

# Beverly Sills

Opera soprano, arts executive (1929 – 2007)

Sills was born and raised in Brooklyn. At age four, she performed professionally on the radio as “Bubbles” Silverman, but soon changed her name to Beverly Sills. Using that name, she was a winner on CBS Radio’s *Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour* in 1939.

In 1947, she made her operatic stage debut in Bizet’s *Carmen* in Philadelphia, and, in October 1955, she first appeared with the New York City Opera. Her reputation expanded with her performance of the title role in the New York premiere of DOUGLAS STUART MOORE’s *The Ballad of Baby Doe* in 1958 [editor’s note: a concert version of the opera was performed at the Century on March 31, 1957].

In 1956, Sills married journalist Peter Greenough and had two children. In 1960, Sills and her family moved near Boston, and in 1962, Sills sang the title role in Massenet’s *Manon* with the Opera Company of Boston, the first of many roles for opera director Sarah Caldwell.

In 1966, the New York City Opera revived Handel’s then virtually unknown opera *Giulio Cesare* and Sills’ performance as Cleopatra made her an international opera star. Sills also made her “unofficial” Met debut in its “Opera in the Parks” program, though nothing further came of this other than offers for minor roles from RUDOLF BING.

In 1969, Sills sang Zerbinetta in the American premiere (in a concert version) of the 1912 version of Richard Strauss’ *Ariadne auf Naxos* with the Boston Symphony. Her performance garnered high praise. She also debuted as Pamira in Rossini’s *The Siege of Corinth* at La Scala, a success that put her on the cover of *Newsweek*. Two years later she landed on the cover of *Time*, where she was described as “America’s Queen of Opera.”

After Bing left, Sills finally made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera on April 7, 1975 in *The Siege of Corinth*, receiving an eighteen-minute ovation. In an interview after his retirement, Bing stated that his refusal to use Sills was the single biggest mistake of his career.

In 1979, she became co-director of NYCO, and then its sole general director, a post she held until 1989. During her tenure, Sills helped turn the financially struggling opera company into a viable enterprise. From 1994 to 2002, Sills was chairman of Lincoln Center, and in October 2002, she became chairman of the Metropolitan Opera, resigning that position in 2005. She succumbed to cancer on July 2, 2007, less than a year after her husband died.

