

# Toledo troupe visits area schools to inspire new fans

6/3/2007

**BY SALLY VALLONGO**  
**BLADE STAFF WRITER**



Leslie Hochman, left, Angelo Marchese, Leandra Ramm, and Timothy Hill of Opera on Wheels perform for students at Walbridge Elementary School.

The Toledo Opera goes to great lengths to build tomorrow's audiences.

This year its Opera on Wheels team, a quartet of talented singers plus one versatile pianist and one director have put on lots of miles traveling from school to school in Toledo and the surrounding area to repeat their message: Opera is for everyone, no matter what age, education, or income level.

Yet mileage is insignificant compared to the extent to which this hardy band will extend itself to get youngsters to sit through an opera. Their goal is to help students connect through great old music with uplifting messages packaged in a sassy retelling of favorite stories.

Watch them work the house typically an elementary school gym filled with hundreds of lively students and amused teachers and you notice both focus and spontaneity, not to mention great comedic timing.

Today the troupe is at Walbridge Elementary School. Do any of you know the story of Cinderella? asks Leandra Ramm, a mezzo who will shortly bring to life the character at the center of the old French tale updated and set to the music of George Bizet's *Carmen*, by Indianapolis librettist Denise Page Caraher.

This new hybrid is named *Carmenella*.

Hands wave in the air as Ramm, a Manhattanite, smiles expansively and explains how to applaud for male and female singers. It's Bravo! for men, she says, and Brava for women.

Then it's on with the show as Tom Szor, pianist and head of music preparation, tears into the first of many excerpts of Bizet's great music balanced with pop works by the Village People, George Thorogood, and Queen.

In front of a simple set designed and built by director Helen Martens, two ungainly sisters Esmerelda and Druscilla, decked out in housedresses, frowzy wigs, and combat boots engage in musical oneupsmanship, singing all the while.

Tenor Angelo Marchese and baritone Timothy S. Hill knew what they were getting into when they auditioned for this Opera on Wheels gig before Toledo Ballet artistic director Renay Conlin last September.

Opera is a fast-growing art form across the United States, and education programs like Toledo's are gaining ground from coast to coast.

I love it, Marchese, a Miami native, exclaims after yet another successful appearance as Esmerelda, the Hairy Godmother, and an effete bull in the just-ended production, one of several performances that day.

Unlike the Toledo Opera's regular performances, *Carmenella* and *Pinocchio* are enlivened with funny side bits, seemingly improvised banter, and lots and lots of physical humor especially stinky-feet jokes.

Still, the messages are serious: follow your dreams, be honest, believe in yourself, and people who fight to feel big are really small.

It's fun to get up in front of the kids and get their attention. And even though it's a comedy, there's depth, too.

I'm a kid at heart, says Hill, a North Carolina native. I love getting in character. His roles in this production, one of two shows the opera has presented in nearly 70 shows since March, are *Drusilla* and *The Prince*.

It's fun, says soprano Leslie Hochman, another New Yorker. She is the Wicked Stepmother in *Carmenella* and *Olympia*, and an Old Blue Lady in the opera's other production, *Pinocchio*. The kids are great. It's nice to know you can entertain them without pandering.

Still, and despite the simplification and broad humor, opera's florid singing and intense emotions, long musical phrases, and complex harmonies are a far cry from the dumbed-down accessibility of TV and video game programming aimed at young audiences.

Yet since 1986, the opera has found that 30,000 satisfied customers can't be wrong.

That's the total number of Toledo area youngsters who have been treated to a live musical performance since 1986 through the opera's education and outreach program.

The difference between arts and entertainment is that entertainment gives you a predictable pleasure that you indulge and enjoy, says Conlin, concluding, but you don't tend to emerge a different person. By contrast, art always allows at least the possibility of transformation, of an inner realization.

Conlin and Jennifer Gross plan the annual Opera on Wheels series that begins in March. This September Conlin will travel to New York to listen to dozens of up-and-coming singers like Ramm, Hochman, Marchese, and Hill, who are moving on to other venues since this season ended last week.

It's very hard work. It's grueling, notes Conlin of the fast-paced schedule these singers maintain during their three-month stint. It's the energy of the kids that keeps you going. Even if they are tired, the kids lift you up.

Ramm adds that because each audience is distinct, We try to add something a little different that picks up on the vibe of the kids. We try to communicate directly with the children.

Contact Sally Vallongo at [svallongo@theblade.com](mailto:svallongo@theblade.com).