

## Met Opera star Jennifer Rowley returns to Baldwin Wallace

by Mike Telin



“Be Prepared” may be the Scout motto but it is also the personal mantra of opera star [Jennifer Rowley](#). “In my career I’ve had a lot of opportunities to jump in at the last minute for someone who was ill,” the soprano said during a telephone conversation from New York City. “And if I hadn’t been prepared to seize each of those moments, I wouldn’t be where I am right now.”

This season the Baldwin Wallace Conservatory alum returns to The Metropolitan Opera to perform the title roles in Puccini’s *Tosca* and Cilea’s *Adriana Lecouvreur*. It also marks her debut with Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, singing Leonora in Verdi’s *Il trovatore*. And when

she’s not traveling to opera houses around the world, Rowley serves as BW’s 2018-2019 guest [Artist-in-Residence](#).

On February 15 at 7:00 pm, Rowley will return to her alma mater to present a concert of bel canto scenes and songs with pianist Jason Aquila in Gamble Auditorium. On Saturday, February 16 at 4:00 pm in Fynes Hall, Rowley will work with students during a master class. Both events are free.

In addition to master classes, Rowley said that she will also “just be around the conservatory,” attending opera workshops and working with students on audition techniques, in addition to private teaching in an open-door setting where students can stop in when they have time. She will also give lectures about the business side of a performing career. “Basically the things that are not taught in school — like taxes. This is a great opportunity for the students, and I’m so excited that they want me

there to pass on some knowledge that I have picked up over the years. And to be able to do that in my home is an honor.”

Rowley holds a special place in her heart for Baldwin Wallace, and for Northeast Ohio. She is thrilled every time she hears her hometown mentioned at the conclusion of the Saturday Metropolitan Opera radio broadcast. “Once, I think it was a *Cyrano* broadcast, Mary Jo Heath said, ‘When you tell this girl to go, she goes — that’s Jennifer Rowley from Cleveland, Ohio.’ It was nice that she was so excited about me, and I really like her.”

One of the topics Rowley will address during her residency is the state of the classical voice industry. “Our business has evolved,” she said, noting that in addition to the MET’s radio broadcasts, the company also has a Sirius satellite station and has been broadcasting Live in HD in movie theaters since 2006. “I know the *Aïda* that just happened with Netrebko was sold out around the world — everyone wanted to hear her sing that role. The business is not just in the opera house anymore, it’s in movie theaters and Madison Square Garden — Andrea Bocelli is selling it out, and he’s inviting guests like Nadine Sierra, who is a beautiful soprano who sings in houses around the world.”



Rowley said that opera is becoming more “mainstream” and because of that, having solid technique has become even more important. “When people are watching an HD theater broadcast, the camera is going to pick up on everything. The performer cannot look like they are in distress. And when I was in school, no one sat me down and

said, ‘You look like you’re having a heart attack onstage, and we need to fix your vocal technique because the camera will pick up the fact that your jaw is shaking.’”

With the rise of social media, the way opera singers present themselves has also become more important than it was in the past. “The audience wants to feel like they are your friend. They want to know when they shake your hand that you are kind, warm, and generous and not some ‘diva’ who doesn’t want to talk to anybody. Today it’s all about reaching out to your fans and bringing a new audience into the opera house or into the movie theater. All of this is a positive thing for the business and it’s important for the students to start learning about these things when they are nineteen or twenty years old.”

The soprano’s mantra of always being prepared has served her career well. A quick internet search revealed the following headlines: “Jennifer Rowley to Replace Elena Stikhina at Opera De Paris” — “Jennifer Rowley Replaces Anna Netrebko in *Tosca*” — “Jennifer Rowley to Replace Maria Agresta in *Il Trovatore*.” Rowley seized each of those moments, so it’s no wonder that “being prepared” is her number one piece of advice for young singers.

“You can look back into history and see the people who have made their debuts by stepping in and then have gone on to have lucrative careers. People get sick or they have a crisis in life that they need to deal with, and if you’re the person who is called upon, you have to be ready to do it. This is not only my story, it is a lot of people’s.”

Being a good colleague is number two on Rowley’s advice list. “I find that the best colleagues are the ones who are the most secure in what they have to give. I’m bringing up Netrebko again, but I have worked with her several times and she is the kindest, most generous, and funniest person, because she knows who she is and what she has to do every time she steps onstage. She’s always herself and that’s wonderful.”

The soprano’s third piece of advice is a combination of practical things that go along with doing the job. “I often tell students what to take in their suitcase: make sure you have Netflix on your iPad and bring a book — you may not have a lot of interaction with other people after rehearsal is over. It’s not like school where you go out and have a party — quite often when I leave the MET, I get in the car and go home.”

Rowley tells students that building a career requires that you see yourself as the CEO of your company and that you assemble the best support team possible. “Your voice teacher, vocal and language coaches, and pianists need to be the best ears, but those ears have to tell you when you’re out of tune and that you need to fix it.”

Rowley's support team includes Keith Brautigam, with whom she studied at BW. "He is still very supportive of me. He knew what I was going to be even when I was 22. He was the one who told me that one day I would sing *Tosca*, even though I didn't believe him." The soprano also includes Martina Arroyo as a mentor. "I met her during graduate school at IU, and I attended her program in New York City. When you transition from being a student to an emerging professional, you need people to push you and to keep you singing, and she did. Right now I study with Michael Paul and he has changed my life."

Did Rowley see herself having an international career as an opera singer when she entered BW? Not at all, she said, but her thoughts changed overnight when, with the support of the Ohio Arts Council, she was invited to study at the *Instituto Superior de Arte del Teatro Colón* in Buenos Aires the summer between her junior and senior years.

"At that point I had done *Street Scene* with Victoria Bussert which was an incredible experience. We had also done *Magic Flute*, so I knew that I had an interest in opera, but I hadn't seen a lot of it — I had never seen *Bohème* or *Traviata*. But on my second or third night in Buenos Aires, my host took me to see *Traviata* at a boxing arena. It was so huge that cameras were projecting what was happening onstage on jumbotrons — the sensory overload was unbelievable. I sat there completely dumbfounded and of course I was sobbing at the end."

Rowley recalled that after the lights came up she turned to her host and said, "I have to do that," and the next day she went to the Colón library and checked out the score to *Traviata*. "That night was what sparked my love for opera. I can't tell you how many people said, 'No, you can't do this,' and every time they told me no, I said, 'I have to.'"

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