

GUEST: NEVA REGO

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Aloha no and welcome to *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox with PBS Hawaii. We're about to sit down with Neva Rego. Never heard of her? Neva is known by many as a Voice Coach to the Stars, the wind beneath their wings, with a list of vocal students that includes Robert Cazimero, Tony Conjugacion, Jimmy Borges, Jasmine Trias and Jordan Segundo, and a waiting list with more than a hundred names.

Neva Rego is an extraordinary woman because she did an extraordinary thing. She followed her dream. Her wish was to be trained in a classical, Italian style of singing, the kind she'd been listening to on records since she was a child. So, at the tender age of 18, not long after World War II, she hopped on a freighter and shipped off to Italy to seek her destiny. She didn't speak Italian and she didn't even know the name of the technique she was seeking. It turned out to be bel canto.

It's very hard to explain. It's easy to listen to. What I think about it is, it's so legato, meaning tied together; it's all beautiful singing without pushing, without smashing those poor little notes. You know, it's just gorgeous, beautiful singing; very legato. And free. I mean, if you're singing bel canto, you're not killing yourself when you hit a high note. Pavarotti is an example of bel canto.

You know, my dad was a radio DJ and when I wanted to work in television I said, Dad, how do I use my voice? And he said, Do it the bel canto way. And of course, I had no idea what that meant. And he said, Take a candle and light it and put it in front of your mouth and speak, but make sure that you don't blow that candle out.

Right.

No clue what he meant. And of course, when he spoke in front of it, he knew how to use his voice. But how does the candle relate to bel canto?

It doesn't blow out. I've tried it so many times. It's because your air is utilized with your voice, and no [BLOWS] comes out. No spurts of air or anything. It's amazing.

And so that should help you as a performer to have a career over time, that you don't destroy your vocal cords.

Oh, yeah. You don't hurt yourself. And then it's easier. Singing wise, you're using your diaphragm and not your throat muscles to hold it up, you know, like some singers do.

So tell me a little about what life was like for you growing up. You were in Ka'imuki.

Right; on 18th Avenue. And I'm still there. And I must say, we had a beautiful childhood, my brothers and myself. And at that time, there weren't that many houses around us. You know, we had a lot of empty lots and little foresty-looking places that we built our clubhouse and all the kids would gather after school there. And I must say, it was a lovely time.

And you went to what school?

I went to Sacred Hearts Academy. And loved it. The nuns were wonderful, and I think they were a bit instrumental in my learning languages. Because all the nuns at that time were French, and I remember studying Latin and the teacher taught to us in French. How do you like that? And we had a lovely sister from Germany, Sister Polaneya, and she was a fabulous musician.

Now the girls at Sacred Hearts Academy are primed to go to college, and have professional careers. What was the goal in those days?

In those days, I do believe that a lot of the girls strived to be nurses or teachers. There weren't that many kooky ones, like I was. [chuckle]

And how were you kooky?

Well, I wanted to something in music. I wanted singing; I loved it. And you know, here's this little kid from Kaimuki, wanting singing. And you know, I don't know why, but I felt it. As I recall, when I was seven years old, I heard this beautiful aria on the radio with this Italian singer. And I remember telling my mother that was the most beautiful thing I ever heard in my whole life. All of seven years, yes? And Mother said, You really loved it? I said, Oh, I love it, I just love it. Well, that did it. Mother went down to House of Music, at that time in Waikiki, and she kept buying all these records of Italian singers. And well, that whetted my appetite for opera.

What were the other kids on the block listening to? What kind of music were they listening to?

They were mostly in Hawaiian. And I loved Hawaiian; but there was something about opera that was for me, I felt. You know. And if nobody else liked it, that's okay; but I did.

What appealed to you about it?

Oh, I loved the language, first of all. The Italian language is so beautiful to sing. You never have a bad sounding word in it. You know, everything is so fluid and beautiful. And the drama, the music; I mean, it's just glorious. Opera is complete, I feel. You have acting, singing, dancing, tragedies, happiness; everything all rolled up in one. You know? And that appealed to me.

So Italian opera was speaking to you from the time you were seven years old.

Seven.

And you're singing at Sacred Hearts Academy.

M-hm.

And looking at graduation.

Yes. And then I said, I think I want to go and study more music. I was looking all over for it; I had seven teachers here, and they were wonderful; all seven of them. But it was not what I was looking for. I kept hearing this other thing in my head, and even though all my relatives told my mother that they were sorry for her, because they felt that she had only one daughter, and what a shame she was crazy.

[chuckle]

So I thought, never mind, they can't hear what I'm hearing. So I convinced my mother and father that I had to go to Italy. So my mother said, Oh, my god. You don't know Italian; what are you gonna do? But you know, when you're 18 you think you have the world in your hand; you can do anything. So I said, I'll learn it; no problems. So [chuckle] off I go on a on a freighter to Italy.

You know, some people follow their dreams to find fortune or fame or truth. Neva Rego heard a beautiful sound and followed it all the way to Milan, Italy simply to seek its beauty. Today, with air travel and cell phones and the internet, traveling halfway around the world, alone at that age, may not seem so remarkable. But to do it, at that time, seems so foreign.

Who did you go see? I mean, who did you know in Italy?

Well, before I left Honolulu, I was singing at the Hawaiian Village. And Rossano Brazzi, this Italian actor, he heard me singing, and he said, You know, *senorina*, you should be singing opera. And I said, Oh, I'm going to. And he said, Yes? I said, I'm going to Italy. And he said, Oh, wonderful. He said, I write to La Scala for you. And I thought, Well, that's very kind, you know. But when I got to La Scala, I realized that [chuckle] it was so silly, because it was like shooting mosquitoes with a cannon; it was that ridiculous. I wasn't ready for anything, except maybe to clean it.

[chuckle]

You know. And but the maestro was very nice, Vittorio di Sabato. He was very nice, and he understood my plight. And he told me, Oh, *senorina*, I will get you a teacher and this and that. So I got set up with this teacher.

How did you pay for this? Were your parents funding this uh, adventure?

Not really. I mean, they gave me a little in the beginning, 'cause I didn't come from a wealthy family. We were medium, you know. And so I had saved money when I was at the Hawaiian Village. And then just before I left, I was fortunate to get an Atherton scholarship, Atherton Foundation scholarship.

M-hm. They're still giving –

--thanks to Bob Midkiff.

Still in business today, helping folks.

Still in business. So that really helped me. And I thought, Maybe I'll stay a year and see how I do, you know. I think I'll understand well after a year. Oh; after a year, I didn't know beans yet. So I knew I had to stay on. And there was no more scholarships; my mother and father helped me a bit, without a doubt. But then I started to get jobs; little jobs. I'm not ashamed to say that I cleaned a few houses in the beginning, because I didn't know the language. And then I started to teach English, which I think was horrible, because I didn't really understand the grammar. [chuckle] And poor Italians would study with me, but they were mostly interested in speaking.

Conversation.

You know, conversation. And then later on, I got a job with the designer Pucci. And that started me working in haute couture. And I went on from him to Valentino and I was with him for seven years. And all the while, studying.

Now, were you dreaming of becoming a huge Italian opera star?

You know, I have to say no, I was not. Because I was so interested in this *bel canto* technique, that that's what I kept looking for. I was trying to find it. And after two and a half years with this maestro from La Scala, I wasn't finding it. And I was so embarrassed to tell my family that I didn't find it yet, in Italy, two and a half years. So I didn't tell them.

Did you think maybe you were chasing a phantom, that it really didn't exist, it was something you heard, but you really couldn't learn?

I knew it existed; I just couldn't find it. You know, and I didn't know where to go. And so I quit La Scala, the maestro from La Scala, and then I must say, I passed about three months of sheer depression. [chuckle] I just said one fine day to the dear Lord, If you really want me to sing, you better show me the way, because I've exhausted everything. And so now, I leave it in your lap. If you want me to find this elusive little thing, you will let me find it. And so I stopped worrying. But that night, I had to get out of my little apartment, because I was getting stir crazy, you know. And so I went to La Scala to hear a concert. And I heard this girl singing. She was studying with me before at Scala, but she had left—she was gone about a year. And she was

singing divinely; just what I was looking for. So I thought, How could that be; she must have found someone. So I was sitting in the opera house in the very top, which we call the chicken coops, yes?

M-hm.

And I rushed down, but somehow I was too late; and I missed her. So I was so upset and depressed, because I didn't know how to get a hold of her. And I remember walking home; I couldn't even take the tram, because I was crying. And so the next morning, I got up, still depressed. I said, I've gotta get out of here. So I went—in Milano, they have this big galleria in the middle of town, glassed in, and you have a coffee, you know. And it's a nice diversion; people are walking to and from. And I was sitting down and all of a sudden, here comes this girl that sang the night before, walking down. Wow; I ran after her, and I said, Ciao; I said, I heard you sing last night; it was just beautiful. And she said, Oh, Neva; did I find a teacher. I said, I can hear it, I can hear it. And she said—I told her that I left that maestro, and she said, I wondered when you were gonna get smart. You know. I said, Yeah, but I didn't know enough to know I didn't know. You know? And so she said, What are you doing now? I said, Absolutely nothing. She said, Well, I'm going to a lesson; come with me. So I followed her to the lesson one-hour lesson, and I sat in a little corner, and I listened to lesson, and I cried for one hour. [chuckle] Cried. Because it was like there was so much emotion, because it was like something I was looking for, for so long and I found it. And so afterwards, the senora came over to me and she said, Senorina Neva, she says, are all Hawaiians so emotional? And I said, No, Senora, I said, you know, it's just because I was looking for you since—I was trying to find you since I was seven years old. And she looked at me, and she started to cry. And we hugged, and it was love from then on; for 22 years, I was with her. Yeah.

What's her name?

Her name is—was Magda Piccarolo. She was a lyrica leggiero soprano, and she sang all over. She sang at Scala and in America at the Met.

So you continued to have lessons with her for twenty-two years?

Yeah; twenty-two.

And you became a singer in Italian opera houses.

Italian opera. I first started off in concerts, because that's what everybody does to get going; get your feet wet sort of thing. You know, and then you get a little role here and a little role there, and it just starts getting better and better.

What was your favorite role?

There's so many. Gosh. Lucia is beautiful; Rigoletto is beautiful. I love La Sonnambula, but we never do it, because it's very classical, it's very bel canto, and maybe boring. But the singing is beautiful. And those are ones I love.

To sing in opera houses in Italy. To live and achieve a dream. Can you imagine? Neva Rego did what she loved and loved what she did. And that's what I love about this story!

You know, I love the language. And I love the people; they're so wonderful. You know. When I first went to Italy, it was not too long after the war, so people were still quite poor. And we didn't have a refrigerator in the house. And there was no washing machine either. [chuckle] You're looking at it. And you know, it's difficult to wash sheets in the bathtub.

You did that for years?

I did all of that.

Ah.

Yeah, I really learned well. You know. And then I realized, silly Americans, when they complain; how beautiful our life is in America. And I think anybody who speaks against America should go abroad a while. Then you will how wonderful our country really is. You know. I know we are having problems now, but I mean, you know, the life is beautiful in America.

You stayed how many years; 26 years in all?

Twenty-six years. Really. It's a lifetime, isn't it?

Had you intended to come back? I mean, were you going to come back?

I think I might not have. The the thing that pushed me back was, in the late 70s, the man responsible for opera in Italy—he's the one that subsidizes—that part of the government subsidizes opera. It was a Communist who got in. And when he got in, he decided no foreigners were gonna sing.

How high had you risen in the hierarchy of opera singers? Were you a big deal?

Well, I don't think so. It was hard to get to be a big deal, because it was so political.

M-m.

You had to do so many things; you had to make sure an empresario liked you. [chuckle] And I didn't wish to go further than that. So I just struggled along and sang and it worked well. But say that I got to the jet stream top; no.

And was that okay with you?

That was okay. Because I didn't start off to be a big opera star. I started off looking for this technique. [chuckle]

And you found it—

I found it.

--and then you practiced it, and --

And now, I'm teaching it.

Neva Rego is a professional voice coach, teaching her beloved bel canto in her longtime family home in Ka'imuki.

I never intended to teach. Never. But when I arrived home, after Italy, I thought, What am I gonna do? So I decided I was gonna go to Seattle. Because Seattle had good opera. And I was still young enough. So, then my father got ill.

M-m.

And had a stroke. And so that determined what I should do; I should stay home and take care of him. Because my brother was taking care of him all those other years, 'cause Mother died so young. And so I stayed home, and this man came over and did an article on me in the paper. And the phone started ringing. And that's the wonderful part of the story; it hasn't stopped.

You have a waiting list this long. How many people are on your waiting list to take lessons?

Well, it used to be 200; right now, I think it's down to about 100, 120. Which is nice; it's security.

So the world started beating a path to your door; people wanted voice lessons from you.

Right. And one of the ones that came was Robert Cazimero.

How old was he then? Was he a young singer, just starting out?

This was in the 80s, early 80s.

In the 80s.

They were just from Manoa—

Sunday Manoa.

Sunday Manoa; and Robert came to me and said, You know, I'm having to lower my keys, and I don't like that. He said, So I thought maybe if I studied a while, you'd help me. So 15 years later [chuckle]—

Now, why fifteen years?

Well, because he didn't want to leave. He kept saying, No, I need it. I said, Robert, you don't need lessons anymore; you know it so well. But we got on so well; he's wonderful.

And this is not something that's a quick fix, right?

No.

A student has to commit himself or herself.

Oh, yeah. With poppy music, I would say two years, two years and a half. Classical, forget it; six and seven. And you can't learn it overnight; it's not like you learn to play piano overnight. You know, you just need time. And anybody can learn to sing, if they wish it.

You are such a popular voice teacher. What kind of criteria do you have in accepting a student?

Just that they really want to learn, and that there's a voice there.

So tell me some of the people you've trained over the years.

Well, as I said, Robert Cazimero. And I had Shari Lynn at that time too. She's been great. And Jimmy Borges, and Tony Conjugacion. At one time, on Broadway, I had 17 people. Really. That was great for me, but it was kind of sad, because I wanted one at the Met.

[chuckle] Don't ask for much.

And everybody was on Broadway. I said, Oh, my lord; what am I doing? You know. We even helped Richard Chamberlain study, Betty and I, and gosh; there's so many.

Well, and just recently, American Idol came along and—

Oh.

Didn't I hear your name with Jordan Segundo and—

Yes.

--Jasmine Trias? After the competition, though; not before.

After. And Anita Hall, Les Ceballos is one of mine too; a dear one. Jasmine, Danny Couch, and John Koko from Makaha Sons. You know. So there's a long list, and they all are like children, like my kids that I never had.

How interesting that a lot of these people distinguish themselves in singing before they had lessons from you, but they were motivated to learn—

More. And you take Jordan, for example. He's singing so well now. I'm so proud of him. And that he's such a nice boy. And I really want him to get ahead. And he's learned very well. He never misses lessons, he's so enthusiastic. See, that's—

Now, he didn't win American Idol, obviously. Do you think he would have gotten farther if he'd had the lessons earlier?

Without a doubt.

How would his voice have changed?

Well, he would have—now, he has a complete range. He sings down the bottom, he goes all the way to a B-flat, and a high C. He never had those notes before.

How about Robert, because he had wonderful training at Kamehameha, I would think.

Yes. Robert can go to a B-flat like that too. You see, what you do with the technique is, you tie the voice together. Especially people like Jordan and Robert; you might sing with your chest voice here; but then the minute you get near what we call the break, the passagio, you have to have a different placement for those high notes. So you have to blend in the bottom to the top, and you learn to go over that transition very smoothly with study. And they do it; beautiful. Listen; listen to Robert. After all these years, he still sounds glorious.

And after all this time, it's still bel canto for you.

Yeah, it's still—

You've never heard another type of vocal technique that works as well for you?

No, I'm in love with bel canto.

And so your mother didn't raise a crazy daughter after all?

No, I don't think so. I hope not. I don't know if others feel that way, but I'm in love with what I'm doing. I love it.

Mahalo to Neva Rego for sharing her stories with us today. And thank you for joining me for them. That's all the time we have for this *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Ciao bella and aloha hui hou kakou!

My name is not really Neva; it's Aggreneva. And everybody gets all twisted 'cause they don't know who she is. But my mother named me after a Russian opera singer, and her name was Agraneva Schlovanskaya. I'm kinda happy Mother stopped after Aggreneva. Mother never told me that I had this name. I knew it was a kooky name; at school, they called me Aggrevacious. You know how school kids are. Anyway, all of a sudden, I said to Mother that I was in love with music and I wanted to do music. So Mother said, Well, you know, I think I'll tell you about your name. And she told me about Aggreneva Schlovanska, who had come here years ago with some Russian group. And they sang at Hawaii Theatre. Isn't that interesting?

And your mother obviously had a love for opera.

Yeah. But I was the one that was gonna make it my life.