



THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN LISTENING SERIES

A Singer's Life

by Jocelyn Robinson

Jocelyn Robinson: I'm Jocelyn Robinson. Berlin is a city with three full-time opera companies, in a country where there are more opera performances than any other place on the planet. It's little wonder that singers come to Germany from all over the world; it's the land of *Milch und Honig* for opera singers like July Zuma, a tenor from Durban, South Africa.

[LESSON AUDIO]

Jocelyn Robinson: July Zuma is living in Berlin now, and he's got a shot at the role of Don Ottavio in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. But he's feeling a little under the weather, so he's working with his voice teacher to perfect the arias he'll sing for the audition. He has to be prepared. That's a singer's life.

Leigh Hamilton: That was fantastic. Really, really good. You're going to be just fine. Please do not sing any more today. You don't need to ... good, you're welcome. Yeah, it sounds great. Would you ever know he's not feeling well? That's a professional for you. You know ... that's the life. It's not an easy life. You have to – really have to take care of yourself physically and psychologically, the whole bag. But it's great, July.

[LESSON AUDIO]

Jocelyn Robinson: The teacher knows what it means to live a singer's life. She came to Berlin nearly two decades ago; the competition is daunting, and you have to be on your game. You have to be at your best, no matter what. That's something she learned back at home, in Southwest Ohio, where she grew up. She remembered that – and more – during her annual summer visit to the little village with big musical expectations.

Leigh Hamilton: My name is Leigh Hamilton, and I was born Leigh Hamilton Adoff. And I went by Leigh Adoff for a very long time. This is Yellow Springs. It's where I grew up, my mom's hometown – where her family landed, so to speak. And music has always been a huge thing, in not just my life, but my family's life. And as a kid, my parents saw that I had a talent and that it was easy for me. And so they really supported that and tried to encourage me, without pushing me. They were never stage parents and I loved it. It was my thing – that and sports.

And for me, they are interchangeable. When you are an opera singer or a classical musician, you are an athlete with what you have to do with your body.

But in the beginning, it was music. It was playing violin in orchestra, it was playing clarinet in band, it was singing in musicals. And sort of finding my footing in what I love the most, and I think – I mean, I love playing violin. I was good at it. I could have gone to music school for violin as well, but the combination of singing, music, and acting and being on stage is what just bit me. That was home.

I think Yellow Springs also really challenged me, as well as prepared me, and encouraged me. They taught me what it meant to be professional, even as a young person. That if you're supposed to be at a rehearsal at one, you better be there at ten of, and that it was important. And there were at least 20 people behind you – just as good as you – who wanted your spot. So, if you wanted your first chair in the orchestra, you'd better well be practicing every day, and good enough to keep it. And that was very good for me, in terms of later.

Jocelyn Robinson: After graduating from high school in 1981, Leigh went to Ohio State, but after a few years, she transferred to one of the top music conservatories in the country – the Manhattan School of Music.

Leigh Hamilton: Can you imagine being at university and your performances are reviewed by *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* or *New York Magazine* ... or I was reviewed once by *The London Times*? And it's incredible, and it's terrifying. It was, you know, competition on a completely other level than even what I'd experienced at Ohio State. You know, going to an audition ... and I remember it was winter and having my shoes stolen. I had my winter boots on and went to change and came back – my pumps were gone, and all my music. That never happened again, because I never left my belongings where they weren't on my person. That's the competition level. Is it good? Is it healthy? Probably not, but that's the way it is.

And it was pretty amazing. Getting into Manhattan School of Music and studying there, and getting to do major roles there and getting reviewed by *The New York Times* as a young individual was pretty wonderful. And my teacher there was also an incredible mentor, Adele Addison. She is an African-American woman – she's got to be in her 90s by now – who was my voice teacher in conservatory. And she sang everything – opera and concert – and taught me to another level of what it meant to be prepared for your first rehearsal with the conductor. Not just knowing your music, but knowing your music inside and out, and where every dynamic marking is, and where every diminuendo and crescendo, and where you get loud and where you get soft, and what each word means if it's in a foreign language. That kind of preparedness.

[NABUCCO AUDIO]

Leigh Hamilton: I consider myself a woman of color. I call myself biracial because that's how I see myself, with a Black mother and Jewish-American, Eastern European ethnicity father. That's who I see myself as. Now, if one could see me, I'm rather fair-complected, and you may not necessarily see that. And a lot of times I would get reactions: well, she doesn't quite have the right look. They just couldn't quite place me, and I think some of that affected some of the casting choices. And also on the flip side, I had a director years ago in New York – who's quite well known, who really liked me, worked with me at Manhattan School of Music in conservatory – and they were doing a modern opera on the life of Harriet Tubman. He wanted me to sing Harriet Tubman. Now, I look nothing even remotely close to Harriet Tubman, so I wasn't quite sure how that was going to work. You know, do you do dark makeup? It feels wrong, it doesn't feel right to me. That doesn't feel good. Yes, I'm half-Black but to be true to

the character, one needs to see that visually, you know. And one should have the singer that is the best representation, not just vocally – but when you're doing a historical piece, I think that's important. And he actually asked me, "If we sent you to a tanning booth, would you get dark enough?" He wanted to hire me. He just didn't have any idea, you know, what the ramifications were of what he was sort of asking. And I said no, and I remember talking to him about a couple of wonderful young black singers that I knew, and one of them was actually at school with me at the time, and she did a stellar job. And she was the right person for the part.

But you know, I mean, that's just strange and odd. And you feel like you want the job ... but how far you going to go to get the job, right? And I think I've always been that person that's been true to herself in my beliefs, ideology – not just being prepared and a great colleague, and a wonderful, I think, person – performer – you'd want to hire. But also that I can get up and look myself in the mirror every day. So there may have been times where that hadn't been, perhaps, to my – I don't know – to help me, in terms of getting places in my career. But that's what, how the only way I could do it, for me. I was never the girl that took some other girl's shoes. I was always of the mind ... I was brought up this way: if you work hard enough, there's room for everybody.

Also, for me, in terms of my outward appearance, you know ... for years in Ohio, I straightened my hair and tried to somehow do my makeup so my nose looked smaller, and so my features looked more ... Anglo, shall we say, and I really had to come to terms with what I looked like and who I was. And god, going to New York, every other street corner was a girl looked just like me. And maybe she was a Latina, or maybe she was mixed like me. Or maybe she was ... yeah, million different possibilities, with crazy curly hair or a big nose like me and freckles or – you know. And that was fantastic for me. That was amazing, and I stopped straightening my hair and I let it grow and let – you know – got the curls all nice and big. And embraced my big nose. But my big old head and my big face is fantastic for singing, because you've got all that resonating space, you know. But New York was really good for me that way, in being self-confident as a young woman, which I never really was to the extent in Ohio – that I really kind of came into my own in New York City, when I got there. And that all plays in ... as a singer you can't sing and be free unless you are also inside, as a person. It just doesn't work. You have to be open and free and able to take risks and become somebody else. And how can you make that different when that character's been created before you for a hundred years? You know, that kind of thing, which I always loved. I always loved that challenge.

[NABUCCO AUDIO]

Jocelyn Robinson: Creativity is in Leigh's DNA. Younger brother Jaime is a musician and writer, and father Arnold Adoff is a poet. Her mother, who passed away in 2002, was Virginia Hamilton, one of the most honored authors in children's literature. She won everything from the Newbery Medal to a MacArthur genius grant.

Leigh Hamilton: But growing up, she was Mom, and she would go into her office – in her study, as we called it – and she'd come out with 50 pages of type, or 100 pages or 150 pages, or however much every day, and I'd be like, "Mom, what were you doing? How do you do this?" "I create and these characters come to me." And I saw her going in there and working seven, eight, nine hours a day, every day. And then these books would be made, you know, and these characters that were in her head would come to life through her creativity. And also this immense discipline and hard work – and that's really the first place I saw it. Even as a little kid, when you just sort of absorb what your folks do. Both my parents were home, they both worked. My dad didn't go to an office. Arnold Adoff is my father, a poet and anthologist – and he also had his office at home. I think because I grew up watching that. And especially in the days of my youth, when my folks only got paid twice a year on royalties, and didn't know

if the next book contract was coming ... and yet still went into that office or studio or study every day and created and worked. That is not easy. My husband, who is an attorney – and has an office and a secretary and an assistant – says to me he could never do it. And for me, it seems utterly natural because it's something I've basically been doing my entire adult life and what I saw my entire youth. So going into my study, my office – and practicing and singing and translating and listening and working and creating at home – was never an issue for me. But before I was teaching, this was working, you know. And that's what I did every single day. Even if there were no auditions, even if there was no job. Because something would come, and you had to be prepared.

Because in this business, if you don't have – and this is something my mother told me – if you don't have self-confidence in what you do, and you don't think you're the best, nobody else is going to. Don't ever – no matter what anybody does or says to you – don't ever let them see you sweat, ever. And the best revenge is being the best. And that is something I think to this day, and have passed along to my own young charges that I teach now.

Those years in New York were pretty amazing, pretty special. I did a lot of work and I traveled. I sang regionally all over the United States. Did a lot of work in regional opera houses and got to do a lot of really great singing roles. And in New York itself, I got to do a lot of different types of music, concerts, and contemporary music.

Jocelyn Robinson: But then you opted for a change of scenery.

Leigh Hamilton: I did. I was in New York a good 15 years and did a lot and sang in a lot of regional houses. And it didn't really get to the next level ... as in, let's say, the top houses – opera houses – in America; San Francisco, Chicago, the Met. I was single, I had my own apartment. I had one friend who lived in Europe, and she lived in Berlin. And I started visiting her and literally fell in love with the city. I could not speak a word of German, and I thought oh, well, how hard can that be? [LAUGHS.] It's a ridiculously difficult language, I think. And I moved! And then I met a man named Jörg Zeisse, who is my husband, and that was 18 years ago. I'm not really sure how that happened!

But I also wanted to stay. I had decided I was really happy there. I reinvented myself. I became another person, in the sense that I sort of started over. But it was great. It was wonderful, and why not, you know? And I learned German. I'm fluent. It took a couple years, but I'm completely fluent, and I did a lot of great singing work there for years and years. I did tours. I did contemporary music. I did orchestra concerts. I did a tour of a new production of *10 women*: two opera singers, musical theater singers, a couple pop singers. We toured all over Europe for a good four, five, six years. I sang at one of the biggest revue theaters in Europe, where I was the ... it was called the *Lichte Königin*, which literally means Light Queen. It was a Christmas show, where it was sort of like the Christmas angel, you know, and that was like Broadway. Monday was dark, Tuesday through Sunday, two shows on the weekends, you know, it's what – six, seven shows a week. And – and that was amazing, too. That taught me what that means to be on your game as a singer, technician, what you have to do to keep your body like an athlete. It felt like an athlete. There was no difference for me.

So I did a lot of really great work, wonderful projects for years and years and years. And then I'd say the last really, really big thing I did was, three or four years ago, *Nabucco* – one of Verdi's big, big operas.

[NABUCCO AUDIO]

Jocelyn Robinson: Leigh had what's called a *Fach* change, from dramatic coloratura to dramatic soprano; her voice had matured as she was aging out of ingenue roles, into roles like the ill-fated Abigaille in *Nabucco*. But the body matures, too, and the life of a singer takes a toll.

Leigh Hamilton: And then after that, I started having some ideas of not wanting to travel so much. And my best friend in Berlin, one of my best friends on the planet, Janet Williams – an amazing African-American soprano, had a huge career all over the world and has a ginormous private voice studio – started really encouraging me to teach. I was like, you're crazy. I can't do that. Yeah, you can. I mean she started – years ago – encouraging me, and I'd dabble a little. But then I'd be traveling and singing and, you know, maybe 3 or 4 years ago, I really started thinking about it as more of a full-time thing. And then I realized how much I love it. And she would send me students that she couldn't take. Or when she was out of town, they could call me, and for whatever reason it seemed like a lot of young people. I would help prepare them for conservatory auditions, and I loved working with them. 18, 19, 20, 21-year-olds, as well as young professionals – mid-20s, early 30s – that are starting to launch. For whatever reason, this seems to be my niche and I'm getting more of a name for myself and reputation in Berlin for this, and I really love it.

So, the last few years have been sort of transitioning from the performing career into the teaching career. I have no agenda. I'm not bitter. I don't want to be them. I'm thrilled I don't have to do auditions anymore, you know. But I love passing on all the things that I have to give and watching them grow and blossom. And ultimately, what I want is that they're independent and secure. And that they'll go off and sing and have careers and give it then to the next generation, and so on.

I have a wonderful young woman – she's half-German and half-Norwegian – and she came to me some years ago with some vocal issues. One of her previous teachers was having her sing rep that was a little bit too heavy. So we had to make a few adjustments, and she's a – has an incredible voice. Silvery, gorgeous, wonderful flexibility. And she just made her La Scala debut in Milan last fall, and sings in the big houses in Germany as well as Scandinavia. And I got to go and see her and that was ... to see – see this person that you – that you worked with, that you helped to get there. And also, for me, I never got to sing on that stage, and it was so poignant. I mean, I was really – I had tears in my eyes, happy tears, you know. To get to be a part of that, to have the privilege of being a part of that.

I think there are a lot of times where I feel like I've always got one foot in one country and one foot in the other country, and I've sort of bridged the pond somehow. I love coming home, and I'm always ready to get back to Germany. And then I'm always happy at home in Germany, and always ready to come home, you know, to the States.

I feel living this life as an American in Germany – not just Europe, but specifically in Germany – as an artist, as a musician, as a singer has given me something that I don't know that I could have ever gotten in the U.S. And getting to be, always – I get to always be my American self, you know. I'm a little ... kind of outgoing and crazy. And I know all the people's names at the *Biergarten* where I take my dog for a walk in the woods and say hi to everybody. Nobody wants me to become German all of a sudden, and that's wonderful, you know. And then when I come home, I get to be this woman living in Europe, who is American. And the experiences that I can – can bring to that, so it's – it's been fantastic for me. I'm extremely grateful for my life and really happy. And it all comes back to where it all began, which was right here in Yellow Springs, really. And having the kind of parents that supported me in a town that supported me. But ... but that just, that – you – you know, you grow up with people in your lives telling you yes, you can do everything. Instead of no, why don't you become an x-ray technician just in case. There was no just in case, and there was no Plan B. 'Cause nobody told me there had to

be. So, I do try to impart that on my students. But also make sure that the price is working your tail off, really – no one's going to give you anything. But when you work hard, anything's possible, yeah.

Jocelyn Robinson: And that brings Leigh Hamilton's story full circle, back to the place where it all began.

Leigh Hamilton: Gosh, you know I have wonderful memories of doing ... my first time on stage was in Yellow Springs, where I sang the youngest daughter of Tevye – Bielka – in *Fiddler on the Roof*. I must have been nine or ten. So '73, '72, '74, somewhere around there. That was the first time I was on stage, really on stage, in a role. And then all the opportunities I had at the high school and doing concerts. The first orchestra concert, singing excerpts from *Porgy and Bess*, and I wasn't in the orchestra playing, I was singing on stage. So some of these pieces are very close to me. *Summertime* I've probably sung hundreds and hundreds of times over the years, and it's still something I could do standing on my head in a hurricane. Because that first time was here, you know, as a 17-year-old or something. And that you're given these opportunities and that was amazing.

Jocelyn Robinson: Could you sing a few bars of it now?

Leigh Hamilton: Oh, my goodness. Maybe I could ...

[SINGING 21:53-22:42] Summertime and the livin' is easy / fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high / oh, your daddy's rich, and your mama's good-lookin' / so hush little baby, don't you cry

Nobody ever said you can't do it. Nobody ever said that, so for whatever crazy reason I thought I could.

Jocelyn Robinson: Leigh Hamilton lives in Berlin with her husband Jörg and their dog, Countess Ruby Tuesday. She's thrilled to help prepare the next generation for the singer's life.

The Big Pond – A U.S.-German Listening Series is brought to you by the Year of German American Friendship (Deutschlandjahr USA), a comprehensive collaborative initiative funded by the German Federal Office, implemented by the Goethe-Institut, with support from the Federation of German Industries (BDI).

Wunderbar together

Germany
and the U.S.

funded by



implemented by



supported by

