

We asked each of this year's Mary Ragland Young Artists some questions about themselves. If you have questions for them, e-mail Kelly at kclaus@nashvilleopera.org.

DAVID SCHMIDT, BARITONE

Mr. Bigbad in *Little Red's Most Unusual Day*

How old will you be when we start the tour? (Feb 06) 32

When is your birthday? September 26

Were you named after someone? No

Where do you live? New York

How many siblings do you have? 2 sisters

Do you have any pets? We have two family dogs, Torpa and Bear.

Did you play any sports growing up? Soccer, basketball, track, and cross country

Where is the neatest/weirdest/farthest place you've ever been? Alaska and Prague

What do you do for fun other than singing? Ride my bike, hike, read

What's your favorite...

Food? (And least favorite too) Favorite: Lasagna. Least favorite: snails

Movie? You Can't Take it With You

Color? Green

Singer? (on the radio) Bare Naked Ladies

Song? (on the radio) Ask Uncle Elwyn

Holiday? (and why?) Christmas, the miracle of Christmas, it's cold out, fires in the fireplace, family.

Sports team? Red Sox

Class in school? Music theater workshop

Pick your favorite:

Spongebob Squarepants or Harry Potter? Harry Potter

Hillary Duff or Lindsay Lohan? Hillary Duff

Backstreet Boys or NSYNC? neither

What did you want to be when you grew up? Pilot

How did you start loving opera? Did you ever see one as a kid? Listening to pavarotti and singing along. I love the passion and the physical demands of singing and the way it feels when you get it right.

Do you have a musical family? They appreciate music, but none of them are musicians

How old were you when you first knew you wanted to be a singer? I was always interested in singing, but put more focus on it my junior year of high school

Where did you go to school to learn about music? St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN and the Fletcher Opera Institute at NC School of the Arts

How old were you when you performed your first role? My stage debut was as the white rabbit in 6th grade, it was then that my mom knew I would be a performer. First opera role - 20 years old.

What is your favorite opera? La Boheme

Have you ever met any famous singers? Dawn Upshaw, Renee Fleming, Ben Hepner, Duane Croft

JOHN TIRANNO, TENOR

Forest Ranger Dudley in *Little Red's Most Unusual Day*

How old will you be when we start the tour? (Feb 06) 29

When's your birthday? March 16

Were you named after someone? My grandfather is also John, and my father's middle name is John, but there is not a lineage.

Where do you live? New York City

How many siblings do you have? One sister

Do you have any pets? No

Did you play any sports growing up? Baseball, tennis and later on golf

Where's the neatest/weirdest/farthest place you've ever been? The farthest place I have been is Italy.

What do you do for fun other than singing? WATCH AND OBSESS OVER FOOTBALL

What's your favorite...

Food? (And least favorite too) Favorite is pizza, least favorite is mushrooms

Movie? The Godfather

Color? Blue

Singer? (on the radio) Honestly, I don't have one.

Song? (on the radio) (Same as above)...sorry

Holiday? (and why?) Christams, because of the gifts.

Sports team? Buffalo Bills, Buffalo Sabres, New York Yankees

Class in school? Music

Pick your favorite:

Spongebob Squarepants or Harry Potter? Spongebob, I guess

Hillary Duff or Lindsay Lohan? Lindsay Lohan (Coin flip)

Backstreet Boys or NSYNC? Neil Diamond

What did you want to be when you grew up? A baseball player

How did you start loving opera? Did you ever see one as a kid? I started loving opera once I got to college. I did not see an opera as a kid.

Do you have a musical family? Not really...my sister played cello for a while, but that's about it.

How old were you when you first knew you wanted to be a singer? I always liked to sing as a kid, but when I discovered I was a good singer in high school, I decided to go to college to be a singer.

Where did you go to school to learn about music? I went to S.U.N.Y. College at Fredonia for my undergraduate degree, and West Virginia University for a masters degree.

How old were you when you performed your first role? I was 21 when I performed my first opera leading role.

What is your favorite opera? Tosca

Have you ever met any famous singers? Renee Fleming

BRIANNE JOY SURA, MEZZO-SOPRANO

Granny/Mom in *Little Red's Most Unusual Day*

How old will you be when we start the tour? (Feb 06) 26

When's your birthday? May 11

Were you named after someone? My middle name, Joy, comes from my moms great Aunt

Where do you live? Sugar Creek, Wisconsin

How many siblings do you have? 3, 1 little bro, 2 big sisters

Do you have any pets? An African Water Frog and 2 Guinea Pigs

Did you play any sports growing up? Basketball and Soccer all the way through College

Where's the neatest/weirdest/farthest place you've ever been? neatest-Italy, weirdest-cheerleading camp, farthest-Czech Republic

What do you for fun other than singing? I play on an indoor soccer team, I go kayaking on the Fox River

What's your favorite?

Food? (And least favorite too) Favorite - cheese (hey, I am from Wisconsin!), least favorite - sweet pickles

Movie? Shawshank Redemption

Color? Green and Pink

Singer? (on the radio) Van Morrison and Norah Jones

Song? (on the radio) currently, "As good as I once was" by Toby Keith

Holiday? (and why?) Thanksgiving because all you have to do is eat a lot of good food and spend time with family-plus, I love Pumpkin Pie

Sports team? Green Bay Packers

Class in school? English

Pick your favorite:

Spongebob Squarepants or Harry Potter? Spongebob!!

Hillary Duff or Lindsay Lohan? Oh geez, um, Lindsay Lohan

Backstreet Boys or NSYNC? which is which? NSYNC, I guess!

What did you want to be when you grew up? A Marine Biologist or a soccer player

How did you start loving opera? Did you ever see one as a kid? In College I sang in my first opera and really loved the plot and music. I never saw one as a kid, but my parents took me to musicals like Les Miserables and Evita and I loved them.

Do you have a musical family? Yes, my sister is also an opera singer and my uncle was a famous trumpet player

How old were you when you first knew you wanted to be a singer? I started taking voice lessons when I was 14 because my older sister was taking lessons. After awhile I started singing solos at school and I really liked it so I decided to study music in College.

Where did you go to school to learn about music? Carroll College and the Cleveland Institute of Music

How old were you when you performed your first role? 19 years old (I was Adele in Die Fledermaus)

What is your favorite opera? Dialogues of the Carmelites and Turandot

Have you ever met any famous singers? yes, I've met a lot of opera singers like Debbie Voigt, Jane Dutton, Brenda Harris and Thomas Quastoff, but I also met Neil McCoy at a Country Fest over the summer!

CRYSTAL MALULANI STROUP, SOPRANO

Little Red in *Little Red's Most Unusual Day*

How old will you be when we start the tour? (Feb 06) 24

When's your birthday? June 4, 1981

Were you named after someone? No, but there is a really cool story behind my middle name, Malulani. It's Hawaiian, and it means "under Heaven's protection." See, my dad was born in Hawaii, and he always wanted to give his child a Hawaiian name of some kind. When my mom was pregnant, she became very sick – so sick that she couldn't get out of bed for 5 months. The doctors couldn't figure out what was going on, so they thought that something was wrong with me. With all that going on, my parents were very worried, so they decided that I needed to be given a special name, hoping that I would be alright. As it turns out, I wasn't sick at all, it was my mom, and she had to be put in intensive care for a month after I was born. Heaven must have been watching out for me after all.

Where do you live? I'm originally from Mount Holly, North Carolina – a little city right outside of Charlotte – but lately I've been living wherever I go to school or work. Hopefully, I'll move to New York City sometime within the next year, or wherever I get another singing job.

How many siblings do you have? None, I'm an only child. But I did always want a little sister – now I have a cousin whose almost 8, and he's kinda like a little brother.

Do you have any pets? Right now I share a lovebird named Peaches with my parents, but I LOVE animals and have had tons of pets throughout my life. When I was little, we had 2 guinea pigs, 5 cockatiels, 2 parakeets, 7 fish, a Sheltie named Sassy, and, at one time, about 400 rabbits – we raised dwarfs and lops, breeding them and taking them to shows around the country. I had an albino lop that my parents let me keep as a pet – I named her Crystal, pretty original, huh?! Not that long ago, I had another Sheltie named Alle, short for Allegra, which means "lively" or "frisky" in Italian (both of my doggies died of cancer, but they got to live long, happy lives – they were both about 12 when they died).

Did you play any sports growing up? I wanted to play sports – I was really good at basketball, and I enjoyed softball and running – but I competed in pageants and danced when I was younger, so I spent (on a slow week) about five nights out of seven, plus a lot of weekends, doing stuff with that, which didn't leave much time for sports, other than for fun. Now, I like to play racquetball and volleyball – and sometimes I think that opera could be considered a sport, depending on how much activity you do onstage, because you definitely have to be in shape and go through lots of training, just like athletes, but I'm sure most people would laugh in my face if I told them that (so it's kind of a secret).

Where's the neatest/weirdest/farthest place you've ever been? For me, the neatest place I've ever been is Hawaii. I think it's one of the most beautiful places on Earth, and I hope to someday have a home there, since I've always felt very connected to the Islands because of my father and my middle name. The weirdest place I've ever been is in a haunted parking lot in Charleston, South Carolina. I was on a haunted tour of the city, and we had these "ghost detectors." I thought it was pretty corny, especially since nothing was happening, but when we entered this parking lot (which used to be a graveyard beside of a river that was used as a sort of disposal system for bodies, to put it nicely), mine started going crazy, beeping and flashing, and didn't stop until we exited the other side of the lot. I was TOTALLY freaked out!!! Now, about the farthest place I've ever been – I've never really calculated it, but I've been to Hawaii and to Europe (England, France, Italy, Austria, Czech Republic, and Hungary), but there are still tons of places I want to go (like Alaska, California, Australia and New Zealand, Fiji, and Egypt, just to name a few).

What do you do for fun other than singing? I absolutely LOVE reading, and I have ever since I first learned. My favorite books right now, without question, are the whole Harry Potter series. I've read them over and over again, and I just can't get enough. (Speaking of, as I'm typing this, tomorrow night is the big party for the release of the new book, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, and I am so excited about it, I can barely stand it!!!) I'm also sort of a movie-buff, and I still like to dance whenever I can. Traveling has always been one of my favorite things to do, whether it's just driving around to no place in particular or flying across the globe. I also really, really love playing with my little cousin, and training our lovebird (she now wants to spend every second of every day chewing my hair and climbing all over me).

What's your favorite...

Food? (And least favorite too) My favorite food, EVER, is ice cream. I don't really have a favorite flavor, there are just too many to choose from, but I do enjoy Cookies 'N Cream, Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough, and Ben & Jerry's Half Baked. My least favorite, no questions asked, is brussel sprouts (a close second is black licorice... YUCK). I tried them once when I was much younger, and have not been able to stomach them since.

Movie? This is one I've never really been able to figure out... I just love movies. I do really enjoy Disney movies, they are just so creative and fun. My favorite one of those is Sleeping Beauty, because I know Mary Costa, the voice of Aurora, and Maleficent is just such a great villain, and then the three fairies are so adorable, and Prince Philip, now there's a prince... well, you get the point.

Color? Green, especially the bright "kelly" greens, it's just a happy, feel good color; my second favorite would have to be orange... go VOLS!!!

Singer? (on the radio) The lead singer of Evanescence, she's just got a nice, mellow voice – and I love the fact that I can really sing along with their music (and not sound like an opera singer all the time). I also like Gretchen Wilson and Faith Hill in the country world – and even though she isn't as popular on the radio now, I still love Celine Dion. There's just something about her voice that is so unique and touching, and she sings and performs with such heart; I love that.

Song? (on the radio) Currently, "Switch" by Will Smith, but it changes a lot, since I listen to a lot on the radio (one of my last favorites was "Redneck Woman" by Gretchen Wilson). Anyway, every time I hear that song it makes me want to get up and dance. Whenever it's on the radio I crank up the volume, open my sunroof, dance around (as much as possible when driving), and sing along.

Holiday? (and why?) This is a new revelation for me... if you had asked me that question not too long ago, I would have said Christmas, but recently, I've changed my mind. I would have to say, as weird as it sounds, that my new favorite holiday is July 4th, Independence Day. Of course I love fireworks and cook-outs and ice cream and warm summer weather and all the fantastic celebrations, but this year, for some reason, it really hit me – how lucky I am to live in America and to be free, even though we argue about it and often deny or abuse it. The world can be a very dark and dreary place, and there are so many who don't understand true freedom, simply because they have been oppressed for so long, they know nothing else. With so much fear and violence across the globe, and even at home, at least I know that I am living my life, and it is mine, because other before me have believed in freedom and given their words, their hearts, and their lives to protect it.

Sports team? The Tennessee Volunteers, of course!!! Now, whether it's football or Lady Vols basketball, that's another story – I'm just glad they're different seasons.

Class in school? VOICE!!! Seriously, at UT, I had the most incredible teacher, one of my favorite people in the whole world, and I loved every second of every voice lesson. I will definitely miss those, and my teacher. Now, when I was in high school, my favorite class was usually English, because I loved reading and exploring the depths of meaning in the written, and spoken, word.

Pick your favorite:

Spongebob Squarepants or Harry Potter? You would have to ask this question, wouldn't you?! I am huge fan of both SpongeBob and Harry Potter. I own almost all the SpongeBob cartoons on DVD, and I have SpongeBob pajamas and a few other little trinkets with the little yellow guy on them. But, without a doubt, Harry Potter wins this contest. My Harry Potter collection includes, but is definitely not limited to: all the books (including Quidditch Through the Ages and Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, plus 2 pop-up books and the first 2 deluxe, leather-bound editions), all the DVDs, about 5 shirts, pajamas, socks, 4 watches, all the Department 56 "Secret Boxes" that come with a little charm inside, the official scarf/gloves/hat set, all the sets of official British Harry Potter coins, a little plush Hedwig and Hermione, 3 picture frames, the complete set of Hogwarts, Hagrid's Hut, and the Quidditch Field figures that have motion-activated lights and sounds, a Golden Snitch antenna topper, and – my special good luck charm – my Harry Potter gold coin necklace. Yes, in case you haven't figured it out, I LOVE HARRY POTTER. (It's just a great childhood indulgence – even my dad reads them, the only books he's read since he graduated from college I might add.)

Hillary Duff or Lindsay Lohan? Lindsay Lohan. Hillary Duff is a little too sweet and sugary for my taste – to me, she just comes across as fake. I first started liking Lindsay in the remake of "The Parent Trap" (although the Haley Mills and Maureen O'Hara version is still the better of the two), but I also really enjoy "Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen," and "Mean Girls." Lindsay just seems a little more human – she makes mistakes, she's not afraid to speak her mind, she's beautiful, and I think her music is fun.

Backstreet Boys or NSYNC? Neither. When I was in high school, I would have said the Backstreet Boys, and I got one of their CDs my freshman year in college as a present, but now, I don't really like either of them – especially since they aren't making much music anymore. I think they sound whiny and, unfortunately for them, a little pathetic; personally, I'm glad that the boy bands seem to have been a fad that phased out none too soon.

What did you want to be when you grew up? Now that's a loaded question if I ever heard one. I've had many career aspirations, but I suppose I'll hit the biggest, and the most interesting, ones. My first goal, from around preschool to 2nd grade, was to be a cheerleader when I grew up – I was a really good dancer and always wanted to make the squad, but never did (until I was a sophomore in high school, which changed my life goals in record time). Then, until junior high, I wanted more than anything to be a veterinarian. I had tons of pets, and adored animals – training them, grooming them, playing with them, and taking care of them – but then I realized that I would also have to deal with very baldy hurt and sick animals, and I knew that would break my heart. So, I took a break from serious ambition for awhile, but there was one dream that I had never really let go of, and that was to be a singer. My parents had taken me to New York when I was ten, where we saw *Phantom of the Opera*, and I decided then that I wanted to be a part of that incredible world that I saw onstage – I could dance and act, but there was a slight problem... I was a horrible singer. I was so bad that my parents would ask me to stop singing along with the radio, and my dad lovingly told me that I couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. So, I wanted to sing with all my heart, but I put that off, waiting for a miracle, and instead decided that I wanted to pursue one of two careers, law or genetics. Senior year came, and to make a super long story short, a few miracles happened in my life, and I sent out my college applications: Princeton for academics – UNCG and Florida State for music – Furman and Rice to split the middle of the fields. Luckily, I received a full ride, plus some, to UNCG, and it was a lot closer to home than New Jersey, so I decided that I would pursue music, which leads almost directly into my next response...

How did you start loving opera? Did you ever see one as a kid? Growing up I didn't know anything about singing (except from the radio and the few musicals I saw, like *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, and *Les Miserables*), let alone opera and whether or not I would love it. The first opera I saw was Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* at Opera Carolina, fall semester my freshman year, and I knew, the moment the curtain went down, THAT was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. *Susannah* carries such a powerful message, and the whole story hits pretty close to home, as I'm from a small Southern town with some interesting societal standards and well-established gossip circles that often abuse their power with damaging results: I think it was probably the perfect show to open my eyes to the amazing world of opera with all its drama, pageantry, passion, and absolute beauty – and I've never looked back since.

Do you have a musical family? Hmm, lemme think, yeah, I would definitely have to say... NO. I've had a few family members to play instruments in junior high and high school, and song has always figured strongly into my family's heritage, but in a more spiritual and folksy manner (i.e. you don't have to be good, and most of them aren't, you just enjoy what you do). This very topic is usually the talk of all the family, both immediate and extended, "Where did Crystal get such a voice and learn to move and act that way?" It's quite an anomaly, to be completely honest, but I suppose that something in the gene pool finally clicked and created me – a late-blooming, but ardently dreaming, singer.

How old were you when you first knew you wanted to be a singer? Since I don't want to be repetitive, just refer to the questions about what I wanted to be when I grew up and when I saw my first opera. However, to elaborate a little more, when I first saw *Phantom*, I'm not sure what exactly it was that made me yearn to be on the stage, but I think some of it was, even at the ripe age of ten, I could sense the emotional power of a performer's connection with their audience, and I wanted to be able to experience that incredible sensation and be able to give something of myself to people in the hopes that they would somehow be touched or inspired. That's when I knew I wanted to be a singer, but it wasn't until I was about 16 or 17 that I even began to imagine that something of my dreams could possibly come true.

Where did you go to school to learn about music? I first started learning about music when I took piano lessons for about 6 years in late elementary school and junior high, then I started playing the flute in band, so I learned even more about music there and in my private flute lessons. My ninth grade year I joined a local church youth choir to be with friends, and also because I had always wanted to be able to sing, then I moved into school concert choir in my eleventh grade year. I took one year of private voice lessons before I went to college at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. I studied voice performance there for four years, graduated with honors earning my Bachelors of Music, then went to the University of Tennessee Knoxville and got my Masters of Music in voice performance.

How old were you when you performed your first role? I guess this depends on what one thinks of as their first role. The first time I was ever onstage in an opera was my sophomore year at UNCG, when I was in the chorus of *Amahl and the Night Visitors* – I was 19 then. I got my first named part in the spring of 2001, also my sophomore year, when I performed as a Violin Student and Can-Can Dancer in *Orpheus in the Underworld* – I was still 19. Yet I consider my first real role to be the first major role that I performed, which would be the title role of *Susannah*, my first year of my graduate studies at UT, November 2003 (which, of course, only added to the fact I love the show so much) – then I was 22.

What is your favorite opera? *Susannah* by Carlisle Floyd, for all the reasons that I mentioned before, and for so many more that I can't even begin to fathom for myself, much less describe to someone else.

Have you ever met any famous singers? I really, really wish that I could say I've met some ultra-famous singer, but to this date, I haven't. I've seen a few in concert or on-stage (my favorite being Renée Fleming), but never met them in person. I know lots of fantastic singers, some who have had or are on the verge of amazing careers, and some people might consider them famous to a degree, but not famous by society's definition. Oh, I did meet and perform in a little concert/dinner show in Hawaii with Charo when I was eight, but most people to whom I mention that have no clue who Charo even is, so I don't know if that counts.