

Santa Ono: Broadcasting from the University of British Columbia, this is *Blue and Goldcast*. I'm Santa Ono, the President and Vice-chancellor of UBC. On this season of the *Blue and Goldcast*, I'm speaking with the people who are leading some of the most innovative and creative work coming out of our campuses. Today in the show, I'm joined by Professor Nancy Hermiston. She's an opera singer with a long and decorated career, and she's been a member of UBC's opera faculty since 1995.

Professor Hermiston has received a Dorothy Somerset Award for Performance and Development in the Visual and Performing Arts, a Killam Teaching Prize, and in 2014, she was appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada. She is currently the chair of UBC's Voice and Opera Division, and the director of UBC's Opera Ensemble. Professor Nancy Hermiston, welcome to *Blue and Goldcast*. Thank you for being on the show.

Well, Nancy, I see you all around campus and at many different events, and in many ways, I view you as the face of UBC, and you were one of the first smiling faces that I met when I arrived at UBC. As you know, you were there on my first day. You were there on stage and at my installation, and also at that concert that we held. So, when I think about UBC from today onwards, I will always think about Nancy Hermiston. That's true for so many different people at the university. I'm glad that we have this opportunity to have this conversation and to share your story with people who love the university through the *Blue and Goldcast*.

Professor Nancy Hermiston: Oh, well, thank you so much for having me.

Santa: I just want to start from the beginning. Tell me a little bit about your life and your upbringing, your childhood, and how you found your way to being an opera singer.

Nancy: Well, I was born in a little village called Warkworth, Ontario, and it's only 700 people and it's still only 700 people. Classical music was not part of my upbringing, but my family was very musical and the families actually had a dance band for about 120 years. When I was a little kid, my mom taught me how to sing. I used to sing with a dance band from the time I was about five years old, so I was raised with a different kind of music, but a love for music.

Then we had good music teachers in the village and then in the high school that I went to, and my uncle who had been in the war, he was teaching in England and later on in different places in Europe, so he was a great music lover. He wanted me to start singing and so I did. I went to U of T, the University of Toronto, and my mom and dad said, "Okay, you can study music, but you have to go into music education, so you can be a music teacher." I said, "Okay," but I knew from a very early age that I wanted to be a performer, but I thought it was in musical theater.

I went to U of T, and I was lucky enough that being in music education, we had to take a voice class to teach voice and to lead choirs, and the professor heard me sing and he said, "You have a voice that could go somewhere. I want you to come to the Banff School of Fine Arts." After my first year of university, he got me a scholarship to go to Banff School, and I said, "Well, could I do musical theater?" He said, "No, you have to do opera," and I thought I hated opera. My dad and I, we'd listen to *The*

Ed Sullivan Show, and when an opera singer would come on, we'd turn off the TV, but I wanted to go to Banff, and we had no money to send me to Banff, so off I went.

After about 10 minutes in the first opera rehearsal, I thought, "Oh, my goodness, this is wonderful. This is what I want to do for the rest of my life." I went back, graduated in music education, auditioned for opera school, and that's what I did for the rest of my life.

Santa: Well, Nancy, I have to tell you that having actually enjoyed many of the opera productions here at UBC that you've put on, having had a chance to see behind the scenes and to know some of your students, that's exactly what you see, is that it is like a family and that you're together for so many hours in a day and in a week, I can see that, and I know how much heart and soul you put into to developing the students and to creating that atmosphere.

I've seen the care with which you think about the costumes and how you think about the sets and it's an enormous production. I think it's probably fair to say that when you first arrived at UBC, you started from scratch. Were you shocked with what you found when you first arrived in Vancouver? It's not what it is today, right?

Nancy: No. [laughs] When I arrived at UBC, I was told I had the budget of \$1,200. I was shocked, but the wonderful thing about the students at UBC, at first, they were very shy to sing. They wanted to sing-- they'd be part of the chorus, but they didn't think they were soloists. I said, "Oh, come on." I just started them out with a line here, a line there, a solo, and then a bigger solo.

At that time, we had no money, really. I had a wonderful East Indian student whose father had so many connections to so many people. They knew so many people in the community and sometimes they would bring in their furniture for the shows or they'd bring in their scarves or shawls and we would make the show happen out of that. It was such a camaraderie there, between the families and the community and the students and myself. We didn't have much money, but we really worked hard.

I think their talent and their enthusiasm and energy and their passion for this art form came through and slowly the audience had started to come. One donor after the other, and particularly the David Spencer Endowment Encouragement Fund and David Spencer himself, I happened to meet him, and he was a great opera lover. He particularly loved the old auditorium because all his friends in Vancouver who were opera singers, they were trained at the old auditorium.

The old Vancouver Festival, when we started an opera program, in 1952, I think it was, and they all went and performed at the Old Aud. When David came to see that, he got so enthusiastic that he started to give us the basis of an endowment, which his board, even after his death, have continued with. That has been the saving grace of the opera program. Then all of the other many people who then have seen, yes, this program is producing some damn good singers and they're having success, and then they start to come along. We've been very fortunate, and that's really-- the students and I have worked together very hard to make that possible.

Santa: You're very humble. None of this would've happened without your dedication and your hard work. You're really flying the flag of UBC, and obviously, the opera

program that you direct everywhere. Credit goes to you for creating what we are very proud of as an institution. It's a first-rate program, you've graduated some amazing singers.

You talk about your supporters and that's appropriate, but it's really a reflection of your passion and your dedication over the years that has built that from a very modest beginning. Now, let's talk about the Old Aud, you've talked about how some people were quite affectionate about the Old Aud and how they had been trained there. Was it meant to be a concert hall or an opera house? Wasn't it meant to be a lecture hall in the early university days?

Nancy: No. In fact, I always say that to everybody that will listen to me because it was built as a theater. It was an old hemp theater with hemp ropes and it was built in 1925, opened in 1925. It was the Great Trek people that came and went from downtown Vancouver out to UBC to say, "Let's get this campus going," and then one of the first buildings was the Old Aud. I always like to remind people the first building that those soldiers, those vets from World War I wanted was a theater, and it was used as a classroom, and it was as a graduation place.

The first graduation, Santa, was held at the old auditorium, and Paul Robeson sang there, and Roosevelt spoke there, and Dylan Thomas, and all-- it was the cultural center of the University. When I came there in 1995, I distinctly remember going through the side door and the interview committee was saying to me, "Oh, don't worry about this old place. We're going to tear it down as soon as the Chan Centre's built. I looked at them, I said-- well, having spent so long in Europe and these old theaters that were my first love, I said, "Oh, you can't tear this down. This is UBC's history. This is going to be our home," and the way they looked at me, I thought, "Oh, dear, I've lost this job. They think I'm crazy," [chuckles] that we would never be able to get this renovated, but it took a long time, 16 years, but then we finally got it renovated, thanks to a lot of people's efforts.

Martha Piper saved it from being torn down and Stephen Toope was able to send some "renew UBC" monies, then it got-- and the faculty of art started to support it in a modest way. I still think they thought I was a little crazy, but in the end, when we started to fundraise, all these people started to come together because they'd met their husband or their wife at an orchestra concert or at an opera, or at whatever, a choral concert, and famous stars like Judith Forst who is a great ally of UBC and particularly of mine, of the Opera programming, she is so generous with her time and her knowledge with all of our students, and Ben Heppner, another huge name in Opera, they made their debuts at the Old Aud.

It has a history. People, when they come in there, they feel very at home too. I love the atmosphere of the Old Aud too, and I love the Chan as well. Of course, we're very fortunate as an opera program, which is very ironic, when you think I started out with \$1,200 and a theater that was all so neglected, but now at UBC, we have the wonderful Chan Centre and we have the wonderful Old Aud. We're so lucky to be able to have our students sing in a European-style theater and then in a North American theater. It's something that hardly any other university has, so we're very fortunate.

Santa: Well, I'm glad that you saved it from being torn down and it certainly is a very special space for the opera program. Ben Heppner, I don't know if you know, I knew him when he was a very young singer. He went to the same church I went to and where my wife and I got married. He sang in a choir at Westmount Baptist Church, which is actually the same church that Susan Porter, the Dean of our graduate school, grew up in, along with my wife, Wendy. We know Ben Heppner from back then and watched his tremendous career as you have pointed out, and we knew of his association with UBC as well.

Now, tell me, the Old Aud is-- that story is remarkable, tell me a little bit about the program you had been trained in Toronto and in Banff, and in Germany, you had performed there for a couple of decades, tell me about UBC's opera program. How is it similar, and how is it different from say the Toronto program or opera in Europe? What have you taken from North America? What have you taken from Germany in forming your own opera program?

Nancy: First of all, we're the only opera program that starts the students in the first year. It's a four-year undergrad opera program. Most undergraduates, any opportunity to do opera is built into a voice performance program and you get to do something likely chorus in your third and fourth years of the undergrad, but we start them in their first year and they do all four years in opera.

Now, the first two years, they don't do what they call the actual opera workshop, but if they can keep up academically, then I give them the opportunity to be in the course, or if I'm doing a part of opera, like *The Magic Flute*, and I need young voices that are far enough along for that, something like the *Three Spirits* or something, that gives them an opportunity, and that's unusual perhaps for some programs, but for mine, it seems to work really well because some of those people that have done every opera since they were at UBC, they were several of them of that graduated from their fourth year and went right into the Canadian Opera Company ensemble after their fourth year, which is extraordinary.

These were extraordinary singers and their voices developed so beautifully. They learned the discipline of the opera, which is very, very strict. It's very powerful and demanding and the languages that they're learning there as well, and then they start acting. Then they start getting used to looking at the conductor and not showing that they're looking at the conductor because you can't act and incorporate the conductor with your acting. You have to do it without anybody noticing. There's so much for them to learn, so that's a tremendous advantage of our program, and that's why a lot of students choose UBC because they have the opportunity for that.

Then, of course, we have our master's program and we have our doctoral program, and we put them all together at once. If you're in seeing an opera program or an opera production, you're probably seeing a doctoral student beside a master student, beside a third-year or first-year opera student. They learn from each other and they mentor each other.

The other very different thing that I do is, and that was born out of the \$1,200 necessity, was that we all take part in the production in some way, some do marketing, some do box office, some build the sets, some paint the sets, some do the costumes, some are the ushers, some are the front-of-house people. It's a totally

student-run performance and opera program. Some do office assistance, so they learn how to do administration for an opera company.

When they graduate from our opera program, they have an all-around knowledge of that, of how to do opera from every side, and it's an advantage for them because especially in these days, when you have to think, "Okay, how can I get noticed? How can I create a program that I can go to all the community concerts and sing and earn my living until I get my big break into a major role or something? How do I produce an opera? How do I find out how to cost human opera?" These students have experience on that side and that's not a usual thing for an opera program, but I find it's a tremendous value.

In fact, one of my work-- and we have the Work-Learn Program and one of my Work-Learn students who was my very first one in 1995, who was my lighting designer, he was a student from the theater, he's still with me. He's been with me 27 years, and he's done more lighting for opera than-- the only one other man in Vancouver has done more lighting for opera than he has.

That's how we're a little bit different, and I bring in a lot of professional singers too, and I mean, really internationally renowned. I'm very fortunate to have donors, particularly Sonya Wall, Charlotte Wall, and Peter Wall there. They're great opera lovers. Sonya and Charlotte have really sponsored this program we call Singer Behind the Song, and we'll bring in a famous singer from the Met, they sing a half an hour concert. We do a little interview where we learn how they got-- and then they do a masterclass with our students, and in the half an hour concert, they always sing some repertoire where the students can sing with them.

Here's this third-year student singing with Sondra Radvanovsky or some of these famous singers that we've had. For those students, I mean, as a young girl singing at U of T, I would have died if I'd been able to be on the stage with those people. We're so fortunate to have people who believe in us, and who are willing to help us in that way because it really makes a difference to the training of the students.

Santa: What you have created at UBC is very special and it's something that we're very proud of. It's something that has impacted not only the university, but the entire province, the nation, and the world. Thank you so much, Nancy.

Nancy, thanks so much for being on the *Blue and Goldcast* today. Professor Nancy Hermiston is the chair of UBC's Voice and Opera Divisions, and director of the UBC Opera Ensemble. That does it for this episode. You can find links to our guests' work, as well as previous editions of the show at BlueandGoldcast.com. You can also find us on your favorite podcast app like Apple Podcasts, SoundCloud, or Spotify. You can tweet at me @UBCprez. That's Prez with a Z. I'm Santa Ono. Thanks for listening.