

photo by Devon Cass



Before her weight loss, Graham as the title role in Opera Delaware's production of *Turandot*, 2004



# Othalie Graham

## The Ice Princess Who Melted

BY CINDY SADLER

*Othalie Graham shares what motivated her to lose over 200 pounds, how she lost it, and how she continues to keep it off.*



Othalie Graham very much embodies the princesses she so often portrays on stage: high, sculpted cheekbones; full lips; beautiful skin the color of café au lait; and, most engagingly, huge doe eyes that snap and sparkle with personality. The Canadian soprano appears every inch the diva, and with a signature role like Turandot and repertoire that includes opera's most formidable heroines—Aida, Tosca, Elektra, Brünnhilde, and Isolde, to name a few—one supposes she needs to be.

In her personal communications, however, she is anything but an ice princess. "Hello, beauty!" she trills in greeting. Confession time: Othalie Graham and I are friends who have never met in person, and our interview is the first time we've actually spoken on the phone. But we've followed each other for years. Graham is a regular reader of my blog, *The Next 100 Pounds*, and credits it with helping her lose and keep off over 200 pounds. And I've followed her career from afar. When we finally arranged a phone date we could both keep, she was in Arizona rehearsing *Turandot* and fighting the urge to visit In-N-Out Burger.

Graham sings the biggest of big roles now, but she came from humble beginnings. "I went to an arts high school but never learned to read music—I just learned my music off a recording." She sang her first opera as a teenager. "It was

extremely unprofessional. You can't even really say that it was singing," she admits. "It was a complete disaster and turned me off from singing until I met my first voice teacher, Lois

McDonall. My coach at the time knew I was trying to start singing, and he said, 'Look, you've never even really had a proper voice teacher.' By then I was in my early 20s." He called McDonall and set up a meeting for Graham.

"She told me that I knew nothing," Graham remembers, "but she let me come over whenever I wanted and charged me next to nothing. I had a three-year immersion with her and then started auditioning for schools. She was absolutely adamant that I leave Canada and go to the United States to get the experience I needed."

Graham arrived to audition at the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia with little more knowledge and experience than the training she received at the hands of McDonall. "At the AVA audition they said, 'You must have brought the wrong résumé.' I had no bachelor's degree, no summer programs. I didn't read music. I came from my teacher's basement."

Clearly, Graham possessed a talent to be reckoned with, but would it be enough for a career? She was admitted to AVA, and there she received the encouragement and training she needed to get started. She also received some advice that was hard to hear: she needed to lose weight.

Graham had heard it before, but somehow it'd never struck home. "I was one of those girls who literally didn't realize how fat I was," Graham says, now incredulous at her own naïveté.

Graham had always been healthy as a child, although as she entered her teens she was putting on some weight. But she had a great role model for health—her father. "I was madly, madly in love with him," she recalls. "He was incredibly healthy. Jogged every day. My father was always adamant that I be careful with my weight. All of the women in my family are big, and my mother and I were very careful with our weight." But then her father became ill with cancer and died. Graham and her mother were shocked and overwhelmed. "My mother and I both lost that will to be healthy. We ate together in comfort. And then I left Canada."

Alone in a foreign country for the first time and dealing with "tremendous underlying issues" from her father's death, Graham continued to turn to food for comfort. "I just ate. It

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Seven months into her weight loss, Graham as the title role in Boheme Opera NJ's production of *Aida*, 2005

“... I can do whatever a director asks me to do without any restrictions at all. That is a great feeling. I am hoping that I can find a full body Spanx suit so I can sing my first Salome!”

wasn't even conscious eating.” Her new eating habits continued through her career at AVA and beyond. “I just continued to eat. I was one of those really naïve people that thought ‘Oh, I need to eat to sing.’ And, yes, you do need to have fuel to sing, but it doesn't have to be a huge bowl of pasta and four slices of buttered toast.”

Still, Graham was in denial about her weight. When visiting the doctor, she had always refused to be weighed. Her scale at home was covered in dust. She knew she was large, but she didn't realize how large or what impact it was having on her career.

There had been clues, of course. She had to buy her own seatbelt extension for the airplane to avoid the embarrassment of having to ask for one. When a costumer had to get a second measuring tape to measure her hips, Graham thought to herself, “Oh my goodness, I must be bigger than I thought.”

“I was just absolutely clueless about the weight issue in our business,” she admits. “Weight was brought up to me while I was at AVA. I said, ‘Yes, I'm a big girl, but I sing big roles.’ [Stage director and Graham's current agent] Bernard Uzan . . . was the first person in the business to make me aware that I had to lose weight or I would have difficulty working.” Still, she didn't begin to acknowledge that her weight might really be a problem until she sang an *Elektra* with Dottie Danner directing. “It was a very physical show. I could do what was required but not without great difficulty.”

After graduating from AVA in 2004, Graham began to work immediately. She met her first agent, Peter Randsman, while singing her first *Turandot* with Opera Delaware. “I'll work with you,” he told her, “but you won't work as much as you could. Regardless of how agile you are, the perception when you walk into an audition is that you can't move.” Randsman gently encouraged her to lose weight, but cautioned her to do so safely.

Graham decided she'd better weigh herself, but her scale at home only went up to 350 pounds. “When I got on it, it said, ‘Error! Error!’ I had to specially order a scale that went up to 400 pounds. I didn't want that [weight] to be the one thing that

held me back. To have sacrificed so much—leaving my mother behind in Canada after I had just lost my father—to scrimp and save, to walk in the door, and be out of the equation of being hired,” Graham says.

Randsman asked her to lose 80 pounds before he began to send her out on auditions. “Eighty pounds when you weigh 400 is nothing,” says Graham. “I lost weight so quickly. Initially weight starts falling off right away, and that helped a lot to give me courage to keep going.”

A little healthy competition also helped. Graham's cover in *Turandot* was also a big girl. They became fast friends and decided to lose weight together. “I wanted someone who was battling the same thing that I was battling and that I could be honest with and call and say, ‘Oh my goodness, I'm going to kill myself, I have to have a cookie!’” Graham laughs.

This was her “first, real big, life diet,” and there was a lot at stake. “I knew that in order for me to stay in this country I had to find a job, and in order to find a job I had to lose weight. I did a massive food detox. My apartment turned into the Betty Ford Center for Overeating.”

She knew she needed to restrict and track her calories, and she decided the easiest way to do it was to eat prepackaged meals like Lean Cuisines. “I did not leave my apartment for two weeks because I didn't trust myself to eat meals anywhere else. The minute you take away all the things you want to eat, that's all you can think about. Thank goodness I could call my friend.”

Graham and her diet buddy weighed in and called each other weekly. “That first time, I lost 140 pounds. And I was just determined to beat her. That was my motivation: every Monday morning I was going to have a bigger loss!”

But as she began to have success with the diet, enjoying buying new clothes, and feeling more comfortable in her body, Graham began to slack off. “I thought, ‘This is great! This is it!’ Then of course I became relaxed with my eating. I was never able to find that balance of gray. I was either dieting religiously or I was gorging like everybody else.”

In 2006, Graham met Koran Willis, a financial consultant with two children from a previous marriage whom Graham has since adopted. The first time they met, he told her, “I’m going to marry you!” and one year later, his prediction came true. They married in the theater at AVA.

“I had only three days of honeymoon because I went to Michigan Opera Theatre to sing *Turandot*, then an Elijah with Bryn Terfel and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and after that on to Utah Festival Opera. Of course, being away from home right away made me feel lonely, and I ate like crazy!” Soon she had regained a significant amount of the weight she’d worked so hard to lose. “There is *nothing* worse than re-losing already lost weight,” she sighs.

And then, Graham says, she found *The Next 100 Pounds*.

Since 2008, I have written a blog ([www.thenext100pounds.com](http://www.thenext100pounds.com)) chronicling my own struggles with weight and fitness. Graham became an avid reader.

“I really didn’t start to think about food as fuel until I read your blog and saw what you were doing. There are times when you know you’re doing everything you should be doing and the scale doesn’t budge. Every time I had one of those moments, I’d go to your blog and see what you were doing,” Graham told me. “It was essential for my daily life to have your blog to constantly go to because I really didn’t realize that women with

this ongoing issue have to monitor it all the time. I resent that a little.

“I needed so desperately to read about someone else who was dealing with the same things I was dealing with. It’d be midnight and I’d be going back and reading what people say and trying so hard to stay on track. My lifelong health was changed because of you.”

Graham also began to work out—running and playing tennis. She also began to educate herself about nutrition, something she had never previously done. She began to restrict carbs and opt for more lean proteins. Now, she receives inspiration and motivation from her family—her husband Koran and their two children, a 16-year-old daughter and a 10-year-old son. “It makes me certainly more mindful, especially when I’m feeding them. I think about feeding them for their long-term health. I still make Rice Krispies treats, but we’ve never had soda in the house.”

Graham is especially vigilant on behalf of her daughter and mindful of her self-image. “I especially want her to focus more on health and feeling good. I don’t let them weigh her at school. She weighs at the doctor. I’m very careful with the periodicals—more health things about feeling strong and empowered and less about weight. So if we bake cookies, OK, we ate three cookies. Let’s go for a walk.”

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Graham has managed to stay within 10 pounds of her lowest weight for about a year. She tries to fill up on lean proteins, veggies, and fruit, with an emphasis on eating as many veggies as possible. She is still battling to reach her goal. "I am exactly 35 pounds away from my goal weight. I find that I have to *really* intensify my workouts and count my calories more than ever to fight for every pound! I feel so much stronger since I have really focused a lot on weight training and light running.

"What has changed now of course is my goal to stay this size which, as you know, is a monumental goal. It requires immense work and sacrifice. You get sick of being mindful of every morsel you put in your mouth."

But what has also changed for Graham is her attitude.

"I would never have been able to sing my first Tosca if I had not lost massive amounts of weight. I would not have been able to continue with the Turandots, and Aidas, or even Wagner without the weight loss," she says firmly. "There is no more 'park and bark' opera. When I sang big excerpts of Isolde in a semi-staged production, I was on my knees and lying on my side, something I would never have been able to do before. Now with my Turandot I can kneel as often as a director asks and get up quickly and gracefully. I can run onstage, up stairs, or anywhere without being winded *and* looking elegant.

"No one is asking me to be stick thin," she says, "and I doubt that I will ever be totally naked onstage, but now I can do whatever a director asks me to do without any restrictions at all. That is a great feeling. I am hoping that I can find a full body Spanx suit so I can sing my first Salome!" While she's waiting on that Salome, Graham is excited to be singing her first Minnie in *La fanciulla del West* with Nashville Opera in April 2012.

Weight loss has helped Graham look and feel better, but the bottom line is that it is a business decision.

"It's funny. Other singers always look to some of the fuller-figured women who are having careers and say, 'I can be big because it has not hurt so-and-so's career.' But we don't know what impact it has had on someone's career. You could be limited in which roles you will be hired to sing, what houses will hire you, and how often you will be hired. We don't know someone else's struggles and we certainly don't know what is being said behind the scenes about a singer. What I do know is that if you are hired for a role and have physical limitations, it might be the last time you work with that house or that director," Graham says.

"It is show business, period," she continues. "The weight is an issue. If you cannot go on the floor, kneel, and get up beautifully and gracefully without holding your palm on the floor or having



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someone assist you, it is an issue. If I wanted to sing ingénue roles and I had wrinkles on my forehead, I would have to get Botox or something. If someone told me I had to dye my hair blonde to have a career, I would do it. We are in the industry of show business.”

Still, Graham enjoys the private benefits of being healthier.

“I celebrate the little victories that only those in the obese club would understand. Every time I cross my legs, I smile. When I run to catch a train, I smile. When I watch the flight attendant take a seat belt extension to someone else, I pull mine a little tighter across my hips! When I fell down to the ground the first time [staging *Turandot*] and had to get up, I almost cried because I was so thrilled that I could do it. People don’t realize, every time I get on an airplane, sit in that seat, put on the seatbelt, and pull it tighter, I think about my life—every time I . . . walk down the aisle of the airplane and don’t fall over people or am able to turn around in the airplane john. Not being able to do those things is a nonstop, quiet humiliation that people who are not in our situation do not understand.”

Graham understands very well how far she’s come and what she must do to get to her goal. “I’m still a plus-sized girl, but now I can buy a regular size XL top. My doctor made it very clear that it gets harder the longer you wait. If I’m going to get

down to my goal—which is really not that much further—I’ve got to keep running and playing tennis.”

And that *Turandot* in Arizona? Graham’s current agent, Bernard Uzan, directed the production. “It was a full-circle moment for me because he [had] told me to lose weight and I was able to do anything he asked me to. It felt fantastic!”

*Cindy Sadler is a professional singer, writer, consultant, and stage director, as well as founder and director of Spotlight on Opera, a training program. She has recently been heard as Baba the Turk in The Rake’s Progress with the Princeton Festival, the Marquise de Birkenfeld in La fille du régiment with Opera Idaho, and Katisha in The Mikado with Syracuse Opera. She also covered Stephanie Blythe as Katisha and Ulrica in Un ballo in maschera at Chicago Lyric Opera. Upcoming engagements include Gertrude in Roméo et Juliette with Florida Grand Opera and San Antonio Opera, Marcellina in The Marriage of Figaro with Kentucky Opera, the Marquise de Birkenfeld with the Sugar Creek Symphony and Song Festival, and the Old Baroness in Vanessa with Sarasota Opera. For more information, visit [www.CindySadler.com](http://www.CindySadler.com), [www.TheNext100Pounds.com](http://www.TheNext100Pounds.com), and [www.SpotlightOnOpera.com](http://www.SpotlightOnOpera.com). (CS)*



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