



As a teenage opera-lover, I wanted to be Frederica von Stade. She was slim, beautiful, agile and elegant; she had the wry, gamine charm to appeal to a dyed-in-the-wool tomboy like me; she also had that silken, silvery timbre—a sound that blended the ringing clarity of a bell with the airy smoothness and lightness of a flute, creating a sonic image of youth, naïveté, purity of heart and, when needed—as it so often was for this paragon of trouser roles—boyish bravado and impishness. In her, the snips and snails and puppy dogs’ tails were sweetened and tempered by a full measure of sugar and spice, so that both Mozart’s Cherubino and Rossini’s Rosina seemed tailored to her particular graces.

Yet even the sunny radiance of her Cherubino, the winsome resourcefulness of her Rosina, were offset by hints of very human angst that brought depth and dimension to every character she played. For all the miraculous sprightliness, an underlying gravity and wisdom anchored von Stade and instilled in audiences a unique sense of trust and shared experience. Onstage and off, she seemed not only an admired and cherished artist but a beloved friend. We knew her, and we felt, in the way her performances reflected our own passions, pangs, quirks and foibles, that she somehow knew us, too.

Growing up in New Jersey, von Stade dreamed of a Broadway career. As an undergraduate at Mannes, she entered the Met auditions on a bet; her unexpected success ultimately won her her first Met contract. She made her debut in 1970 as one of the Genii in *Die Zauberflöte* and subsequently sang “everybody’s page or maid or nanny...” I was an operatic domestic,” she told *Fanfare*—until she stepped in unexpectedly as Stéphanie in *Roméo et Juliette*, a break that led to her first Cherubino. That

role became her calling card around the world.

Von Stade’s was and remains a lyric voice, unsuited to big dramatic roles, but her musical intelligence, stylistic mastery, vocal grace and personal charisma made her a legitimate star and allowed her to explore forgotten areas of the repertoire, winning a new place in the operatic pantheon for the lyric mezzo and setting the standard for generations to come. Within her fach, her range was remarkable. Her Cherubino was truly sui generis—and, for many who saw it, definitive: such a combination of suavity, spunk, silliness and sensuality may never come along again. Yet as Mélisande at the Met in 1995, she projected a sadness so profound that it transcended the idiosyncrasies of Jonathan Miller’s production and shone through the veil of mystery that often holds an audience at arm’s length, allowing us to feel deeply for this most enigmatic of characters.

Documents of von Stade’s remarkable career abound: her recordings, ranging from Monteverdi’s *Ritorno d’Ulisse* to Rodgers & Hammerstein’s *Sound of Music*, earned her six Grammy nominations. Her commitment to American music can be heard in recitals featuring works by Bernstein, Ives, Copland, Bolcom and Jake Heggie; she has created roles in operas by Heggie, Conrad Susa, Thomas Pasatieri and Dominick Argento, among others.

The spiritual truth of everything von Stade does springs from her belief that sharing music—“the art form closest to prayer,” she told OPERA NEWS in 2000—is not a career but a vocation. Her fans will be forever grateful for the dedication that led her to “that blessed, blessed moment ... when you realize that yes, my voice is doing all these nice tricks for me, but that’s not why I’m here. I have a song to sing, a story to tell...” —Louise T. Guinther

CHERUBINO BECAME HER CALLING CARD AROUND THE WORLD.



As Mélisande at the Met, 1995, with Victor Braun (Golaud)



HAIR AND MAKEUP: SHERRIE LONG (PORTRAITS); © BETH BERGMAN (PELLÉAS)



|| MEZZO-SOPRANO ||

FREDERICA VON STADE

Her unique blend of directness and complexity seems to speak from the soul.