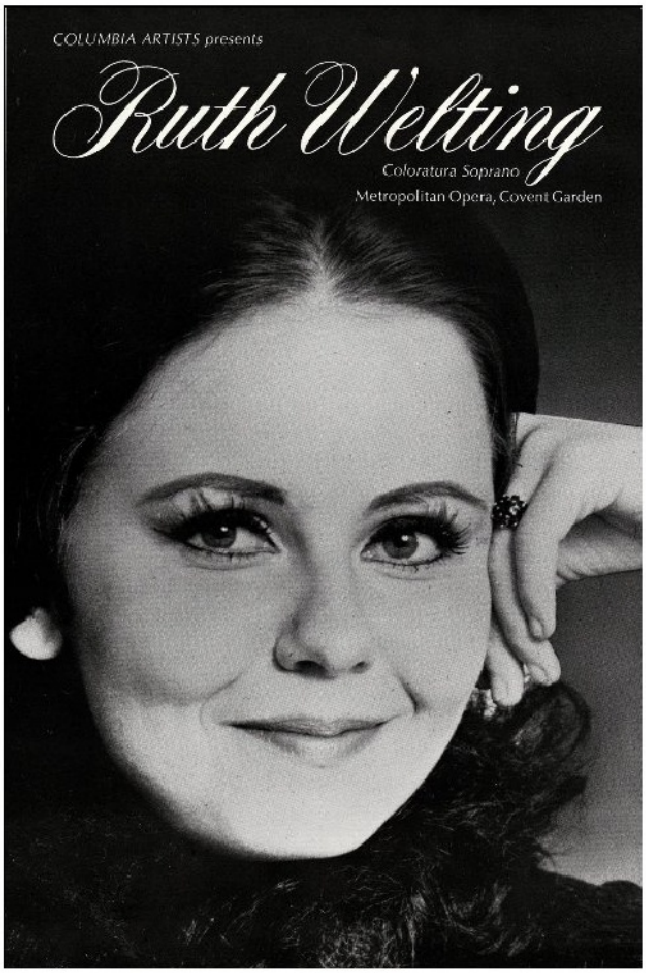
Soprano Ruth Welting

A Conversation with Bruce Duffie



"Soprano Ruth Welting dazzled her audiences with the ease of her singing in coloratura roles such as Donizetti's Lucia, Richard Strauss's Zerbinetta and Mozart's Konstanze. She produced ravishing sounds up to the F above high C, and she was also an excellent actress, who made an enchanting figure on stage. At a time when heavier voices had become fashionable in much of this repertory, she projected her light, pure-toned voice in such a way that she filled the largest auditoria, notably the Metropolitan Opera, New York, and Lyric Opera, Chicago, to the satisfaction of the listener furthest from the stage."

That quote, taken from the obituary which appeared in the British paper *The Independent* seems, to my mind at least, to sum up the dazzling career that was hers from beginning to end. [The entire article can be seen at the bottom of this page.]

Chicago audiences enjoyed her Olympia in two seasons, as well as Zerbinetta, Konstanze, Amina in *La Sonnambula*, and Ophélie in *Hamlet*. It was in 1981 during the run of *Ariadne* that I had the opportunity to speak with her at her apartment. She was gracious and bubbly, and exuded the laughter everyone had come to expect from this happy artist.

As I was setting up the machine to record our conversation, the subject of being from the South came up, so that's where we began . . . . .

Bruce Duffie: How does a girl from Tennessee get into opera?

Ruth Welting: Oh, I don't know . . . [Laughter] That's a good question. I have no idea. Actually, I come from a musical family with four girls. My older sister, Patricia Welting, sang at the Met in the original staging of the Chagall *Magic Flute*. She did Papagena and she also

sang Oscar, Adele, Despina — a lot of the roles that I do. Our voices are very similar in timbre, but my voice is higher than hers. She's more of a lyric soprano than I am. So I was raised in a musical house. That explains something.

BD: I started to instinctively say, "That's nice," but is it nice being pushed into something?

Welting: We didn't know that we were being pushed. It is amazing that two daughters out of the same household would sing at the Met. Everybody thinks that the Met is the pinnacle of achievement. I don't necessarily think so, but somehow that seems to be important to a lot of people. But the fact is that we both sang there, and she did do a lot of things at the City Opera and traveled all over the country with Alfred Drake in *Kismet*. She had quite a career. There must be something behind us that would prompt two of us to go that far... there was, but it was more psychological and not only what our parents put into us to make us what we are. My sister is now teaching voice and performing at Sophie Newcomb, but there was almost a lack of something that they didn't give us that prompted us to search for what that lack was. I think that is more of it. I'm not taking anything away from what my parents did. They really gave us all the training. They went to the nth degree to give us piano lessons and dancing lessons — all the things we needed to develop our talent — but at the same time there was something missing that drove us to go out and find what it was that we needed. That, I think, led us both to be performers. It takes a lot of drive, let me tell you! You've got to have something that makes you go through the whole maze of competition and being treated just terribly at first. When you're a younger singer nobody respects you.

BD: Just how badly are young singers treated? [*Vis-à-vis the recording shown at right, see my interviews with Rockwell Blake, Julius Rudel, Richard Stilwell, Marilyn Horne, Mstislav Rostropovich, James King, and Joan Sutherland*.]

Welting: I would say a lot. This business has a lot of insecure people in it. The great people, of course, the ones who are really great and have achieved a certain greatness never belittle anyone. On the contrary, they encourage and are wonderful people. But there are other people who get their kicks out of making young singers feel like, "What are you doing here?"

A1	Rockwell Blake – L'Italiana In Algeri: Languir Per Una Bella Composed By – Rossini* Piano – Jeffrey Goldberg	7:23
A2	Carol Neblett – Mefistofele: L'Altra Notte Composed By – Boito* Piano – Julius Rudel	5:17
A3	Richard Stilwell – Don Quichotte À Dulcinée: Chanson Romanesque. Chanson Épique Composed By – Ravel* Piano – Jeffrey Goldberg	7:03
A4	Marilyn Horne – Semiramide: Ah, Quel Giorno Composed By – Rossini* Piano – Eugene Kohn	9:46
B1	Nicolai Gedda – Eugene Onegin: Lensky's Aria Composed By – Tchaikovsky* Piano – Mstislav Rostropovich	7:02
B2	Ruth Welting – La Sonnambula: Come Per Me Sereno Composed By – Bellini* Piano – Eugene Kohn	8:08
B3	James King (3) – Rienzi: Rienzi's Prayer (Allmächt'ger Vater Blick' Herab) Composed By – Wagner* Piano – Jeffrey Goldberg	4:54
B4	Joan Sutherland – Les Huguenots: Ô Beau Pays De La Touraine Composed By – Meyerbeer* Piano – Eugene Kohn	6:14

BD: Are those the ones that are just hanging on for dear life wherever they are?

Welting: Not necessarily. Like in any business or any world of accomplishment there are people of different competence levels, and that's the same in opera, too. I'm not saying that this is something I'm down on or anything like that; it's just that you do have to go through a certain amount of scraping — you know what I mean — to do anything. It's like that to do anything that you do. There are the rituals. It costs a lot; the price is real high. This is what I was saying about the stick-to-it-ness quality — just the drive that it takes and having the stability to keep plugging away. A good example of that is my experience at the American Opera Center. I was 18 when I was there, and there were 25 singers chosen from all over the country and even other countries to come and study there. This was supposed to be the cream of the crop, and indeed every one of those singers was really gifted in what they did. But out of all those people, I think there are two of us now who are singing professionally. My real salvation at that point was getting away from New York, getting away from the world of competition and going to Rome and studying privately with Luigi Ricci. He gave me personal encouragement that I just didn't get in the whole world of the New York scene when I was there.

BD: You say that the Met is the pinnacle for some people but not for you. What is the pinnacle for Ruth Welting?

Welting: My idea of success is not singing in a particular opera house; it's more personal achievement. I feel that I haven't gotten near what I want to achieve in my work. It's not so much even changing repertoire or going into a different repertoire, but doing the repertoire that I have been doing now for the last ten years as well as I can do it; just developing more depth in the roles that I do. I'm the first one to admit that I have a long way to go. There are two kinds of singers — those who grow and those who don't grow. To me, if I don't grow, doing this work doesn't interest me at all.

BD: My family are educators and they say that a teacher of twenty years can have twenty years' experience or one year's experience twenty times.

Welting: Anything takes a long time to develop an expertise. You don't get it overnight. America right now is such a country of the push-button impulsiveness. We have impulse-buying. Turn on the TV and have what you want right now. It's a kind of lust for having things now. I notice that in some of the young singers coming up now. They aren't so willing to go and study for three years in Italy. They want a career now, and they're not willing to pay anything for it.

BD: Is it still necessary for American singers to go to Europe for a career?

Welting: We're talking about two different things. I went there to study. I didn't work at all on stage. I just worked with Ricci on repertoire. But I know what you're talking about. Some singers go there to get experience in European opera houses.

BD: Or just to get work.

Welting: Yes, but there are a lot of wonderful programs for young singers here in our country. Chicago is a perfect example with the Apprentice Program. It's fantastic. They get experience and exposure to artists and conductors and directors that they would never have the opportunity to work with just by starting at A and going to B. But as far as getting real professional experience, having a professional contract with a house, the place that takes the most chances on young singers in America is the New York City Opera. I'm talking about giving singers a chance to sing leading roles. They took a chance on me at age twenty-two to do Lucia. There's no other place in the world that would do that. You get invaluable experience doing that, but other than that, the other place that singers can get experience in their repertoire in leading roles is in Europe. That's just the fact.

BD: There are simply more houses over there.

Welting: That's right, and American houses have to sell. San Francisco or Chicago or Dallas or the Met are not going to hire somebody that no one knows to sing Konstanze or Ariadne, so they have to go abroad.

BD: They might hire unknowns for Niade, Driade, and Echo . . .

Welting: Yes, that's right. It is a problem, but if singers go to Europe, they get invaluable knowledge in the languages and things like that.

BD: The big problem that I hear from singers is that the houses will take them and work them to death for three or four years and then just cast them out and get the next victim.

Welting: That's true. But let's face it, people who run opera houses are not personally interested in your voice or in your problems. I'm not saying that there aren't some that are, but they're interested in their end of the business, and that is getting as many good performances as they can out of someone. It's up to the singer. It's the singer's decision. They have the right to say "no."

BD: How much of this ability to say no rests with the agent?

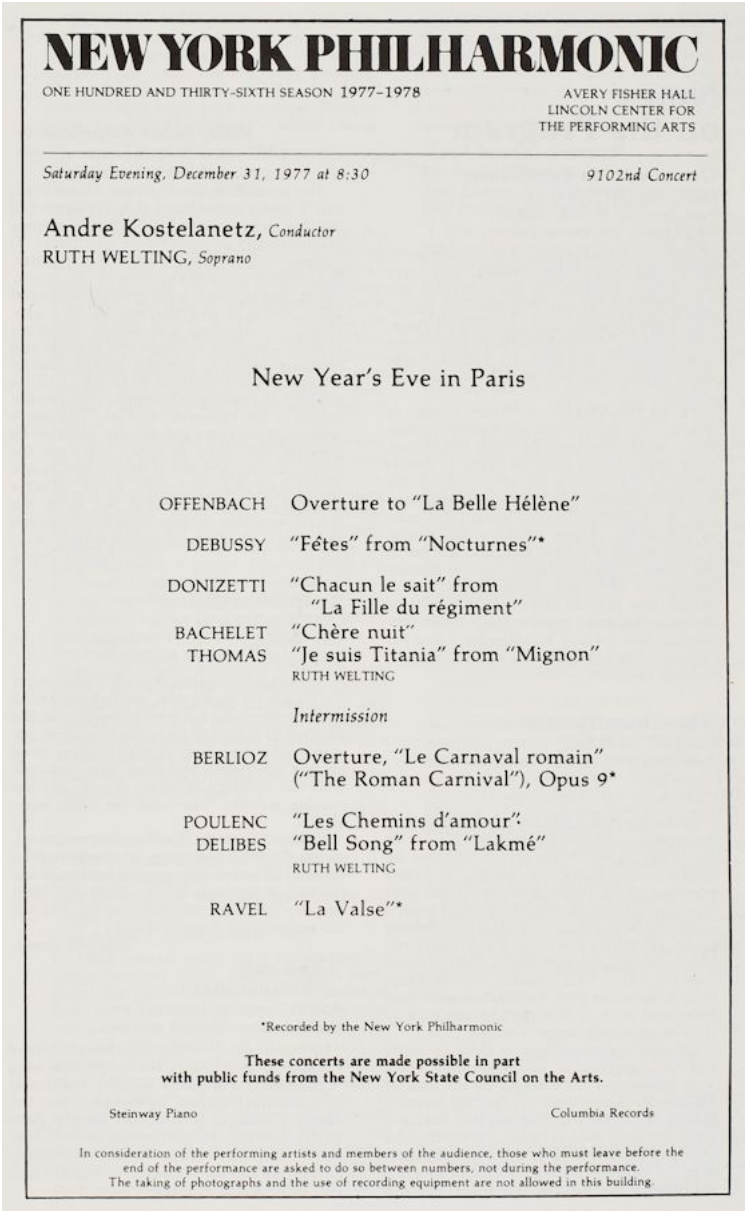
Welting: If you have a good agent, someone who is interested in your career and in you personally, they will advise you to say no in certain circumstances... although I must say, most of them wouldn't. I really think that it's up to the singer to say no.

BD: How difficult is it to say no?

Welting: It can be hard. There are big temptations. I think the worst temptation that a singer has is when they surround themselves with a lot of "yes-men." People who say, "You are the next Callas," or, "You are the most fabulous singer that ever lived," or, "It's not true that you have a wobble; it's not true that you sing flat," and "You should go into the next heavier repertoire." People get led astray simply because they don't face the truth about themselves, and they go into other repertoire which is very tempting. It would be lying if I said that it wouldn't be tempting for me to want to do a Konstanze or something like that with more meat to it. I know my own limitations... not limitations really, it's where I belong, and I'm staying where I belong. It's hard to say no in that respect.

BD: Do you ever miss doing roles like Konstanze or Norma or Brünnhilde?

Welting: No. I love that music and at home I'll sing it by myself just for pleasure and fun, but really I'm very content singing the repertoire that I am. This is also because I'm not living my whole life for my career. Therefore, it's not the end of the world if I don't go over into another repertoire. If it was my whole life, indeed, I would be disappointed.



NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

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AVERY FISHER HALL
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THE PERFORMING ARTS

Saturday Evening, December 31, 1977 at 8:30 — *9102nd Concert*

Andre Kostelanetz, *Conductor*
RUTH WELTING, *Soprano*

New Year's Eve in Paris

OFFENBACH	Overture to "La Belle Hélène"
DEBUSSY	"Fêtes" from "Nocturnes"*
DONIZETTI	"Chacun le sait" from "La Fille du régiment"
BACHELET	"Chère nuit"
THOMAS	"Je suis Titania" from "Mignon"
	RUTH WELTING
	Intermission
BERLIOZ	Overture, "Le Carnaval romain" ("The Roman Carnival"), Opus 9*
POULENC	"Les Chemins d'amour"
DELIBES	"Bell Song" from "Lakmé"
	RUTH WELTING
RAVEL	"La Valse"*

*Recorded by the New York Philharmonic

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BD: It's nice that you have more things on your mind.

Welting: Oh sure... living for one thing. A lot of singers think that traveling and singing all the time is life. In fact it is a form of life, but to me a very lacking form with no personal life at all — except the drive to go from one theater to another and portray upon the stage a representative of the life that they don't know about.

BD: I wonder how much the climate and surroundings of your upbringing have to do with that ethic?

Welting: I don't know. It's your environment in which you're raised, but it's something personal. Everybody has to set their own ideas about what is important. You must decide on your own priorities. I'm very happy with the priorities that I've chosen. It's not that I feel like other people don't have the depth of personal life that I do are missing out, but sometimes I do think they are.

BD: Does being on the road as much as you are upset this personal life? Do you have to adapt to it?

Welting: My personal life travels. It has nothing to do with anything that you can see, it all has to do with something invisible and that is what I carry inside of me. I hold a very deep belief in Christianity, and I'm a follower of what the Bible teaches and of Jesus Christ and his teachings. This gives me an inner depth I don't have to go looking around for. Since this need has been met in me, and it does travel no matter where you are, that inner fulfillment goes with you in a car, boat, plane, and through this I'm able to relate better to everything around me.

BD: Is it a security for you?

Welting: Of course. It's a crutch, too, and if it's one crutch, give me two! People say it's only a crutch when they want to dismiss what I believe, and I say it is a crutch and I would gladly take two! Of course, this crutch is something that never leaves you. You can go right through life and death with it.

BD: You don't often find opera singers that have this kind of an emotional attachment to religion.

Welting: It's not an emotional attachment, it's a reality. It has nothing to do with feelings or knowledge, it's what people call "faith", and faith is the reality of things you don't see.

BD: Do you go to church on Sunday morning even after a Saturday night performance? [*Vis-à-vis the recording shown at right, see my interviews with Ileana Cotrubas, Elisabeth Söderström, Siegmund Nimsgern, Kiri Te Kanawa, and John Pritchard.*]

Welting: I sure do — not because I have to demonstrate what I believe in, it's just a fringe benefit of what I believe. But you're right when you say not many opera singers believe deeply in religious things or in a religion at all. Certainly I find it to be a very dark world in some ways. I think that a lot of opera singers are searching. They're searching in a loneliness, especially when you travel — like you said when you asked if it upset me — and indeed it does when you have nothing but a family you've left thousands of miles away. There's a great loneliness and a great need among opera singers. This is what led me to find the fulfillment that I did.

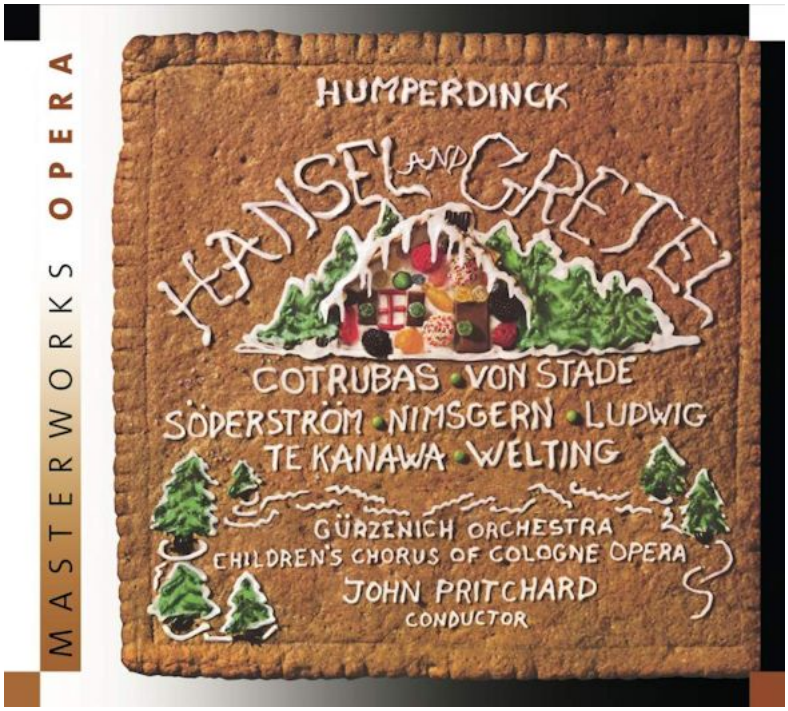
BD: Is this a recent thing?

Welting: From when I was four years old. I was raised in the South, and of course they call it the "Bible Belt" because they belt people over the head with the Bible! [Both laugh]

BD: I hope it is the paperback edition . . .

Welting: I was raised in an atmosphere of hypocrisy, and that just turned me off completely for years. I was like everybody else when I

ridiculed people who believed. It was later in life that I found it in a real way. It's like if the Beethoven *9th* is given a bad performance, it doesn't mean the symphony is bad, it means that it got a bad performance. That's what happened to me — I got a bad performance, but now I realize that the symphony is great and I'll take it.



BD: This will send me off thinking about all this.

Welting: Well good, I hope so! It's always good not to think too much, but enough.

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BD: Let's talk about some of your roles. Do you like doing Zerbinetta, and how do you see the big aria?

Welting: It's really a statement of Zerbinetta's philosophy. I love the cast — we have a great cast, Johanna Meier and William Johns and the conductor Janowski and everybody. I like doing Zerbinetta; it's lots of fun. Just recently it's become more fun than it used to be. I tried to overdo it. It has so much depth to it. There are all the letters from Strauss and Hoffmansthal explaining the meaning about the two faces of womanhood, and I just racked my brain trying to think how I could be this face of woman when I didn't feel like that face of woman at all. So this time I decided basically to just let all that knowledge go and quit trying to beat it to death; just sing it and have a great time with it and represent this person as best I could.

BD: And let the music speak for itself?

Welting: Yes. It helps. I'm beginning to wonder just how deep the opera really is! [Both laugh]

BD: I find it a huge lot of fun, myself.

Welting: It is. Just the sheer face of those comedians coming out in the middle of the aria is funny. It could have been something you see in Nashville at the Grand Ole Opry — something just totally outlandish.

BD: Perhaps you could play *Ariadne* at the Grand Ole Opry just to get them into opera.

Welting: It would help.

BD: Would this opera be more accessible to Grand Ole Opry audiences than, say, *Traviata*?

Welting: Oh, no, I don't think so. I think *Ariadne* is really the gourmet's delight. It's an opera for people who really are seasoned opera-goers.

BD: You're lucky in singing Strauss because he drew such a wonderful gallery of female portraits. Tell me about another one you've done — Sophie. [*Vis-à-vis the recording shown at right, see my interviews with Evelyn Lear, and Frederica von Stade.*]

Welting: I like her better than Zerbinetta. I don't like Zerbinetta that much as a person, although I've tried to make her more sympathetic by putting some of my own spices in it. But Sophie is more me. She goes along more with what I just mentioned to you about my beliefs. She's just a simpler, more basic person, and I am too. Zerbinetta is complex; she's woman at her worst! She's devious and she's untrustworthy.

BD: What is she out for?

Welting: I think she is the one who searches the most in this opera. What is she doing having all of these lovers? What is she saying about herself? She's saying that nothing really fulfills her. She has a depth of emptiness. She is just a voice that she is trying to fill with all this. I believe that she is living a facade.

BD: Is Zerbinetta all talk?

Welting: Yes... well, maybe. The facade is brought out in the duet with the composer. She seems to be so happy but is really so sad. Although she is surrounded by companions and she plays this whole part, underneath it all she's really empty.

BD: Is Zerbinetta different in the Prologue and in the Opera?

Welting: No. It says that in the score as a matter of fact — Zerbinetta always plays herself. She may be more relaxed in the prologue because that is supposed to be real-life. The only place you really see who she is, is in that duet with the composer. There are people who disagree with me on that, people that I respect. They say the duet is just another vamp routine, that this is another seduction scene, but to me that is totally uninteresting. She spends the rest of the opera being a seductress and there has to be some depth somewhere, so I choose to do it that way. But I'm not so sure that is what Strauss and Hoffmansthal wanted. They may have wanted her to be that consistent personality throughout in order to show the two faces of woman in a clear manner. I'll ask them eventually . . .

BD: When you die and get to Heaven you will go up to him and ask!

Welting: Yes, if he's there! I don't know if he's there or not . . .

BD: He's somewhere playing Skat. Let's go back to Sophie. She's much more straightforward?

Welting: There's no deviousness in her, there's no guile in her.

BD: She's not gullible, though.

Welting: No, not gullible, but there's an innocence about her. She believes what people say. She hasn't been hurt yet. She's just a very vulnerable and very accepting, trusting person.

BD: How old is she?

Welting: Around 15.

BD: How old is Octavian?

Welting: He's about 17.

BD: They get presumably hitched in the end. Do you think they're happy? How does the fourth act look?

Welting: No, their relationship becomes like the Marschallin and the Field Marshall.

BD: Octavian goes off and has other lovers?

Welting: Yes, I think so. Probably.

BD: Does Sophie then have other lovers, too?

Welting: No, I think she becomes very religious. She goes back into the life she had in the convent. Why would she suddenly go wild? I guess you could think that, but I think that she would go back to the way she was before.

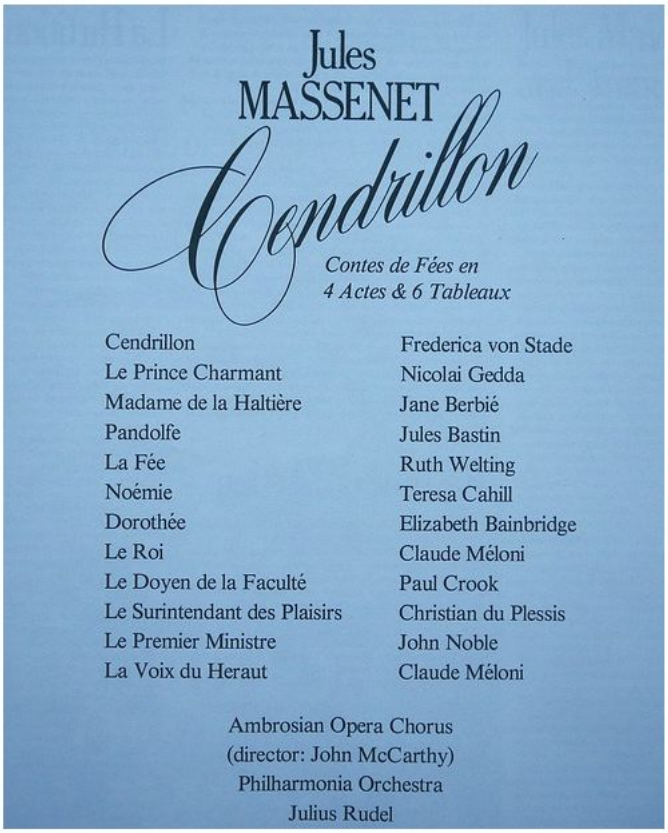
BD: They must be happy for at least a little while.

Welting: Oh, I think so.

BD: But then it deteriorates?

Welting: Yes. I think you see a lot about Octavian's character in the beginning of the opera. He's "in love" with Sophie, but it says a lot about him that he has trouble deciding between the two women. What would make him change that later? Perhaps if he had a conversion experience or something like that, but nothing else that I can see.

BD: Have you done Mozart's Susanna?



Welting: Not yet. I'd like to, but I'd have to drop four or five notes off the top of my range in order to do it.

BD: Do you like Lucia?

Welting: I haven't done her in a long time.

BD: She's not just a dingy-dame?

Welting: No. I like the Italian *bel canto* very much. I like doing Gilda and Lucia, and I would like to do *La Sonnambula*. I like the deeply-felt, sincere bel canto roles.

BD: Those are grateful to the voice and to the psyche?

Welting: That's right. It's really where my training lies, in the Italian repertoire. That's what I spent those three years with Ricci learning, so I feel most at home in that style.

BD: How far gone is Lucia in the third act?

Welting: The way I play her is that she doesn't turn into a Mad Hatter, but she is a very sensitive girl/woman and therefore being forced to marry the man she did not love. So the confrontation with the truth pushed her over the edge. In the *Mad Scene*, then, as a means of escape she reverts to her childhood.

BD: A fantasy?

Welting: Yes. Somebody explained to me what the word "psychotic" meant, and it deals with building a castle in the sky and then living in it. So that's what she does. I believe she becomes almost happy in the *Mad Scene* because she has indeed escaped the reality. It keeps me from beating my voice to death in that scene by playing it that way. I always have to think up ways to do roles that will allow me to do them properly.

BD: Do you wish that she had the same fortitude in the second act that Sophie had to be able to say no to the wrong man?

Welting: I think it's different. Then they might have done something terrible to her if she had said no. During that period they were so bloodthirsty . . .

BD: What could they have done to her?

Welting: Locked her in a tower or something.

BD: What if a director said we'll play it that way and have the mad scene in a tower?

Welting: I'm really very flexible in working with directors and conductors. I'm always willing to accept new ideas if they're good.

BD: You have to decide if the idea is good.

Welting: Yes, and if I don't like it I'll discuss it with him.

BD: Who has the final say?

Welting: He does. He's my authority figure. Absolutely. As much as I can, I do what the director and the conductor want.

BD: Have you been involved in productions you've really hated?

Welting: Yes, a couple of times.

BD: Do you just grin and bear it?

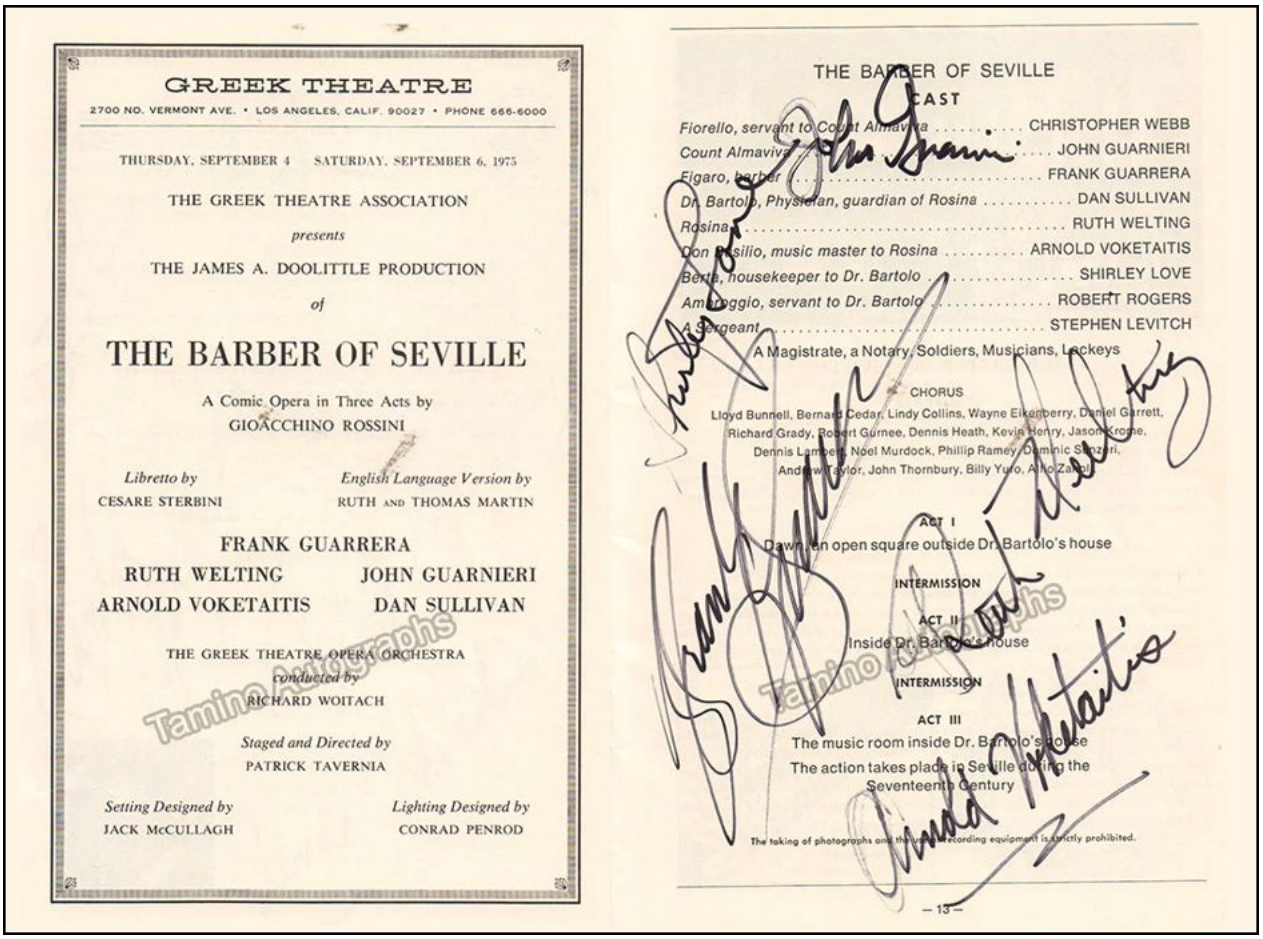
Welting: Usually you don't grin, but you bear it. Unfortunately when you don't like something, you usually get hung with a lot of criticism for it.

BD: Do you ever want to write the newspaper and say, "That wasn't my idea, it was the director's?"

Welting: No, I don't read reviews so I don't to need write the newspaper.

BD: What's the purpose of the critic then?

Welting: He's for other people, I suppose, if they read it. It's not that I have any kind of hatred for critics. There are a couple that I know personally and respect so I read their opinions, but if I want an opinion about my performance, I go to people who care for me who give me the truth. I want the truth, but from someone who cares about me. Critics don't know you so it's doubtful whether they care for you. I've seen things written that hurt people. It's a shame to give anybody the power to hurt like that.



GREEK THEATRE

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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 4 SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 1975

THE GREEK THEATRE ASSOCIATION

presents

THE JAMES A. DOOLITTLE PRODUCTION

of

THE BARBER OF SEVILLE

A Comic Opera in Three Acts by
GIOACCHINO ROSSINI

Libretto by CESARE STERBINI

English Language Version by RUTH AND THOMAS MARTIN

FRANK GUARRERA
RUTH WELTING JOHN GUARNIERI
ARNOLD VOKETAITIS DAN SULLIVAN

THE GREEK THEATRE OPERA ORCHESTRA
conducted by
RICHARD WOITACH

Staged and Directed by
PATRICK TAVERNIA

Setting Designed by JACK McCULLAGH

Lighting Designed by CONRAD PENROD

THE BARBER OF SEVILLE

CAST

Fiorello, servant to Count Almaviva ..... CHRISTOPHER WEBB
Count Almaviva ..... JOHN GUARNIERI
Figaro, barber ..... FRANK GUARRERA
Dr. Bartolo, Physician, guardian of Rosina ..... DAN SULLIVAN
Rosina ..... RUTH WELTING
Don Basilio, music master to Rosina ..... ARNOLD VOKETAITIS
Berta, housekeeper to Dr. Bartolo ..... SHIRLEY LOVE
Ambrogio, servant to Dr. Bartolo ..... ROBERT ROGERS
A Sergeant ..... STEPHEN LEVITCH
A Magistrate, a Notary, Soldiers, Musicians, Lackeys

CHORUS

Lloyd Bunnell, Bernard Cedar, Lindy Collins, Wayne Eikenberry, Daniel Garrett, Richard Grady, Robert Gurnee, Dennis Heath, Kevin Henry, Jason Krome, Dennis Lambert, Noel Murdock, Phillip Ramey, Dominic Stanzeri, Andrew Taylor, John Thornbury, Billy Yuto, Alfio Zanazzo

ACT I
Dawn, an open square outside Dr. Bartolo's house

INTERMISSION

ACT II
Inside Dr. Bartolo's house

INTERMISSION

ACT III
The music room inside Dr. Bartolo's house
The action takes place in Seville during the Seventeenth Century

The taking of photographs and the use of recording equipment is strictly prohibited.

— 13 —

See my interviews with Frank Guarrera, Arnold Voketaitis, and Richard Woitach.
This image is for sale from a commercial source, hence their 'watermark'.

BD: Are the critics different in Europe from America?

Welting: I don't know. They're each individual people. I'm sure if I met critics I would like them as people very much, but why would you

go to someone you didn't know to ask them what they thought of your performance?

BD: It can be objective sometimes. . .

Welting: Well, it can, but I forego that. Anyway the best critic of all is the audience. They're very truthful. They will give you exactly the reception they feel you deserve.

BD: Are the audiences as sophisticated as you would like?

Welting: Not usually in the really deep knowledge of technical things, but you're never going to find that. You're out there to bring joy to this audience.

BD: Would you sing differently for an audience of vocal teachers who might be more in tune with such details?

Welting: No. I sing as though I'm singing to vocal teachers all the time. I think that people can recognize if it's good even if they don't know any technical details at all. It speaks to you and you have empathy with what's going on.

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BD: Do you enjoy translations?

Welting: No, not that much. I guess in comedy it's nice to have translation because the audience hopefully understands what you're saying. In most cases, I find English translations unnecessary because the sad fact is that people don't understand the English anyway. It's hard to project a language like English in a big house.

BD: Is it harder for you because of your range — would it be easier for a bass?

Welting: They say, and I believe this, that men do have less trouble projecting a language. I think I have pretty clear diction because I really concentrate on that. It's important that people understand it. It's like a craft, and that's part of doing your craft well.

BD: Do you take coaching sessions regularly?

Welting: Not regularly. I do work with Daniel Ferro in NY. He's my voice teacher, and has been for the past 7 years. I wouldn't change him for anything, so whenever I get to NY I work with him — at least a couple of times a year. It's very rarely that I go to a coach. If it's a new role, I teach myself most of it, and then if it's something really specialized, something that I want to get a real good opinion on, I will go to someone I respect.

BD: How do you select your new roles?

Welting: I don't. They select me! If I'm offered something, then I will learn it if I feel that it's right for my voice.

BD: Then how do you decide whether or not to sing a role?

Welting: First of all, you look at who sang it before to see if they had similar type voices or to see if it's common knowledge that the role is right for you. With my voice, there's very little to decide. It's either right or wrong, written for a high voice or not.

STAR: Soprano Ruth Welting stars on Live From Lincoln Center as Elizabeth "Baby" Doe in the New York City Opera's production of "The Ballad of Baby Doe," to be televised live on PBS Wednesday, April 21. (Editors: Please consult local PBS station for area broadcast time.) Live From Lincoln Center, produced by Lincoln Center in collaboration with WNET/13, is underwritten by Exxon Corporation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Charles A. Dana Foundation.

BD: What then about a new work, such as a premiere?

Welting: I'm really not into modern music, although some of it I would be open to. I like some of the things of Thea Musgrave, and I'm willing to try, but it's not my main staple. But I can look at a score and basically tell just by the *tessitura* — where the notes lie — if I can sing it. Of course I try to get others' opinions, people who know the work, and ask about things like the orchestration. I can see how that kind of thing would be much more difficult for a more dramatic voice.

BD: We have a pretty big house here in Chicago. How do you find the different opera houses to sing in?

Welting: I like smaller houses better, naturally, because I have a light voice. In smaller houses, some of the intimacy reads better, especially in *Ariadne*!

BD: Does it surprise you to do that work in Chicago with its huge house?

Welting: Not really because the music is great! Like the music master says to the composer in the prologue, it's better to have your work done some way than not at all. I feel that way about *Ariadne* — it's better to have it in big houses than not at all.

BD: Do you also do concerts?

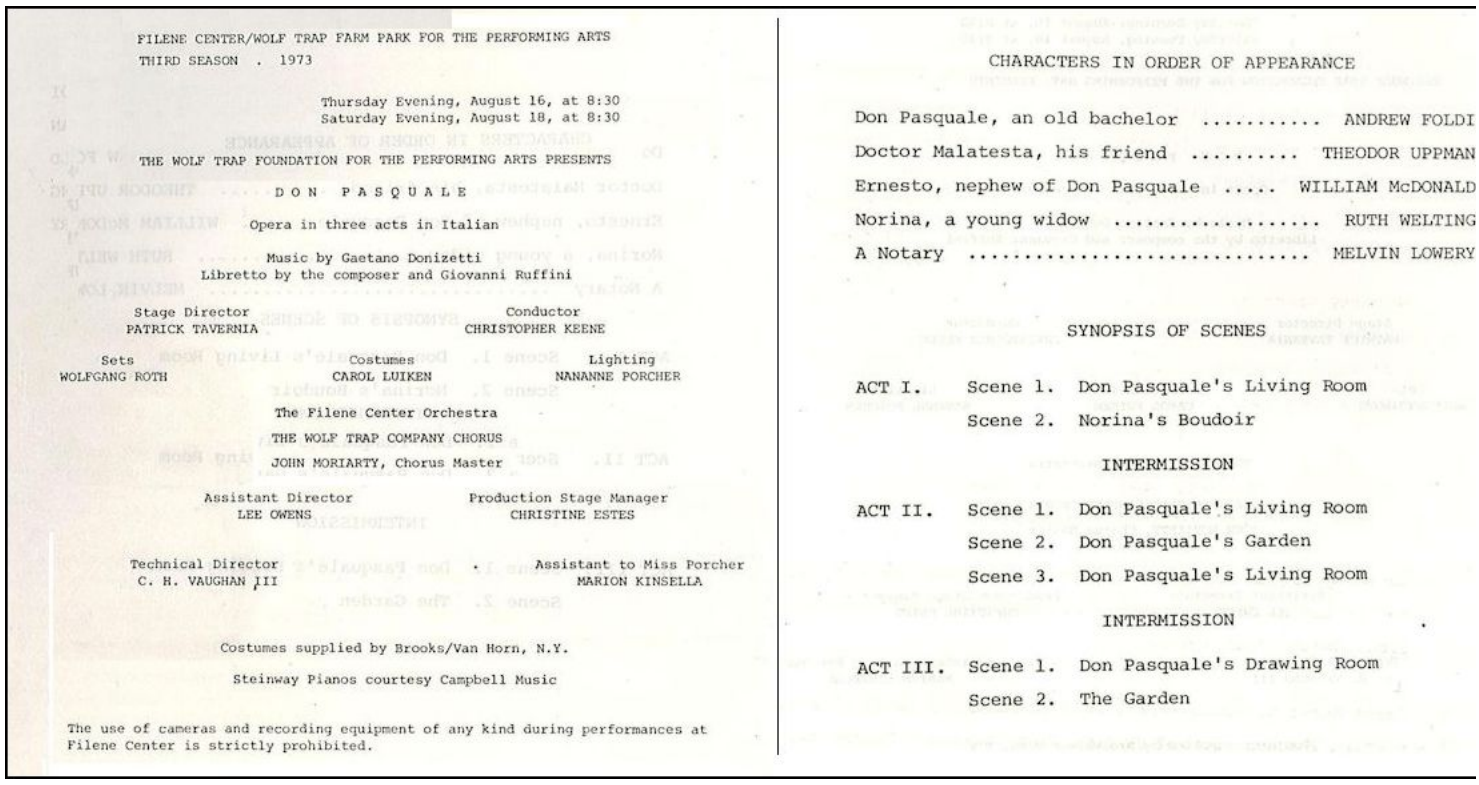
Welting: Yes, I do concerts quite a bit and I like recitals very much. I wouldn't say I like them better than opera, but in some ways I do. It's more up to me what happens. In opera there are a lot of compromises, and what you see out on stage is the result of a lot of compromises. There are so many people who have opinions about what will happen — the costume designer, the conductor, the director, and all the colleagues who each color your interpretation with theirs. Whereas in recital it's only up to you and your accompanist to paint the picture of what you want to do. I like that freedom very much. I like to do lieder by Schubert and Schumann, some French songs and a group of English and American songs and maybe an aria at the end of each half.

BD: What's the place of opera arias on the recital platform?

Welting: I don't think people should say they've giving a recital if all they're doing is arias. I like to do arias that are virtually unknown — one at the end of each half. Things like one from *La Buona Figiuola* by Piccinni, or some early arias with flute, and maybe I'll do some trash like the Proch *Air and Variations*! [Both laugh]

BD: [With a gentle nudge] Is that really "trash?"

Welting: That's what the musicologists say, but I think it's just sheer fun. Or I'll do the Adam *Variations* — you know, the *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* tune — things that people aren't accustomed to hearing in opera.



FILENE CENTER/WOLF TRAP FARM PARK FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
THIRD SEASON . 1973

Thursday Evening, August 16, at 8:30
Saturday Evening, August 18, at 8:30

THE WOLF TRAP FOUNDATION FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS PRESENTS

D O N P A S Q U A L E

Opera in three acts in Italian

Music by Gaetano Donizetti
Libretto by the composer and Giovanni Ruffini

Stage Director
PATRICK TAVERNIA

Conductor
CHRISTOPHER KEENE

Sets
WOLFGANG ROTH

Costumes
CAROL LUIKEN

Lighting
NANANNE PORCHER

The Filene Center Orchestra

THE WOLF TRAP COMPANY CHORUS

JOHN MORIARTY, Chorus Master

Assistant Director
LEE OWENS

Production Stage Manager
CHRISTINE ESTES

Technical Director
C. H. VAUGHAN III

Assistant to Miss Porcher
MARION KINSELLA

Costumes supplied by Brooks/Van Horn, N.Y.

Steinway Pianos courtesy Campbell Music

The use of cameras and recording equipment of any kind during performances at Filene Center is strictly prohibited.

CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Don Pasquale, an old bachelor ..... ANDREW FOLDI
Doctor Malatesta, his friend ..... THEODOR UPPMAN
Ernesto, nephew of Don Pasquale ..... WILLIAM McDONALD
Norina, a young widow ..... RUTH WELTING
A Notary ..... MELVIN LOWERY

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I. Scene 1. Don Pasquale's Living Room
Scene 2. Norina's Boudoir

INTERMISSION

ACT II. Scene 1. Don Pasquale's Living Room
Scene 2. Don Pasquale's Garden
Scene 3. Don Pasquale's Living Room

INTERMISSION

ACT III. Scene 1. Don Pasquale's Drawing Room
Scene 2. The Garden

See my interviews with Christopher Keene, Andrew Foldi, and Theodor Uppman

BD: What is the place for obscure operas in America today?

Welting: I don't think opera houses can afford to put them on today. In Europe they do a lot. In London there's a company that does only those kinds of forgotten operas like *L'Etoile du Nord*, and it's really great! We can't afford to take such chances.

BD: How much do the economic factors dictate artistic decisions?

Welting: It dictates the repertoire, certainly, and in a lot of cases even who the opera companies hire. Of course, they want big names. People come to hear singers that they know.

BD: Do you enjoy being a "big name?"

Welting: I don't know that I am. If God so wills that, then fine, but it's not the end of the world if I'm not. I'm grateful for the gifts that I have.

BD: Do you enjoy making recordings?

Welting: The first one I made, *Der Schauspieldirektor*, I hated because the microphone was so close that it didn't hide anything. In fact, though, recordings do hide quite a bit. It's kind of hard to know what they're going to do once you've recorded it.

BD: Is that scary?

Welting: Sure it is. You hear what you sound like when they play it back at the time, but when you get the record they have done some kind of weird stuff to it sometimes. I know they have to do it to achieve certain polished sounds; I don't mean to say they alter the sound so very much all the time, but take my recording of *Cendrillon*. Hear how much they did to make me sound like a fairy, almost echoey. It's debatable whether the music itself, the way Massenet wrote it, wasn't enough to sound like the ethereal character. I think it's written into the music enough. I still love the record and they did a great job and it did add an interesting touch in it, but I guess I'm more of a purist.

BD: Are records too perfect?

Welting: I think that singers can get by with murder on records. It's not exactly fair because you're not always hearing the exact truth. You lose a lot of the spontaneity of the live performance. I'm not one who can think in sections, so all my recordings are done in one or two takes. When I did *Mignon*, I did the big aria, *Je suis Titania*, in one take and they loved it. But that's just me, that's the way I love to sing.

BD: Tell me a little about Philline.

Welting: I did the record and I did it on stage in Dallas. I don't know if it's all that believable on stage.

BD: The ending is a little hokey. [*Vis-à-vis the recording shown at left, see my interview with Nicola Zaccaria*.]

Welting: Yes it is. People will go along with operatic license just so far, and I think that goes a little bit farther, really.

BD: Do you enjoy the part?

Welting: Yes. It's a typical French piece and has a lot of charm to it in the music and in the character.

BD: What roles are you looking forward to singing? You've mentioned *Sonnambula*.

Welting: I would love to do *I Puritani* and *L'Elisir d'Amore*. I know that role, but I've never sung it and would like to. Basically I would like to get into more Gildas and more Lucias. In the past years I've gone more into the French and German repertoire for some reason.

BD: Because they wrote for your style of voice?

Welting: Yes. People don't think of my voice in the Italian repertoire that much. The trend now is toward the fuller sound, which I can understand. But I think a more innocent sound is right for Gilda, more than a voluptuous sound. I think she's innocent all the way through. She's just the victim of the awful happening.

BD: You don't think she sees the Duke many times between the last two acts?

Welting: No. I don't think she saw him again after that seduction. Let's admit it, she had a very strange relationship with her father. He's a very rough man, but she loves him and he's not rough with her very much. He puts her off when she tries to find out about the rest of her family. She doesn't know even where he works. It's a strange relationship; it's intimate, yet not intimate in a lot of ways. There's some strain there. I don't think it's a deeply warm relationship because if Rigoletto really knew his daughter, he would have seen her need to be with people her own age.

BD: How old is Gilda?

Welting: About 16 or 17. That's why I don't hear a dramatic voice singing the role because she is so very young. If you didn't know the plot, a heavier voice might lead you to think she's Rigoletto's wife.

BD: But it must be convincing enough for the couriers to think she's his mistress.

enjoys it. Right?

Welting: Yes, that's true. It's an interesting libretto.

BD: Any other roles down the lane for you?

Welting: I guess *I Capuletti e i Montecchi*. I've always wanted to play a Juliet somewhere, and it's the only one I can play. I'm pretty happy doing what I'm doing right now. I'll be doing a *Don Pasquale* in Canada after this, and *Lakmé* in New Orleans.

BD: Are you coming back to Chicago?

Welting: Yes! I'll be back for Olympia next year [in the production from 1976]. It'll be interesting. It's real fun. I'm on a remote-control platform that works sometimes and sometimes it doesn't, so there's always the element of surprise!

BD: What would you do if the machine started going berserk?

Welting: Well, it did! I screamed for them to stop the thing, and the guy backstage said he couldn't because the control was on the same frequency as the ambulance and the fire department. So if there's a fire, watch out because that doll is going all over the place! That's the truth! That really happened! Another night my dress got hooked in the track and being a mechanical doll I was not supposed to move. It kept unraveling as the material was caught in the track. It's like a railroad track, and I kept trying to talk to somebody out of the side of my mouth to get them to tear it away, which they finally did. But a lot of mishaps have happened in that opera.

BD: Any other good mishap stories?

Welting: We almost had one at the last performance here of *Ariadne*! I had butter-fingers or something. There's a part where I throw the apple in the air and I missed and it went off stage. Jim Hobak [who was singing Brighella] had to run offstage and catch it. Then I kicked my shoe off and it went off stage, too, like it was jet-propelled! And they lift me up on things and a lot of it's kind of shaky, so you never know what will happen. So far we've had a good time, though.

BD: You enjoy singing!

Welting: Yes, it's a great joy. What's inside of me, the joy, comes out. It's just an expression of it which is really good. I find if I enjoy it, then the audience

Soprano Ruth Welting

By Elizabeth Forbes *The Independent* Thursday 23 December 1999 [With corrections]

THE AMERICAN soprano Ruth Welting dazzled her audiences with the ease of her singing in coloratura roles such as Donizetti's Lucia, Richard Strauss's Zerbinetta and Mozart's Konstanze.

She produced ravishing sounds up to the F above high C, and she was also an excellent actress, who made an enchanting figure on stage. At a time when heavier voices had become fashionable in much of this repertory, she projected her light, pure-toned voice in such a way that she filled the largest auditoria, notably the Metropolitan Opera, New York, and Lyric Opera, Chicago, to the satisfaction of the listener furthest from the stage. She sang at Covent Garden, in Barcelona, Paris and Parma, but the greatest part of her career was spent in North America.

Welting was born in Memphis, Tennessee. She studied in New York with Daniel Ferro, in Rome with Luigi Ricci and in Paris with Janine Reiss. At the age of 23 in 1971 she made her debut with the New York City Opera as Blonde in Mozart's *Die Enfuhrung aus dem Serail*. After singing Lucia at Duluth in 1973, the following year she tackled the extremely florid role of Philine in Thomas's *Mignon* at Boston. During the summer of 1975 she appeared at Santa Fe, singing the Nightingale and Fire in Ravel's *L'Enfant et les sortileges*, as well as Nannetta in Verdi's *Falstaff*. The same year she made her Covent Garden debut as Rosina in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*.

Welting made her Metropolitan Opera debut in March 1976 as Zerbinetta in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, one of her finest roles. She sang it during December at Covent Garden, making a much more favourable impression than she had with Rosina the year before. In Zerbinetta's great aria her shining top notes and the accuracy of her florid singing were greatly admired, as well as the sweetness of her personality. Meanwhile in 1976 she had sung at the Holland Festival as Sophie in Massenet's *Werther*, returning the following year as Lauretta in Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*.

Welting made her Chicago debut in 1976 in another of her most popular roles, Olympia the Doll in Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. Her ability to dance as well as sing like a clockwork toy always brought forth torrents of applause. At San Francisco in 1977 she appeared as Zerbinetta, and also as Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*, one of her few lyric roles. Another, which she also sang at San Francisco, was Norina in *Don Pasquale*. Oscar in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* provided her with a congenial part at Dallas in 1978, while the following year she sang the Fairy Godmother in Massenet's *Cendrillon* at Ottawa, scoring a great success.

Marie in Donizetti's *La Fille du regiment* was yet another florid role dripping with coloratura: Welting sang it at New Orleans in 1979, Dallas in 1983 and Barcelona in 1984. Returning to New Orleans in 1981 she sang the title role of Delibes' *Lakmé*, while in Chicago the following year she attacked the dramatic role of Konstanze in Mozart's *Entfuhrung aus dem Sevail*, which proved rather too heavy for her voice. There were no such complaints in Cincinnati, where in 1985 she appeared as Lucia, singing the Mad Scene in the original key of F Major. According to the soprano, "The key change gives the Mad Scene a lighter mood. The reality of madness has drawn Lucia into her own world, a childlike, beautiful one [in which] everything's just the way she wants it to be."

Welting sang Ophelia in Thomas's *Hamlet* (one of her last new roles) at Chicago in 1990, with Sherrill Milnes in the title role. The following year she sang Zerbinetta in Madrid; in 1992 Marie at Portland, Oregon; and in 1993 she gave her last performance at the Metropolitan as Queen of Night in *Die Zauberflote*. For more than 20 years she had sung a very taxing repertory and her voice was beginning to show the wear and tear. At her best, as Zerlina, as Marie, as Olympia and as Lucia, she was unsurpassed.

She spent the years 1994-98 at Syracuse University studying government. After graduating there she attended the Maxwell School of Government.

Elizabeth Forbes

Ruth Welting, opera singer: born Memphis, Tennessee 1 May 1948; died Asheville, North Carolina 16 December 1999.

This interview was recorded at her apartment in Chicago on October 20, 1981. Sections were used (along with recordings) on WNIB in 1989, 1994, and again in 1999. It was transcribed and published in *Opera Scene* Magazine in May of 1982. The transcript was re-edited and posted on this website in 2013. Additional photos and links were added in 2024.

To see a full list (with links) of interviews which have been transcribed and posted on this website, click here. To read my thoughts on editing these interviews for print, as well as a few other interesting observations, click here.

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Award - winning broadcaster Bruce Duffie was with **WNIB, Classical 97** in Chicago from 1975 until its final moment as a classical station in February of 2001. His interviews have also appeared in various magazines and journals since 1980, and he now continues his broadcast series on **WNUR-FM**, as well as on **Contemporary Classical Internet Radio**.

You are invited to visit his website for more information about his work, including selected transcripts of other interviews, plus a full list of his guests. He would also like to call your attention to the photos and information about his grandfather, who was a pioneer in the automotive field more than a century ago. You may also send him E-Mail with comments, questions and suggestions.