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Bass-baritone Keith Miller performs with Metropolitan Opera. (photo from Blackman Rakowitz Public Relations)

When University of Colorado football player Keith Miller took his girlfriend to see “The Phantom of the Opera,” he left under the phantom’s spell.

“The lights, the chandelier pulling up all the audience, it was everything combined,” Miller says. “I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, this is so cool.’ I had no idea this stuff went on.”

His interest became a dream, which turned to passion, which fueled a career. Today, the former Arena Football League fullback is a professional bass-baritone who sings with the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. He’ll be the featured guest this weekend at the University of Central Florida’s first Opera Scholarship Festival.

It has been quite a journey for Miller, 37, who grew up in the tiny town of Ovid, Colo., but now lives in New York City with his wife, Sage Salzer.

They've been married almost a year — she's not the young woman he took to "Phantom" all those years ago.

"I move faster than that," he says, laughing.

After seeing "Phantom," Miller taught himself to read music by copying piano and vocal scores. He sang along with soundtracks such as "Beauty and the Beast" and "Les Misérables."

Finding his range took some time. "Even pop songs are done by tenors. I couldn't match pitch," he says. "There was no way I could sing that high. I thought, 'OK, I'm not a singer.'"



Keith Miller was a football player before he was swayed by the Phantom's "music of the night." (photo from Blackman Rakowitz Public Relations)

But his football ethic helped: Practice, practice, practice. "The more you do it, the more you're able to do it," he says.

Listening to the Three Tenors — Plácido Domingo, José Carreras and Luciano Pavarotti — introduced him to opera.

And then he saw “Don Giovanni.”

“I was blown away again,” Miller says. “This amazing music, this powerful story.”

During this exploratory period, he was playing professional football. His teammates weren’t sure what to make of Miller’s fine-arts interests.

“They thought I was crazy,” Miller says. “They’d all be listening to heavy metal or rap to get psyched up for the game.” He had his show tunes, arias or classical music: “It really helped, it’s calming, there’s a focus to it.”

He stuck with football for five years, but by 2001 the grind was getting to him, as well as the physical realities.

“You never knew where you’d be from one year to the next,” he said of the arena league. “I thought, I’ve got maybe two years left in my legs, so what can I do?”

The dream became a calling.

He walked into an open audition with no music, no head shot, no experience — and received offers from four opera companies.

Miller was soon studying at Philadelphia’s Academy of Vocal Arts and in 2006 made his debut with the Metropolitan Opera. He has since sung in nearly 200 Met performances, as well as appearing with the Washington National Opera, Portland (Ore.) Opera and Florida Grand Opera in Miami.

The critics noticed his voice — but also his still-athletic frame. Six feet tall, Miller has lost some bulk since his football days but still weighs in at more than 200 muscular pounds.

Opera News hailed his “smoldering presence and sharp, booming delivery” and called him an “artist to watch.” In a New York Times review of the Met’s “Carmen” Karen Schweitzer wrote, “The bass-baritone Keith Miller brought an imposing stage presence and strong voice to the role of Zuniga, the menacing captain.”

Director Mary Zimmerman cast him as the head demon of hell in the Met’s “Armida,” in part because of his physical prowess.

“He clearly brings more physicality than the average opera singer,” Zimmerman says. “He’s doing things that normally dancers, not opera singers, would do.”

Miller says his athletic background helps him in another key way: Stamina. He compares completing a grueling vocal performance to surviving the drills used in an intense football practice. “You figure out how to get up off the ground and finish those sprints,” he says.

Miller has founded a training program for students that stresses physical fitness along with vocal instruction. He says staying in shape is crucial as opera moves toward more showy presentations.

“It’s frustrating for a group of people not known for being physically active,” he says. “But they can work on their [vocal] technique while their body is being put under physical duress.”

Then, he says, when the high note seems impossible to reach, “you can go that reserve tank of emergency fortitude and pull yourself through.”

See for yourself

- **What:** University of Central Florida’s first Opera Scholarship Festival
- **When:** Friday and Saturday, March 25-26
- **Recital by Keith Miller:** 7:30 p.m. Friday, Trinity Preparatory School Auditorium, 5700 Trinity Prep Lane, Winter Park
- **Master Class with Miller and UCF students:** Noon Saturday, Trinity Preparatory School Auditorium
- **Reception with Miller:** 3-5 p.m. Saturday, hosted by the Brand family, 1521 W. Ivanhoe Blvd., Orlando
- **Tickets:** \$100 for all three events; \$60 for recital and master class; \$45 for recital only; \$20 for master class only; UCF students pay \$15 for recital, master class is free for them
- **More information:** <http://music.ucf.edu/opera.php> or call 407-823-2869