



Monica Yunus DAUGHTER OF THE EAST

Her father may be the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, but Monica Yunus has an accomplished resume of her own in the world of Western classical music.

Although raised by her Russian-born mother and only recently exposed to her Bengali heritage, she is very proud of her South Asian identity, Geeta Bhatnagar-Novotny writes.

BENGALI TENOR: Monica Yunus, the eldest daughter of Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, sings at Goethe Institute in Dhaka in December 2005. Monica was born in Bangladesh but was raised in the U.S.



BY NOW, most of you have heard of Muhammad Yunus, founder of Bangladesh's Grameen Bank. On Oct. 13, the microfinance banker, economist and professor won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize.

Yunus and the Grameen Bank have helped millions of needy families, spanning four continents and 22 countries, overcome poverty by providing small collateral-free, trust-based loans. The Grameen Bank has especially empowered women.

Speaking of empowered women, there is another equally impressive Yunus. She is Monica Yunus, an accomplished artist in the world of Western classical music and she is the daughter and the firstborn of Muhammad Yunus.

In the light of her accomplishments, those of us in the Western classical music realm can say Muhammad Yunus is actually famous for his opera-singing daughter. It is only natural that Monica would take her place at her father's side at the Nobel Peace Prize Awards Ceremony and Concert in December in Oslo, Norway.

At the concert, hosted by the actresses Sharon Stone and Anjelica Huston, Monica performed with such stars as the former singer/songwriter Cat Stevens (Yusuf Islam), R&B star Lionel Richie, Rihanna, the British pop band Simply Red, American country singer Wynonna Judd, Mexican singer and actress Paulina Rubio and legendary soprano Renee Fleming.

Monica sang to her father "O mio babbino caro" (Oh dear daddy), Lauretta's aria from Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi." It was a very emotional performance and received many accolades.

Twenty-nine-year-old Monica has a bachelor's and a master's degree from the Juilliard School in New York City. She is, without doubt, establishing herself as one of America's most auspicious young sopranos. Since making her professional debut with the Palm Beach Opera in 1999, she has sung lead roles with prominent opera companies and symphonies all over the United States and Europe.

OPERATIC PINNACLE

In 2003, Monica hit the pinnacle when she made her principal role debut with the most renowned opera company in the world – The Metropolitan Opera in New York City. She received great acclaim for her portrayal of Barbarina in the opera "Le Nozze di Figaro" (The Marriage of Figaro).

That year, she joined the company for productions of "Die Frau Ohne Schatten," "Le Rossignol" and "The Queen of Spades."

She returned to the Metropolitan Opera for the 2005-06 season, where she reprised her role of Barbarina and also sang the role of Poussette in "Manon." Monica returns for the 2006-07 season at the Metropolitan Opera, performing the role of Papagena in "Die Zauberflöte" (The Magic Flute).

Monica has also sung solo in the eminent Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall in New York City with the Los Angeles Da Camera under the auspices of The Marilyn Horne Foundation and in ►

◆ Bangladesh, her country of birth. Her many other concert and recital appearances include performances at Alice Tully Hall and Cooper-Hewitt Museum, both in New York, at the Manuel de Falla Hall in Granada, Spain, and at Madrid's Auditorio Nacional with Queen Sofia in attendance.

As you can see, Monica has graced the stages at a prominent level. But as her father was empowering women around the world, who was empowering Monica to achieve such prominence? Monica's Russian-born mother, Vera Yunus.

Monica's parents separated when she was only 4-months-old and it has been her strong upbringing, steeped in her mother's Russian heritage, that has provided Monica the fortitude to navigate her life with such ambition and to pioneer her career. When Vera discovered Monica's talent for singing at a very early age, there was no stopping the undying support she gave her daughter.

Vera was born in Russia. After World War II, she and her family migrated to Germany, where they resided in a camp in Hamburg in the hopes of beginning a new life. When Vera was 6, her family was sponsored to come to the United States. They set down roots in New Jersey and Vera's father went on to help create the Russian enclave that is still very vital in New Jersey.

Vera and Muhammad Yunus met at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. Vera received her master's degree in English and Russian literature and Muhammad fulfilled his Fulbright Scholarship and received his Ph.D. in economics.

Vera and Muhammad then returned to Muhammad's hometown of Chittagong in Bangladesh, where he soon became the head of the economics department at Chittagong University. A few years later, Monica was born.

How life can be so ironic and bittersweet! Vera and Muhammad separated and Vera returned to the United States with Monica. Vera says of her ex-husband: "He is very passionate and driven by his work."

Most of Vera's family lived in New Jersey; and between her family and the community of their Russian Orthodox Church, let's just say it took a village to raise an opera singer.

HER GRANDMOTHER'S VOICE

As a single mother looking to establish herself, Vera started teaching. Her mother would take care of Monica during the week and Vera would have her on the weekends. Monica's singing talent was discovered on the drives back and forth from her mother's house to her grandmother's house.

Vera says of her mother, "She had a beautiful voice, the kind of voice that, if it had been trained, could have been at Monica's caliber and this is where I believe Monica received her instrument." When Monica was a bit older, her grandmother took her to sing in the choir at their Russian Orthodox Church and that is where Monica began to blossom musically.

"The liturgy of our church services are entirely sung in Slavonic and are very compelling, much like an opera," Vera explains.

Monica grew up in Jackson, N.J. When she ►

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MULTICULTURAL HERITAGE: Far left, Monica with her Russian-born mother Vera. Left, Muhammad Yunus, the Bangladeshi economist who shot to global fame with his microcredit program for the poor. Though estranged from her father since she was a child, Monica says she shares many personality traits with the Nobel laureate.



MOHAMMED HATEF/SABA SAWA

◆ was in kindergarten, her teacher discovered Monica had perfect pitch – the ability to identify a musical note by name without the benefit of a reference note or to be able to sing a note that is the correct pitch without reference. When this was discovered, Vera knew Monica was destined for a career in singing.

Since Monica sang with her grandmother and within the community of the church, it seemed singing provided much more than a hobby. Singing became the covenant in Monica's family. It was their salvation and the expression of their faith that, in turn, is the root of who they are.

"Singing and being involved in the church gave Monica a place in society that encompassed a cross-section of people of all ages and cultures. Singing in the church taught a certain discipline to Monica," Vera remarks.

Monica also went to Russian school on Saturdays and learned to read and write Russian and Slavonic.

When Monica was 11, Vera decided to start refining her singing talents. She found her daughter a voice teacher in Lakewood, N.J., and that same year, Monica auditioned and was accepted to the esteemed Metropolitan Opera Children's Chorus. That was Monica's first introduction to opera on stage.

A MOTHER'S INSPIRATION

Vera was the archetype of the dedicated mother in nurturing her daughter's interests. Saturdays were spent driving to her singing lessons, then to New York City for the children's chorus and back home again. Vera notes, "My life was hectic and I had to do a lot of things to nurture this talent, and now I can see it in full bloom."

At 13, Monica was accepted to the prestigious Tanglewood Music Center in Massachusetts, and this is where her eyes were opened to the profession of being a solo musician.

"I did not want to go to the Tanglewood audition, but also knew that if I did not get in, that I

would be crushed," Monica recalls.

Tanglewood is where she met people who truly shared her passion for classical music and this is where she was "bitten by the performance bug," so to speak. Then, from the age of 15, Monica spent five summers at the world-famous Aspen Music Festival, where she solidified her craft and became Juilliard bound.

For Monica, only the best will suffice when it comes to her career. I asked her if she ever wanted to pursue any other career in her life, and her reply was an unequivocal "no." Monica says, "I always knew that I wanted to sing as a career." She is one of those rare people who has known what she wanted to do with her life from a very early age and that is the only thing she has done.

Monica may even have been a prodigy of sorts. She said she tried to play other instruments and tried other activities throughout her childhood, but lost interest in them very quickly. She says she pursued what came naturally and what she did well.

I asked Monica what it is about opera that excites her. She exclaims, "Opera is an amazing mixture of music, drama and acting and is a real collaborative event. Music is just incredible."

Having known Monica for many years now, and having the opportunity to know her mother, too, it is easy to see why Monica is thriving. Not only does her opera career predicate her love of music and languages, it also reinforces her love of travel and her intrigue of the world and its cultures.

This love was sparked by Vera, who made sure Monica had the opportunity to travel and to experience other cultures. Vera often took her daughter abroad and helped her explore the world. Not only did Vera and her family provide undying support for Monica's endeavors, they also provided the financial backing. Vera says of her brother and her family, "They don't miss anything that Monica is doing with her life."

Vera is now a social worker for the state of ◆

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NOBEL TRIBUTE: Muhammad Yunus receives from Ole Danbolt Mjoes, chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize Committee, the Nobel medal and diploma at Oslo townhall in December.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JAYESH SAHSRANI

◆ New Jersey. I ask her what words of wisdom she gives Monica in times of struggle, and she replies, “I tell her to learn to stand on the ladder and then take the step up. There are certain levels of being, of consciousness, to move yourself forward. You can’t skip a rung on that ladder or you may slip and fall back to start.”

Vera says she comes from a line of strong Russian women and this is the strength that she imparts to Monica. She says, “Although Monica is a strong woman herself, she is also very giving and generous and very supporting of others.”

I ask Vera what it is like to watch her daughter perform. She says, “Watching Monica, I can see how much she grows and develops from performance to performance. I watch how she affects people and helps to release their emotions through her performing. I can’t imagine communicating to hundreds of thousands of people as she does when she sings at the Met, and that is the power of her voice. She is no longer my daughter; the artist comes out and I am in awe and I can see her as an artist.”

And on being her mother, Vera says, “Monica has been able to draw out so many characteristics in myself. Sometimes I had to rise to find the strength in myself to give her support. It is an empowerment that works both ways for a mother and a daughter. It is a living energy.”

Vera also says that she is very straight and honest with her daughter. She says, “It takes great courage to be frank with her, with her increasing stature in her career.” But mother-daughter relationships are strong and primal.

THE BENGALI SIDE

Monica says, for obvious reasons, her mother kept her Bengali side somewhat clandestine. She did not grow up with much influence from Muhammad Yunus. She knew of him and briefly saw him from time to time. Only in the last seven years has Monica really come to know her father.

A year ago, Monica’s father invited her to

accompany him on one of his many humanitarian trips. This trip was life-changing for Monica as she traveled back to Bangladesh, the country where she was born. Monica recalls as she stepped off the plane in Bangladesh, she was greeted with a red-carpet welcome. Throngs of her countrymen arrived to greet her literally with open arms. Monica remembers, “It seemed like the whole country was waiting for my arrival.”

“Yes, my dad is famous there, so maybe I was the curious daughter who finally came back, but it was more than that – they were proud of my accomplishments as an opera singer, that a Bangladeshi girl, their girl, was making a name for herself abroad – and that really touched me,” she says.

About her trip, she says, “And where do I start about Bangladesh? It’s a poor country, this we know. But somehow, people are happy. I thought going over there, that I wouldn’t be able to handle the extreme poverty, the hopelessness of it. But they aren’t hopeless. In fact, they are more full of life somehow.”

“I finally went to see first-hand a village where microcredit is operating,” she says. “The women’s faces were just shining. A few of them narrated the story of how, before Grameen, they had to beg to sleep under someone’s little piece of roof overhang. Now they had cows, now they had rickshaws, now they had dignity because they could provide for their families. Their children went to school, their daughters were in universities and not married with four children, their sons respected them, their husbands respected them. All this because of a loan ranging from \$15 to \$100!”

When Monica arrived in Bangladesh, it was as if she had found a missing piece of the puzzle. Because she is so steeped in her Russian heritage she says, “I just thought I was Russian.”

“Suddenly, I saw people who looked like me,” she says. Monica has known of her half-sister, Deena, from Muhammad Yunus’ second marriage. But she also discovered 26 cousins on ▶

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IN HER FATHER’S SHADOW: Monica and her father interact with Bangladeshi women who have made a successful livelihood from the credit they got from Grameen Bank, the brainchild of Muhammad Yunus.



◆ her father's side who she never knew seeing as she grew up with only two on her mother's side.

With regard to the ageless debate of nature vs. nurture, I ask Monica if she realizes she possesses any personality traits of her father. She remarks, "We are similar in the sense that we have strong organizational skills." And, of course, they both possess passionate ambition. Monica bares a strong resemblance to her father and one of her strong physical Bengali traits is her beautiful eyes.

Monica has performed Western classical music concerts for very curious audiences of her countrymen, and while in Bangladesh, she discovered the musical narratives, jatras. She says jatras are very comparable to opera.

This trip truly helped solidify this father-daughter relationship. Monica and her father now have had the opportunity to observe each other in their particular professional element and it seems they have garnered much respect and love for one another.

About Monica's fairly new relationship with her father, Vera spiritedly says, "While Yunus (Muhammad) was championing for world peace and got the Nobel Peace Prize, which is an amazing one-in-a-million feat, I got Monica to the Met!" Vera says in the light of these accomplishments, "Monica is up in the clouds about all of this. In the past seven years since she has been getting to know him, she is dazzled by the attention she is receiving."

Monica reiterates that although much of her father's work has empowered women, it has been her mother who has empowered her. Monica is proud of her new-found Bangladeshi culture: She has learned some Bengali and loves to wear saris, although she says she is still learning to wrap them properly.

See, Monica and I share sentiments as we are both children of intercultural marriages: Her mother is Russian and mine is Irish, her father Bangladeshi and mine Indian. We both remark that we are, bottom line, Americans. We may not walk in our saris as our native sisters do, but we bare striking physical resemblance to them. We may not speak fluent Bengali or Hindi, but we understand the beauty of these languages. We may not be able to pronounce South Asian names and words with the same flare a native speaker can, but we understand the uniqueness of our extraordinary cultures. Therefore, we appreciate who we are much more.

SING FOR HOPE

Monica has also been very inspired by her father's humanitarianism. As a result, she has recently become co-director of the charitable foundation Sing for Hope. Through a move that culminates both Yunuses' philanthropic missions, Monica has proudly brought her father on the board of directors of Sing for Hope.

Acclaimed opera singer Camille Zamora ►

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IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF BONO: Monica and alumni from the Juilliard School outside Lincoln Center in New York after their performance for Sing for Hope to raise funds for AIDS victims. Monica has been very involved with the charity organization founded by her friend Camille Zamora.

◆ created Sing for Hope: An Evening of Art Songs and Arias in 1995 in memory of her friend, Frank Logan, who spent his final days at Omega House AIDS Hospice in her hometown of Houston. The Sing for Hope annual benefit concert is now one of the country's largest AIDS benefits, having raised over a million dollars.

Zamora says of her friend and colleague: "Monica and I have been dear friends since our days together at Juilliard. ... I always really appreciated that Monica was intrigued by and supportive of the AIDS fundraising concert that I had founded."

After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Monica wanted to hold a fundraiser and turned to Zamora for guidance and advice. "We used the Houston AIDS concert model as kind of a template, re-creating its musical programming balance of light-hearted and more contemplative works," Zamora says.

The foundation was born from this and aims to unite and support artists who wish to create events that benefit humanitarian efforts. "Our motto is 'Uniting Artists, Uniting Communities,' and our mission is to enable artists to assist non-profit organizations and to reach out to communities in need," Zamora says.

"What I love about working with Monica is that she channels her father's humanitarian vision as well as her mother's incredible strength and determination, and adds to both a spark and a sense of humor all her own. As an artist and an activist, she leads by example, inspiring all around her."

During her travels in South Asia, Monica and her father visited disaster relief centers in Pakistan. She says the extreme need of the people she met there, coupled with their courage in the face of terrible odds, reaffirmed her commitment

to find a way to contribute through music.

About Sing for Hope, Monica says, "I see us doing perennial events. We want to build relationships with communities. My hopes are for more work with Bangladesh to create a cultural exchange and some musical outreach. I will always make time for my singing career and for Sing for Hope because they both go hand in hand. Sing for Hope gives me perspective on what my purpose is as a singer."

So in all of this dialogue about Monica's extraordinary endeavors, you may wonder if she partakes in anything that is, well, ordinary. What does Monica do when she is not performing all over the world and championing for humanity? When she does have time to sit down and take a breather, she likes to indulge in some of her favorite TV shows – "Grey's Anatomy" and "Desperate Housewives."

She shares a condominium in the New York City area with her companion, the wonderfully talented tenor, Brandon McReynolds.

PRIDE OF ALL BENGALIS

I ask Monica what her dreams and goals are, and she simply answers, "To continue singing, to watch Sing for Hope grow and to have a family." And on her father winning the Nobel Peace Prize, Monica says, "This is overwhelmingly the biggest prize you can possibly receive, and I am amazingly proud. This brings something great to the country for its millennium development goals. This is a mandate for all Bengali people to inspire them to do better. This is a great achievement and marks what other Bengalis should be proud of."

It seems that nowadays Monica has the best of both worlds. She has found empowerment from her mother and her father. And she will be the first one to say that she is very blessed.

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FOB: Monica and her father with President Bill Clinton at the Clinton Global Initiative in 2005 in New York. The former president and Senator Hillary Clinton refer to Muhammad Yunus as their friend and have visited him in Bangladesh.

MOHAMMED JAFER/SNAPS INDIA

