



JANET L. MATTHEWS/The Columbian

From front, seated, clockwise: Rabbi Aviva Bass, Rosalie Gottlieb, April Brookins Duvic, Janet Bell, Linda Appert and Virginia Holter, with muff.

The Sopranos

Clark
County
divas
share
their
fierce
love
of opera

By ANGELA ALLEN
Columbian staff writer

Once a diva, always a diva. Deservedly so, if you can sing opera.

Opera singers perform and perfect feats with their bodies, minds and voices, reaching highs and lows the rest of us can only imagine.

Besides all the notes, they know several languages and numerous singing styles. They perform while inching down flights of stage stairs and climbing over walls, wearing 50-pound turbans and 100-yard dresses.

They sing sitting, standing, lying down and tied up in ropes. They jump from bridges to their stage deaths, and sob while they hit a high E.

The art requires physi-

cal stamina, a knowledge of rhythm, pitches and theatrics. And opera singers do it all on stage, in front of thousands of people, some skeptical of the centuries-old musical art of exaggeration and excess.

Opera, its passionate fans say, is history and histrionics, poetry and lyricism, humor and tragedy, real life and life magnified, as well as exquisite voices.

"It takes brass to get out there and do your best," says Virginia Holter, a former opera singer who now lives in Vancouver and is determined to develop a full-fledged arts center in Clark County.

Opera singers must embrace the stage to use their enormous voices, but some are less keen on it than others.

"I really don't like to perform,"

said Vancouver's internationally sought-after soprano Linda Appert, who makes reaching a high E-flat sound easy when she sings the role of Queen of the Night in "The Magic Flute."

Appert is modest about her lifelong vocal talent, pursuit and career. "I want to be good and affirmed, but I'm just serving faithfully with what God has given me."

Opera is a complex calling. It doesn't pay well, and the fame is minimal when compared to that of today's cultural heroes. It requires a lifetime of discipline, hard work, ups and downs, and time away from home. And aging, though "we're all on the same caravan," as Holter jokes, does little to enhance a diva's career.

"You don't sing opera because

Did you know?

■ A diva, according to Webster's New World Dictionary, is a leading woman singer, especially in grand opera, or a prima donna. The word's roots are in deity, or god. It is the feminine form.

you want to become famous and rich," said Janet Bell, an up-and-coming Vancouver soprano who shies away from the term diva.

Though she can render "Adieu, Notre Petite Table" from "Manon" with precision, emotion and glamour, Bell, 27, insists she's too young and untested to fit the diva label.

Divas:

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"A diva is someone with much more experience on a much grander scale than I have. Therefore, I suppose I am 'la petite diva.'"

Despite her studies and musical gifts, Bell claims she doesn't want "to pursue the diva end of opera. It's a long and arduous road. One has to be very resilient."

Other Vancouver sopranos who have reached diva heights view those days with nostalgia.

Loti Christensen, who made her singing debut at 19 with the Israel Opera and studied at the Conservatoire de Paris (known today as Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris), has turned her talents to exposing kids to the art form with the Vancouver Children's Opera.

In former days, she recalls being treated "with awe" as a young Bulgarian-born singer in Israel and France. As singers age, she says, "our bodies and vocal chords betray us, though in our inner psyches, we are still and forever more opera and lieder singers. It is an identity that we can never shed."

For April Brookins Duvic, a voice teacher at Clark College, singing on stage in front of an audience is intense and satisfying. "There's no better adrenaline rush. . . . But I really think of myself as a teacher, not as a diva or an opera singer."

Aviva Bass, who incorporates singing into her work as a rabbi at the Congregation Kol Ami in Vancouver, feels one with the stage as well.

"When I step onstage, I'm home. It means control and power. But when I lead services, I am at my most humble. I feel myself resonate within the walls of what I'm singing. Humility and ego: When you strike just the right balance, it's electrifying."

The sopranos say that once you've sung an aria and embraced an opera, you can't stop living life from the vantage point of a gifted singer.

As Christensen says, "We never quit."

Adds Holter, imagining the arts center of her musical dreams, "You can't quit."

If they did, say the divas of the high register, the operatic hopes of the next generation would be without a stage or an audience.

Linda Appert

Vancouver soprano.

Favorite role: Queen of the Night in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "The Magic Flute," where her coloratura fireworks are on full display.

"It is a role that sopranos work to perfect for many years, so when it is finally 'there,' it is most rewarding to sing."

She sang the Queen of the Night in Kansas City, Macedonia, and most recently, with the Vancouver Children's Opera.

Favorite opera: "Don Giovanni" (to be performed by Portland Opera in May).

"It ranks up there for its bold moral statements and choices and their inevitability. Its rich and varied characters and the gorgeous arias are unmatched."

While performing in St. Petersburg, Russia, two years ago she heard "Don Giovanni" sung by an all-Russian cast.

Nursing the opera passion: When she was 10½, her mother brought her to first voice lesson close to their small New England town near Boston. Her teacher was Dr. David Blair McClosky, a well-known baritone and a voice therapist who worked with John F. Kennedy to help him use his voice properly.

Besides voice lessons, her aunt had season tickets to the Metropolitan Opera for 60-plus years. "Her love of opera was infectious."

Hearing glamorous soprano Shirley Verrett at Boston Symphony Hall when in junior high "was totally mesmerizing," Appert says. Then when she saw her first opera at 17, "The Barber of Seville" in Vienna when touring with the Concordia Youth Chorale, she was hooked even more. Then came her first opera role in "Four Saints and Three Acts" when she was a freshman at Oberlin College Conservatory.

Community and family connection: Appert's husband, Donald Appert, conducts the Clark College Orchestra. The two collaborate in concerts overseas, this season in Turkey, Poland and San Salvador. Their daughters, Laura, a violist, and Rebecca, a violinist, graduates of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, are freelance musicians in and around Cincinnati.



Linda Appert

ist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia for the student who most contributed to cantorial music. "I love the pastoral aspect of the rabbinate. I wanted to be able to float between the two roles."

Favorite opera singer: Jessye Norman, whom she heard during the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. "We were enthralled by not only the power of her voice, but the effect of it, as well as by her very presence and soul. By today's Western standards she is not likely to be considered physically attractive, yet when she got onstage, she was the most beautiful woman in whose presence I have ever been."

When Bass met Norman backstage, Bass's husband, Daniel, then her boyfriend, mentioned that Bass was a singer "who hopes one day to be as great as you."

Bass said she was embarrassed by the remark, yet Norman looked her "directly in the eyes and smiled without any trace of condescension, and said, 'Well that's wonderful; the world needs more good singers.'

"She shook my hand and I could not help feeling that something of her grace had transferred to me."

Janet Bell

Vancouver soprano

Voice vocation: Teaches voice and piano, and sings opera and musical theater in the Portland-Vancouver area. Studied with April Brookins Duvic at Clark College and Ellen Faulk, both featured in today's story. She is working on a master's degree from Portland State University.

Recent roles: Papagena in "The Magic Flute" in 2006 Vancouver Children's Opera and Sandman in "Hansel and Gretel," also a children's opera production, as well performing in and directing local musical theater.

Favorite opera singer: Joan Sutherland.

Thoughts on opera:

"What I appreciate most about the art of opera is the unpredictability. The voice can be great one day and hoarse the next. Anything can affect it and change the color, be it the weather, a good night's sleep, a glass of wine. I was at a performance of an opera in the Vienna State Opera where a coffin fell into the orchestra pit and took out a cellist. The show must go on. It did eventually after they hauled out the cellist and the coffin. Or was it the cellist in the coffin?"



Janet Bell

Rabbi Aviva Bass

Vancouver soprano

Community role: First rabbi of Congregation Kol Ami in Clark County as of September, 2005.

Musical evolution:

As a girl, she studied concert piano, acting and voice. In college she double-majored in vocal performance and Judaic studies at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Fla. As her life and studies progressed, she decided her rich voice could fit into her rabbinical work.

Awards: Many, among them the Mehlman Jewish Music Award from the Reconstruction-



Rabbi Aviva Bass

Loti Christensen

Vancouver soprano

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chi," gained her admittance to the Conservatoire National de Paris at the age of 23. She made her debut at 19 as Siebel in "Faust" with the Israel Opera, a stage where Placido Domingo sang as a young tenor.

Favorite opera singer: Placido Domingo.

Thoughts on gifted voices: "The opera voice is a vehicle for the glorious music that myriad composers have left us as legacy. And it is a painful time, for older singers, and for illustrious opera singers such as Maria Callas and Beverly Sills, to cease being performers and delegate to the younger singers to be the vehicle for the music."

April Brookins Duvic

Amboy soprano

Community link: Music and voice teacher at Clark College. The Music Teachers National Association recognized her for teaching excellence with two of her voice students winning the association's national high school voice competition. Duvic was awarded Clark College's Exceptional Faculty Award in 2001-2002.

She teaches and directs musical performances between eight and 12 hours a day. Along with Vanessa Jump Nelson, she performs regularly with the Duellin' Sopranos. Both she and Nelson were born in April. (See www.duellinsopranos.com.)

Fanning the opera

passion: "My dad had records of mezzo-soprano Rise Stevens and I thought she was great. I used to sing along with her. Oh, and I loved 'The Lawrence Welk Show,' especially 'Champagne Lady' Norma Zimmer. I'd go around the house mimicking her when I was 4 years old."

Duvic saw her first opera, "Aida," in the 1970s. "I was totally enthralled and went back to college ready to tackle any and all opera my teacher threw at me. I used to sit at the piano and read through the entire soprano opera anthology and sing every aria in the book."

Favorite place to hear opera: The Metropolitan Opera (in New York City). "I love it. And Paris (Opera de Paris-bastille) is a close second."

Daily singing regimen: On her 45-minute commute from Fargher Lake to Clark College, she practices "a very regimented set of vocal exercises. It's crucial to systematically vocalize every day to keep the voice in shape and be able to handle all the stresses it faces during the day."

Ellen Faull

Camas soprano

Debut: Donna Anna in "Don Giovanni" at New York City Opera in 1947, which began her 35-year association with the company. Other favorite roles: Cio-Cio-San in Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" and Mimi in his "La Boheme."

Teaching highlights:



April Brookins Duvic



Ellen Faull

From 1980-1990, she taught at Juilliard School of Music in New York City and chaired the voice department. She continues to coach voice in the area, and worked with Janet Bell, another soprano in today's story.

Comment: Former New York City Opera music director and Grammy Award winner Julius Rudel on the 89-year-old Faull's talent, quoted in 1998 on "Ellen Faull: An American Soprano" compact disc: "In the years immediately after World War II, a new kind of opera singer took the stage. This new breed of artist was a good colleague, a good musician, a good actor, believable looking, willing to take direction, cooperative and American Ellen Faull was the epitome. ... Ellen's voice — clear, warm and flexible — could handle many different styles and composers, making her the ideal performer for the situation."

The Keller Auditorium's acoustics, Portland Opera's performing home: "If you have a healthy, well-projected voice, I find it easy to listen there."

Rosalie Gottlieb

Vancouver soprano

Early opera experience: Guiseppe Verdi's "Rigoletto" was her first role, which she learned at 15 and sang at the San Francisco Conservatory with college students preparing for a San Francisco Opera performance. She continues to sing at churches and synagogues and teaches voice.

Favorite opera:

"Madama Butterfly." About the Puccini opera, she says, "One is lulled into the beauty and happiness of love and happy life. Then, of course, there's the shock of the real life. One forgets about reality during the first act."

Favorite place to hear opera: "San Francisco Opera as it was when I was growing up." Second to the top is the Seattle Opera.



Rosalie Gottlieb

Virginia Holter

Vancouver soprano

Opera highlights: Sang leading roles with West Bay Opera in Palo Alto, Calif., in such operas as "The Marriage of Figaro," "Il Trovatore" and "Gianni Schicchi." In the 1970s, she performed Portland Opera previews in Vancouver. The program is now part of Clark College's Mature Learning classes. "I always enjoyed the roles I sang because I only sang the ones I liked."

Ongoing determination:

Helped form Citizens for Cultural Arts in 1999 in Vancouver, a nonprofit which she chairs. She envisions a "real center for the arts in Clark County, acoustically, architecturally, aesthetically, with attention to the sizes of auditoriums."

She imagines three auditoriums with an orchestra pit and an area for visual artists and visitors. Web site is C4CA.org.



Virginia Holter