregated and cross-tabulated to explore relationships between educational mobility, funding type, and career location (domestic vs. international). These relationships informed the subsequent Findings and Discussion sections, where patterns are interpreted through the lens of sustainability and transcultural artistic labor.

Methodological Rigor and Limitations

To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation was used across performance archives, venue records, and interviews. Member checking was performed with selected participants to validate emerging interpretations. Despite the strength of the approach, limitations include the exclusion of currently inactive or early-stage singers and the underrepresentation of unpublicized performers. Furthermore, the reliance on performance visibility may have led to the omission of singers operating solely in niche or underground scenes. Nevertheless, the methodological framework offers a replicable model for future studies in under-documented artistic ecosystems, particularly within emerging economies. It foregrounds the voices of cultural practitioners as agents of sustainability in hybrid operatic traditions.

Findings

This section presents the empirical results of the study, organized into five thematic areas emerging from the data: educational trajectories, funding and scholarship access, career configurations, international mobility, and the performance ecosystem in Thailand. These categories were drawn from thematic and matrix analysis of interview data with 46 Thai classical singers, including 16 who studied in Austria.

Educational Trajectories (Local vs. International Training)

Among the 46 participants, all but two held university-level qualifications, with 34 having completed or pursued postgraduate music education overseas. Austria emerged as the most common destination, with 16 singers completing at least part of their vocal training there, followed by Italy, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Singers often pursued foundational training in Thailand and sought advanced artistic development abroad, particularly in countries with strong operatic traditions. As one soprano (F1) noted, *“It made sense to study where opera is part of the culture — the environment itself teaches you.”* Another participant (M2) remarked, *“I didn’t just learn singing in Austria — I discovered who I am as an artist.”* These reflections underscore the value of immersive learning and suggest that international education plays a formative role in both artistic identity and professional readiness.

While Thai institutions such as Mahidol University and Silpakorn University offer specialized music programs, students perceived international institutions as providing more rigorous diction

training, stylistic nuance, and real-world performance opportunities embedded in everyday life.

Funding and Scholarship Access

Out of the 34 internationally trained singers, 20 received partial or full funding through scholarships. Among them, 12 benefited from Austria's ASEA-UNINET scheme — a pivotal enabler of transnational mobility in the sample. Others relied on short-term grants (e.g., ISA) or self-funding, with many highlighting the burden of financial risk in choosing this career path.

As one participant (F5) stated, *“Without the scholarship, I couldn't have gone. And without going, I wouldn't have had the technique to sing the role I'm doing now.”* Participants noted the competitiveness of scholarships and the accompanying pressure to succeed. F9 reflected, *“I didn't want to waste the opportunity. Everyone there just goes home and studies — I had to match their level.”* The transformative potential of scholarships extended beyond recipients. Some singers who failed to obtain funding still pursued training in Austria, demonstrating how access — or even the aspiration for access — serves as a motivational driver, reinforcing the scholarship's cultural and psychological significance.

Career Configurations (Performer, Teacher, Hybrid Roles)

The majority of participants pursue portfolio careers, combining performance with teaching, coaching, or arts administration. Only five singers rely exclusively on performance income. This configuration reflects a pragmatic response to Thailand's limited operatic market and aligns with Bartleet et al. (2019) and López-Íñiguez & Bennett's (2020) findings on multi-professional musicianship.

Participants framed teaching not only as financial support but as a mode of sustaining the art form locally. As F1 noted, *“We're kind of the first generation — there's a responsibility to nurture the next one.”* Others, like M7, expressed ambivalence: *“If I break the connection with Europe, I risk my career here. It's hard to give that up to focus only on teaching.”* This tension between cultural stewardship and career sustainability highlights the fragility of Thailand's operatic ecosystem and the strategic balancing acts singers must perform.

Mobility and International Careers

International mobility shapes both artistic competence and professional networks. Many participants reported returning to Thailand after their studies, either due to family obligations, visa restrictions, or aspirations to develop the local industry. However, a number continued to perform abroad in seasonal contracts, voice residencies, or collaborative projects.

Austria was viewed not only as a site of training but as a professional gateway. F11 shared, *“If I didn't go to Austria, I wouldn't know how composers feel. Now when I sing Strauss, I feel the Danube and the winter in his music.”*

Language acquisition, particularly in German and Italian, was cited as a core professional competency. Participants described Austria as an immersive environment that forced linguistic and cultural adaptation. *“I didn't just translate lyrics — I learned the composer's soul,”* F10 reflected.

Singers reported mastering stylistic agility, learning to navigate French *mélodie*, Italian *bel canto*, and German operetta through their international training. Many also emphasized the importance of connecting this knowledge back to their Thai roots, blending technical mastery with cultural storytelling.

Performance Ecosystem in Thailand (Venues, Events, Networks)

Despite growing interest in classical music, the operatic infrastructure in Thailand remains underdeveloped. Few full-length operas are staged each year, and most performances occur in academic settings, private venues, or regional festivals. The Thailand Cultural Centre and Prince Mahidol Hall host the country's most formal productions, but programming is inconsistent, and Thai singers are often excluded from lead roles. For example, all principal parts in the July 2024 *Madama Butterfly* were performed by non-Thai singers.

Participants frequently perform in unconventional spaces — hotels, shopping malls, embassies — or transition into musical theatre or crossover genres for stability. A review of operatic productions between 2019 and 2024 (**Table 2**) reflects these constraints, highlighting limited frequency, underrepresentation of local talent, and reliance on foreign companies.

No.	ID	Voice Type	Funding	Primary Career (Secondary Careers)	Career Location	Highest Education	Study Abroad
1	F1	Soprano	ASEA-UNINET & Thai Higher Ed	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's (also Doctorate, UK)	Austria
2	M2	Tenor	ASEA-UNINET	Classical opera singer	Germany	Master's	Austria
3	F3	Soprano	Self-funded	Classical opera singer (Voice teacher)	Norway	Master's	Austria
4	F4	Soprano	ASEA-UNINET	Classical opera singer (Voice teacher)	Austria	Master's	Austria
5	F5	Soprano	ASEA-UNINET	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Bachelor's	Austria
6	M6	Baritone	Short, ISA	Classical opera singer (Voice teacher)	Thailand	Bachelor's	Austria

7	M7	Tenor	Short, ISA	Classical opera singer (Voice teacher)	Thailand	Bachelor's	Austria
8	F8	Soprano	ASEA-UNINET	Classical opera singer (Voice teacher)	Germany	Master's	Austria
9	F9	Soprano	Self-funded	Classical opera singer (Voice teacher)	Austria	Master's	Austria
10	F10	Soprano	Self-funded	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Austria	Two Master's Degrees	Austria/Germany
11	F11	Soprano	ASEA-UNINET	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's	Austria
12	F12	Mezzo-Soprano	ASEA-UNINET	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's	Austria
13	M13	Bass-Baritone	Self-funded	Classical opera singer	France	Master's	Austria
14	F14	Soprano	Nine-month scholarship	Classical opera singer	Poland	Diploma	Austria/Poland
15	F15	Soprano	Short, ISA	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's	Austria
16	M16	Bass-Baritone	US Master Scholarship	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Doctorate	USA

17	M17	Counter-tenor	Self-funded	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Canada	Master's	Canada
18	M18	Tenor	MM Scholarship	Vocal teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's	USA
19	F19	Soprano	Masterclass Scholarship	Classical opera singer (Voice teacher)	Thailand	Master's	Italy
20	F20	Soprano	TA & Merit (MM + DMA)	Vocal teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's	USA
21	M21	Counter-Tenor	BA Scholarship	Voice teacher (Classical singer)	Thailand	Master's	Singapore
22	F22	Soprano	Opera Studio & BA Foundation	Classical opera singer (Organizer)	Belgium	Postgraduate	Belgium
23	M23	Baritone	Royal Private	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Bachelor's	UK
24	M24	Baritone	Self-funded	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's	China
25	F25	Soprano	Royal Family Scholarship	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Bachelor's	USA
26	F26	Mezzo-Soprano	Self-funded	Classical opera singer	Thailand	High School	USA

27	M27	Baritone	Self-funded	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's	Australia
28	M28	Bass-Baritone	Self-funded	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's	Portugal
29	M29	Tenor	Thailand Merit	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's	No
30	M30	Tenor	Self-funded	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's	Philippines
31	M31	Baritone	Self-funded	Classical opera singer (Insurance seller)	Thailand	Bachelor's	No
32	F32	Soprano	Education Scholarship	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's	No
33	F33	Soprano	Self-funded	Classical opera singer (Voice teacher)	Thailand	Master's	No
34	F34	Soprano	Self-funded	Classical opera singer	Thailand	Bachelor's	No
35	F35	Soprano	Self-funded	Voice teacher (Classical opera singer)	Thailand	Master's	No
36	F36	Soprano	Self-funded	Business owner (Classical opera	Thailand	Master's	No

				singer)			
37	F37	Sopran o	BA 1-year Scholarsh ip	Voice teacher (Classical singer)	Thailan d	Bachelor's	Austria
38	M3 8	Counte r-Tenor	Self- funded	Lecturer (Classical singer)	Thailan d	PhD (Unrelated)	UK
39	M3 9	Bariton e	Self- funded	Voice teacher (Classical singer)	Thailan d	Doctorate	UK
40	F40	Sopran o	MM Scholarsh ip	Voice teacher (Classical singer)	Thailan d	Master's	No
41	F41	Sopran o	Private Lessons Scholarsh ip	Chef (Classical singer, Vocal teacher)	Thailan d	Master's	USA
42	F42	Sopran o	BA Scholarsh ip	Voice teacher (Classical singer)	Thailan d	Bachelor's	No
43	M4 3	Tenor	Self- funded	Business manager (Classical singer)	Thailan d	Master's	No
44	F44	Sopran o	Universit y Merit	Voice teacher (Classical singer)	Thailan d	Master's	No
45	M4 5	Bariton e	Self- funded	Voice teacher (Classical singer)	Thailan d	Master's	No
46	M4 6	Counte r-Tenor	Scholarsh ip to complete degrees	Voice teacher, (Classical singer)	Thailan d	Master's	Italy

Table 2. Opera Productions in Thailand (2019–2024)

This table underscores the significance of local institutions like Mahidol University and Bangkok Youth Opera in sustaining the artform, albeit with minimal state support. Participants called for more investment in venues, production infrastructure, and public awareness campaigns to elevate opera beyond elite or expatriate circles.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive view into the educational and professional trajectories of Thai classical singers and their role in fostering cultural sustainability within the operatic arts. The discussion is organized across five key dimensions: demographic access to education, international mobility and artistic capital, career configuration and sustainability strategies, Austria's outsized influence in global operatic pathways, and implications for policy and practice.

Demographics and Educational Access: Barriers and Gateways

Among the 46 participants, a slight female majority (26) was observed, dominated by sopranos, while male participants (20) represented tenors, baritones, bass-baritones, and countertenors. Educationally, access to the profession is largely conditioned by formal academic training: 44 of the singers hold at least a bachelor's degree in classical singing, with 35 having earned postgraduate qualifications. This supports the conclusion that higher education—particularly in voice—is both a gateway and a gatekeeper for professional legitimacy in opera.

Only two singers lacked university-level training, and even they supplemented their education through private study, underscoring the exclusivity of operatic training. This echoes concerns about the social stratification of opera education (Guachalla, 2024), and supports Ho et al. (2021) who found that financial constraints and familial influence often determine educational choices in the arts. Within the Thai context—where traditional forms such as *likay* still dominate (Polachan, 2020)—opera remains a specialized, elite artform, with access largely determined by socioeconomic privilege or scholarship support.

Educational Mobility and Artistic Capital

Educational mobility emerged as a key facilitator in both skill development and international career access. Of the 46 participants, 34 studied abroad, with Austria standing out as the most common destination (16 participants). The role of Austria, particularly via the ASEA-UNINET scholarship, reveals how international academic exchange programs shape transnational artistic careers. These findings mirror Lo's (2018, 2019) assertion that study-abroad experiences serve as accelerators of global cultural capital and professional opportunity.

Of the 20 participants who received scholarships for international study, the majority pursued long-term programs—ranging from nine-month residencies to full master's degrees. These long-term scholarships appear to have the strongest correlation with sustained international careers. In contrast, participants with only short-term exchange or summer study programs still gained valuable exposure but were more likely to remain within the domestic circuit.

That said, self-funded students—particularly those who trained in Austria, the UK, or Canada—also found pathways to international work, though the financial burden was often higher. The evidence here supports Salmi's (2020) claim that scholarships democratize access to elite training, while also suggesting that even short-term cultural exchanges can have lasting professional value.

Career Configurations: Navigating Precarity through Hybrid Roles

A defining feature of participants' career development is the prevalence of portfolio or hybrid careers, where performance is combined with teaching, coaching, arts administration, or even unrelated employment. Only five participants relied solely on performance for income—all but

one had studied abroad.

This reflects both the fragility of the operatic labor market and the adaptability of Thai classical singers. As noted by Bartleet et al. (2019) and López-Íñiguez & Bennett (2020), hybrid careers are not merely fallback options but necessary strategies in managing career precarity in the arts. Thai singers embrace these multi-professional identities as a way to sustain artistic engagement, especially in a country where opera remains underfunded and underperformed.

Importantly, these hybrid roles serve long-term career sustainability. As Santos et al. (2019) observed, vocal quality declines with age, making teaching or coaching essential for career continuity. Several participants have used their postgraduate credentials to transition into university roles, echoing Connell's (2020) typology of career lifecycles for professional singers. This adaptability enhances resilience within an unstable creative economy.

Austria's Dominance and the Dynamics of Cultural Sustainability

The centrality of Austria to many participants' professional journeys deserves specific attention. Of the 16 singers who studied in Austria, eight are now based internationally—primarily in Europe—and three (M2, F3, F4) have long-term contracts with opera houses. Eleven of these singers were funded by the ASEA-UNINET program, indicating the profound influence of targeted, long-duration scholarships.

However, it is essential not to overstate Austria's role. Some singers who trained entirely in Thailand have forged meaningful careers through local networks, small-scale performances, and academic appointments. These singers often participate in the sustainability of opera through education and community engagement, compensating for the lack of formal productions.

The findings suggest a nuanced balance: international education offers greater access to global opportunities, while local pathways can still support cultural sustainability—though often with fewer resources. This duality aligns with Tomasi, Paviotti and Cavicchi's (2020) concept of “educational tourism,” where short study periods abroad complement but do not replace robust local engagement.

Implications for Cultural Policy and Practice

Thai classical singers emerge not only as interpreters of Western operatic heritage but as cultural agents transforming it through hybrid identity, educational mobility, and adaptive professional strategies. Their careers reveal both the limitations of existing infrastructure and the potential for grassroots cultural sustainability.

These insights prompt several recommendations. First, expanding scholarship opportunities beyond Austria can decentralize training access and create more diverse educational ecosystems. Second, investment in local operatic production infrastructure—including venues, commissions, and regional collaborations—can empower domestically trained singers. Third, recognition of hybrid careers should be embedded into policy frameworks, acknowledging the dual importance of teaching and performance in sustaining the field.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the fragility of operatic ecosystems, with many participants relying on their secondary roles—particularly teaching—to survive. As Murdaugh, Hausknecht and Herbst (2022) suggest, the digitization of music education is not a full substitute for live interaction but remains a valuable tool for career continuity in times of crisis.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that a career in classical opera is possible both within and

beyond Thailand. While international education—especially in Austria—may facilitate access to larger performance platforms, local ingenuity, collaboration, and resilience continue to define the operatic careers of many Thai artists. Future research might explore longitudinal impacts of specific scholarships like ASEA-UNINET and examine emerging educational geographies that will shape the next generation of Thai classical singers.

Conclusion

This study presents the first empirical exploration of Thai classical singers' educational and career pathways within the Western operatic tradition. Based on interviews with 46 professionals active between 2019 and 2024, the findings highlight the pivotal role of international education—particularly in Austria—and the significance of scholarships such as ASEA-UNINET in fostering access to elite training and expanding career opportunities abroad. Among those currently performing internationally, most had studied in Austria, underscoring the role of cross-border education in enabling global operatic participation. Equally important is the resilience of singers who remain in Thailand. In the absence of a robust operatic infrastructure, these artists sustain their careers through hybrid roles that blend performance with teaching, coaching, or arts administration. These portfolio careers demonstrate how cultural sustainability in the arts often depends on adaptability, collaboration, and local community engagement rather than traditional institutional pathways. This research reframes Thai classical singers as active agents in a transcultural process—individuals who do not merely inherit European vocal traditions but creatively reshape them through localized expression, multilingualism, and pedagogical contributions. Their work exemplifies a dynamic model of cultural sustainability, where global art forms are reimaged through national contexts and identities. The findings suggest several policy implications: expanding scholarship opportunities beyond Austria, investing in local operatic ecosystems, and recognizing the legitimacy of hybrid professional careers in cultural and educational planning. Supporting these diverse pathways can empower future generations of Thai singers and ensure the long-term sustainability of operatic practice in Thailand and beyond. Thai classical singers occupy a vital space at the intersection of heritage, mobility, and sustainability. Their stories reflect both the challenges and possibilities of pursuing opera in a non-Western context—and offer a compelling model for how global art forms can be preserved, adapted, and sustained through local innovation and international exchange.

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