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Steve Kelley

## Ex-fullback becomes an opera star

Keith Miller's latest gig is playing the role of Sarastro in "The Magic Flute" at McCaw Hall in Seattle.



Steve Kelley

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Two bags were packed as Keith Miller waited for the phone call from the Denver Broncos. If they invited him to training camp in Greeley, Colo., Miller was taking one bag and heading west.

If Denver decided against signing him, Miller was leaving Minneapolis and heading east, to the Pine Mountain Music Festival in Hancock, Mich., where, after a successful audition, he was invited to make his professional singing debut.

Miller liked his chances with the Broncos. A former fullback at Colorado, he had played in the XFL and in the arena league. He worked out for both Denver and Oakland,

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and believed he'd made an impression on the Broncos.

"I knew I could play," Miller said Tuesday, sitting in an apartment on Lower Queen Anne. "But it's a fact, sometimes you get your call and sometimes you don't. You accept that."

At the time, he felt more prepared to play fullback than he did to sing opera. He wanted the chance. But on a summer day in 2002, the Denver Broncos determined the direction Miller's life would take.

"Opera Man," said Broncos scout Chris Trulove when Miller answered the phone. Nothing else needed to be said.

"It sucked," Miller said. "I had a great workout with them, but at the same time, I had an opportunity to do something else. I went east."

Miller grew up in the small farming town of Ovid, Colo., population 350. His high school played six-man football. It won three straight state championships and, in his senior season, Miller said he scored a touchdown on the first play of every game.

Colorado, Indiana and Wyoming showed interest in Miller. He chose Colorado and was part of the team in 1994 when Kordell Stewart threw the historic, 64-yard game-winning touchdown pass to Michael Westbrook that beat Michigan and hushed the crowd of more than 100,000 inside Michigan Stadium.

Miller said that game was transformative.

"To be a part of a game like that changes the whole character of your life," he said. "To know what can happen if you put that kind of work into something, it wasn't just a Hail Mary. We practiced that play every single day. It was the last play we did before every practice, the day before the game.

"It was probably the only thing I respected him for, but (then-Colorado quarterbacks coach) Rick Neuheisel walked right down the sidelines and he said, 'There's no way in hell we're going to lose this game.' We had that feeling that there was nothing that was going to stop us. To be down like that and still know you're going to win is something that you never forget."

Miller, who is making his Seattle Opera debut in the role of Sarastro in "The Magic Flute," which runs through May 21 at McCaw Hall, has used the lessons learned from that game to help him succeed in opera.

He has a self-belief that is as powerful as his deep, bass-baritone voice. He has a smoldering stage presence that is the stuff of stardom.

At 37, he still looks as if he could open holes for Stewart to sprint through. And, as the good Sarastro, he stalks the stage with the confidence of Don Giovanni. In his second aria he hits a low F that sounds somewhere between thunder and the end of the world.

"That confidence that I got (in the Michigan game) is what you need as a singer," he said. "Even in 'The Magic Flute,' at the beginning of the second act, I sing this aria and you walk out and there is this group of men and you have to be this leader among men. You have to have the confidence to assume that role."

When he was young, Miller's parents bought him the Best of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart albums. He would listen to them every once in a while, when he wanted to feel urbane.

"My focus on sports was so intense and driven that I needed something to balance it out," he said. "Classical music just seemed to fit."

Soon after the win over Michigan, Miller, who played in the Fiesta and Cotton bowls for Colorado, took his girlfriend to a production of Phantom of the Opera and slowly his life began to evolve.

"I was just blown away," he said. "The fire and the smoke and lights and the story really got me."

He began buying CDs like "Beauty and the Beast" and "Les Miserables." He said he felt like "doors were opening up" to him. Miller rented Three Tenors and remembers the look of power on Luciano Pavarotti's face when he finished the last note. It was like a linebacker's look after a sack.

"I wondered how that could make me feel the same way that I felt standing on the field in front of 110,000 people after we'd just snatched victory from the jaws of defeat at Michigan," Miller said. "I wondered what was going on here."

He went to Colorado's music library wearing his letter jacket, and the librarian asked him what he was doing there. When Miller told him, the librarian gave him Mozart's Don Giovanni, which begins with the kind of low voices that can rumble the floorboards.

"It was the story of this defiant man who goes to Hell and just the music and the swelling. It was something I'd never heard before," Miller said. "I don't know. It made you feel like you were a Gladiator again."

Like a prized draft pick, Miller slowly has worked his way through opera's farm system. He taught himself to read music. He attended the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia. He sang wherever he could find parts. No role was too small. No house too obscure.

In 2006, Miller, who will sing the national anthem at the May 19 Mariners game, made his debut at The Met on opening night of the Anthony Minghella staging of "Madame Butterfly," which is like starting your major-league career in center field at Yankee Stadium in the World Series.

His career is making the slow, steady progress that he began charting for himself in 2002. He has performed more than 200 times for The Met. He debuted at the Washington National Opera this year and is singing in Carmen this summer at New York's Glimmerglass Festival. Because of his commitment to fitness, Miller doesn't expect to hit his prime for another 20 years.

The founder of the Puissance (French for power) Institute, a fitness program designed for singers located at the Crested Butte Festival, Miller is the perfect prototype for the new look of opera. The era of the great, overweight singers like Pavarotti is disappearing. In the new hi-definition world of performance, it is as important to look good as it is to sound good.

"You need physical strength to survive," Miller said.

With apologies to former Washington Bullets coach Dick Motta, now the opera often is over before the fat person sings. In fact, there may not be a fat person on stage.

Keith Miller is the new face of opera. "Opera Man" has found his place.

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