

Ruth Welting: A Life in Opera

From the University of Memphis to the International Stage as One of the Opera World's Most Acclaimed Coloratura Sopranos



Ruth Lynn Welting,

Nov. 5, 1948 – Dec. 16, 1999

"As a close friend and classmate, I find it remarkable to reflect that when Ruth performed as the Queen of the Night in a 1968 University of Memphis Opera production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, she likely could not have imagined that 25 years later, she would reprise that iconic role in her final performance at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City."

Robert Casper, UofM BBA, 1975

Ruth Lynn Welting (1948–1999) was born in Memphis, Tennessee, and went on to dazzle audiences as one of the top coloratura sopranos of her time. Known for her stunning vocal range, incredible technical skill, and captivating stage presence, she performed in the most prestigious opera houses around the world.

What many people don't know is that before Ruth's star rose, she was a proud Memphian who studied at the University of Memphis (then

Memphis State University) from 1966 to 1969. It was here, just a stone's throw from her childhood home, that her extraordinary journey began.

A Musical Prodigy from Memphis

Ruth grew up in the Sherwood Forest neighborhood near the University of Memphis as the third youngest of four daughters born to William and Mary Welting. Music ran deep in the Welting household, with all four sisters developing their own artistic talents. Her older sister, Patricia, also became a celebrated opera singer, performing with the Metropolitan Opera.

Ruth's musical gifts were evident early on. By just 19 months old, she could play *Mary Had a Little Lamb* on the piano with one finger, and by age five, she had already mastered the piano, organ, and accordion. A 1954 article in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* marveled at her ability to play pieces like *Sabre Dance* by ear. Over the years, she added flute and guitar to her repertoire and won numerous awards in regional music competitions. At just 12 years old, she appeared on *Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour*, and at 15, she won the *Mid-South Fair's Youth Talent Contest Finals*.

In high school, Ruth shone in two musical theater productions, *The Sound of Music* and *Carnival*, but her true calling awaited her in opera.

Finding Her Voice at the University of Memphis

Ruth earned a full music scholarship to the University of Memphis, initially intending to be a concert pianist. But during her time there, she discovered her passion for singing. Guided by her voice teacher, Mrs. Jerome Robertson, Ruth began to explore opera, diving into the demanding coloratura repertoire.

A pivotal performance came in 1968 when she portrayed the Queen of the Night in a UofM production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (*Die Zauberflöte*) under the direction of George Osborne, then the UofM director of opera. Her flawless execution of the demanding aria "Der Hölle Rache," with its iconic high Fs, foreshadowed the brilliance she would later bring to this role at the Metropolitan Opera.

Ironically, she reprised the role in her last performance at the Met on November 20, 1993.

In a UofM opera workshop performance In 1967, she charmed audiences as Miss Wordsworth in a production of Benjamin Britten's *Albert Herring*.

Met Auditions Offer a Road to Stardom

In 1968, Ruth's talent earned her a win at the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, a pivotal moment that secured her a spot at the Juilliard School in New York City. Her Juilliard studies soon took her to Italy, where, at the urging of composer and conductor Gian Carlo Menotti, she began her voice studies with the celebrated voice coach Luigi Ricci of Rome, who helped her refine her understanding of Italian opera and complex roles. Reflecting on her time with Ricci, Ruth once said, "If I climb the ladder of success, I owe it all to him."

Ruth also spent much of her career studying with the esteemed voice instructor Daniel Ferro in New York City and worked with Janine Reiss in Paris for a period. Early in her journey, she had the privilege of studying briefly with the legendary cellist, composer, and conductor Pablo Casals, who praised her voice for its "remarkable purity and flexibility."

Her career officially took off in 1971 with her debut at the New York City Opera as Blondchen in Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. Soon after, she made her mark at the Metropolitan Opera in 1976, playing Zerbinetta in Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

A Global Sensation

Ruth became an international star, performing in iconic venues like La Scala, the Royal Opera House, San Francisco Opera, and the Vienna State Opera. She was celebrated for her dazzling high notes, agility, and emotional depth in roles like Lucia (*Lucia di Lammermoor*), Olympia (*Les contes d'Hoffmann*), and Lakmé (*Lakmé*).

As confirmation of her extreme vocal range, she would sing the role of Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor* in the original key of F Major, which is rarely done. According to Ruth, "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."

One of her most memorable performances was as Baby Doe in Douglas Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe* during the New York City Opera's 1976 *Live from Lincoln Center* broadcast. Along the way, she collaborated with legendary artists like Luciano Pavarotti, Sherrill Milnes, Frederica von Stade, Marilyn Horne, Julius Rudel, Jose Carreras, Daniel Barenboim, and Plácido Domingo, earning the admiration of colleagues and fans alike.

A Humble Star

Despite her fame, Ruth remained down-to-earth, known for her soft Southern accent, quick wit, and easygoing personality. She once said, "If God so wills that I'm a 'big name,' then fine, but it's not the end of the world if I'm not. I'm grateful for the gifts I have." Her deep spiritual faith and authenticity set her apart in the often intense world of opera.

Life Beyond the Stage

By the mid-1990s, Ruth had retired from her operatic career and shifted her focus to public service. She earned a degree from Syracuse

University in 1998 and continued her education at its Maxwell School of Government. Her classmates were often surprised to learn of her operatic fame, but they were equally impressed by her warmth and humility.

A Profound Legacy

Ruth passed away in 1999 at the age of 51, leaving behind an incredible legacy of artistry and inspiration.

Ruth left behind several acclaimed opera recordings that showcase her extraordinary vocal talent, particularly in the coloratura repertoire. Ruth's performances in major opera roles including standout performances in *Cendrillon*, *Lakmé*, *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, and *Ariadne auf Naxos*, continue to captivate listeners today.

Her recordings are available for purchase on platforms like Amazon Music. Additionally, individual recordings of her arias and songs can be streamed on Apple Music, Spotify, and various social media platforms.

She rests in Pleasant Hill Cemetery near Memphis, alongside her parents and two of her sisters. Ruth's remarkable journey from a musically gifted child in Memphis to a UofM music scholarship student to one of the world's leading sopranos remains a testament to her talent, passion, and indomitable spirit. Her story continues to inspire musicians and audiences alike.

Getty Images of Ruth Welting

<https://search.app/VrQ1RPQzvVgE2jRq7>



Ruth Welting as Norina in *Don Pasquale*, an opera by Gaetano Donizetti, San Francisco Opera



Ruth Welting as Norina and Timothy Nolen as Malatesta in *Don Pasquale*, an opera by Gaetano Donizetti, San Francisco Opera



Ruth Welting as Norina and David Rendall as Ernesto in *Don Pasquale*, an opera by Gaetano Donizetti, San Francisco Opera



Ruth Welting as Lucia and Richard Leech in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, an opera by Gaetano Donizetti, Canadian Opera Company



In a dress rehearsal at the San Francisco Opera is Ruth Welting, third from left, as Zerlina, in *Don Giovanni*, an opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Also, from left to right are David Rendall as Masetto and Walter Berry as Leporello. The singer on the far right is unknown.

Images of Ruth Welting from the Metropolitan Opera Archives



Ruth Welting performs as Queen of the Night in a production of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.



Ruth Welting as Olympia in a 1989 performance of Offenbach's *Les contes d'Hoffmann* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.



Ruth Welting as Olympia in a 1989 performance of Offenbach's *Les contes d'Hoffmann* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.



Ruth Welting as Sophie in a 1977 performance of Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.



Ruth Welting as Sophie in a 1977 performance of Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.



Ruth Welting as Zerbinetta in Strauss' *Adriadne auf Naxos* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.



Ruth Welting as Zerbinetta in Strauss' *Adriadne auf Naxos* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.

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Ruth Welting, *Lucia di Lammermoor: Spargi d'amaro pianto* with High F#, 1985, <https://youtu.be/WMaErFINUm0?si=NhbsYSMeP7YB6oSg>

Ruth Welting, *The Bell Song, (Lakme)*, Song by Francesco Molinari-Pradelli, <https://youtu.be/i24yAfeYH8Y>