



THE ACCIDENTAL OPERA SINGER

HOW FORMER ALL-AMERICAN
LINEMAN MORRIS ROBINSON WENT
FROM PIGSKIN TO PUCCINI

WORDS BRUCE BRITT | PHOTOS MILLER MOBLEY

“IF I EVER AGAIN WAS IN
A POSITION TO DO
SOMETHING GREAT,
I WAS GOING TO BE GREAT AT IT.”

Welcome to this edition of Cadillac Magazine Playhouse. Today, in keeping with our editorial credo of “Dare Greatly,” we humbly submit the curious saga of classical singer Morris Robinson. It’s the true-life story of a former All-American football player who decides to embark on the mother of all life makeovers, pursuing a career in—opera. We would be remiss if we failed to mention that Mr. Robinson possessed limited classical music knowledge or experience when he first performed on an opera stage. It’s a story of chance, seized opportunities, and nose-to-the-grindstone determination that will put a song in your heart. So relax, pour a glass of your favorite libation, and enjoy this publishing production we call ... “Crash Course in Opera: The Morris Robinson Story!”

ACT 1: A HOMECOMING

OUR CURTAIN OPENS ON THE SILHOUETTE OF A BURLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN MAN.

He stands at a lectern adorned with the seal of The Citadel, the legendary U.S. military academy. The mystery man is Morris Robinson, world-renowned opera singer and Citadel alumnus. Dressed in a scholar’s gown, he addresses his alma mater’s class of 2017, his Gothic voice rolling through the crowd like a seismic wave.

“I stand before you today as the first African-American to ever address the corps cadets,” Robinson proudly informs the graduates. The room erupts in applause as the singer gazes heavenward, his nod to the Almighty for making this moment possible.

For Robinson, this Citadel homecoming is especially gratifying. One of the most acclaimed bass vocalists in opera today, Robinson wins more critical plaudits each year for his portrayals of classic opera roles, including the Grand Inquisitor in Verdi’s *Don Carlos*, Porgy in Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, and the Bonze in Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*. He has performed in

many of the world’s major opera houses, including Italy’s La Scala, New York’s Metropolitan Opera, and the Sydney Opera House. The *San Francisco Chronicle* has described Robinson as “shatteringly great,” while London’s *Globe and Mail* said Robinson’s voice is so deep, “it’s as if a vibration goes through the audience every time he opens his mouth.”

Robinson’s historic Citadel moment was made possible by a vow he made to himself during his own graduation year. It was the early ’90s, and the singer had glimpsed glory as a Citadel offensive lineman. Having made three All-America teams in his senior year, Robinson set his sights on making the pros. Finally, the day of reckoning arrived—his major league tryout.

“The scouts ran me, tested me, made me do all the lifting,” Robinson recalls. “But I ran slow, and at 6 feet 2 inches and 290 pounds, it just wasn’t gonna happen for me. That failure has probably driven me more than anything. I determined that if I ever again was in a position to do something great, I was going to be great at it.”

Robinson fulfilled that promise, becoming an exceptional employee at a few Fortune 500 tech companies, even named

Employee of the Year at one. The gigs came with the usual corporate perks—expense account, 401(k), etc. The 30-year-old was contented, save for a nagging feeling that life had something more exciting in store than selling thermoplastic elastomers. Fate was about to prove that suspicion correct.

ACT 2: SWING LOW, SWEET VOCAL CHORDS

OUR SPOTLIGHT SHINES ON A 9-YEAR-OLD BOY PLAYING DRUMS IN A CHURCH CHOIR, HIS INSISTENT RHYTHM PROVIDING THE FOUNDATION FOR A JUBILANT GOSPEL SONG.

This is young Morris Robinson at the dawn of his musical experience. The son of an Atlanta Baptist minister, Robinson’s musical education began at his dad’s church, and extended beyond to the secular sounds of R&B idols like Prince and James Brown. But opera? For most of his life, Robinson knew almost nothing about the celebrated European art form. He performed the Mozart *Requiem* while attending Atlanta’s High School of Performing Arts, but singing Mozart was his closest brush with opera. Despite this

unfamiliarity with Western art music, Robinson consistently received compliments on his voice, a subsonic rumble so colossal it made mundane requests like “please pass the salt” sound like heavenly decree. So, for giggles and spare cash, Robinson began singing at local events. “I knew I had a certain sound to my voice,” he says matter-of-factly.

In music parlance, Robinson is a “basso profundo,” the absolute lowest voice possible. But according to Grammy-winning classical conductor James Conlon, Robinson’s “dark, round” bass voice has the added distinction of being impressively pliant. “Morris is a basso profundo, but he is capable of singing up high as well,” says Conlon, who has directed Robinson in works by Mozart, Wagner, and more. “Some basso profundos get cut out of a certain amount of repertory, because their voices stop when they get too high. But Morris is strong [in the higher registers].”

In 1998, Robinson was plying his heroic voice at an event when he was approached by the director of Boston University’s Opera Institute. “She heard my voice and asked if I had



“THE FIRST OPERA I
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PORTRAYING THE KING OF EGYPT
AT THE BOSTON LYRIC OPERA.”

ACT 3: THE PRICE OF MASTERY

THE CURTAIN PARTS TO REVEAL A SCREEN PROJECTION OF THE LATE PAUL ROBESON, THE BASS SINGER WHOM MORRIS ROBINSON IS SOMETIMES COMPARED TO.

The similarities between the two are striking. Both Robeson and Robinson share the distinction of being preacher's sons, All-American football players, and celebrated singers (Robeson's 1928 performance of the classic show tune “Ol' Man River” remains the standard by which all subsequent interpretations are measured). “Our names are even similar,” Robinson notes.

Whether Robinson can scale the heights of his famed doppelgänger remains to be seen, but he certainly boasts the raw stuff that makes opera legends—i.e., innate talent, theatrical skill, and an instrument strong enough to negotiate the most challenging roles. “Morris possesses the voice and the instinct for the dramatic, absolutely,” says conductor Conlon. “You don't mistake him for anybody else, and this is the mark of a great operatic singer.”

Great voice notwithstanding, Robinson also possesses the requisite drive to succeed. Ever the businessman, he sometimes employs business terms, referring to himself as “the product,” while describing opera-goers as “the customer base.” Maestros love his concentration, which allows the singer to make turn-on-a-dime conducting adjustments, as well as his nuanced, drummer-like sense of timing. The latter could explain Robinson's adoration for rhythmic composers like Mozart and Beethoven. “When singing other composers, you can just let your voice fly,” Robinson explains, “but since Mozart and Beethoven incorporated a lot of syncopation, you actually have to play your instrument. You've got to have immaculate ‘pocket,’ and be right on the beat. That's why I enjoy working with their music.”

Toward his goal of absolute excellence, Robinson has committed himself to a life of continuing education. That has meant perfecting his languages, including German, French, Russian, Italian, Latin, and English. He's been known to leave his family for weeks on end, traveling abroad for immersion language courses. “The meticulous work one must put into becoming an international opera singer is incomprehensible

to most, but I've always liked excelling,” Robinson says. “That's just part of what I am.”

ACT 4: GREAT REWARDS

OUR CURTAIN RISES ON MORRIS ROBINSON, ALL SMILES BEHIND THE WHEEL OF HIS CADILLAC ESCALADE.

Robinson's insatiable thirst for excellence has afforded him a taste for the finer things—premium cigars, watches, and eyewear. He has a growing collection of custom-made ostrich and python cowboy boots, which he wears everywhere, even onstage. Naturally, the singer's insistence on quality extends to his automotive tastes. He is the latest in a long line of Robinson family Cadillac owners, with his parents and extended family having driven everything from vintage Cadillac Fleetwood Broughams to classic Coupe DeVilles. “To me, Cadillac is the epitome of American elegance, exemplified in the highest form of engineering,” Robinson says. “I think it surpasses all of its European competitors. There's just nothing like it.”

Just as destiny led Robinson to opera, so it seems his path was destined to cross with Cadillac. Both the man and the brand are virtuosos that share a mutual guiding philosophy of uncompromising integrity. Indeed, the singer speaks of his Escalade like a lover speaks of a soulmate. “My Escalade matches my personality,” Robinson says. “I could go into the 'hood right now, and no one would ever guess that I'm an opera singer, because I can get on the court, talk smack, bang down low, and all that stuff. I see that same dichotomy in my Escalade. When you sit in an Escalade, you just glide down the highway, like you're on air. Sometimes, I get so caught up in the luxuriousness of it, that I forget it's really this rugged SUV with four-wheel drive.”

And that, ladies and gentlemen, concludes our story. We'll leave you to judge whether Robinson's high-flying saga qualifies as dramatic opera seria, or farcical opera buffa. But while serendipity may have gotten the singer's foot in the door, Robinson's lasting success can only be attributed to genuine talent and formidable dedication. Or, as the virtuoso himself says: “I've been in opera 18 years now. If this is a fluke, it's one hell of a masquerade.” 🍷



ever thought about singing opera,” Robinson recalls. “I said, ‘Not really.’ She said a voice like mine was really suited for opera, and she encouraged me to try out for their program.”

Here it was—Robinson's chance to “do something great again,” as he vowed he would back in 1991. But redemption wouldn't come easy. To be accepted into the Boston U opera program, the monolingual sales manager would have to learn five arias in three different languages in four months. It was a long shot, but he jumped at the opportunity, summoning every ounce of discipline gleaned from his devout Baptist parents and The Citadel. He purchased essential recordings and textbooks, reviewing them every minute possible. He also sprang for personal voice, language, and diction coaches.

The homework paid off. Robinson aced his Boston U audition, joining an elite group of 12 singers accepted into the opera program. But Robinson didn't merely adapt; he thrived. Just three weeks into his studies, he performed for celebrated conductor and former Boston Lyric Opera music director Stephen Lord. “It was in a church basement,” Lord vividly recalls.

“Morris walks in, and I said, ‘OK, what are you going to sing?’ And he sang, and I said, ‘Oh, my God!’ The one thing we all look for in a singer is that certain something that reaches out and compels you to listen. Morris had that something.”

Lord was so impressed that he offered Robinson a coveted role, casting him as the King of Egypt in the Boston Lyric's production of Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*. And just like that, Robinson went from being a face in the crowd to up-and-coming opera star. Lest the incredibleness of this accomplishment be lost on you, bear in mind that the Boston Lyric is the crown jewel of New England opera companies. Most singers who perform with the Lyric have studied classical music since they were pups, like purebreds being groomed for Triple Crown competition. For a 30-year-old jock to stumble in and earn a coveted lead role is almost inconceivable. Today, some 18 years later, Robinson himself still seems stunned by his accomplishment. “The first opera I ever saw, I was standing onstage portraying the King of Egypt at the Boston Lyric Opera,” he says, stifling devilish laughter.