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## Leandra Ramm Finds Singing Dream

by Rachel Durfee



LEANDA RAMM

Leandra Ramm knew she was hooked on opera before she graduated from high school. "I was about 15 or 16 years old and I went to see Madame Butterfly at the Metropolitan Opera," she says. "I went by myself on a \$25 student ticket and sat in the orchestra. I went to see what it was like and I was so moved...I was crying so much at the end...tears dripping down my face because it was so moving, so riveting...[it was] such an emotional experience."

Less than a decade later, Ramm is a professional mezzo soprano with a long list of accomplishments. Without a note of bragging, she calmly ticks off performances in *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Barber of Seville* in places like Prague, Vienna, England, and Carnegie Hall. Nonchalantly, she mentions that she also plays flute and piano; she can sing and dance; and she speaks Italian, French, German, and Spanish, as well as bits of Russian and Czech. "To me, opera is the highest art form because it is a weave of music, acting, the human voice, instrumental music, great literature, and sometimes even ballet and other forms of dance. It combines all these

arts to tell a story through the voice."

Ramm, who has striking green eyes, high cheekbones, and wavy auburn hair, was born and raised on Roosevelt Island. It was here that she first thought of becoming a singer. "When I was about 14, my mother's dance teacher, who was like a grandmother to me, took me for a walk and asked me what I wanted to do. I said I didn't know and she asked me, 'What makes you really happy?' and I said, right away, 'singing.' And she said, 'Then you should be a singer.'"

Ramm's melodic voice overflows with enthusiasm when talking about her career path. From third through eighth grades she performed with the Main Street Children's Theatre, to which she credits her early love of performing. There, Ramm sparred with an amorous Curly when she played Laurie in Oklahoma! and crooned about summer nights as Sandy in Grease!

At 14, Ramm won an international competition for solo voice as a member of the Young People's Chorus of New York, which inspired her to pursue classical music seriously. She won a full scholarship to the Manhattan School of Music and received a degree in classical voice.

After graduation, Ramm began auditioning with different opera companies for an apprenticeship. Growing up in New York City gave her unparalleled audition opportunities: "Other cities simply don't have the same exposure to classes and teachers." She landed an apprenticeship with the Sarasota Opera in Florida, and "I've been singing ever since."

Like others in her field, Ramm travels the world on a grueling schedule in order to remain a full-time singer. Most recently, in only a couple of months, she has lived and performed in England, Arizona, and New York City. She cites the frequent traveling as one of the challenges of being in the business. "Though it's wonderful to visit all these places, it's hard being away from your family," but "Opera is a very small world, and I'll see a lot of the same people over and over again."

On or off the road, singers are training intensely. "You have to be a triple threat," Ramm explains, "meaning great voice, great acting, and great dance skills." How does she stay at the top of her game? There are weekly voice lessons with a private teacher, weekly sessions with diction coaches, language classes, dance classes, fitness classes, and music theory classes, not to mention the hours spent studying a single role.

Ramm laughs when she hears the stereotype of large, red-lipsticked sopranos shattering opera house glass. "It's not big, fat singers that just stand there and sing anymore," she says. "Now you have to have everything."

Even when a singer has it all, not every role is the right one, Ramm explains. When she is first offered a part, she has to make sure that it is healthy for her vocally, as well as a good career move. Once she accepts, she must read the libretto from front to back and research the background of the composer and librettist, learn the origins of the story, and decide where her character fits. "I translate every script word-for-word," says Ramm. "You have to know every single word you're singing - otherwise, it's just sound." Depending on the language, this task can be demanding. Italian is her favorite because "it's easy to sing, and has a wonderful bel canto repertoire." Bel canto literally means "beautiful singing" and, according to Ramm, it is a term used in opera to describe the 17th century Italian vocal technique made famous by composers like Rossini and Bellini. For any role, most singers will have one main coach to train with, but will additionally employ specialist coaches depending on the source of the opera (French, German, etc.), and every opera company also has coaches on staff. But again, there's no place like New York: "At home, I can pick up the phone and find a specialist in an hour."

Only after all this prep work does Ramm let herself go to the piano, where she opens to the first

page of the opera and starts singing. As for forgetting on stage? "The memorization sort of comes naturally," she says breezily. Ideally, says Ramm, a singer will want at least a month to prepare before rehearsals, but sometimes the process is more rushed. In fact, performers sometimes have only one to two weeks to prepare, which "can affect the smoothness of the rehearsals and the ultimate performance."

Extensive prep work pays off, but Ramm says that the most important element of a successful performance is fully embodying the character. Ramm says her favorite roles are those that explore human relationships, adding that with every costume she puts on, she must first understand her character's motivations in order to truly become her--or him, as the case may be. Of her first professional onstage opportunity in San Francisco in 2001, where Ramm sang in *The Marriage of Figaro*, she says: "Surprisingly, I wasn't that nervous because I felt like I was the character. I felt like I was telling a story and [instead of having stage fright] it was a great experience."

Costumes and make-up help on the exterior. The process usually takes one to two hours, but "if you are completely transforming, it could take much longer." She says with heavy make-up, wigs, and elaborate costumes, there is usually a dresser and a make-up artist backstage. "It is amazing looking in the mirror after the make-up and hair is done, and seeing yourself look completely different," she says. "Sometimes I don't recognize myself, especially if I am playing a male role." When she performed as Hansel in *Hansel and Gretel*, a "pants role," as male roles are called in opera, Ramm says, "this was the role most different from the real-life me. I actually thought a lot of my teenage brother, to give me inspiration on how to walk and act."

Currently, Ramm is in Tucson, participating in a program called Education Outreach. She is part of a small cast of four singers performing a children's version of *The Magic Flute* by Mozart, Ramm's favorite composer. Along with a soprano, tenor, baritone, pianist, and stage manager, Ramm is touring the entire state from August through this month, performing at different elementary schools.

The young singer describes her days as long and exhausting. She wakes up at 5:30 each morning, jumps into a van with the group at 6:20, and travels to the first school. The cast sets up the stage, gets into costume, and warms up. In addition to loosening up her vocal chords, Ramm stretches her entire body, giving one a sense of how kinetic each of her performances is. Ramm plays four characters and has "about a zillion costume changes." After they perform, the group takes down the set, hops back in the van, and travels up to two more hours to the next school. A short break for lunch, and it's time for the second performance. Ramm's day ends around 5:00 and she is in bed by 8:00, "because I have to get up and do the same thing the next day."

This is Ramm's third time performing with an Outreach Tour, a unique experience because "it can really touch children... It's great to instill the arts into the lives of young people." She remembers performing arts groups visiting PS 217 on Roosevelt Island and believes that "they have a lasting effect. Maybe not [all these kids will] go into opera, but hopefully they will have some sort of music or performing arts in their lives."

Ramm considers herself lucky to have been working consistently since she turned professional. Her real motivation is her desire to reach every audience: "Even though [performing] makes me happy and I love to do it, it's really about influencing other people and seeing people moved. Ensemble pieces that make everyone in the audience have tears in their eyes, that moment is priceless. It's worth everything to me."

For those who hear "opera" and think "boring," Ramm's advice is, "Don't judge a book by its cover." She adds passionately, "Opera is so much more than people just standing there singing. It's wonderful singing, wonderful stories. You can go to an opera and walk out of that opera a

changed person." Plus, she insists, "Traditional operas will always be there, but there are modern takes." Operas and musicals are also increasingly melding. Shows like 1996's *Rent*, for example, enjoy huge success. Opera companies are also adjusting to the times by filming operas and then screening them at movie theatres, and, live or filmed, Ramm promises there are always English translations on an overhead screen. Plus, she adds, with "millions" being spent on sets, costumes, and special effects, it's entertaining. "You can like movies and TV and still love opera," she says adamantly. "I think young people would be surprised. There's so much more to it [than the stereotypes]."

Speaking of young, many pros say an opera singer's peak is between the ages of 45 and 55, but Ramm doesn't see her age - 23 - as a handicap. Rather, she's excited that she's begun so early. "Hopefully I can keep singing until I'm in my 60s." Though she admits she was lucky--"I got a lot of 'yes's"--Ramm attributes her success to perseverance more than anything else. "Don't let setbacks stop you," she says energetically. "If you get rejected, keep at it. There's always another audition tomorrow." She adds that to keep the auditions coming, "staying healthy is the most important thing," and getting a cold is one of her biggest fears. She takes vitamins daily, drinks plenty of water ("I'm chugging water now because of the [low] humidity in Arizona"), and tries to get enough sleep. With that in mind, she has to head to bed. There is another day of singing ahead of her tomorrow.

For more information, visit [www.LeandraRamm.com](http://www.LeandraRamm.com). On November 2, Ramm will be back in New York performing in an American Art Song recital sponsored by the Greenwich Music House in the West Village ([www.gharts.com](http://www.gharts.com)).

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