

Rita Shane

She was a leading soprano at the Metropolitan Opera. And now she's teaching students who may, someday, do the same.

Go to YouTube, type in: "Rita Shane." In exactly six minutes and 47 seconds, expect chills up your spine, for you will have just had the opportunity to watch rare footage of one of opera's great dramatic coloratura sopranos.

"I made a lot of noise," Rita Shane says, laughing, of her performing days, when her notable voice captured audiences from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City to theaters in Milan, Munich, and Strasbourg, to name a few. "My voice is—or should I say was—very high. But it was not a little, light, tweedy bird sort of voice."

Which is likely what evoked an "animalistic roar" from a theater crowd in Vienna as an ovation for Shane's concert performance as Marguerite de Valois in Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* in 1971.

"I will never forget that," she sighs, "It was a very special night."

Despite her life as a world-traveling opera singer whose collection of loose performance photographs, headshots, and rehearsal candid is reminiscent of a famous actor's or movie



star's portfolio, Shane flies under the radar. And she flies quite often—back and forth between her native and beloved New York City and Rochester, where she has been teaching voice at the Eastman School of Music since 1989. Her career as a voice teacher presented itself with very little foresight on her part, as did her operatic career.

"I always had a nice voice," she remembers of her youth, "I loved to just sing. I sang myself to sleep when I was a little girl. I sang at my elementary graduation, my high school graduation. I was Laurie in Oklahoma! when I was at camp in a crepe paper costume."

Still, having a recognizably good voice growing up did not steer Shane to consider professional training. Unlike most of her own students, who enter Eastman as early as age 17 with a clear-cut path towards vocal

performance, Shane did not even consider professional training until after her liberal arts studies at Barnard College.

"I had no idea I was going to be an opera singer," she admits—even after she was taken under the teaching wing of renowned soprano Beverly Johnson. After Johnson heard Shane sing and asked her what exactly she would like to do with her talent, Shane replied, "I don't know, I guess I'll just take it as it comes."

And sure enough, it came. At 24, Shane entered the opera game fairly late, but it was no hindrance on her career. She was quickly ushered as an apprentice into the Santa Fe Opera and then back to New York, where she happened upon a secretarial job in the Metropolitan National Council's fundraising department. Perhaps fatefully, Shane found herself hanging around the opera house often,

an invitation. "You just learn how to take care of yourself," she says without a bit of resentment. "If you're smart," she adds.

Twenty years and countless performances later—many of which are described as "sensational," "breathtaking," and even "borderline astonishing," Shane was invited to Eastman to teach five students for one year. "And then they got stuck with me," she laughs of her now full-time position.

"I stopped performing. I didn't mean to make it permanent. I walked away," she says with a bit of nostalgia. "But nobody will ever hear me less than I was. I'd rather it said 'too soon' than 'oh, finally!'" Shane laughs.

Shane's modest office at Eastman is warm

and welcoming. A piano sits in the corner. Pictures of her students are tacked to a bulletin board. Posters from *Lulu*, *Arabella*, *The Magic Flute*, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, and *Die Fledermaus* adorn the walls. Aside from the framed photograph of her grandson on her desk, it is a space that represents both her past and present careers.

"I loved singing," she says as she glances at the concert prints. "I am a born performer." She pauses. "And I love teaching. LOVE teaching," she emphasizes. Shane pauses again. Her eyes sparkle a little, her lips curl into a smile of remembrance. "But I do miss the costumes."

— Laura Shields



constantly surrounded by the great singing that echoed through its halls.

When auditions rolled around, Shane was fortunate enough to be there.

And so the life of an opera singer commenced, which involved much more than arriving on stage a few times a week to belt out tunes. Daily rehearsals, learning music and stories and languages, hours of makeup, heavy wardrobes. And of course, maintaining good health.

"You live a certain life taking care of this," Shane explains, gesturing to her throat, "because it is your instrument." She had to take great care to stay away from sick people. She saw her ear, nose, and throat doctor as often as close friend. If people were going to be smoking at a dinner party—which many were in that era—she would decline