Long Island speakers bring lectures on Billy Joel, more to local libraries

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Tanisha Mitchell, the founder of Opera Talks.
Tanisha Mitchell, the founder of Opera Talks. Credit: Linda Rosier

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Singing opera's praises

It was a very different piece of music under discussion at a recent program at the Huntington Public Library, where Tanisha Mitchell of Lawrence, sang the aria "Vissi D'arte" from the opera "Tosca." Her subject was "Halloween at the Opera," a talk that shed light on the witches, ghosts and one "deadly diva" who appear in well-known productions.

Tanisha Mitchell performs an aria during a lecture at the...



Tanisha Mitchell performs an aria during a lecture at the Huntington Public Library. Credit: Linda Rosier

Mitchell said her business, Opera Talks, has consistent bookings, with as many as six lectures a month. Her approximately 30 programs range from specific operas and singers — "Madama Butterfly," "La bohème" and Maria Callas — to themes like love duets or operatic villains.

The goal, said Mitchell, is to take audiences behind the scenes, so they understand the workings of any given production. She acknowledges that opera can be a tough sell.

"I've spoken to so many people who tell me they don't like opera," she said.

Mitchell understands — she said it took her awhile to fall in love with the art form herself. Her first exposure was at age 9, she said, upon seeing an infomercial for a set of CDs by opera superstar Jessye Norman. "There was this woman with flowing hair

and a beautiful white dress," she recalled. "I was mesmerized by her, but I hated the music, I couldn't stand it."

It wasn't until high school, when a choir director told her she had an operatic voice, that Mitchell said she started to feel more kindly toward the music. She studied performance at Queens College with a track in music theory, and by the time Mitchell finished her undergraduate work, she decided she wanted to focus on teaching. She got an internship at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City and was then offered a job doing outreach (she often gives the popular pre-opera talks at the Met).

For the Freeport Public Library, where she has worked since high school, Mitchell put together a program about opera basics, and was encouraged by her mother to see whether other communities might be interested. "My first program outside Freeport was in Garden City in 2015," she said, "and I haven't looked back."

Mitchell offers several levels of programming — virtual, a live multimedia presentation of photos and video clips from the operas she's discussing, or a program like the recent one in Huntington, in which she sings an aria related to the topic. "People are always asking if I can sing more," she said, so she's working on adding a presentation that's more like a recital.

Mitchell said she is thrilled to be able to share her love of opera, which she called "otherworldly." It's special, she added, because it is "a combination of all the arts . . . these characters are relatable but also larger than life." Though Mitchell translates the words, she tells her audiences that it's not necessary to understand Italian or French to love opera.

"Just close your eyes," she tells them. "See how it makes you feel."