

Sooner Nation

Mary Jo Heath, Voice of the Metropolitan Opera

Mary Jo Heath sees the irony in working with the greatest singers in the world yet being called the “Voice of the Metropolitan Opera.” As “Radio Host/Announcer,” her title since 2015, Heath anchors broadcasts of the Met’s Saturday matinees on the company’s radio network and weeknight performances on SiriusXM’s Met Opera Radio. That amounts to about 75 broadcasts of 25 operas per season, originating from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City’s Lincoln Center. She also interviews opera stars for *The Met: Live in HD* transmissions to movie theaters.

The programs air in 34 countries in North America, South America, Europe, Australia and Asia. Drawing almost 10 million listeners weekly, the broadcasts surely make Heath one of the most widely heard — both geographically and numerically — University of Oklahoma alumni today and, perhaps, of all time.

The job calls for training and experience. A Norman High School graduate, daughter of OU professor of education Dr. John W. Renner and Carole Renner, Heath earned a bachelor’s degree in music education and a master’s in music theory at OU in 1976 and 1979, respectively. She earned her Ph.D. in music theory from the Eastman School of Music in 1988.

While at Eastman, she studied voice with future Met star soprano Renée Fleming, then a graduate student, leading to a lifelong friendship.

Heath worked for 10 years in executive positions for the Philips Classics record label, including stints in the company’s New York and Amsterdam offices.

She joined the Met as senior radio producer in 2006, where she was in charge of all “non-performance content.” She wrote scripts and interview questions, produced audio features and supervised the *Opera Quiz*, a staple of matinee broadcasts in which a panel of opera experts and aficionados answer listener questions and discuss operatic esoterica. During the broadcasts, she ran the program from the producer’s chair, keeping the show on a tight schedule.

When Peter Gelb, the Met’s general manager, interviewed Heath for the producer job, he asked if she liked sports.

“His model for switching from a solo host to a host and

commentator set-up was to capture the buzz of excitement associated with live sports,” Heath says. “So all those years of being a Sooner fan — and still loving football, baseball and golf — really came in handy.”

Reflecting Gelb’s sports reference, Heath handles the play-by-play, and commentators Ira Siff and William Berger provide the color.

She is only the fourth announcer since the broadcasts began in 1931, following Milton Cross (1931-1975), Peter Allen (1975-2004) and Margaret Juntwait (2004-2015). Heath and the radio team of about five editors and producers do much of the work before the conductor gives the first downbeat. They write and tweak scripts, have several read-throughs and check timings set by the stage manager for both before curtain and intermission. She attends final dress rehearsals to take notes on scenery and costumes. For new productions, she attends more rehearsals.

From her office on the top floor of the Metropolitan Opera House, Heath has a north view of the Henry Moore bronze statue *Reclining Figure (Lincoln Center)* 1963-5 in the plaza below. A radio control room and small broadcast booth are on the same floor.

Heath does not have a direct view of the stage. She sees performances on a 32-inch Panasonic high-definition video monitor, wears a headset to communicate with the producer and talks into a Neumann TLS 103 microphone. She also has a “conductor cam,” so she knows when performances are about to begin.

“It’s very important I stop talking in time,” she laughs.

Part of the challenge comes in finding something new in the familiar or becoming familiar with the new.

“Every season there are a handful of operas I don’t know, and that’s where my background in music theory and history really kicks in,” Heath says. “When it’s a known entity like an early Verdi opera or something else from the past, I’ve already got plenty of context, so it’s a matter of digging into the score and learning that particular work. But when it’s something new, like Thomas Adès’s *The Exterminating Angel*, it’s a team effort. For that one, we watched the movie on which the opera was based and read interviews with Adès himself and discussed lots of ideas of how best to present it to the radio audience.”

The job requires a command of languages beyond the



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Mary Jo Heath, right, interviews Tony-award winning soprano Kelli O'Hara, a fellow native Oklahoman, after a rehearsal of Mozart's *Così fan Tutte*, in New York last spring

usual French, German and Italian. "The biggest challenge is always a Russian opera full of Russian character names performed by Russian singers," Heath says. "That's the hardest."

Her husband, Ronald Heath (OU ba 1975; ma 1978, and a Seminole, Okla. native), teaches high school history in Ossining, N.Y., near their Connecticut home. Their daughter, Madison, swayed by annual childhood visits from Connecticut, is a senior at OU studying anthropology.

Although she now works in the center of the international opera world, Heath still has deep attachments to Norman and OU. Voice professors Thomas Carey and Carol Brice Carey and music theorist Dr. Gail de Stwolinski were early influences.

Later in life, Thomas Carey became Heath's stepfather and her mother, Carole Renner Carey, served on the Cimarron Circuit Opera Company board of directors, which was founded by the Careys. Her Norman upbringing and OU connections provided the early training that has allowed Heath to converse as a colleague with opera's biggest stars.

"Mary Jo Heath brings a convergence of talent, education

and experience to her position as the voice of the Metropolitan Opera," says soprano Renée Fleming. "Her intelligence and ability to think on her feet in interviews with grace and humor, combined with her deep knowledge of music and music history have placed her at the top of this field."

It is hard to imagine a more fitting "Voice of the Met."

Larry Laneer writes about the arts from Norman.

Editor's note: Opera fans can hear Metropolitan Opera broadcasts on radio stations around the world Saturday afternoons from December to May. Met Opera Radio, channel 75 on SiriusXM, carries live performances throughout the season and archival broadcasts around the clock seven days a week. Live performances stream for free one night per week during the season on metopera.org under "Listen Live."

Mary Jo Heath will be at the radio host's microphone when the Met opens its 88th broadcast season on Dec. 1 with Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele*.