

## Mutual Mainstreaming

By Michael Ching, Artistic Director, Opera Memphis

We artistic directors are a skeptical lot. Everybody has a cousin who sings opera who wants an audition. Nine times out of ten, these courtesy auditions don't result in much, but they help grease the wheel of good relations with the public. But sometimes due diligence pays off.

Last year, Dr. Howard Lenhoff got in touch with me about his grown daughter Gloria. Gloria has Williams Syndrome (for further information, see [wsf.org](http://wsf.org)), a rare condition affecting one in 7,500. Her condition makes her a musical savant with a childlike intellect and demeanor. Gloria, who previously lived in California, had moved to the Baddour Center (baddour.org), an idyllic campus for people with mild to moderate retardation in Senatobia, Mississippi, a small town within the orbit of Memphis. Gloria had been singing with the Center's group, THE MIRACLES. She had an impressive list of singing credentials and was interested in new challenges and opportunities.

Gloria has a repertoire that includes hundreds of songs and dozens of opera arias, all permanently memorized. She can also accompany herself on the accordion. Her childlike demeanor gives way to focus and self assurance when she sings. After her audition and some visits with Gloria and her family, I offered her the opportunity to sing in the ensemble of our first production — *Samson and Dalila*. I reasoned that since it is in part a show about clashing communities, it is conceivable that the ancient Hebrews and Philistines could have had such a person in their midst.

Just prior to the rehearsal period, Gloria sang a short program at the home of a former board president, Dr. William Falvey. The program included "O mio babbino caro," "Quando m'en vo," and a Korean folk song in which Gloria accompanied herself on the accordion. Our supporters were touched by her and touched by the opera's inclusion of her. We have a significant group of scientist-doctor patrons who were eager to meet her. Also present were supporters of the

Baddour Center, who got the chance to meet our key people, and to briefly hear our Samson, Randy Locke.

This was to be Gloria's debut in a professional, fully staged production, and there was a chance that it simply would not work. Preparations needed to be made. In order to learn her music, Gloria required a detailed rehearsal CD, with careful attention to her musical line and the French diction. (A side benefit of this process was the creation of rehearsal CDs for every voice part, which helped to improve the regular chorus.) Our chorus manager, Jeannie Jones, partnered Gloria with a seasoned and patient chorister, Sharon Dobbins, and stage director Karen Tiller agreed to accommodate Gloria's slight physical limitations in her staging.

Except for allowing her to wear her glasses onstage, it has turned out that accommodation was not necessary. At rehearsals and in the performances, Gloria blended into the ensemble in such a remarkable way that her condition became invisible. She beamed with such joy and pride about her participation, and was not averse to declaring these feelings aloud to everyone in rehearsal. It is impossible not to like her. And as conductor of the production I can say she never missed an entrance.

Those with mental handicaps strive to obtain mainstream opportunities; opera strives to prove that it is a mainstream entertainment form. But the mainstream is increasingly proving to be nothing if not a collection of smaller constituencies. Including Gloria opened up our company to a new audience and provided a beautiful view of another aspect of the human condition. We hope she will come back and sing with us again soon. ✧



Gloria Lenhoff and Sharon Dobbins backstage. Photo by William E. Moore and courtesy of Opera Memphis.