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## Ask Vance: Opera Star Ruth Welting

Our history expert solves local mysteries:  
who, what, when, where, why, and why  
not. Well, sometimes.

by Vance Lauderdale

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Dear Vance: Whatever  
became of the famous  
Memphis opera star, Ruth  
Welting? — J.P.,  
Germantown.

**Dear J.P.:** Your question makes me appreciate the magic in our city that has produced so many musical legends in rock-and-roll, soul, gospel, and yes — opera. Just consider the number of Memphis women who have performed with companies around the world — Mignon Dunn,

Kallen Esperian. I remember their names easily. Over the years, each of these singers performed at the Holiday Extravaganza in the Lauderdale Ballroom, and I often accompanied them on kettledrum and oboe, until they demanded I stop.

Born here in 1948, Ruth Lynn Welting grew up at 3651 Barron, a small house close to the Sherwood Forest neighborhood. Her father, William Welting Jr. ran a successful commercial air-conditioning business, and her mother, Mary, had an even harder job: running a household that would eventually include four daughters.

Ruth attended Messick High School, her considerable talents evident at an early age. She performed in school plays, notably the 1965 holiday presentation of *The Sound of Music*, where she had the leading role of Maria. That year, she was also the grand-prize winner of the Mid-South Fair's talent show, and the society pages of *The Commercial Appeal* often mentioned her singing at friends' weddings, or performing for such diverse groups as Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, Memphis Better Films Council, Beethoven Club, Lausanne Mother's Club, Tuesday Study Club, and Les Passees. That summer, she was the featured soloist at a Labor Day concert at the Overton Park Shell.

Ruth didn't confine her talents to Memphis, in 1966 performing with the St. Louis Municipal Opera in *The Student Prince*. The opening-night show attracted more than 10,000, and a reviewer noted that "the petite Memphis soprano was well-received, and her voice was

In 1967, she enrolled in the music department at Memphis State University. Once again she stood out in the school's opera company and became a principal with the Memphis Opera Theatre, appearing before sold-out crowds at Ellis Auditorium.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MILTON FEINBERG / OPERA COMPANY OF BOSTON

*Welting in a 1984 production of The Tales of Hoffman, with the Opera Company of Boston.*

Ruth's big break came in 1968. Only 18 years old, she qualified as a coloratura soprano with the New York Metropolitan Opera and a few weeks later won the group's Mid-South regional auditions. *The Commercial Appeal* noted that Ruth "was following in the footsteps of her older

bespoke well for the community. Ruth has also underlined the cultural tempo. But what they really did was to put the Welting name into the musical history of Memphis.”

Ruth left our city that year to receive coaching for the Met’s semi-final auditions, and then the nationals. As you’ve gathered by now, it’s not easy to join this elite organization. One wonders how much coaching she needed, because the March 30, 1968, *Commercial Appeal* headline was “Ruth Welting Dazzles Opera Judges.”

Performing as Olympia, a wind-up mechanical doll from *The Tales of Hoffman*, she drew “the loudest bravos of the day ringing out for the petite brunette coloratura, the youngest of the finalists and looking every day of it in a baby pink dress.” It seems the word “petite” would follow her throughout her career, and after another round of auditions, she accepted a position with the Metropolitan Studio, a “training company” for the Met.

It’s almost impossible to keep track of her burgeoning career. While all this was going on, Ruth signed a contract with the American Opera Center, a division of the famous Juilliard School of Music in New York City. Somehow, she also found time to journey to Rome for several months, where “the petite Memphis soprano” (there’s that word again) studied under Luigi Ricci, one of the famous teachers at La Scala, the world-famous opera company.

years, it seems Ruth never stopped working. Even after she broke her foot after a tumble from the stage at the Kennedy Center, that didn't slow her down. Wearing a cast, she performed with the Hawaii Opera Theater, Dallas Civic Opera, San Francisco Opera, and the Greater Miami Opera.

By 1971, newspapers here reported that Ruth “has chalked up her New York City Opera debut in Mozart’s *Abduction from the Seraglio* in Lincoln Center” in addition to “a tidy repertoire of other roles.” She also renewed her contract with Julliard. Curiously, reporters still described her as “a Memphis State sophomore,” even though she left MSU to spend all her time on stage in other cities. After her performance in *A Masked Ball* with the New York City Opera, *The New York Times* praised her as “a child-sized soprano whose voice is already much too big to ride half-fare, and is probably still growing.”

Readers, I could easily fill the rest of this column with a long list of Ruth’s performances over the next decade. Instead, I’ll jump ahead and reference a *Commercial Appeal* story from 1977.

“Former Memphian Ruth Welting, a coloratura soprano who has made the big time in opera, has been in her hometown for a week. ‘I’m here to study, have a bit of fun, and just rock on this porch,’” she told the reporter, from the Germantown home of Jane Robertson, her former voice teacher.

She had certainly been busy. She stopped in London long enough to record *Mignon* for Columbia Records. Somewhere along the way, she also married Edo de Waart, the music director of the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra. The couple maintained homes in the Netherlands and California.

During this interview with Fulbright, “the diminutive 28-year-old soprano, dressed in a bright blue housecoat,” mentioned that the very next day she would be performing at the Kennedy Center, and four nights later would sing with the National Symphony Orchestra, with additional appearances coming up soon in Amsterdam, San Francisco, and New York City.

According to Fulbright, “Ms. Welting made opera history in *The Ballad of Baby Doe* right after her marriage. The performance was broadcast live from Lincoln Center and presented a major breakthrough in live televising of the performing arts.”

For the next year, Ruth said, “I’ll record Massenet’s *Cinderella* in London. I’ll go to Dallas and then I’ll be in New York to do *Baby Doe* for the New York City Opera and *Ariadne* at the Met.” Although she never became an official cast

All this touring sounds tiresome (to me, anyway), but she insisted, “I’m devoted to my singing, and I’m young and able to do it well now. I still have so much to learn.” She admitted, “There’ll be no children for us right now. I don’t want to be more divided than I am between marriage and career. It’s hard to be separated so much from Edo [and] our design for living isn’t perfect. But that’s the way life is.”

Over the next several years, it seems Ruth never stopped working. Even after she broke her foot after a tumble from the stage at the Kennedy Center, that didn’t slow her down. Wearing a cast, she performed with the Hawaii Opera Theater, Dallas Civic Opera, San Francisco Opera, and the Greater Miami Opera. She returned to Memphis (briefly) where she kicked off the inaugural concert series at Lindenwood Christian Church. A newspaper reviewer wrote: “Miss Welting sang throughout with brilliance, perfect control, and dazzling vocal production. Her dramatic projection and enrichment of each selection were remarkable.”

And then, after all this success, came tragedy. In 1986, older sister Patricia, whose career Ruth had mirrored, was murdered. She had been teaching music in Fresno, California. Ruth abruptly stopped performing as she tried to cope with this great loss. Afterwards, a friend told *The Commercial Appeal* that for almost three years afterwards “she lived a quiet, religious life in Maine,” no longer married to Edo.

In November 1989, her many fans were surely pleased to read “Met Welcomes Miss Welting’s

her signature roles. Noting her “comeback,” local reviewer Whitney Smith observed, “At 40, Welting retains enough command over Olympia’s high-pitched tessitura and menacing character to earn comforting reviews.” *The New York Times* said she “can pipe impressively above high C.”

Still living in Maine, Ruth signed on for a dozen performances with the Met for its 1991-92 season. Shortly after the last show, however, health problems forced her to retire, and she moved to Fletcher, North Carolina, just outside Asheville. She passed away there in 1999 at age 51.

The “petite coloratura” was laid to rest with the rest of her family in Pleasant Hill Cemetery, outside the Brunswick community in north Shelby County. Ruth Welting’s simple tombstone makes no mention of her international stardom. Musical notes carved into a top corner are the only clue that a remarkably talented singer is buried here.

Got a question for Vance?

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Vance Lauderdale is the history columnist for Memphis magazine and Inside Memphis Business. His dramatic life story is so well-known that schoolchildren are taught to recite it for extra credit.

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