

## Chapter 12

# **A Personal and Intellectual Feminist Journey**

# A Personal and Intellectual Feminist Journey over Four Decades with Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres

## **Sarah Stephens**

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**Sarah Stephens** is President and co-founder of Stephens Nicolson Artists Management in New York City, an international agency representing opera singers, conductors, stage directors, and composers world-wide. Born and raised in Minneapolis, she attended the University of Vermont, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg in Germany, and the University of Minnesota, where she received her master's degree in 2008. In Bremen, Germany, she founded International Artists Management in 1996. Stephens teaches seminars for emerging artists at Middlebury College, The Juilliard School, Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, and Hunter College in New York City. She is on the board of Freiburg Alumni North America and a founding member of Opera Managers Association International (OMAI).



Ruth-Ellen Joeres & Sarah Stephens  
MA Celebration, June 2008

FIGURE 12.1

In the late fall of 1977, after a year abroad in Freiburg, Germany, I reluctantly returned home to Minneapolis to complete my undergraduate degree. My intent was to deepen my knowledge of German and German literature and to head back to Germany as soon as possible.

My year abroad had seemingly changed everything. I lived and breathed as a different person. The way I dressed, the way I ate, my more fashionable hairstyle. I was thinking, seeing, and processing the world very differently than I had before. A new exciting, intriguing world had opened up to me at age twenty in Europe—*ein Blick in die große Welt*—and I didn't want to let go of it for one single moment.

But now, back home, I was thousands of miles away from the world I yearned to be in. A twenty-minute phone call to Germany cost \$100, far beyond my budget, and the thin blue aerogram letters took seven to ten days to cross the Atlantic. It was the pre-internet world of the 1970s, and I felt stranded and isolated—until I registered in the German department at the University of Minnesota.

The first class I signed up for in the winter quarter of 1978 was Goethe's *Faust* with the new young, female professor in the German department, Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres. She was the only female I was aware of in the line-up of mostly older male German professors. In those early days, she taught the traditional Germanic literature canon.

I had no idea how lucky I was. Nor did I anticipate the evolution that was to follow—for her and for me.

I sat in the front row of class and learned volumes from her intellectually curious approach, her contagious enthusiasm for the *Faust* subject matter, and detailed attention to the language, poetry, and imagery. She reminded us from time to time of *Faust's* far-reaching influence and the value of a work that can be revisited with different eyes throughout a lifetime. How true that came to be.

Indeed, later during graduate studies, thanks to Ruth-Ellen, I learned to re-examine *Faust* with different eyes—namely from a feminist point of view. The contrast between Faust's sweeping struggle for deeper meaning and fulfillment in life and Gretchen's narrowly defined role as the feminine object of his desire and male development became unmistakably clear to me.

Moreover, and perhaps even more eye opening to me, was understanding Goethe's male-vantage-point depiction of Gretchen within the gender stereotype of the *Hure/Jungfrau* dichotomy. As a first-time reader of *Faust*, I gravitated more to his journey and struggle than to Gretchen's. It never occurred to me to ask why. Being aware now of male idealization of female figures, I could no longer ignore those questions of gender stereotypes and vantage points.

In opera, this *Hure/Jungfrau* dichotomy is found in many nineteenth-century works, most notably in Wagner (*Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*). The legend of *Faust* was set to music in operas by the composers Hector Berlioz (*Le damnation de Faust*, 1844), Charles Gounod (*Faust*, 1859), Arrigo Boito (*Mefistofele*, 1868), and Ferruccio Busoni (*Doktor Faust*, 1925). These enormously popular works were and still are performed at hundreds of theaters throughout Europe and in the United States (US). The archetypal character portrayal of Gretchen, intricately bound to the legend of *Faust*, has become ingrained in the canon of the operatic repertory. So, Ruth-Ellen was right about the far-reaching influence of *Faust*, but not quite in the way she had taught us in that first class in 1978. Both our world perspectives—*die eigene Weltanschauung*—were fundamentally shifting and changing during those years.

After completion of the *Faust* seminar, I asked Ruth-Ellen if she would be my undergraduate advisor, and she agreed. I had found a new intellectual home as well as someone who understood my struggle as a young, culturally split personality. With her support and mentoring, I sailed through my last year of studies, graduated at the end of the year,

and returned, as planned, to Germany—more knowledgeable and critically aware than before.

In 1981, I again returned to Minnesota, this time to pursue graduate studies in the German Department. Ruth-Ellen had advanced in the department and was teaching new courses in the graduate curriculum that no one had previously offered: “German Woman as Writer” was one of them. I was eager to sign up for most anything she taught, but this seminar was of particular interest to me. The prevailing assumption at that time was that very little nineteenth-century German women’s literature, other than Bettina von Armin, was worthy of much attention. Ruth-Ellen was going out on a limb and not getting support from the department. We were a small, engaged group of students for that early seminar and felt the pull of being witness to the new feminist approach in German literature within academia.

We read Louise Otto, Hedwig Dohm, and others of whom I had never heard before. Most writings were autobiographical in nature: letters, diaries, and self-conscious histories. Ruth-Ellen convinced us of the importance of reading these subjective women’s stories in the context of their marginalized roles in the patriarchal society in which they lived. As secondary texts, we read Elaine Showalter on feminist literary criticism and Adrienne Rich’s *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*. We discussed hidden ideologies, self-censorship, subjectivity of the reader and writer, and writing as a path of self-discovery. I became intrigued by the demystification these women were engaging in and the honesty of their writings. During this seminar, I decided to write my master’s thesis on the letters of Rahel Varnhagen. That never came to be, but it set me on an important life-long path of analyzing writings—and later opera—from a feminist perspective.

At the end of my graduate studies, I was chosen by the department for an exchange at the *Humboldt-Universität* in then-communist East Berlin (GDR). It was another paradigm-shifting experience for me for which I am very grateful. During the previous year, I had gotten married, and my husband had been accepted at Harvard University for a cardiology residency. We both left Minneapolis in the fall of 1984—he for Boston, I for East Berlin, not to return to Minneapolis. By 1991 our family had grown to five, and we settled in Bremen, Germany, to raise our three children for the next nineteen years. Behind me, though, back in Minneapolis, I had left my graduate studies like an open, unfinished book. That followed me around like a shadow for the next twenty-four years.

Fortunately, life circled back around. In 2007, separated from my husband and with my three children launched at various European universities, I decided it was time to finally take on the last chapter of that open book and finish my master's thesis. In Bremen I had founded an international management agency for opera singers that was doing quite well. My divorce was pending, and I wanted to pursue a career in opera management on a higher level. Completing my master's was a critical step for me to become more competitive in the field. Besides, for my own self-esteem, I needed to finally get that degree under my belt. I searched online and found Ruth-Ellen who was in semi-retirement. I sent her an email telling her of my plan. She answered immediately and encouraged me to come back to Minneapolis and do it. So, I did.

By June of 2008 I had completed my master's degree. Ruth-Ellen supported me through the process, helped me re-register and apply for one last credit in the German department, and put together a graduate committee. We met weekly as she coached me through the academic writing process, which I had not engaged in for years and about which I felt insecure. Even more to her credit, she accepted my new thesis title: *The Metaphysics of Wagner's Music in Tristan und Isolde*. She had cautiously told me she was not a fan of Wagner, but she nonetheless listened and mentored me. In the end, she told me she learned a great deal and was more open to it than ever before. I was so pleased. But really, it was testimony to her as a person and to her dedication to her students. I was after all, at age 52, still a student of hers and she was going to see me through.

Following the completion of my master's degree, I moved to New York City and co-founded Stephens Nicolson Artists Management, an international agency for opera. Today, I am part of a small but growing group of women (and men!) who are fighting for more recognition of women composers, conductors, stage directors, and general managers. We are also advocating for more diversity in casting and policy changes in the handling of sexual assault and harassment cases. It's an uphill battle, but the opera world is changing, and I am proud to be part of this long-overdue paradigm shift.

In my work, and in everything I do, I am aware of the need for feminist perspectives. It's been a choice, and it's been an imperative, this feminist path. I am grateful to Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres for mentoring me over the four decades on this journey of feminist choices—and of choosing a feminist life.