



Cheri Rose Katz

Perseverance Pays Off

by Joe Connolly

With two Young Artist Programs on her résumé and a fruitful future ahead, Cheri Rose Katz was on her way to a burgeoning career. When her father was diagnosed with a terminal illness, however, her career came to a screeching halt. After caring for her father for two years, Katz found it extremely difficult to get back in the business. She almost called it quits, but one “last” audition made all the difference.

Immediately after returning to the States this past summer, after two intensive years performing in Germany, Cheri Rose Katz reached a career milestone. John J. Miller of Pinnacle Arts Management, a well-known artists’ manager, signed her. With a big sound and intense stage presence, this attractive, young mezzo-soprano—with captivating, deep-set eyes and thick, raven hair to match—seems poised for a fulfilling, international opera career.

Yet less than three years ago, Katz was one audition away from ending her quest for a career and moving on to the next thing in life. Through deaths in the family, a resulting gap in her résumé, and the ending of a relationship—not to mention the financial strain most young singers face—her story is one of hard work, courage, and determination.

Katz grew up in quiet little Roosevelt, New Jersey (fittingly, a former artists’ colony). Her family—including her parents, an older brother, and a sister—was close, but not

Her teachers gave her the idea of having a career in opera. After one year, Katz transferred to Miami University. She didn’t know how to sight-read or play the piano, and had to work

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hard to make up for what she calls her “late start,” eventually earning a bachelor of music degree. After graduation, she gained valuable

musical. Katz didn’t like opera. She did like jazz, though, and played lead musical theatre roles in high school.

Katz majored in theater and pre-law at Muhlenberg College.

experience singing with full orchestra in a company called Opera International. Through this company, she also traveled to Italy for masterclasses with soprano Antonietta Stella. Katz gives credit to Stella and famed soprano Licia Albanese for teaching her the traditional Italian style.

Soprano Sandra Lopez has been a close friend of Katz’s since the first day they met in school. She talked about how her friend has developed since those days. “She had no opera background whatsoever, just the instinctual reaction to the music and a strong desire to make it her own. She went from a strong musical theatre background to [become] someone thoroughly aware of the musical history and aesthetic of opera. She really knows the business and has an organized, well thought-out approach to it.”

Financial constraints precluded pursuing a master’s degree. Katz came tantalizingly close to acceptance at a major conservatory, reaching the final round of auditions twice. Two years later, she had completed two Young Artists Programs, one at Central City Opera, and an apprentice program at Sarasota Opera.

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Alberto Rinaldi, Marina Prudenskaja (standing), Melissa Shippen (L) and Cheri Rose Katz (R), as Gianni Schicchi, Zita, Nella and La Ciesca, Deutsche Oper Berlin, *Gianni Schicchi*, 2006



Her father, who worked as a credit manager, became terminally ill. For three years, she commuted on weekends between New York and home in New Jersey. When asked if this helped, knowing that she was doing what she could for him, she remembers, “I felt better to be able to go home and help out my family and spend time with my father. It was still very difficult to focus on a music career and study.”

Katz took voice lessons and coached when time and finances allowed. She turned down contracts, and appeared in just a few small, local productions. When asked if this was a conscious decision, or simply the result of the circumstances, she said, “I think it was a mixture of both. I had very little energy [to] focus on my music, as my father’s illness and death was a real tragedy for me.” Her father died at age 56.

Katz says dealing with a career and a seriously ill family member is an experience that is individual to each person. “Everyone has a different relationship with their families. I have always had a strong family bond. I was very lucky to have a wonderful father and family . . . I love to sing and hope that the career I would like to have will follow. However, this experience taught me a great deal about life and myself. The career is not everything. Jobs will come and go.”

Just one and a half weeks after her father’s death, she not only sang in the final round of the Gerda Lissner Foundation competition, she won it. How did she find the courage and strength to sing at such a difficult time?

“Honestly, I think I was in a semi-fog and shock,” she remembers. “However, I have a very strong belief in my faith, and prayed *a lot!* This was not a choice for me to sing or not. My father was so excited and proud about (my) making the cuts for the audition. This foundation has continued to be a huge blessing for me.”

Still, more heartbreak followed. Cheri’s aunt, her father’s sister, died

tragically in an auto accident, and a relationship in which she was involved ended.

“It was a bad year,” Katz said. As a result, she moved back home for a year. “I needed time off to regroup and figure out what would bring joy back to my life.

“Singing became a joy again,” she added.

Lopez said these setbacks changed her friend professionally.

“She grew *a lot*. This growth brought more depth to her interpretation. She was singing the title role of Zanetto pretty soon after her father’s death, and it was a challenge, but she also felt that she was honoring his memory, and she threw herself into it with even more commitment. It was amazing—all of these experiences, and the years of simply ‘living’ [have made] her a much more complex artist. It’s no longer just promise, it’s artistry.”

Picking-up where she left off, however, proved difficult—Katz had a gap on her résumé.



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“It was definitely more difficult,” she says. “People would ask about the gap, and I responded with two replies: ‘Illness and death in my family,’ and ‘I was trying to learn how to sing better and work through things in my voice.’”

After pursuing the dream for two more years, Katz decided it was time to quit. She had done what she could, but things weren’t developing fast enough. It was time to get on with life. First, however, she had one last audition, which she had learned about through *Classical Singer*. She had already sent in the application, so she thought she might as well go. The audition was for the American Berlin Opera Foundation scholarship. She had no idea what was involved, but sang the audition and went home to contemplate her new life.

On a March day a week and a half later, the phone rang. It was Deutsche Oper Berlin calling. She had won the award, which allows one American singer a year to sing in Germany. She was to report in November. The foundation would provide an apartment at a reduced rent, and a list of repertoire with assignments to learn. Unfortunately the “rep” list got lost in the mail and had to be replaced, noticeably cutting short her time to learn the material.

“You’d better be well prepared going in,” said Katz. She remembers feeling “really scared,” nervous, and out of place, and making a lot of mistakes. She enrolled in a German class and said she was “always studying.” Thankfully, a lot of people spoke English. Rehearsals were in the daytime for up to five shows at a time. Sometimes she got discounts or free tickets to see the productions. Otherwise, she spent her time learning roles.

That was no small feat. Katz usually had three days to a week to learn roles, and sometimes didn’t even get a chance to rehearse with the orchestra. She went on stage in her first role, as Third Lady in *The Magic Flute*, after only a few rehearsals. Katz says her success was a team effort.

The First Lady and Second Lady led the American newcomer Third Lady around the stage. Once, she received a call at 11 in the morning asking her to sing a performance that evening at six. Of the less than ideal rehearsal schedule, Katz said, "You make what you can of it."

Even with all the ups and downs, after completing her one-year scholarship, Katz signed a contract for a second season at Deutsche Oper. She describes her two years as a very positive experience during which she grew tremendously.

One of the best advantages of singing at a big, international house like Deutsche Oper was the "fantastic opportunity" to learn while watching other performers and top conductors. Katz sang in a world-premiere concert performance of *Dulcinea*, by Lorenzo Palomo. "The contralto, Cheri Rose Katz," noted *Opera Actual*, "embodied the perfection of the earthly Teresa." Katz also sang in concert with Salvatore Licitra, and a "Traviata" with Elizabeth Futral.

With this great experience behind her, Katz feels the next step is to "come home and sing," to refine roles, solidify technique, to "move forward with my art." She is seeking to establish herself at home, but she is not forgetting Europe, periodically singing and auditioning in cities such as Frankfurt and Brussels. Miller is her sole manager in America, but she has several agents in Europe, where exclusivity is not required. Happily, she recently received a grant from the Lissner Foundation for a fourth consecutive year.

"To be in this position," she says, "I feel very lucky."

Katz gives credit for bringing out the best in her voice to Ira Siff, her current voice teacher.

"Cheri has a richness that is natural in her sound," says Siff. "I don't believe mezzo-sopranos should artificially create this kind of opulence . . . as they often do. She also has a spectacular top." As for Cheri's future, "I think Cheri will blossom as an Amneris, Azucena, Santuzza, and Delilah before long. We are ironing out technical issues that are necessary to singing these 'big gun' mezzo roles with security and longevity."

Regarding Katz's style onstage, Siff said, "She has a strong stage persona and lots of intensity. She is not in danger of being 'generic,' that's for sure. Operatic acting is through the voice. . . . So we are looking for lots of specificity in the reading of text and in phrasing. She is sounding both beautiful and expressive, a rare combination."

When asked about the personal attributes Katz has that serve her well in career pursuits, Siff replied, "She works hard, and is honestly self-critical. She appreciates hard work and caring in her colleagues and

teachers. She has the requisite amount of drive, and this career demands that—along with patience a great deal of the time."

Katz's friend Lopez agreed, "It is Cheri's incredible self-discipline and drive that serves her. . . . She is, quite honestly, one of the most single-minded singers that I know. She has clearly defined goals and she is constantly working her music, her character analysis, her self-analysis, and her business strategy to reach them."

Katz says she's "very excited" to have the opportunity to play "amazing characters" while "saying something with music." She wants to be "the best artist I can be," while giving as much energy as she can to "grab" the audience.

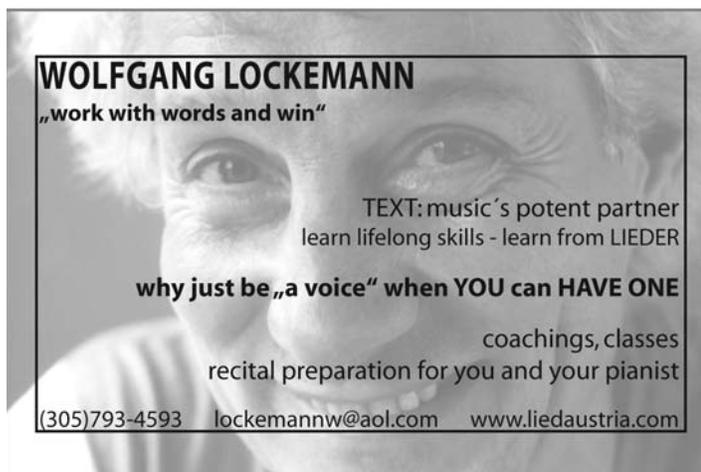
The journey has been tough, with many ups and downs, but Katz manages to keep things in perspective.

"Nobody has it easy in this business," she says. "Everyone has different paths. I do believe, though, if you are meant to sing and determined to have a career, you should never give up."

"Sometimes we hit detours on the road, but the path that is mapped out for your future takes you there, regardless."

For more information, visit www.Cherirosekatz.com.

Joe Connolly has been an actor in dinner theater, an impressionist, a librettist, a producer of many outdoor concerts, and a publicist for two separate opera companies. Currently, he enjoys being "just" a singer. You can reach him at JCConnolly@worldnet.att.net.

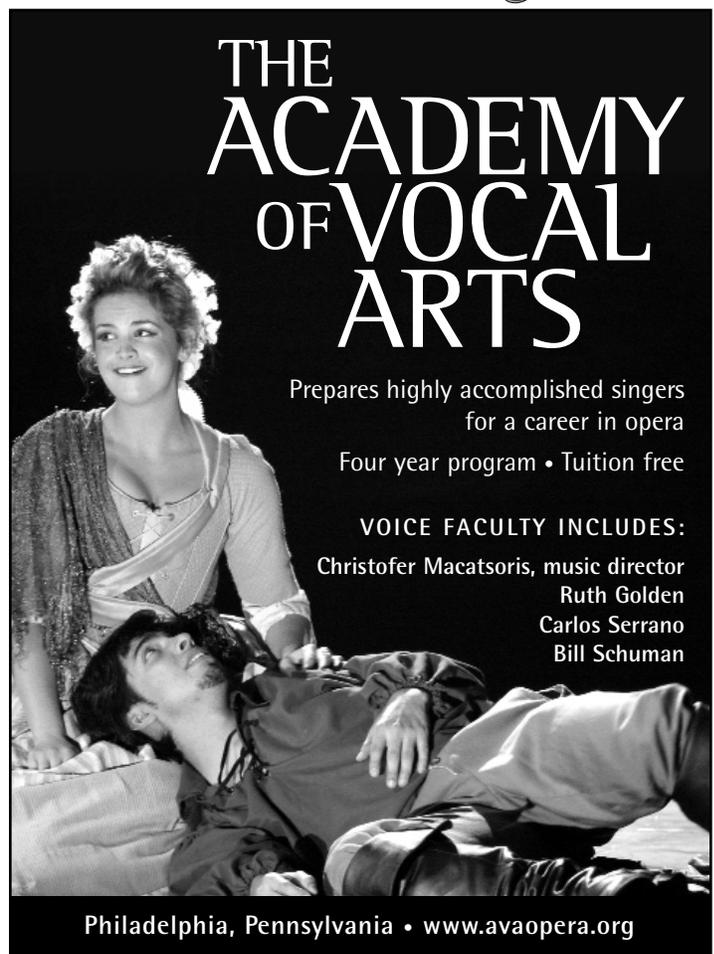
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