

Good afternoon! It is such a pleasure to be here! I would like to extend a big warm thank you to Sue Jones and the Provincial Council for thinking of me and for the invitation to speak today – it is an honour to be here sharing my story with you.

The Ontario Registered Music Teachers' Association has been such an important part of life because my voice teacher - Barbara Ross - was one of your esteemed colleagues – and a 50 year ORMTA member. Barbara Ross passed away in the spring – so I thought it would be only fitting that I dedicate my speech to her today.

Being a performer was something that resonated with me at a very young age. When I watched entertainers sing and act on TV or in the movies - I knew that I was one of them. When I had friends over - I would stage plays, assign roles, direct the show and of course – cast myself as the star – all in the basement of our house.

One summer my parents bought a piano. I was so excited, I couldn't wait to get my hands on it – you had to wait until the fall to register for lessons – but I didn't. I spent that summer teaching myself the notes by ploughing through a series of rudimentary theory books that my dad bought for me. We didn't grow up

listening to Classical music or opera – but that summer, I transcribed themes from my favourite TV programs and to my mom’s delight I taught myself to play the theme from The Young and The Restless by ear. In the fall I started my piano lessons - and completed four grades in one school year. I loved it. I spent a lot of time practising – and I didn’t need to be forced. And I also loved singing.

I joined the choir at Alta Vista Public School – all the kids did back then – and my voice was strong – it soared above all the other kids’ voices in the choir – and I remember how empowering that felt – and that was the game-changer. I was a chubby little kid with frizzy hair and a big old voice whose destiny had become illuminated. I was a good pianist – but a crackerjack singer.

One evening my mom received a phone call from the choir director at Alta Vista Public School – Sylvia Darwood. Mrs. Darwood asked my mom if she had ever considered giving me voice lessons - and then suggested a teacher for me in our neighbourhood. That voice teacher was Barbara Ross. She also told my mom that there were auditions taking place at the the National Arts Centre for children to play the part of the fairies in Benjamin Britten’s opera A Midsummer Night’s Dream. A few days later – I was in a rehearsal hall at the National Arts Centre surrounded by a bunch of choir boys – and nailing my audition. I was cast in the

role of the fairy - Moth – and made my operatic debut on the big stage with The National Arts Centre Orchestra led by Mario Bernardi. I remember thinking – now that’s a backup band!

I began taking voice lessons with Barbara Ross right after that amazing summer. Barbara Ross taught me that there is a lot more to performing than just having a voice. She taught me how to be a master story-teller through the art of song. She taught me stage comportment – we practised walking on and off stage in her living room. Mrs. Ross showed me how to bow elegantly, properly and with grace - she taught me how crucial it is really understand the poetry – to make it my own – to figure out what the poetry meant to me - separately from its musical setting – and all of this in five different languages – no detail was left unturned in Mrs. Ross’ living room on Heron Road in Ottawa. That living room was a magical place.

Barbara Ross has been in my life for over 30 years – she attended every single performance, every competition. She drove with us from Ottawa to Timmins when I competed in the ORMTA Provincial Vocal Competition. I won and we drove back to Ottawa elated with the radio tuned to a classic rock station for most of the way – but not too loud. I wanted to be respectful of her and didn’t

crank the volume. But Mrs. Ross kept saying – Julie if you want to turn it up you can! She didn't mind.

Everywhere I sang – Barbara Ross was in the front row – with my mom. From Montreal to Victoria to Kingston - she was there. Up until the day she died – Barbara Ross continued to suggest new repertoire for me – she always listened to my latest adventures in life.

As I went from one success to success – Barbara Ross was there. When the music industry took a huge hit after the tragic events of September 11 – I struggled – we all struggled. Other singers I knew were quitting – one after the other – taking themselves out of the game as I stayed the course – Barb was there for me.

When you're young and people tell you that having a career in music is going to be hard, you have no idea what that means - and you can't really know because you haven't been there yet. And when the going gets tough and you're in the throes of it, oh boy do you get to know what hard means - and it's personal. It tests you constantly - it makes you ask yourself, "Still want to do this?" a hundred times a day. Barbara Ross helped me to always press the reset button during the tough times in my career.

When I got the job at the CBC, Barb was thrilled for me – but – she was worried about my singing life. I told her there was no way in hell I was ever going to stop. I am a singer first. And then I told her about an idea I had rolling around in my brain. I wanted to produce the opera, Carmen, in a pub where the audience could have a meal, a glass of wine or beer, dress casually and watch a show - just like “dinner and a movie” except “dinner and an opera” all in one place. Everyone - including Barb - thought it was a great idea, certainly new and definitely worth trying! I would sing the role that I was destined to sing while bringing opera to a broader audience.

So I called up some friends, contacted some out-of-towners – searched for a venue, signed contracts, booked hotel rooms – got some sponsors – and Carmen on Tap was born!

Carmen on Tap is now in its fifth season – every performance is a sold out show. This summer, Carmen on Tap will debut at the Stratford Music Festival and in Toronto`s hip venue Lula Lounge at the end of August. Carmen on Tap will also be part of the Prince Edward County Music Festival in September.

The classical music landscape needs some shaking up. I don't see any reason why a gal from Ottawa shouldn't be the one to lead the charge. And Barb agreed whole-heartedly.

So here I am now – a singer with a performance schedule - a full time job at the CBC – and Carmen on Tap contracts aplenty. People often ask me, “Julie, how on earth do you do it? My answer is, “Hey look, I’m not married and I don’t have kids - so I have lots of time!” But the truth is when you are this passionate about what you do in life, you may feel daunted by the challenges that come your way, and you may feel scared, but you push through it all, you work hard, and you give it everything you have because your heart has no choice. Your triumphs feel euphoric - and overcoming adversity becomes your triumph.

I stayed true to myself in the music world because of Barbara Ross. She embodied everything the ORMTA represents. Barbara Ross promoted excellence in music education – a life-long love of music - she emphasized the importance of encouraging others – and instilled in me a standard of excellence I will uphold forever.