

Opera singer Williams heads to Europe

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following interview was conducted by Yellin' Rebel staff writer Michael Clayton at the Yellin' Rebel Office. UNLV student and opera singer Monica Williams had dashed over to the office immediately after a performance at the University's Honors Convocation. She arrived breathless...

Williams' high standards and her attention to detail were evident as we tried to come to an agreement on what picture from her portfolio would best be facilitated in the interview. Despite her objections the decision made was one that was well received by the staff.

Williams recently won second place in the UNLV National Association of Teacher's Association of Singing. The competition is judged by UNLV Voice Professors, as well as professors from other colleges. She was also selected from a program in Miami Florida to attend Salzburg, Austria for five and one-half weeks this summer to take part in an intense opera workshop and to work with international opera singers.

Monica Williams: I'm happy with my performance at the Honors Convocation. I'm happy for all the members of the ensemble as well. I think we [University Chorus] did a wonderful job. Once piece in particular that we'd worked on all semester long came out really well.

YR: What piece was that?

Williams: It's entitled *Carmina Vurana*, and it was written by Carl Orff. It's a beautiful story about students from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries who write about their feelings...during spring-time, about fortune, and about their desires. It's a great story set to music. We have mock costumes which really adds to the performance.

YR: How did opera enter your life?

Williams: [takes a very long pause]

YR: Did your parents force it on you?

Williams: [softly] No-o. I've just always enjoyed singing since I can remember. I was started voice lessons when I was fifteen or sixteen from a woman who had been teaching me piano since I was seven. Actually, she was more of a voice teacher...

YR: Why did it take so long to go from instrumental music to vocal music? From age seven to age fifteen or sixteen is a long time.

Williams: Your voice isn't ready. It hasn't matured enough until your mid-teens, though some people do have really nice voices when they're younger. But I remember her [piano and voice instructor] hearing me sing when I was younger, and she thought it best that I wait.

Sometimes it just takes time for you to develop. Most singers start at about 16 or 17. And it's best that way because you can seriously ruin your voice if you start

too young. When I started I wasn't as serious about it as I could have been—not at all actually; but when I became a senior in high school I asked myself 'what am I going to do?' The only thing that I had done with my life up to that point was the arts: singing, acting, playing the piano, so I gravitated towards that area.

YR: Are you satisfied with the major?

Williams: Yes!

YR: Do you think that you can make a living at it?

Williams: Yes I do...

YR: Are you a confident singer? Most people are self-conscious about their singing.

Williams: At this point in time I'm very confident. Before, I wasn't. It takes time—years, but now my technique is really coming and that makes me feel very secure with what I'm doing. Plus, the feedback from other people is incredible.

My voice teacher is very enthusiastic. You have to sing in your classes all of the time, which means that you will be critiqued...all of the time. And that's good. You get feedback almost daily. Just the other day in my voice class my instructor only had wonderful things to say about my singing. [smiles]

YR: Do your feelings come out when you sing, which is to say, if you feel bad does that come across to your audience?

Williams: When you're a singer you have to take very good care of your health. You have to avoid being sick or tired a lot because it comes out in your voice.

YR: What about when you're upset or angry about something?

Williams: You have to put that in the back of your mind. What I'm doing calls for such extreme concentration that you have to keep outside feelings and distractions in a distant corner of your mind or else it comes out. It comes out in your expressions—you're not as comfortable and you certainly can't focus on your technique, or things like breath control. And what you're singing about, which is usually in another language. I'm a pretty emotional person. I'll have days when I don't feel like singing, and I'll say [inflective] 'I'm not singing today!' Then I'll reason with myself, saying, 'Well, Monica, you've got to put it in the back of your head and leave there until you've sung for an hour or so.'

YR: Tell me about technique...

Williams: It's hard to explain. You can work on your runs. [Williams offers a vocal demonstration of a warm-up scale] You work on support...keeping it strong from the diaphragm, which is the most important thing. It [support/diaphragm] must be strong throughout an exercise or an actual performance. Then comes tone quality—getting the sound in your mask [Williams pulls her hands across her face]. You need to get the sound frontwards. You do exercises where you try to keep the sound in

your face while at the same time keeping a huge opening in the back of your throat. There really are a lot of things to think about. Your back has to be expanded. You never let your torso slump. Good posture is an imperative.

YR: What has opera done for you? Self-awareness? Money?

Williams: When I was first exposed to opera I wasn't too thrilled about it. But when I did sit down and pay attention I was mesmerized by it. People—Americans—just don't know what a deep, deep art form it is like, say, the people in Europe. It's so common in Europe. It's their life [Europeans]. I mean I was literally crying when I sat and watched and took in the English translated subtitles. I was crying, and I didn't know anything about it. What I saw was the most beautiful piece of art. The acting was above par too. And if people would see that they wouldn't run away from it. The exposure to it made me watch it all the more. I have been inspired beyond any inherent talent. I have developed an inner commitment. I have a total commitment as to what it takes to be well trained—certainly moreso than any pop singer.

YR: What genre is your favorite form of opera? The love story? The tragedy?

Williams: I like the love stories. I love *La Traviata* by Verdi. It was a wonderful experience being able to perform it [La Traviata] with the Nevada Opera Theater/Chorus. It was my dream to do *La Traviata* because it was the first opera I saw. I also like the light comedy operas.

There's one in particular, by Johann Strauss entitled *Die Fledermaus* that comes to mind. It's wonderful. Right now I'm doing *Carmen*. I'm playing a cigarette girl who works in a factory in Seville, Spain.

YR: Leontyne Price...when I say the name Leontyne Price, what comes to mind?

Williams: [soulful] Amazing lady! I saw her hear at UNLV. I never thought I'd get chance to see her in person. She's a fine lady whose had a long career in opera, and has probably opened up a lot of doors for other blacks. So much so that now it is very common. We may even have a headstart because we have a different sound to our voice.

YR: Did you get to meet her?

Williams: [sadly] No-o. She was very ill that night. She became ill during the performance. It think it's the first time in almost thirty years that she's ever had to stop during a performance. She came back out to explain what happened, and she could barely speak. Her voice was low and raspy. She said, [Williams imitates Price] 'Against doctors orders I was going to sing for you tonight...' That showed me just how much technique she has because the way she spoke was in no way reflective of the way she sang. She collapsed backstage and wasn't able to do her spiritual. She



always does a spiritual at the end of her performance.

YR: 'Spiritual?' You mean like something you'd hear in Baptist church?

Williams: A lot of the black opera singers close out with a spiritual arias.

YR: When you go to Austria will that be your first time performing outside of the United States?

Williams: No. I've been to Austria before. I've also been to Italy, France, England, Germany, Switzerland, and to Yugoslavia. When I go to Europe this time I'm going to seriously consider whether or not I'm going stay there for good. I prefer their culture and lifestyle to ours. I know a lot of people will look down on me for saying that, but chances are they are limited in their scope and don't know that the American way is not the only way of life, and that this is a very big world with many different cultures, attitudes, and outlooks. People look at me strange when I tell them of the differences, but I'll tell you, I felt more comfortable over there than I've ever felt in this town. I'm not ashamed to say that...because I do. I wasn't judged first by my color—my voice is what they were interested in. The attitude was 'let's talk to her, let's try to communicate with her...'

YR: Does the draw of quick success in another form of entertainment ever become appealing?

Williams: [decisive] No...the only other things that I'm interested in are jazz singing and musical theater. But opera is still number one.

It's what I do best. My voice works best when I'm being operatic. I've sung musical theater, but as far as the sound quality my voice is just better suited for opera. I've even danced musical theater for seven years. Opera is just my niche. And don't get me wrong, I've had measured success in both jazz and musical theater, so I'm not running away from because of negative feedback.

YR: What does applause do for you?

Williams: [sensual, emotive] If I've done well, and if I've gotten great applause because of it, then, like Leontyne Price says, 'I want to go back out there and do it again.' [dramatic] You're scared to death when you go out there...every single time. I guess I'll never get rid of that part of it, I mean, I'm so scared I'm sick. And I've heard a lot of performers say that. They talk about being overcome with nervousness and how the nervousness is forgotten when the applause comes. I sang for a Catholic church on Easter. The place was packed.

Well, when you sing and touch someone in such a setting it's fulfilling. I had people coming up to me saying from their heart, 'You sang so beautifully, you've got the most beautiful voice, you brought tears to my eyes, you made me numb, you made me shake and tremble' to touch people like that, people you don't even know. It's just the best feeling in the world. You never want to give it up. It makes me want to work harder.

When people clap for you it's the best feeling in the world.