



## Mona Seghatoleslami, Musicologist and More

By Carol Crocca

Mona who? Although you may or may not know how to pronounce her name, many of you will know Mona Seghatoleslami as the classical radio host on WXXI on weekday afternoons from 3 to 7 pm. (Note from Mona's youth: she persuaded her father not to shorten their Iranian name, which means, "a man all Muslims can trust"; she loved both its oddness and its musicality). Mona has always, it seems, worn many hats: she is assistant producer and host of *Noontime at Hochstein* on Wednesdays, which moves outdoors to High Falls in the summer, creates special radio and movie features, represents the station at opera and other musical events, introduces performers at the Annual Jazz Festival, and manages the music heard in The Little Café. This last intersects with the Opera Guild, for she works with board member and Communications Chair Mary Bonaccio to present our Bravo Nights programs.



Mona grew up in New Jersey, where she began musical study at the age of ten with the viola. Like other elementary students, her choice of instrument was urged upon her by the fact that the orchestra could use a violist, already having its full complement of violin players. Her parents found her a wonderful teacher, principal violist of the Chicago Symphony Robert Glazer, from whom she absorbed a great love of music and a great love for the stories of its composers and performers. As a younger student Mona did not have much experience of opera, with one exception. On a high school chorus trip she attended no less than the Vienna Staatsoper, a production of Wagner's *Rienzi*. She sat with the school orchestra's trombone player and what she remembers most is that their seats offered a great view of the orchestra's trombonist!

Mona continued with the viola as an undergraduate performance major at Illinois State University. Although she discovered she was not destined to be a professional violist, in part because of a slight tremor, she also realized that her love for music history was another professional avenue she could pursue. And she took all the music history courses she could.

She found her place at Indiana University in a master's program which combined musicology and music librarianship. Here she received a well-rounded music education which included composition and theory in addition to many more music history courses. A key academic course was "Writing About Music for General Audiences." Students practiced writing concert reviews, program notes, CD liner notes, and articles, the goal being to convey clearly something meaningful about the music without resorting to jargon or specialist language inappropriate for the general reader. Indiana also has a very well-regarded conservatory which presented seven fully-staged operas each year, and this was Mona's true introduction to opera. And here, most significantly for the future, she had her first experience in radio.

While working as a music librarian intern, Mona found herself constantly thinking of her other job at the student radio station, WIUS, helping her fellow student Thom Pease host a classical music program. Later, she applied for a job at the station, where she was gradually given opportunities to expand her role: she did some announcing, some audio production, created an opera quiz, did interviews, and wrote program notes for operas. Mona had evidently found a milieu which stimulated her creativity and provided an outlet for her many musical interests and talents. Oh, and something else - by the time she left Indiana, she had married Randy Pollok, an all-round musician who is director of music at the First Presbyterian Church in Brockport, and who plays and teaches piano, clarinet, guitar and ukulele.

Mona's next step was her first "real job," at West Virginia Public Radio, a state-wide public radio station based in Charleston, which included all music genres as well as news and features. Again, her work was in the music library, with a bit of announcing ("You're listening to..."), but she soon was filling in on occasion for music show

hosts, and then became a substitute for the classical host, who was out for three months after surgery. She also created a blog, "Classically Speaking" and interviewed performers from other genres, such as folk singer Judy Collins. And of course, since Mona is a person with an apparently boundless enthusiasm and energy for her work, she also wrote all kinds of reviews for the newspaper, taught American music at a local college, and was on the board of the chamber music society.

Although she was offered the opportunity to do other kinds of productions at the radio station, after five years Mona and her husband decided to leave West Virginia. On Mona's part this was largely because she wanted to concentrate on music rather than general radio work. She had a connection with Rochester because her sister had gone to college here, and interviewed with Peter DuBois successor to Richard Gladwell as WXXI host of *With Heart and Voice*, who, as it happened, was originally from West Virginia. And so Mona came to Rochester, where she enriches our lives with her enthusiasm and knowledge.

A small challenge for Mona was hosting *Noontime at Hochstein*, where "real people see you." She soon got over her jitters, however, and now loves her connection to Hochstein, and its connections to Rochester history and the settlement house movement, on which she did a program for the school's 100th anniversary. At Hochstein she also met other biking enthusiasts and was inspired by board member Jim Blake to become a team member in the Tour de Cure event on behalf of the American Diabetes Association.

At the Little Café, Mona changed the system of rotation of the musical groups for the Café, and added classical guitar night and the Bravo Nights opera program. One of my favorite Mona creations was a panel discussion a few years ago with the audience of *Moonstruck*, a movie with an opera connection for which we share an enthusiasm. These days, in addition to her afternoon radio broadcast, Mona continues to write special features (see her spot on the WXXI web site), and program for the virtual Little Café. She looks forward, as do we all, to the time when we can again share live music, as well as other face-to-(maskless) face pleasures, like sitting in the theater or café.