

Beverly Sills

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Beverly Miriam Silverman, born in Brooklyn in 1929, made her public debut at the age of 3 in a contest proclaiming her "Miss Beautiful Baby of 1932". She sang "The Wedding of Jack and Jill" and, as she said, <sup>later</sup> won the award for talent as well as body. The name "Bubbles", as she is known to close friends and associates, was a result of her having been born with an enormous bubble of spit in her mouth and her brothers christened her Bubbles from then on.

Her mother had an intense love of music and her daughter grew up listening to her mother's collection of old Madame Galli-Curci records and before she was 7 had memorized all 22 arias on the recordings and could sing them in phonetic Italian.

Every Saturday morning Bubbles went to a school where she was given dancing and singing lessons and the school had a weekly Saturday morning show on WOR - "Uncle Bob's Rainbow Hour". There she did her big aria - "The Wedding of Jack and Jill". One Saturday morning on the air Uncle Bob asked her how she was. She replied that she didn't feel too <sup>well</sup> good, she thought she had the mumps. This cleared the studio out - every male ran for the doors - and as soon as she finished her song she was hustled out.

At age 7 she became Beverly Sills because an optimistic friend of the family thought that some day it would look better on a marque than Belle Silverman. And it marked the beginning of her introduction to Estelle Liebling who was called "Coach of the World's Greatest Voices". Every Saturday Beverly and her mother traveled an hour and a half from Sea Gate so she could have a 15 minute lesson with Miss Liebling - this was the start of an association that was to last 34 years until Miss Liebling's death in 1970.

After 2 years of lessons, Miss Liebling spoke to her old friend, Major Bowes, who had a successful weekly program on CBS called the Major Bowes Amateur hour. She felt Beverly was ready to display her singing voice to the public. She sang an aria from Rigoletto, won the contest and became a regular on the Major Bowes show. This lasted until Major Bowes became ill and the program was taken over by Morton Gould. Beverly became a soloist with Mr. Gould along with a young man with a beautiful baritone voice by the name of Merrill Miller, later changed to Robert Merrill.

Even at that young age, Beverly's dream was to become an opera star. By the age of 15 she sknew 20 operas. Miss Liebling opened up fascinating worlds to her - she would invite Beverly and her mother to dinner where the other guests might be Maria Jeritza, Grace Moore, Lauritz Melchior and many others and often Beverly was asked to sing after dinner. By then she was traveling into the city 3 or 4 times a week and her lessons had expanded from 15 minutes to 45 minutes or an hour. Miss Liebling's usual fee was \$25 an hour but for Beverly there was never any charge thoughtout their entire relationship. Beverly was absorbning opera like a sponge - she adored Lily Pons and wanted to sing everything she sang. She memorized operas that she never would sing just because she loved them.

When she was 15 she decided it was time to do something - to make a start. The New York City Opera had not been established and for a girl dreaming of becoming an opera star the opportunities were nil. Miss Liebling came to the rescue and introduced Beverly to J. J. Shubert who in turn came up with the idea of Beverly doing a Gilbert and Sullivan repertory tour. Her family wouldn't consent to it until a nice chaperone was found who would room with her, make sure her clothes were in

order, make all the trains, etc. The chaperone was also supposed to do Beverly's hair and keep it a lovely golden color - 2 parts gold bleach to one part red rinse, plus a dash of peroxide. The chaperone got it backwards - 2 parts red to one part gold and that is how Beverly became a redhead. The chaperone didn't last long - she had a habit of entertaining men friends in the room and when Beverly's mother found this out, through a letter a chorus boy in the cast wrote her, she promptly fired the girl chaperone and hired the informant for the rest of the tour. That chaperone later served a jail term for murder.

It was 1945 and Beverly was 16, making a \$100 a week. She had transferred to the Professional Children's School in Manhattan and even though she won a mathematics scholarship to Fairleigh Dickinson college she had her mind on only one thing - to be an opera star. She had returned from the Gilbert and Sullivan tour with good reviews, a knowledge of stagecraft, an ability to project her speaking voice and the edge taken off of her Brooklyn accent. But her family said no to any more tours - she was to concentrate on her voice lessons and aim for a serious career.

So back to Miss Liebling it was. Beverly was fluent in Italian and French and was beginning to master German and by the time she was 19 had a repertoire of 50 or 60 operas. She made her operatic debut in "Carmen" playing one of the gypsies in the Philadelphia Opera company. Then Miss Liebling formed a group called the Estelle Liebling Singers. This group of 5 girls and one baritone toured college towns and each singer made about \$75 per performance but for Beverly it was frustrating. She felt she wasn't getting any closer to her dream.

Next for her was a singing engagement in an exclusive private club. She sang and accompanied herself on the piano, singing everything ~~xxx~~ from popular music to operatic. But by the age of 21 she quit. She had made enough money to take her mother to Europe and during that summer studied at the Paris Opera. Miss Liebling was pleased with her progress - her French was now as good as her English and her repertoire was expanding. And her mother, <sup>too,</sup> was very involved in what she was doing - she sewed all of Beverly's clothes and when need be, her costumes - and always encouraged her in her plans to be an opera star.

Through Miss Liebling's friendship with the right people, Beverly got the chance to audition for Desiré Defrère, a stage director at the Metropolitan. An opera tour was being organized by Charles Wagner, a great impresario - the only tour of its kind in the United States. In 9 weeks it would do 63 one night stands with a 30 piece orchestra and two alternating casts. That tour began Beverly's operatic career - she was offered the role of Violetta in "La Traviata" and sang it more than 40 times. It was a strenuous life - the group would travel 300 miles a day on the bus, arrive at a town, race through dinner, get into costume, perhaps in a locker room, or, if not that, on the bus. But the experience was very worthwhile. And Monsieur Defrère, the stage director, had 2 valuable pieces of advice - eat steak and salad at 4 PM on the day of a performance and don't worry about short tenors!

After the tour it became a struggle again. Beverly acquired an agent, sang a few recitals, and began singing on the Borscht Belt. The Concord Hotel in the Catskills had an opera night every Tuesday and Beverly would sing several arias and

eat fantastic food. Then it was back on tour with the Wagner company - this time singing Micaela in "Carmen." Shetsang that 63 times and it became one of her all-time least favorites. She thought it limiting, frustrating and a bore.

Then things improved - in 1953, through a friend from the old Philadelphia Opera Company, Beverly met and was immediately captivated by Rosa Ponselle, the artistic director for the new Baltimore opera. She sang parts of "Manon" for Miss Ponselle and then sang "Manon" with the Baltimore opera company. It was a great success - and that indirectly led to an invitation from Gaetano Merola, music director of the San Francisco Opera to sing roles in their repertoire company, notably Elena in "Mefistofele" and Donna Elvira in Mozart's "Don Giovanni."

When Beverly arrived in San Francisco where she was to be a guest of the Merolas she learned that Merola had died the night before. It was a lonely week for her - no one seemed to know what to do with her and she spent the week in a terrible hotel on Market Street waiting for rehearsals to begin.

Her debut as both Elena and Donna Elvira was very successful. She received wonderful personal notices, met and sang with a great many famous people and on evenings when she wasn't singing would listen enthralled to the others in the company.

In December of 1953 she returned to New York. She was introduced to Carlo Vinti who was producing a television show called "Opera Cameo". The sponsors were Progresso Foods and Gallo wines and Beverly, in addition to singing three operas, did commercials for antipasto, minestrone and Gallo's California port. The television exposure was great and she also wound up with cases of Progresso foods and barrels of Gallo wine.

Beverly was still a girl who couldn't say no. She accepted anything and everything that came her way,. In the summer of '54 she went to Salt Lake City to sing "Aida" - it was well received and she felt at last she was beginning to get somewhere. Now was the time, Miss Liebling felt, to try the New York City Opera.

Dr. Joseph Rosenstock was then the general manager of the City Opera located in the old City Center on 55th Street. Beverly had auditioned for him 7 times since 1952 and gotten nowhere and felt another audition would be just another turn down. She asked her agent to ask Dr. Rosenstock what she was doing wrong. He did and the answer was - she has a phenomenal voice but no personality. For this audition she wore black lace stockings and as she said - a dress cut nearly to the naval - and her long red hair hanging all the way down. It must have done the trick because she learned later that Dr. Rosenstock was a long-time aficionado of lady's legs.

She debuted the following season in the role of Rosalinda in "Die Fledermaus" and it was a great success. Later in the season she sang Oxana in Tchaikowsky's "The Golden Slipper," affectionally called by the cast the Golden Schlepper. Beverly's mother was still making all her costumes for which the opera company was very grateful. The lead tenor was Richard Cassilly, who later became the lead tenor of the Hamburg Opera. He couldn't support his family as a singer in the United States - the Hamburg Opera had a medical and pension plan ~~which~~ unlike the opera companies in this country. At the conclusion of the City Opera season Beverly was hired for the 1956 season - and has been associated with the opera everysince.

At that time the City Opera did only a fall season and then

headed for out-of-town appearances. It was in Cleveland that Beverly met her future husband - the cast was attending a press party and she received a note written on a book of matches from a handsome blond man who said he would like to see her. His name was Peter Greenough, an associate editor of a Cleveland paper owned by his family. They had dinner the following evening accompanied by his two little girls. He was originally from Boston, a direct descendant of John Alden and another of his ancestors, Peter Buckley, had founded the town of Concord, Mass. He was in the process of <sup>a</sup>divorce - his 2 little girls lived with him, and a third daughter, severely retarded, was away at a special school.

When Beverly returned to New York she told her mother she thought she had met the man she wanted to marry. Her mother was ecstatic. However, Beverly explained to her, there was a slight problem - he was still married, had 3 children, was 13 years older than she, and he wasn't Jewish. This caused her mother to break into tears and ask - "why does everything have to happen to my baby?"

Peter played his cards exactly right and courted both mother and daughter. When his divorce was final, he and Beverly became engaged. When the engagement was announced it puzzled a great many people - this Jewish singer and a rich Boston Brahmin. One of those most puzzled was a little Jewish shopkeeper who lived in her mother's neighborhood. He said to her mother - what kind of a name is Greenough? Her mother replied that he was a wonderful fellow and the little shopkeeper replied - he must have changed his name from Greenbaum.

The next season with the City Opera Beverly sang Rosa-

linda again but was also given a new role - that of Madame Goldentrill in "The Impresario", Mozart's <sup>one</sup>~~one~~ act opera. It was her first chance to really sing coloratura and she enjoyed it thoroughly and for the first time her picture was published in the New York Times.

Beverly became Mrs. Peter Greenough in November of 1956. The ceremony took place in Miss Liebling's studio with the couple taking their vows standing on the same Oriental carpet that Beverly had first stood on when she was 7. Her wedding gown was made by her mother, as was her entire trousseau.

When the Greenoughs returned from their honeymoon to Nassau, Beverly began her travels on the road. She had signed up for concerts a year in advance and she went all over the country. One concert in Jamestown, New York, when it was so cold only 100 people showed up, another in Athol, Mass. when it was 20 below zero and her accompanist had to keep his hands in hot water until it was time to go on stage and that time face only 30 people. She sang with the Memphis Symphony and the Jacksonville symphony, on the Woolworth Hour with Percy Faith's orchestra and at the Brevard, North Carolina, Music Festival. Her reviews were all excellent but in spite of that her career wasn't exactly skyrocketing.

Meanwhile, back at the New York City Opera, Dr. Rosenstock was replaced for one year by Erich Leinsdorf. But the company was in serious financial troubles. Newbold Morris and a great many others came to the rescue and Julius Rudel was named artistic director.

Mr. Rudel announced that the 1958 spring season would be devoted to contemporary American operas sponsored by the Ford Foundation. The showpiece opera was "The Ballad of Baby Doe"

by Douglas Moore and Beverly Sills was chosen as Baby Doe. She said later that there were just 4 roles in which she felt she had reached the peak of her performance - Baby Doe, Manon, Cleopatra in "Julius Caesar" and Queen Elizabeth in "Robert Dev-  
ereux".

Then, in 1959, and 6 months pregnant, she played the role of the Prima Donna in the world premiere of Hugo Weisgall's "6 Characters in Search of an Author". It was not well received. And then in August of that year her daughter Muffy was born and for 2 years Beverly was on a leave of absence because of family responsibilities. In 1960 the family moved <sup>from Cleveland</sup> to Boston, and Beverly became pregnant again. A son, Bucky, was born in 1961 and almost immediately tragedy struck. The Greenoughs realized, and testing bore out the truth, that their little girl was profoundly deaf and their baby boy was mentally retarded.

During this difficult period, Beverly and Sarah Caldwell, artistic director of the Boston Opera Company became great friends and in February of 1962 they did their first opera together - Manon - with the Boston Symphony in the orchestra pit. Although the production was done on a shoe string the notices were all raves and Beverly received an enthusiasm from the audience such as she had never received before. Opera now became a refuge from her personal problems.

On Beverly's 33rd birthday her husband gave her 52 round trip tickets on the Boston-New York shuttle. She was to go to New York once a week, have her singing lesson with Miss Liebling and see her mother. It was the kind of therapy she needed. And Julius Rudel helped too - he insisted that her leave of absence had gone on too long and he wanted her back

at the City Opera. She sang "Louise" with Norman Treigle and then they both did "Faust" for Sarah Caldwell in Boston. And shortly thereafter she was asked by Leopold Stokowski to sing 4 arias in a performance of Bach's St. Matthew's Passion with the American Symphony Orchestra in Carnegie Hall.

By 1963 her career was moving along at a fast clip. She sang at the Philharmonic opening of the 1963 Promenade concert series with Andre Kostelanetz, at Lewisohn Stadium, at Robin Hood Dell and to Honolulu with Kostelanetz for a Viennese Night. And in the fall back to the City Opera where she sang "LaTraviata" that season.

Touring that winter was as hectic as ever but music critics around the country were beginning to sit up and take notice. One of the more down to earth appraisals was made by a critic in Miami, who, after exclaiming about her voice, called her a "red haired tomato".

Early in 1966 the City Opera moved to its new home in the New York State Theater, part of the Lincoln Center complex. The official opening in the fall was to be the premiere of Handel's "Julius Caesar" with Norman Treigle as Caesar and Phyllis Curtain as Cleopatra. Beverly took great exception to this - Miss Curtain had joined the Met and was no longer part of the New York City Opera Company and Beverly felt it was not right to go outside the company for the part of Cleopatra. She faced Julius Rudel with the ultimatum - either she sing the role or she would resign from the company. She was, after all, the prima donna in the company and Mr. Rudel acquiesced to her demand and the role was hers.

That summer, while working on her role of Cleopatra, she was approached by Robert Herman, Rudolf Bing's assistant manager at the Met, to do a performance as Donna Anna at Lewisohn

Stadium. She did the role, but did not consider it her debut with the Met - that would have to be on the stage at the Met, not in an open air stadium. Mr. Bing did not attend her performance, which was a smash hit, and it was to be 6 years before she had another nibble from the Met.

"Julius Caesar" was a tremendous hit, simply done for about \$60,000 - staged the way it probably had been done in Handel's time. By coincidence, the Met was opening its season with "Anthony and Cleopatra" - it was rumored to have cost three quarters of a million dollars and in spite of Leontyne Prices' beautiful singing, was a disaster - overproduced, over directed and, like a Hollywood extravaganza, the opera got lost.

"Julius Caesar" was the turning point in Beverly Sills career. Her notices had been raves - but she felt she was no longer singing to build her career, she was singing for the pure joy of it and because it was such an outlet from her personal problems.

About this time, Beverly had to make a very difficult decision. She realized that her young son could no longer live at home - he was autistic, could not speak and was showing signs of epilepsy. He needed the teaching and therapy that only a special institution could offer, so Bucky was put in the same school in Massachusetts where her husband's daughter was.

After "Julius Caesar", offers poured in from all over the world. And, as Beverly had said before, she was just a girl who couldn't say no - so in a period of 3 weeks she sang on 3 different continents and, between engagements, at the City Opera, in Europe and South America, she toured the United States - she was considered the work horse at the City Opera - need someone to sing 3 nights in a row? Call on good old

Beverly.

So it was that she made her debut at LaScala in "The Siege of Corinth" with Thomas Schippers conducting. And from Marilyn Horne who was to perform with her and had performed at LaScala before, she learned that at LaScala you don't say please, you ~~not~~ talk in loud, booming tones and you act the prima donna 24 hours a day. Otherwise, no one notices you. Opening night of "The Siege of Corinth" was a tremendous success with endless ovations. And as a result of her LaScala success, she was given two more foreign assignments - one in Manila and one in Naples, Italy. In Manila, she was indeed treated like royalty - the whole first class section of their airplane was booked for Beverly, her husband, daughter and mother. And in San Carlo, in Naples, the applause went on and on - one of the reviews said - "It took an American to teach us Italians how to sing Traviata."

Then came a tremendous undertaking - the role of Queen Elizabeth I in Donizetti's "Roberto Devereux." Julius Rudel had agreed to mount a new production for her and while she was doing her homework for Queen Elizabeth he suggested she think about doing 2 more Donizetti operas - "Anna Bolena" and "Maria Stuarda." The trilogy of the queens opened with "Roberto Devereux" in October 1970. Placido Domingo played Essex. Costumes were designed after paintings of Elizabeth in the National Portrait Gallery in London and the costume she wore in the second act weighed 55 pounds and was too heavy to be lifted over her head. Makeup - transforming her into an embittered sixty year old - took 2½ hours. The role was very taxing and sometimes Beverly lost as much as 8 pounds during her performance. On opening night the audience gave her a standing ovation at the end of Act II - a first for her. She felt that Elizabeth

was her finest accomplishment.

She made her debut at London's Royal Opera at Convent Garden in "Lucia di Lammermoor" during the Christmas holidays in 1970 and 324 friends of the City Opera chartered a flight to attend her debut. Then it was off to the Berlin Opera to do "Traviata" and on to Paris to do an orchestral concert.

In early 1971 President Nixon appointed Beverly a member of the Council on the National Endowment for the Arts and she was invited to sing at the White House. The press applauded her singing and had fun with the fact that the zipper on her gown popped and the talon went flying. Luckily she had a matching cloak with her and she finished her recital wrapped in the cloak.

Beverly was still the girl who couldn't say no. "Maria Stuarda" premiered at the City Opera in March of 1972 and "Anna Bolena", the third opera in the trilogy, was done in the fall of 1975. January of 1974 led off with recitals in Pittsburg, Hartford, New Rochelle, Chicago, San Francisco, Denver - a couple of concerts with the Milwaukee Symphony, 3 "Traiviatas" in Houston and a benefit concert in Albany.

In 1974 a special honor came her way - at the Harvard commencement that year she was made an honorary Doctor of Music. Her husband's family had sent its sons to Harvard since 1700 and she had had the hope that her son would continue the tradition. Since that was impossible, she accepted her degree, not as Beverly Sills, but as Beverly Greenough.

She was preparing to do a new production in Dallas of Donizetti's "Lucrezia Borgia" when her brother, a doctor, called her to say that routine tests she had taken showed cancer in the pelvic region. She flew back to New York, had the operation

and was back on the stage in 3 weeks doing the "Daughter of the Regiment" in San Francisco.

On the night of April 8, 1975, Beverly made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera House, 20 years after her debut at the N. Y. City Opera. When she is asked what took her so long to make it to the Met, her answer is - Rudolf Bing - who ran the Met from 1950 to 1972. Mr. Bing had a thing about American singers - he felt they hadn't been trained abroad, in his opinion the only training ground, and he doubted the American singer's ability to draw at his opera house. After Beverly's successes in "Julius Caesar" and at La Scala, Mr. Bing came under increasing pressure from his Board of Trustees to find something for her to sing at the Met. When he finally did offer her the choice of three dates, she had long since been booked elsewhere for all of them and she felt Mr. Bing certainly knew this. It wasn't until Goran Gentele, Mr. Bing's successor, was in charge that the decision was made, with Beverly's approval, to make her debut in the "Siege of Corinth." But Mr. Gentele didn't live to see it - he was killed in an automobile accident in 1972. Schuyler Chapin took over the Met but all the promises Mr. Gentele had made to Beverly were kept. Her debut was a huge success - when she made her first entrance on the stage she was greeted by a roar from the audience. They loved her, the opera, and the fact that, at long last, she was at the Met. It is sad to think that her daughter, who attended almost all of her mother's appearances, could not hear the glorious voice.

Today, Beverly Sills, at the age of 57, is the general ~~managing~~ director of the New York City Opera. Last fall when she was honored at the 8th annual Kennedy Center Honors program in Washington, along with Bob Hope, Lerner and Lowe, Merce Cunningham and Irene Dunne, she was introduced by Carol

Burnett who said of her good friend - "she taught a new audience to love an old art form." And Beverly Sills said of the gala "the best part of the whole thing was that the President of the United States called me "hot stuff".