

THE SOPRANO

HOW DO YOU GET
TO CARNEGIE HALL? JUST
FOLLOW LUVADA HARRISON

The University of Alabama's Dr. Luvada A. Harrison grew up surrounded by music, so perhaps it's no surprise she made a career of it.

Harrison, known as Dr. Lah to some of her students, grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, where her father was a jazz enthusiast and her mother enjoyed a little bit of everything. She sang at her Episcopal church, played flute and sang soprano throughout junior high and high school.

It was a simple act of charity, though, that cemented Harrison's future — a philanthropist donated tickets to see the Baltimore Opera Company perform "The Saint of Bleecker Street" by Gian Carlo Menotti, and Harrison went to see the show. >>

BY STEPHEN DETHRAGE
PHOTOS BY GARY COSBY JR.
AND FROM LUVADA HARRISON

Tickets

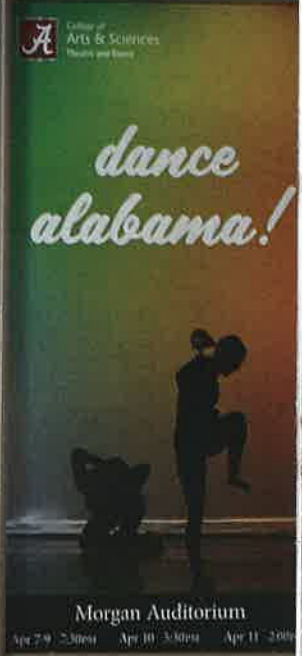
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ABOVE: Harrison, with Lawrence Jackson, performing in Cornelius Carter's "I Walk With Spirit" at the 76th Dance-Forms International Choreographers Showcase at the Festival Fringe in Edinburgh, Scotland. **BELOW:** At the Houston Grand Opera Tour performance of "Porgy and Bess" in Paris at Théâtre du Châtelet. The woman holding the bouquet, Ann Brown, was the original Bess.

"I was up there, seated in the balcony looking down, and just seeing the orchestra in the pit, seeing the singers up on the stage, the fact that I could hear them above all of that, that's when I said, 'OK, that's what I want to learn how to do,'" Harrison said. "I made the decision right then to major in music in undergraduate school."

That decision took her to Towson State, where Harrison — the only one of five siblings to go to college — chose to drop the flute and pursue singing full-time. She joked that she thought singing would be easier, but found developing her voice took just as much discipline, if not more, than sticking to woodwinds.



It wasn't immediately smooth sailing, though. Harrison said she was almost talked out of pursuing a career that would ultimately take her to perform at Carnegie Hall, in Paris and at the ruins of Pompeii.

"My undergraduate degree is actually in vocal music education because a professor at the time didn't think my discipline was at a high enough level to pursue a performance career," Harrison said. "But then I got a job singing chorus with a professional company and that took me in the direction of pursuing this full-time."

The work led Harrison to a vocal contest called the Lois J. Wright Competition, where the first-place winner would be granted a performance with the Baltimore Symphony.

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"In preparing for that and having that opportunity, walking out on the stage in front of an orchestra, I was like, 'OK, this is home, I feel comfortable here.' " Harrison said. "That was when I put my nose to the grindstone and got it in gear. I got a great education at Towson State, but they did not necessarily prepare me to build a career in this business. That performance, that's when I felt truly comfortable there, on stage, singing professionally."

Harrison thrived in Baltimore, but the proverbial pond began to feel too small for her blossoming career on stage, and she did what any reasonable up-and-coming performer would do — she moved to New York City.

In the Big Apple, Harrison found a vocal coach, attended workshops and soon enough, she was playing Mimi in the Amado Opera Company's performance of "La bohème."

At another competition, Harrison met a friend who was scheduled to audition for a role in the Houston Grand Opera's touring production of George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess."

"He said I needed to come with him to this audition," Harrison said. "I knew I didn't have an appointment but he said, 'So what? Come crash it. Let's go.' "

Harrison crashed the audition and must have crushed it, too, because she got a callback and was hired to go on tour, covering for the role of Serena. The tour covered 17 U.S. cities and also took Harrison to France and Italy, where she said the opera became the first theatrical group to perform in the amphitheater at the ruins of Pompeii.

When the tour ended, Harrison landed back in New York, where she decided she could still develop as a singer and earned a graduate degree at Binghamton State. >>





ABOVE: Harrison, as Clotilde, and Carla DelVillaggio as Julie, in a production of "New Moon" from Tri-Cities Opera. **RIGHT:** Harrison now teaches musical theater and voice at the University of Alabama.

In between performances with the Tri-Cities Opera and the New York City Opera, Harrison began to put her training as an educator to work. Working with the NYCO and eventually the Metropolitan Opera Guild, Harrison began going into area high schools and introducing young people to opera, mirroring the opportunity she'd been given in Baltimore.

She didn't stop performing, though — she landed gigs with the Syracuse Symphony and the New Mexico Symphony, was featured prominently in an operatic episode of "Sex and the City" and even performed solo in Manhattan's world-famous Carnegie Hall.

The city was forever changed on Sept. 11, 2001, however, and Harrison said appetite for the opera dried up for a while. After spending time as a legal secretary, Harrison decided she wasn't ready to give up a career in music just yet, and she decided to seek her doctorate degree at Florida State University in Tallahassee.

Since then, Harrison has been a full-time educator — first at Florida A&M, then for a 10-year spell at Stillman College before finally landing at the University of Alabama in 2017, where she teaches musical theater and voice in the Department of Theatre and Dance.

Harrison said she sometimes misses performing full-time and the opportunities it afforded her, but said she found a new passion in teaching and helping her students mold themselves into performers who will someday reach great heights themselves.

"I really enjoy teaching. I'll have my moments asking why I'm doing this and whenever I do, the universe sends a former student to me," Harrison said. "They'll call me or send me an email or text and just share an experience or an accomplishment they've had, and that just reinforces that, at this stage, I'm doing the right thing."



Harrison said she still remembers that feeling of home on a stage, though, and never takes for granted how a philanthropist's act of charity helped her find that feeling in some of the most magical places in music.

"I cannot say that the prestige of standing on the stage at Carnegie Hall escaped me. You sense that energy of the people that have gone before you and stood on that stage," Harrison said. "The awe of things like that, of performing in Paris and Pompeii — I stand in awe of the fact that this little Black child from Baltimore has the opportunities to do these things, and I wouldn't have done them if I did not have the gift that was given to me and then the desire to build upon that gift. I do truly see — I see what I have as a gift, and working at it is my way of showing the gratitude I have for that gift."

She also recognizes the importance of giving back, of paying it forward when she can and helping young minds discover opera and music just as she did in Baltimore decades ago. From high schools in New York to the classrooms of Stillman College and the University of Alabama, Harrison has strived to take students to see performances or given master classes herself in the hope that someone, somewhere will find themselves on the same path she did and discover the feeling of home on a stage.

"I work to give back in that way because I see the value of arts education," Harrison said. "If it were not for music, I'm not sure where my life would be, and I see the significance and importance of that, so I do work to bring music to others wherever I can." 🌱