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GARY EICHTEEN: Thanks, Greta. Six minutes now past 12:00. And welcome back to Midday here on Minnesota Public Radio. I'm Gary Eichten. It's been said that Minnesota is the land of sopranos. And tonight and tomorrow night, folks in the Twin Cities will have an opportunity to hear one of the nation's very best sopranos, Minnesotan Maria Jette. She'll be giving two free concerts tonight and tomorrow night. She appears tonight at Lake Phalen in St. Paul. Tomorrow night at the Lake Harriet Bandshell in Minneapolis.

Both performances are with the Minnesota Sinfonia. Minnesota, it turns out, is Maria Jette's home base as she travels the nation singing classical music, American popular song, and much, much more. Minnesota Public Radio's Dan Olson spoke with Maria Jette earlier this week and prepared this Voices of Minnesota interview.

DAN OLSON: Maria Jette fears no music. She is at home performing art song.

(SINGING) Spring, sweet spring

Opera.

[OPERATIC VOCALIZING]

And jingles, where there are four of her.

[VOCALIZING]

(SINGING) Greetings from old Milwaukee

Yeah

Maria Jette's varied musical career includes a stint with the Baroque Opera Company that was artistically, if not financially successful, and with only occasional wardrobe failures.

MARIA JETTE: I will say he was not really a great tailor by nature. And I did have a bodice. I remember some boiling hot summertime production that was lined in duct tape. And I wouldn't recommend that to anyone. But I was young then, and so I had sweat to spare.

DAN OLSON: We'll hear Maria Jette's reflections on growing up, thoughts about music, and of course, we'll hear her sing. Maria Jette lives in Deephaven, a Western Twin Cities suburb. She was born in Estherville, Iowa. The family resettled in Dubuque. Then her father, who worked for a pharmaceutical company, was transferred to Karachi, Pakistan. And after that, to Johannesburg, South Africa. The family lived abroad for more than five years when Jette was a schoolgirl.

An expatriate child living abroad. What did that teach you? What values did that give you?

MARIA JETTE: A strange, mixed bag. That was in the '60s, and we were all hypernationalist as children, of course. And I, having been born in Iowa, was always really ecstatic when we had the Iowa tests of basic skills. I felt those were the tests of my countrymen. And we all just gave that poor Urdu teacher a terrible time when she was trying to teach us just a couple of words of the Native tongue. But we all ignored her.

And meanwhile, though, of course, you can't help but absorb a little bit of your surroundings as you are driven to school through mud villages and past the dead donkey that died on the construction site that's left to rot and look at kids your own age who are out performing their morning ablutions on the hillside. That, and also observing a Muslim country. I was raised as a Catholic kid.

DAN OLSON: And you came back after that to the United States, presumably during the unrest over the Vietnam War.

MARIA JETTE: That's right.

DAN OLSON: About that time.

MARIA JETTE: That's right.

DAN OLSON: In junior high, and then into high school years.

MARIA JETTE: Uh-huh, that's right.

DAN OLSON: Where did you return to? STOP

MARIA JETTE: First of all, after South Africa, which was another radical experience for a kid, an American kid, we went back to Indianapolis, which was the home, headquarters of Eli Lilly.

DAN OLSON: So jumping back to South Africa for just a moment. Total segregation while you were there, apartheid. And what did that mean for a kid?

MARIA JETTE: I'm so impressed that you pronounce apartheid properly.

DAN OLSON: Well, I've been practicing, because I knew you'd come.

[LAUGHS]

Challenge.

MARIA JETTE: As they would say, I think. Well, that was really an astonishing experience for a white middle class Catholic child, to be in a place where we lived in the lap of luxury, as so many white people did, with swimming pool and servants. And then meanwhile, observing how the lovely lady who came to do our laundry on Thursdays had to travel by bus something 30 miles from Soweto to the suburb of Bryanston. And a couple of times was stopped by the police on the road and told to give her papers. And then really had to give all her money and be bribing the police. It gave me a lot to think about.

DAN OLSON: How did your parents react to all this? Did they encourage you to make friends and integrate yourself with all of the people in South Africa?

MARIA JETTE: There was no integrating. I mean, the Blacks and whites lived totally separately. The only Black people that we ever really encountered were working for our family. But I could read the paper. And I remember reading an incident of a girl about my age in Cape Town-- we lived in Johannesburg-- who had pretty curly hair and fairly full lips.

And the neighbors suspected her of having Black blood. Reported to the authorities and wanted to have her go living with the townships. And I just thought, well, why are so many Black people letting so few white people push them around? You'd think there'd be some kind of revolution. And if I was thinking that at age 11, a lot of other people were thinking the same. But it was pretty fantastic to see that kind of segregation in action.

And then to come back to America, where we ostensibly had become a free society.

DAN OLSON: Had you already started your music training and singing and performing?

MARIA JETTE: No, not really. Although I always loved to sing. And I used to lie in bed at night singing "for--" I put that in quotes-- my poor beleaguered siblings. So I would just go through all the things I knew. And mostly I liked music in the minor mode. So I loved to sing *God Rest Ye Gentlemen* and *Greensleeves* and anything that sounded wan and wistful. So I would do that.

And then in school, there was never really a great music program anywhere I was. A little bit of choir.

DAN OLSON: How many brothers and sisters?

MARIA JETTE: Three. I'm the eldest of four.

DAN OLSON: So the oldest siblings are the most responsible siblings. Isn't that so?

MARIA JETTE: Well, I guess. Yeah, that's the theory.

[LAUGHS]

DAN OLSON: So you come back and you end up in Indianapolis. And now you're in high school. And you'd been living abroad for what, more than half a dozen years.

MARIA JETTE: About 5 and 1/2 years.

DAN OLSON: Yeah, almost a half a dozen years. What was your reaction to returning to this country?

MARIA JETTE: Well, for one thing, I had this little English accent that I was completely oblivious to. And I'm a pretty carefully articulating person by nature. Anyway, my mother was a speech teacher. But so I was mocked for my accent, which I could not hear. But I was always pugnacious.

DAN OLSON: You were putting on airs.

MARIA JETTE: I guess so. And of course, I couldn't--

DAN OLSON: Couldn't help it.

MARIA JETTE: Hear it, right.

DAN OLSON: Just a kid. But you dropped it, I gather.

MARIA JETTE: Well, I think it eventually just fell away, bit by bit.

DAN OLSON: So well, I suppose I don't know how to ask it except directly. And that is to say, did the country seem strange? Was it a disruptive time to you or were you somewhat insulated from all of that, too?

MARIA JETTE: I will confess to you that the part that bugged me the most was not having servants.

DAN OLSON: No?

MARIA JETTE: I still hate that. The making of the bed, the mopping of the floor. And none of that did we ever have to do overseas.

DAN OLSON: Maria Jette. When the family returned to Minnesota, Jette attended St. Margaret's High School, now Benilde St. Margaret in St. Louis Park. Then on to college at Hamline University in St. Paul. One of her fondest musical memories, she says, is a stint with the Baroque Opera Company. We'll hear about that in a few minutes.

First, a couple of tunes. Jette is a fan of American popular song. She helps organize and performs at the Oregon Festival of American Song. Here she is accompanied by Dan Chouinard singing a country and Western standard, followed by one of Stephen Foster's most famous songs.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

(SINGING) I'm a roaming cowboy

Riding all day long

Tumbleweeds around me

Sing their lonely song

Light underneath a prairie moon

I ride alone and sing a tune

See them tumbling down

Pledging their love to the ground

Lonely but free, I'll be found

Drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds

Cares of the past are behind

Nowhere to go, but I'll find

Just where the trail will wind

Drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds

I know when night is gone

That a new world's born and done

I'll keep rolling along

Deep in my heart is a song

Here on the range I belong

Drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds

[APPLAUSE]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

(SINGING) Beautiful dreamer wake unto me
Starlight and dewdrops are waiting for thee
Sounds of the rude world heard in the day
Lulled by the moonlight have all passed away
Beautiful dreamer, queen of my song
List while I woo thee with soft melody
Gone are the cares of life's busy throng
Beautiful dreamer, awake unto me
Beautiful dreamer, awake unto me
Beautiful dreamer, queen of my song
List while I woo thee with soft melody
Gone are the cares of life's busy throng
Beautiful dreamer, awake unto me
Beautiful dreamer, awake unto me
[APPLAUSE]

DAN OLSON: Maria Jette singing *Beautiful Dreamer*. And before that, *Tumblin' Tumbleweed*. You're listening to Voices of Minnesota on Minnesota Public Radio. I'm Dan Olson. Maria Jette says one of her fondest musical memories is her time from 1985 to 1995 with a small Twin Cities opera company. Here's more of our conversation.

You had an affiliation with something called Ex Machina.

MARIA JETTE: Yes.

DAN OLSON: The Baroque opera company.

MARIA JETTE: James Middleton and Mark Ellenberger were the geniuses behind this really unique undertaking. Mark, as the make-it-happen guy, was building all these props and raising money and keeping the nuts and bolts together. And James, this incredible genius who had just a huge breadth of knowledge about the Baroque era. And he would select these pieces. Sometimes they were ancient manuscripts that would be cut and pasted together.

He would translate the pieces. He would do incredible program notes. He did wonderful drawings of costumes. He built the costumes. I will say he was not really a great tailor by nature. And I did have a bodice. I remember some boiling hot summertime production that was lined in duct tape. And I wouldn't recommend that to anyone. But I was young then, and so I had sweat to spare.

DAN OLSON: That's theater.

MARIA JETTE: I mean, we would wear these wigs and giant hats with two feet of ostrich feathers sticking out of the top. And we had our white Baroque style makeup with our bright pink cheeks. We would walk out crab fashion, always facing the audience. And it was like seeing statues and paintings come to life and sing *Julius Caesar* by Handel or *The Coronation of Poppaea* by Monteverdi. I got to do so many incredible roles. That was really one of the-- it remains one of the highlights of my life, those years.

DAN OLSON: So artistically, really fulfilling. Commercially--

MARIA JETTE: Really negligible.

[LAUGHS]

In fact, I mean, sometimes various of us would just give back our meager paychecks. \$200 for a month worth of work. But we had a following that was verged on the rabid but never managed to turn it into a money making or even a break-even proposition.

DAN OLSON: But that's how opera goes, isn't it? It's really tough--

MARIA JETTE: Well, some opera.

DAN OLSON: And then there's--

MARIA JETTE: It can be expensive. But I think one of the problems with Ex Machina was it never-- the way that James worked, the way he could put together some glittering, fabulous costume that looked like it walked off the street in 1780, and it was covered with jewels from the Dollar Store that were hot glued on. And there were more every night. Each performance, there would be more gewgaws attached to your costumes.

We had so many wonderful people in our board, but I don't think it ever looked urgent. And about the time that things were really starting to pick up for us-- we had done our first Mozart opera. We did a production of *Così fan tutte*. It was sold out in a small theater. But sold out. And had done *Alcina* that year of Handel. It's another big giant Handel opera.

The burden was just too much for him to bear, and he decided to stop. And now lives in New York and is doing occasional Baroque opera forays in to other parts of the country and doing very well. But those days of Ex Machina. I still run into people who talk about it. And yearn for it.

DAN OLSON: Are you most comfortable in opera? What are the art forms you're most comfortable in?

MARIA JETTE: I actually do very little opera. And I have to admit that I'm the worst person about any kind of auditioning or personal promotion or anything. In order--

DAN OLSON: You don't have your own website.

MARIA JETTE: Oh, it's so ridiculous. And all I do is poke around in the web day and night. So it's all the more ridiculous. I don't have a website.

DAN OLSON: You're quite a mystery figure.

MARIA JETTE: Oh, yes.

DAN OLSON: Finding you on the web is-- we have to search through everything and everyone else.

MARIA JETTE: Well, there are a lot of ancient biographies out there, too, which is another terrible story. I warn anyone who's hearing this, beware. Anything about you that's on the web will never vanish. But, well, I've never been good at setting up auditions or anything like that, so--

DAN OLSON: But you had to learn to market yourself at some point, because you're everywhere in every corner of the country, from the Oregon Bach Festival to San Antonio and Chicago and everywhere.

MARIA JETTE: But so many of those jobs have just-- practically all of them have just sprung out of other appearances.

DAN OLSON: You do have an agent, though.

MARIA JETTE: No, I did briefly for a while back in the late '80s. But then I fired him, and I thought, this is the impetus I need to go to New York and get another agent. I just haven't.

DAN OLSON: So you're out there on your own to this day. And what happens? The phone rings and--

MARIA JETTE: I just wait for the phone to ring and think, gosh, I hope someone calls about something in March. Otherwise, I'm going to have a really grim month.

[LAUGHS]

DAN OLSON: But of course, they know Maria Jette. They know what you do now.

MARIA JETTE: Well, some do. And I think people know me as different versions of myself. There are some who think of me as an early music person, others who maybe think of me as a person who can do difficult contemporary scores.

DAN OLSON: Right.

MARIA JETTE: Or others as a chamber music person. That's one of my big loves.

DAN OLSON: But apparently, they haven't pigeonholed you.

MARIA JETTE: Well--

DAN OLSON: So you have different groups thinking different things.

MARIA JETTE: Yeah, I mean, there are various pigeonholes.

DAN OLSON: You're in various pigeonholes.

MARIA JETTE: And that's OK. As long as there are plenty of pigeonholes and they keep filling up.

DAN OLSON: But popular song at all? Any popular song? Do you do popular song?

MARIA JETTE: Well, American popular song, I would say up through probably World War II.

DAN OLSON: And that's your cutoff point.

MARIA JETTE: Well, but I don't really have a cut-- I mean, if someone wants to pay me to sing.

DAN OLSON: Sure.

MARIA JETTE: Well, you know what I have done? I'll say one of my most interesting programs I ever did was at the Grand Rapids Symphony in Michigan. It was a Christmas pops thing. And I guess in August, I started getting some emails from them saying, well, how about singing *O Holy Night*? Oh, OK, fine. Then another one that came and said, well, what did you think about singing *Santa Baby*? I said, oh, I've always wanted to sing *Santa Baby*.

Then another one said, how about *Jingle Bell Rock*? Fine. Well, how about how about that Kathleen Battle medley? And I thought, well, fine, fine. Any of these things are fine. Little did I know it was every single thing that they had named. And when I saw the list on this packet of music, I would say that was the most far reaching program, with the exception of the Soprano Rama programs, which we do here every year.

But that, I think I can safely say that *O Holy Night* has never been preceded by *Jingle Bell Rock*, except when I sang them both on that program. So.

DAN OLSON: And I bet the audience went wild. I bet they loved it.

MARIA JETTE: Well, yeah. But I--

DAN OLSON: Variety is the spice of life.

MARIA JETTE: I loved it. Well, you know what they said in the review?

DAN OLSON: What did they say?

MARIA JETTE: They said if variety is the spice of life, Maria Jette is a spice rack.

DAN OLSON: Wow. What a line.

MARIA JETTE: What a line.

DAN OLSON: Put that on the website.

MARIA JETTE: If I ever have a website, it's going to be on there. It'll be on the amusing page.

[LAUGHS]

DAN OLSON: Maria Jette. You're listening to Voices of Minnesota on Minnesota Public Radio. A few years ago, Jette and her friends, Janice Hardy and Molly Sue MacDonald created Soprano Rama. The annual show features the three performing all kinds of music. Here, they sing two pieces, *Paul's Fugue* and Leroy Anderson's *Syncopated Clock*.

[VOCALIZING]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

(SINGING) Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick tock

There was a man like you and me

As simple as a man could ever be
And he was happy as a king
Except for one peculiar thing
He had a clock that worked all right
It worked all right but not exactly quite
Instead of going tick, tock, tick
The crazy clock went tock, tick, tock
The poor old man just raved and raved
Because nobody could say
Why his silly clock behaved that hickory dickory way
But now a famous man is he
He owns a public curiosity
From far and wide, the people flock
To hear the syncopated clock
Tick, tock, tick, a-tock, tick, tock
A-tick, tock, tick, a-tick, tock, tick, tock
Tick-a-tock, tick-a-tock
There's a zing in the swing of that clock
Tock-a-tick, tock-a-tick, tock-a-tick, tock-a-tick
Don't you think it's a marvelous thing?
Ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling
There's a zong in the bong of that ring
Ling-a-ting, ling-a-ting, ling-a-ting, ling-a-ting
Don't you think it's a wonderful thing
Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock
The experts came to hear and see
But none of them could solve the mystery

They called Professor Einstein, too

He said, there's nothing I can do

But soon, the fickle human race

Will find another freak to take its place

And one fine day, the man will hock

The poor old syncopated clock

Tick-a-tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick

Tick, tock

DAN OLSON: Molly Sue MacDonald, Janice Hardy, and Maria Jette, singing two pieces, *Syncopated Clock*, and before that, *Paul's Fugue*, from their show Soprano Rama. You're listening to voices of Minnesota on Minnesota Public Radio. I'm Dan Olson.

Maria Jette once thought she'd be a music educator. She fulfills part of that role with a performance she takes to schools around the country based on a famous Theodore Geisel Dr. Seuss story. Here's more of our conversation.

Green Eggs and Ham. You have a touring thing that you do. What is that?

MARIA JETTE: Well, a wonderful composer, Rob Kapilow-- this must have been about '94, I think. '93 or '94. Devised a little two person opera-- I use the term somewhat loosely-- on *Green Eggs and Ham*. It uses that as its sole text. Nothing is even really repeated, I don't believe, from the book. And it's set for this jangly little ensemble of nine instruments. And also in an orchestra version, which was commissioned by Minnesota Orchestra.

And I thought, oh, that's so fantastic. I talked about it to everyone who even sat near me on a bus. And so I got a number of *Green Eggs and Ham* performances out of it and gradually started to compile my own props.

Ultimately had my brother Dan, who's an incredibly talented visual artist, to make props for me, which are his own takes on the *Green Eggs and Ham* characters. He goes, I've got the fox, I've got the box, I've got the train, and the plane. And dark. I've got dark in a box. And rain.

So there are these flat cards, and I have an actual 3D ham. I had ultimately special little clear easels made. I mean, over the years, I have perfected my *Green Eggs and Ham* prop kit. So now I travel with this box full of props. I've got a couple of trained kids.

DAN OLSON: How many times a year do you do this?

MARIA JETTE: Well, it depends on the year. Last year, I did a lot because it was a big Seuss centennial or something.

DAN OLSON: And this is for fun, for entertainment, for lightness? Or do you have a message? Are you conveying something with *Green Eggs and Ham*?

MARIA JETTE: Well, the that *Green Eggs and Ham* always conveys. You can't judge a book by its cover. You can't judge a plate of eggs by their color. Well, except that's not exactly true. But it's so wonderful. If you get a group of kids and occasionally get to-- in something like a gigantic auditorium packed with little tots who are watching in suspense to see what will happen. Even though they have assiduously studied the story.

And then when I eat that marshmallow soaked in green food coloring and say--

(SINGING) Say, I like green eggs and ham

--and I've got this bright green tongue and horrible green teeth, that's a big thrill for me. And then if we have time for question and answer afterwards and they get to ask their hilarious questions, which is almost always the same question, is it a real ham?

DAN OLSON: Oh, perfect.

MARIA JETTE: But that is really a lot of fun. And the piece itself is only 20 minutes long, and it incorporates about five different vocal styles. For a lot of kids, it's the first time they've heard a person, a live person, sing with a kind of operatic voice.

DAN OLSON: And this fulfills your opera quotient. This goes back to *Ex Machina*.

MARIA JETTE: Yes, except no feathers on the head.

DAN OLSON: No No duct tape.

MARIA JETTE: Right.

DAN OLSON: And it's a balance, though, because to put it candidly, I suppose there are a fair number of performers of your caliber at your level who would not do this. Is that your impression, or is that wrong? Are there a fair number of performers, in fact, who do?

MARIA JETTE: I guess, everyone needs to make a living. And it's not so easy for singers in our country. But I know that there are a lot of people who really are pretty much exclusively opera oriented. And I certainly was never that way. I will do anything someone wants to pay me to do practically. But I never had that burning desire to do nothing but Puccini.

KAREN: Are you happy?

NORMAN: Sure. Why do you ask?

KAREN: You don't seem happy.

NORMAN: I'm OK.

KAREN: I didn't ask if you were OK.

NORMAN: What's the difference?

KAREN: Answer the question.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

(SINGING) Are you happy

Sure, I guess so

Aren't you

No

No happiness

What's the problem

I don't know

You feel bad

You could say that, yes

DAN OLSON: One of soprano Maria Jette's best known operatic roles is Mrs. Olsen in Garrison Keillor's and Andy Stein's opera titled *Mr. and Mrs. Olsen*. Keillor says it's the story of a married couple searching for romance. The opera features Norman Olsen, a tax man, and his wife Karen, an English teacher. They live in St. Paul. Keillor says Mr. Olsen thinks about the lawn. Mrs. Olsen is thinking about a divorce. The role of the husband is sung by Robert Orth.

(SINGING) I just that I could be joyful

Joyful

Joyful

Really

Sure

Seems a little unrealistic

Maybe, but I wish I were

Guess I figured you were happy

You never told me otherwise

You felt happy

Fairly happy

Happier than lots of guys

What's the problem

Maybe I'm stressed out

I see some redness in your eyes

Maybe it's hormones

Could be hormones

Maybe I need to exercise

DAN OLSON: Late in the opera, after scenes featuring internet chat room dalliances, arias about jello and much more, Mrs. Olsen dies suddenly, tragically, from food poisoning. Bad shrimp. Maria Jette performs Mrs. Olsen's swan song.

[OPERATIC VOCALIZING]

(SINGING) I feel a burning in my chest

It must be something I ingested

My hands are cold

My feet, my face

Could it have been the bouillabaisse

My arms and legs are going limp

It must have been the shrimp

The shrimp

Oh, death and devastation

Caused by a poisonous crustacean

Hold upon me, paragon, the victim of a deadly prawn

What bitter irony is this

I can feel paralysis

Now my extremities are chilled

In just a moment, I'll be killed

And my maker, I shall meet

Thanks to a deadly spiral keet

Yes, I am every close to death

I feel a chill like influenza

But while I still have breath

I can sing a last stanza

[LAUGHTER]

[OPERATIC VOCALIZING]

[COUGHS]

At last, I feel the fatal cough

My time is not so long

But ere I am carried off

I must finish my song

[OPERATIC VOCALIZING]

Such a strange sensation of darkness before my eyes

And yet, while there is respiration, I can still open my eyes

[OPERATIC VOCALIZING]

[APPLAUSE]

DAN OLSON: Maria Jette as Mrs. Olsen in Garrison Keillor's and Andy Stein's opera, *Mr. and Mrs. Olsen*, performed three years ago with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. Andreas Delfs conducting. Maria Jette is a featured soloist with Minneapolis based Vocalessence, the musical performance group founded by her friend and musical collaborator, Philip Brunelle. Jette is also a soloist at Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis. Here's more of our conversation.

You sing a lot of sacred music, and you are not a religious person, you've pointed out,. And religion didn't take with you, or something else took with you. What took with you?

MARIA JETTE: Well, I guess I was raised Catholic, and I'm in a very seriously Catholic household. And I always read a lot of fairy tales and folk tales as a kid. And we moved a lot. So I was able to go through the entire collections at every library in each new community. And I started to think a lot by about third grade about religions of different cultures and mythology vis-a-vis the Bible.

And so for a while, I guess, in about-- maybe it was about second grade that I developed a real interest in the Greek gods. And I slightly worshipped Athena for a while and Artemis. But then I moved on, natural progression into science fiction. And I guess I must have been about 14. When suddenly, just believing in a supreme being evaporated from me. It wasn't like I made a choice that I would not believe. I think you can't make yourself believe or not believe. But I just ceased to believe.

DAN OLSON: And so when your audience members witness you singing some piece of sacred music and they see your eyes glowing and shining, they're glowing and shining because of the beautiful music?

MARIA JETTE: Yes. And I think because of humanity and just the glory of human achievement and human aesthetic grandeur. And it's also a dramatic business, even in sacred music and maybe even more so.

DAN OLSON: Has it lost you any jobs, the fact that you're not a card carrying Presbyterian methodist?

MARIA JETTE: Probably not any jobs I would have wanted, I'll put it that way. I've been a soloist for now I think about 15 years at Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis. And I just love it there. It's such an interesting congregation. So many bright people. And they think, if it were not that, I wouldn't be singing at a church, I would say. Not in a regular church job.

DAN OLSON: When people hear an interview with Maria Jette, they're going to want to want to certain physical, mechanical things. For example, what is your vocal range?

MARIA JETTE: Well, it's altered over the years. I think when I started singing and it was just very, very high and light, I always could rely on a high E flat. That's your Simpre Libera required note. Or Lucia di Lammermoor note. I used to do those arias sometimes. And even had quite a regularly occurring high E natural. And in fact, that we used in Paul Bunyan. That was the first time I ever met Philip Brunelle, was doing that recording of Paul Bunyan with the Plymouth music series, where there was a requirement for a dog, a coloratura dog to sing a high E. So I got that job as Fido. The Lumberjacks coloratura high note dog.

DAN OLSON: Still another role.

MARIA JETTE: So anyway, I used to do a lot of that material. And then I got away from singing some of those pieces. And in the intervening years, my thyroid, I had a thyroid problem, as lots and lots of people do. Didn't realize what was going on. But my voice, it seemed like the high notes got harder. And it became more laborious to sing. And I just thought it was encroaching 40s coming upon me.

But I went in finally after many years and had a physical, and it turns out my thyroid was underproducing. And so typically, people get a hoarse voice.

DAN OLSON: So some good chemicals, and the voice is back.

MARIA JETTE: It's largely back. But in the intervening time when I was having to muscle my way into producing what used to be always simple, I started singing a little bit different way.

DAN OLSON: How so?

MARIA JETTE: Fuller, I guess. And also I'd done a couple of operatic roles that were fuller and louder.

DAN OLSON: So now mechanically, for those of us who don't know much about singing, by fuller, do you mean more head voice, more throat voice, more chest voice?

MARIA JETTE: More throat, chest. I guess I feel it more down below the neck than I used to. Because I had this boy soprano thing I used to always enjoy doing.

DAN OLSON: Everybody has seen Maria Jette, but for those who haven't, you're diminutive, you're quite petite. But you have a mouth built for singing. Is that so?

MARIA JETTE: I wish this weren't radio, or I would demonstrate how I can fit my fist in my mouth.

DAN OLSON: I knew this would come up. You can--

MARIA JETTE: I can fit my fist in my-- and it's not that small of a hand. No, I do have a pretty good sized mouth.

DAN OLSON: That's important.

MARIA JETTE: It is, I think. Well, you don't see that many really narrow faced singers. But I always seem to have my mouth hanging open.

DAN OLSON: How many hours a day do you rehearse? Yeah, OK. We won't go there. Back to indolence.

MARIA JETTE: Back to indolence. And I think it would be great if I were to have some kind of disciplined life where--

DAN OLSON: No, I don't see why.

MARIA JETTE: Why it would arise.

DAN OLSON: Look how well you've done.

MARIA JETTE: And then yes, I know. I practice quite a bit when I have something coming up that needs preparation.

DAN OLSON: Well then, let's--

MARIA JETTE: And then I always think, I should do this every day.

DAN OLSON: Well, let's go there, then. So you'll have a big performance and you'll have a big performance week or a big-- and then the day arrives. Do you have a regimen? Are you a little superstitious? Do you have certain clothes or toothbrushes or things?

MARIA JETTE: No, I just try to avoid really, really salty foods.

DAN OLSON: Salty foods? No salty foods on performance day.

MARIA JETTE: Well, I mean, I do love salt. But that would be the day I would probably choose not to eat at the Chinese restaurant. And it might be MSG, too.

DAN OLSON: Do you have little funny, interesting, odd vocal warmups that you do?

[LAUGHS]

MARIA JETTE: No.

DAN OLSON: No.

MARIA JETTE: Usually, I mean, if I get into the dressing room, I'll sometimes-- what do I do? I'll go--

[OPERATIC VOCALIZING]

There. I've got it. Isn't that horrible?

DAN OLSON: That's warmup.

MARIA JETTE: And you know what I'll say, too. I don't carry around one of those water bottles that everyone has chained to their wrist. That's one of my pet peeves. I think, can't people go for an hour without continually sucking on a water bottle? So anyway, I drink water from time to time during the day, a glass of it. And then I continue on my way.

DAN OLSON: How many tunes do you think you have in your head memorized that you could more or less reel off if someone asked you to sing Mozart's this or that?

MARIA JETTE: Not that many.

DAN OLSON: A couple hundred, do you think?

MARIA JETTE: No.

DAN OLSON: No.

MARIA JETTE: Oh gosh, no.

DAN OLSON: Maybe 100.

MARIA JETTE: I don't even know. Well, I must. I mean, because I could sing you the theme song from *Flipper* or something. Which is how we got the name for our dog, one of our dogs. Because my husband and I both like that theme song. But I forget things quite quickly, for better or for worse. I'm not one of those people who has things just stored in there.

DAN OLSON: But you have to memorize so much as a vocalist, a professional vocalist.

MARIA JETTE: I don't really. And I think that's another reason I've shied away from really pursuing operatic material, because I hate memorizing things so much. So I do a lot of recitals in a year. And if I had to memorize them, I wouldn't do any. I never would. I just hate it. There's so much pressure in. It And I know that a lot of people do it easily or they feel compelled to do it for some kind of reason of honor or something. I'm not sure exactly what that is. There's a machismo about it.

DAN OLSON: So when it comes to a very famous piece of music or even a not so well known piece of music, do you listen to other people's performances of it and think, I like that. I think I'll try that.

MARIA JETTE: Well, if it's a style that feels remote to me, I do. Because unlike a lot of sopranos-- I remember everyone was always singing Mimi's aria or something, you know, [INAUDIBLE], or something like that. Puccini, and I think, who cares? It always seemed meandery to me. Of course, now that I have been hired to sing those things from time to time, I thought, hey, this is really fun to sing. No wonder everyone likes it.

But it wasn't anything that I really worked at early on. So when I wanted to do anything like that so that I don't feel so much like a total fraud, I will listen to some of the greats of the past to try and figure out what they're doing in terms of style.

DAN OLSON: How much liberty do you take as an artist, as a vocalist within a piece that is very well known, part of the classic standard in ornamentation? How much do you add to it in the way of anything that you might do to the piece?

MARIA JETTE: Mostly that would be in early classical and back. And with Baroque music plenty, I mean, that's one area that I've done a certain amount of reading and study in. And so I love to ornament and like to try and have every Messiah be a little bit different than the last one, which is tricky for us. And you're not really encouraged in American music schools to be making things up.

DAN OLSON: Really?

MARIA JETTE: So isn't it shocking? So I continually run into these young singers who'll say, where did you get your ornaments? And I think, well, obviously I devised them. They say, well, who taught you how to do that? I think, are people such sheep that they always have to be led? And that is a depressing thing about singers. They are people who, much less than I would say, to generalize, instrumentalists. Always think that someone is going to dish out for them. The truth about music or something.

DAN OLSON: Didn't happen to Maria Jette, apparently.

MARIA JETTE: I was always too pushy and had my own ideas. But in terms of Baroque ornamentation, I'm very careful about what I do that it remains within the style and--

DAN OLSON: You don't turn into Ella Fitzgerald or--

MARIA JETTE: No.

DAN OLSON: No. Alice Parker has suggested that there's so much noise in America that Americans can't hear themselves sing anymore, that we're forgetting how to sing to ourselves and to each other. Do you think popular culture is all noisy and we're losing our ability to sing?

MARIA JETTE: Yes, I think people let everything wash over them. There's very little participatory. Although on the other hand, choirs are going gangbusters in our country to a degree. We still don't have all the single gender glee clubs of the golden era, which I so adored. But for the most part, people, they go home and they've got their great entertainment systems and everyone's tired and they don't want to go out and actively listen to a new piece with the orchestra or something like that, when they can just sit there and have it be on in the background and be cooking or on the internet at the same time.

DAN OLSON: So what explains karaoke?

MARIA JETTE: That's a good question, isn't it?

DAN OLSON: Why are people nuts? If we're such a bunch of lumps about music, why are people-- some people-- so wild about karaoke, do you think?

MARIA JETTE: Well, I think there's always going to be the urge to perform and to have there-- to be on display and to have adulation of the crowd and to fantasize that you are that pop singer or better than Britney Spears' rendition of whatever her big numbers are.

[LAUGHS]

DAN OLSON: Maria Jette, thank you so much for your time. A pleasure talking with you.

MARIA JETTE: Oh, it's such a pleasure. And you know a lot about classical music. You news guy.

DAN OLSON: Soprano Maria Jette. Here she is with two more tunes. First, Dominick Argento's spring, followed by an arrangement of summertime.

(SINGING) Spring

Sweet spring

Is the year's pleasant king

Then blooms each thing

Then maids dance in a ring

Cold doth not sting

The pretty birds do sing

Cuckoo, jug-jug, pu-we, to-witta-woo

The palm and may make country houses gay

Lambs frisk and play

The shepherd pipes all day

And we hear aye birds tune this merry lay

Cuckoo, jug-jug pu-we, to-witta-woo

The fields breathe sweet

The daisies kiss our feet

Young lovers meet

Old wives a-sunning sit

In every street, these tunes our ears do greet

Cuckoo, jug-jug, pu-wee, to-witta-woo

Spring, sweet spring

[MUSIC PLAYING]

(SINGING) Summertime

And the living is easy

Fish are jumping

And the cotton is high

Oh, your daddy is rich
And your ma is good looking
So hush, little baby
Don't you cry
One of these mornings
You're gonna rise up singing
Then you'll spread your wings
And you'll take the sky
But till that morning
There's nothing can hold you
With daddy and mammy standing by
[OPERATIC VOCALIZING]
[APPLAUSE]

DAN OLSON: Maria Jette performing *Summertime* with bassist Greg Pippen and Peter Ostroushko on mandolin. Before that, Dominick Argento's *Spring*. You've been listening to Voices of Minnesota on Minnesota Public Radio. I'm Dan Olson.

GARY EICHTEEN: By the way, Scott Liebers, Alan Strickland, Becky Wexler, and Mike Pengra helped Dan put that program together. On the tune, *Beautiful Dreamer* Maria Jette was accompanied on violin by Michael Sutton and by Philip Brunelle on the song *Spring*. And you can hear and see Maria Jette in person tonight and tomorrow night at two free concerts in the Twin Cities. She'll be singing with the Minnesota Sinfonia as part of a program tonight at Lake Phalen Park in St. Paul. And then tomorrow night at the Lake Harriet Bandshell in Minneapolis.

Well, that does it for our Midday program today. Gary Eichten here. By the way, if you want to catch up on more of these Voices of Minnesota interviews, great interview series that Dan has put together, check out our website at minnesotapublicradio.org. minnesotapublicradio.org.

Tomorrow, we're going to hear from World renowned researcher, chimp expert Jane Goodall, who-- fascinating stories to tell about her research and about the world and environment and so on. We'll hear from her tomorrow on our Midday program. I hope you can tune in.