

# Roberta Peters, 86, Sparkling Soprano Whose Fairytale Met Debut Led to a Five-Decade Career, has Died

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Roberta Peters



Roberta Peters as Kitty in Menotti's *The Last Savage*, in a 1964 rehearsal at the Metropolitan Opera

Roberta Peter's overnight ascent to Met stardom at twenty combined with her uncommonly attractive face and form to suggest a sort of fairy-tale figure. But Peters's early years were spent absorbed in arduous study, devoid of many of the diversions taken for granted by the average teenager. Although in later life the soprano spoke about tears shed under the pressure of trying to live up to the expectations of those who believed in her, she maintained that young people should be urged to fulfill their potential. It was, in fact, this seriousness of purpose and artistic integrity that carried Peters through a five-decade career in which she racked up 512 Met performances of twenty-four roles during thirty-four seasons.

Roberta Peterman was born in the Bronx on May 4, 1930, the only child of Sol, a shoe salesman, and Ruth, a milliner. Roberta's exceptional voice and love of singing became evident early on, as she imitated singers on the radio. Her mother was somewhat stagestruck, and Roberta was taken to kiddie shows and movies, and eventually groomed for a children's opera radio program that was canceled before making it

to the airwaves. In preparation, however, she had learned arias and scenes, encompassing everything from *Tosca* to *Gilda* to *Norma*.

In 1942, when Roberta was twelve, Jan Peerce entered the picture. While singing at Grossinger's in the Catskills, where Roberta's grandfather was maitre d', Peerce was persuaded to hear the girl sing and was impressed. But she had never sung a scale or developed a technique, so he recommended her to William Herman, teacher of Patrice Munsel. Herman offered Roberta a scholarship, asking her parents to pay whatever they could afford and covering the rest himself. The rest included accompanists for coaching, ballet lessons, French, Italian and German lessons and movement—with Joseph Pilates. Herman took Roberta to museums, opera and concerts and offered unlimited access to his library of scores and recordings. She spent hours, fascinated, listening to her coloratura predecessors on old 78rpm discs. Herman also—and Peters herself was always amazed at this—managed to write a letter on his singing-studio stationery to the principal of her school, stating that her education would be taken care of, and had her pulled from school at

thirteen. Although Peters accumulated a number of honorary degrees over the years, she never received a high-school diploma. By the time she was fourteen, Roberta was reading Dante in Italian, and at nineteen she knew twenty opera roles without having set foot on any stage. Rather than use the traditional Panofka vocalise for technical facility, Herman had his young protégée practice with Klosé clarinet exercises, and she immersed herself in the Garcia bel canto technique as well. Herman was exacting, to say the least, and there were some long, unhappy lessons and emotional moments. But all of this added up to a remarkable technique of astounding agility, supple legato and great vocal beauty.

In November 1949, Peerce brought impresario Sol Hurok to Herman's studio to hear Peters in excerpts from *Lucia* and *I Puritani*. Hearing her again at Town Hall, Hurok signed her. In January 1950, Met conductor Max Rudolf asked to hear excerpts from *Rigoletto* in the Ladies' Parlor of the old Met, and the following week Peters sang the Queen of the Night's second aria for incumbent general manager Rudolf Bing—four times. She later discovered that Bing had had four different conductors come in to listen to her. Bing signed her on July 20, 1950 (by which time he was in power) as an "apprentice singer" for twenty weeks at \$120 per week, targeting her for a debut in *The Magic Flute* on January 12, 1951.

But on November 17, 1950, Nadine Connor, scheduled to sing Zerlina in that evening's *Don Giovanni*, became ill, and on six hours notice, never having appeared on an opera stage, Roberta Peters took the subway down to the old Met and made a surprise debut. This was the sort of event the press lives for, but in this case the "unknown girl makes good overnight" aspect was backed up by genuine quality, and

Peters won the hearts of press and public alike, beginning a love affair with the Met that lasted until her final performance at the house, as Gilda, on April 12, 1985. (Her last company outing was one more Gilda on April 25 in Boston.)

Reading reviews of the soprano's Met performances, one encounters consistent praise for both her singing and her performing instincts. Typical is a *New York Times* appraisal of her Rosina: "The soprano was delightful in every way. Looking as dainty as a Dresden figurine, she acted with grace, vivacity and skill. And she sang with fresh, sweet tones, negotiating the difficult coloratura passages with accuracy and real enjoyment. . . . Such was her pert assurance that she succeeded in stealing a few scenes." This was an age in which soubrettes were supposed to be cute, and while Peters cashed in on her beauty and charm, she was far too intelligent and disciplined to coast. Blessed with a rather rich middle voice for a soprano of such silvery heights, she was able to provide adequate vocal and dramatic weight to manage a very convincing Gilda or Lucia, in contrast to her lighter assignments. And when coloratura fireworks were demanded, she supplied them aplenty, as Zerbinetta or the Queen of the Night. Adding roles to her Met repertoire with some rapidity, Peters then stayed with her core parts for the duration of her career, never endangering her instrument. And she continued studies with Herman until 1963, two years before his death.

The Peters explosion coincided neatly with the television explosion, and her gorgeous voice and stunning looks guaranteed her a place on such programs as *The Ed Sullivan Show*, on which she appeared sixty-five times, a record for any opera singer. A particular memory for this writer is her "Shadow Song," from *Dinorah*, on the show; instead of a flute obbligato at the end, she was partnered by Al Hirt on trumpet. She was a regular guest on *The Voice of Firestone* and appeared as well on *The Bell Telephone Hour*. In 1975, she made a foray into television drama, playing a terminally ill opera star on *Medical Center*. Commercials beckoned as well, and Peters was a Maxwell

Housewife, sipping coffee—and who doesn't recall her American Express ad, in which the trademark voice sang out, "Taxi!"?

Consistency, of course, can mean being taken for granted, and Peters was not given all the opportunities she had hoped for; Bing kept her constantly in the same repertoire, and by the time her old friend James Levine came along (she had known him since he was ten), she was in the final decade of her Met career. What's more, the very definition of "coloratura" changed with the advent of Maria Callas, who brought her quite different Lucia to the Met in 1956. Five years later, Joan Sutherland's sensational big-voiced Lucia appeared, further redefining the fach. But Peters outlasted Callas at the Met by two decades and sang more than twice as many performances at the Met as her Australian colleague.

Peters ventured outside the Met only occasionally, singing at Covent Garden, the Vienna Staatsoper, the Bolshoi and the Salzburg Festival. The Met was her home, and she was onstage for a number of significant nights—Marian Anderson's historic debut in *Un Ballo in Maschera*; the closing-night gala of the old house; Rudolf Bing's farewell gala; her own twenty-fifth-anniversary performance; and the Met's Centennial Gala. She also created the role of Kitty in the U.S. premiere of Menotti's *Last Savage* at the Met in 1964. Peters was kind and attentive to Bing as he succumbed to Alzheimer's disease, visiting him frequently. Regional appearances allowed her excursions into slightly heavier repertoire—Mimi and Violetta in particular—and she eventually branched out into musicals and operetta as well (Noel Coward's *Bittersweet*, *The King and I*, *The Sound of Music*, *The Merry Widow*). She had an extensive concert and recital career, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of her debut with a recital at Alice Tully Hall on November 17, 2000.

Peters did a bit of teaching but decided it was not for her. She did, however, provide scholarships for young singers, and she was also active in Jewish organizations. She sang with Richard Tucker in Israel on the eve of the Six-Day War in 1967; urged to leave, Peters and Tucker insisted on staying and

singing. Her recorded legacy is extensive, representing many of her celebrated roles, and she appeared on forty-eight Saturday Met radio broadcasts, some of which have begun to surface on the Met's Sony Classics series, reminding one of the excellence of her work.

Peters's personal life was rich as well. After a brief marriage to Robert Merrill in 1952 ("I think I fell in love with his voice"), Peters married Bertram Fields in 1955. Their marriage lasted until his death in 2010.

Throughout her performing career and afterwards, Peters was an effective and generous arts advocate. She joined the board of directors of the Metropolitan Opera Guild in 1981 and remained an active member of the board until 2013, when she was appointed to the Guild's artists council. President George H. W. Bush appointed Peters to the National Council on the Arts in 1991, and in 1998 President Bill Clinton awarded the soprano the National Medal of Arts.

I had the pleasure of knowing Peters a bit; we appeared in several galas together. I particularly recall the 2006 Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation Gala. I was in my dressing room, getting into makeup and costume. Suddenly, over the monitor, came this silvery tone, floating the Vilja lied from *The Merry Widow*. I was astonished that one of the young competition winners had such a sense of the style—until I realized it was Peters, at seventy-six, shedding decades with every phrase. ■

—Ira Siff

Courtesy of *Opera News*