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Tamora Wood

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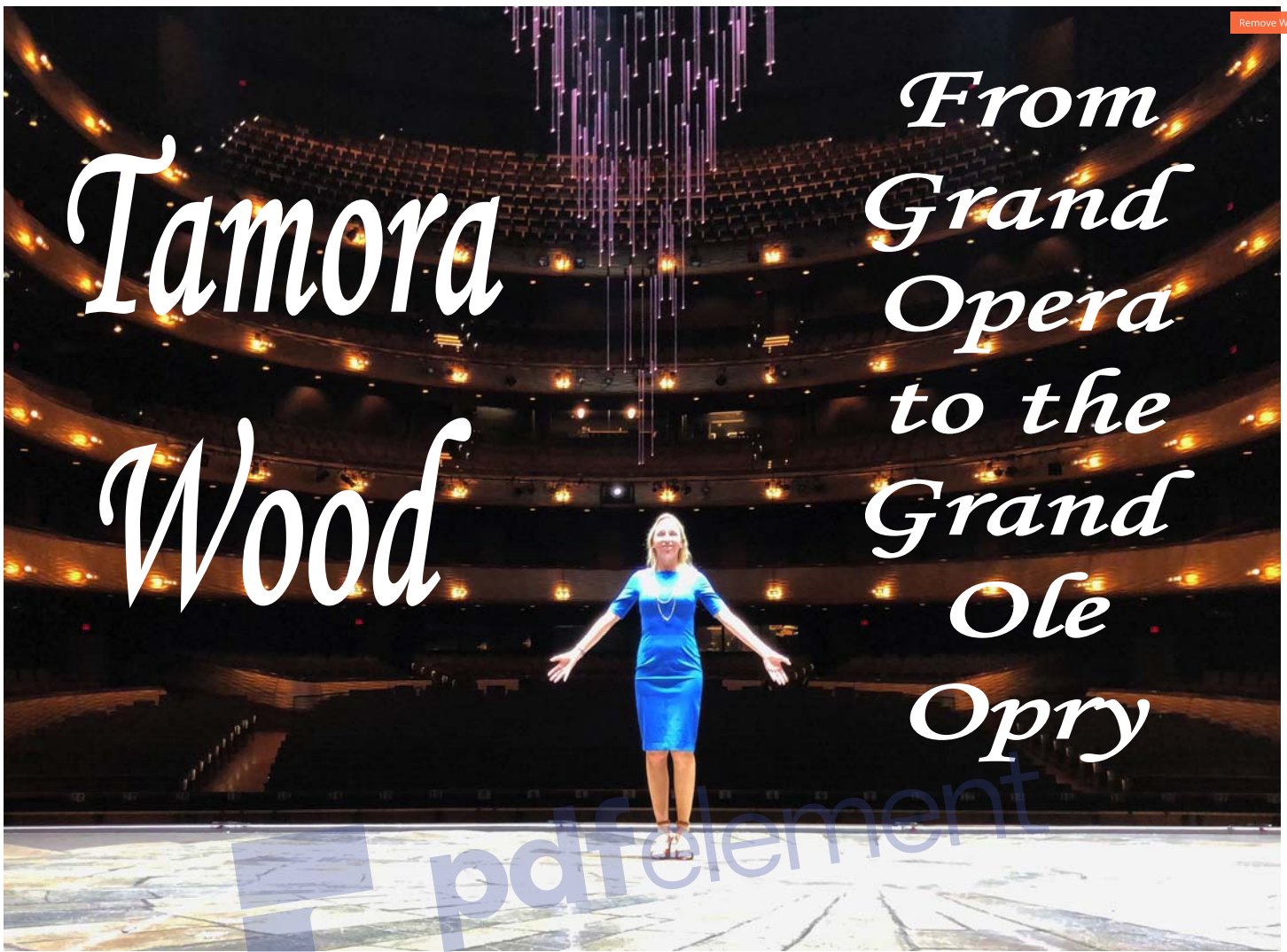
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by John Heiman

“You either sing opera, or you don’t,” she was told. While it holds true that there is not a lot of crossover for classical singers (and it’s rare that an opera singer will explore other genres), Tamora Wood has proven that statement wrong - as she has done with other clichés in the musical world. And, after belting out the Patsy Cline jukebox classic *Crazy* with the *Dallas Banjo Band* at a recent show, her many fans totally agree.

Tamora was exposed to opera at an early age as her mother worked as a dyer and her father a stage manager at the *Royal Opera House Covent Garden* in London. In that setting she grew up hearing some of opera’s greatest singers. On one occasion, during a rehearsal for Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, Tamora sat enraptured by the music. Afterward, the director, Jonathan Miller, asked to meet the child that had sat riveted through the entire rehearsal. But it wasn’t only operatic music which enamored the youngster, as Tamora recounts; “One of my early memories is of seeing a man playing a banjo in a grocery store. He was sitting on a bale of hay and I told my mum from that time on that I wanted a banjo.”

While lecturing on dyeing and textile art at Ohio State University, Tamora’s mother bought her a five-string banjo from a left-handed man who was trying to sell it. She also bought her a book on how to play the banjo by Fred Sokolow. As there wasn’t anyone who taught banjo at Tamora’s boarding school in England, she did her best with Mr. Sokolow’s book while continuing to develop her musical talents in voice, piano, violin and music theory.

England has a strong choral tradition and, being in a Catholic boarding school in Shepton Mallet, Tamora sang masses by Mozart, Bach, Fauré and Rutter every Sunday. “I feel closest to God in music and nature,” she comments, adding, “I find something profoundly spiritual in the overtones produced by voices singing in harmony.” Fully immersed in music, Tamora was elated when her school choir director cast her in her first full-length opera with orchestra at the age of 12. After playing Belinda in Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*, there was no doubt to Tamora that operatic singing was what she wanted to do for the rest of her life.



At the age of 15, Tamora was accepted into the prestigious *Interlochen Arts Academy*, a boarding school in Michigan, where she majored in voice. “Girls voices break, too. It was at that time that my voice went from Soprano to Mezzo Soprano. I was crushed because the Sopranos get all the great beautiful heroine roles. When you’re a young Mezzo, you get a lot of ‘trouser roles’ where you are playing boys, such as Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro*. However, as it turns out, those are such fun roles to play because they are so cheeky and funny and can really steal the show. Then, of course, as your voice matures, there are the iconic roles such as *Carmen*.”

Seemingly oblivious to the subtle change in her voice, opportunities to display her gifts were abundant. At fifteen she sang for Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers) when he was being honored by the *Ronald McDonald Foundation* and less than a year later for former President Ronald Reagan. “At President Reagan’s request I sang *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* and *Onward Christian Soldiers*, reminding myself throughout the performance of where music can take you and how you can be of service to others with what God has given you.”

After subsequent studies, Tamora earned her Bachelor of Music degree in Vocal Performance from the *San Francisco Conservatory of Music*. After making her debut with the *San Francisco Symphony* she went back to Europe where the ensuing years saw her marry and co-raise her stepson while, professionally, she sang opera in Italy and Austria, did her residency at Opera Santa Barbara, performed in national tours of America with an Irish show, and sang on an episode of the television show *Hell’s Kitchen*.

While living in Los Angeles, Tamora’s husband discovered that Fred Sokolow - the author of the banjo instruction book she had been learning from and carrying around in her case as she crisscrossed “the pond” – actually lived in Los Angeles. Being nothing less than a perfect opportunity, Tamora was gifted with a





series of banjo lessons from Mr. Sokolow the following Christmas. “It was one of the best presents I have ever received. I really got to focus on the instrument and how it can be used to bring joy to myself and others. Meeting Fred - whose book was my only access to this instrument in those pre-internet days - was so thrilling. He helped bring my instrument to life, showing me neat tricks such as how to make the banjo sound like a harpsichord. I learned everything from Bach pieces to my favorite Dolly Parton songs and, through Fred’s guidance, was introduced to folk and banjo greats, both past and present. As a special and very memorable personal gesture, Fred played when my husband and I did our 10th wedding anniversary vow renewal.”

“For several years my New Year’s resolution had been to get back to making music for fun. For a while I wasn’t even playing the piano for fun any more and I felt guilty if I wasn’t working on my vocal music...I needed something without pressure. After moving to Dallas, I was looking up things to do while accompanying my husband on a business trip to Austin. On the website for the botanical gardens I found an advertisement for the *Austin Banjo Band*. I thought that if Austin had a banjo band, surely there must be one in Dallas. A continued internet search led me to the Dallas Banjo Band and its director, Harold Poole.” Poole recalls, “That was a great call...who else has a bona-fide opera singer in their banjo band? Everyone loves her and she brings so much to the life of our band.”



“When I called Harold,” Tamora recalls, “I told him I played the five-string banjo and that I could read music. I didn’t tell him about my music degree or that I was a professional opera singer...I just wanted to play the banjo and be with a group of people that had no expectations of me.” At her first rehearsal, Tamora sat next to Dick Bernet, one of the founders of the band. “During the breaks, he would show me three different variations on what we were doing while the rest of us were just trying to figure out how to play it. He was such a sweet man, a gentleman, and his musicianship was astonishing - and the banjo was not his

primary instrument! It was the same with Marla Sporrer...she is a fantastic banjo player and singer, but her main instrument is the bass. Her musicianship and talent is so impressive and she is incredibly generous with sharing her knowledge and helping others.”



From that very first rehearsal Tamora felt at home. Eventually, word got out that she was an opera singer. “Dick’s brother is a talent agent in Dallas and he told his brother he had tried to book me for a job. That’s when I began to get asked to sing with the band. Singing a song like *Crazy* with the band is a lot of pressure because Patsy Cline is such an icon and the song itself is so beloved. More than any other song I do, people come up to me and tell me how much they like it. I think it speaks to them of special times in their lives.”

Tamora credits the Dallas Banjo Band for taking her to interesting places such as Nashville, Tennessee, and Eureka Springs, Arkansas as well as introducing her to different musical genres. “Big Jim” Lawrence introduced me to New Orleans Blues - which are some of my favorite pieces we play in the band. He was such a gifted singer with such absolutely brilliant phrasing that he intimidated me - in a good way! When he looked at me I felt as though he was looking into my soul and when he paid me a compliment on my singing it was high praise indeed.”

While her agile voice at the top end still makes her eligible for many parts in the world of opera, Tamora eventually settled in doing chorus work with the Dallas Opera. “It’s a great example of how the Dallas Banjo Band has become my family. I was invited to audition for Dallas Opera with three days notice. Coincidentally the Dallas Banjo Band was preparing for our trip to Nashville and the Grand Ole’ Opry at the same time - and I was so excited. However, when they contacted me about the opera audition I realized that, timing wise, it would be impossible for me to do both. Then, DBB member Bill Cude and his wife Suzie offered to pick me up the morning after my opera audition and drive me with their granddaughter to Nashville. We even stopped at Elvis Presley’s *Graceland* on the way! I am forever grateful to them because I got to sing in ‘The Circle’ on the stage at the Grand Ole’ Opry and I also got to sing with Dallas Opera as they hired me.” To date, Tamora has performed in several operas with Dallas Opera, the most recent being the comedy *Falstaff*, which she last performed in Italy.



While there is no question that she loves performing on the opera stage, playing the banjo is now a close second in Tamora’s artistic life. “I have met the best people through the Dallas Banjo Band, as well as at the ALL FRETS convention and the Eureka Springs rally...the most interesting and kind people. I will never forget my first Eureka Spring rally and being so impressed that the headliner, Ron Hinkle, volunteered with



us to play at local retirement homes. I have discovered that banjo people are there to have a good time and share their joy and love of this fantastic instrument, which never sounds sad, even in a minor key!"

"The Dallas Banjo Band is like a family. When my mum was having major health issues, people in the band began to pray for her. I believe in the power of prayer and the band has celebrated with me in happy times and held me in prayer during difficult times. Teri Ann and Bill and their spouses have been to almost every classical performance I've done here in Dallas; Chuck and his wife have hosted us for parties (including last Christmas when they kindly included my mum and my

son); Glenn gave me bluebonnet seeds from his farm; 'Five-String Jim' helped me with figuring out chords and picking patterns; Jack transferred all of our arrangements so I could have them on my iPad; Aubrey gave me a tenor banjo chord book (a hint I think) when my banjo was in the shop; and, Harold and his wife Joan have been so kind to me and my family. Simply put, being part of the Dallas Banjo Band has been one of the greatest joys for me of living in Dallas."

"Being part of the band pushes and stretches me to be a better musician. Additionally, the band's existing repertoire give me a great range of material to work with, both vocally and instrumentally. While songs like *All That Jazz* and *Big Spender* allow for plenty of vocal latitude, band songs such as *Rhapsody in Blue*, *Banjo Pickers Ball*, and *Kansas City* – with arrangements by Smokey Montgomery and Harold Poole - are incredible. They are four part arrangements, so we really are a 'banjo orchestra'. I love it when we play classical arrangements such as *Rhapsody in Blue*...it's so unexpected for our audiences and it always knocks their socks off. I also like the fact that different members of the band are featured doing their best work. Every member has something that they bring to the band, which makes it all so good."



When living in two musical worlds, it is only a matter of time before those worlds collide. Tamora recalls, "It took a while for me to tell my classical friends that I played the banjo in a band...I didn't know what their reaction would be. While surprised, they enjoyed the fact that I was having a good time and understood that playing as part of a group was fun. Then came the 'moment of truth' when I invited the Dallas Banjo Band to perform as part of an informal concert of operatic music...Opera and banjos can be quite a polar experience! But the audience loved the variety of the music we did as well as the great arrangements. To have both of my musical loves together in the same

room and on the same program was a great blessing for me. Whether it is opera or a banjo band, when we perform we all share our gifts with our listeners...it is what we get back from them that keeps us going!"

Legends and icons are created over time...Tamora Wood's career now spans three decades and there seems to be no stopping this talented young lady, be it opera, the banjo or whatever she sets her mind to.

WHAT OTHERS SAY ABOUT TAMORA...



DARLA MATTERN HENDERSON - Darla is one of Tamora's closest friends. "We met in 2009 while participating in the Opera Santa Barbara Young Artists Program," Darla said. "We hit it off right away and realized we both lived in Southern California, so we kept in contact and the friendship developed from there."

"Her love of opera is so deep that it will never leave her. That is another thing that makes our bond so special. We both have that in common. It is something that not many will understand, but we both do, as we have had that decision to make. Another thing I love is that she is a very family oriented person and takes her

friendships seriously, not to mention her love of music and all things creative. Those are just a few of the many things that makes her so special."

Recently Darla flew in from California to join her friend in a concert for the Puccini Society at the magnificent home of one her friends and supporters in Dallas. There was standing room only, of course and, as no surprise to anyone, their voices blended beautifully.

"I think one of the things that makes our friendship so special is our mutual love of music and creativity," Darla says of her friend. "She is one of my closest and best friends because I know that she is always there for me and I can count on her for anything no matter how near or far apart we are."

HAROLD POOLE - "I absolutely love having her in the band. Being an opera singer, she has a built-in sense to watch the conductor. That makes a huge difference in her performances, and makes me want to do a better job of conducting."

MATT TOLENTINO - who plays tuba for the Dallas Banjo Band, says, "Obviously, her vocals are great. She is singing tunes that would normally be just instrumentals. But also she brings a great presence and warmth and a smiling face that really helps us out on the front row." Matt is also the leader of a popular band in Dallas, *The Singapore Slingers* and has Tamora sing with his band from time to time. "I love the way she does a beautiful job with those ballads- the 'torch songs'." This year, with Tamora and Matt's help, The Dallas Banjo Band will be headlining *Banjo Rally International Eureka Springs* on August 28-31st...for information visit www.banjorally.org.

