

**RESOLUTION NUMBER 335**

**Grace Bumbry**

**WHEREAS**, we have been apprised that Grace Bumbry is being honored as a St. Louis legend at the "St. Louis Argus Lunch with the Legends"; and

**WHEREAS**, Grace Bumbry was born in 1937 in St. Louis, Missouri, to a freight handler for the Cotton Belt Route railroad and his wife, a Mississippi schoolteacher who had once dreamed of becoming a singer herself. A religious, middle-class couple, Benjamin and Melzia Bumbry taught their three children to count their riches in music. There were always neighborhood kids rehearsing at the house after school; there was singing around the piano in the evenings; and there was warbling around the washtub on Saturdays, when the family did the laundry. Every Thursday night, the parents went off to rehearse with their church choir, while their sons, Benjamin and Charles, sang in the youth chorus. Too young to stay home alone, Grace tagged along with her brothers, who eventually persuaded their choir master to let her join the group, even though she was younger than the other members; and

**WHEREAS**, Bumbry entered Sumner High School with her eyes already fixed on the concert stage. Determined to learn as much as she could as fast as possible, she practiced constantly, often storming home from music lessons in tears when dissatisfied with her own performance. The first of several important mentors, no-nonsense voice teacher Kenneth Billups guided her carefully, pacing his lessons to her developing voice and reining her in when she wanted to leap ahead; and

**WHEREAS**, In 1954 St. Louis radio station KMOX held a teenage talent contest. Billups encouraged his 17-year-old student to enter, sharing her pleasure when she won. Grace was now the proud possessor of a \$1,000 war bond, a free trip to New York, and a \$1,000 scholarship to the St. Louis Institute of Music. The scholarship proved to be a bitter blessing; it slammed her up against the ugly reality of a prejudiced board of trustees who offered her segregated private lessons at the institute in lieu of admission alongside other students. Rosalyn Story, in her book, *And So I Sing*, recalled Melzia Bumbry's parting shot after an acrimonious meeting with institute trustees: "It may be YOUR school, but it's MY daughter," she said, and stalked out; and

**WHEREAS**, Bumbry and Lotte Lehmann arrived at Northwestern simultaneously--Bumbry as a student, Lehmann to offer master-classes. Bumbry presented some meticulously prepared operatic scenes and songs for Madame Lehmann's criticism and was thrilled to receive an invitation to spend a summer at her Musical Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, California. Eager to see that nothing stood in the way, Lehmann even arranged a scholarship, which was partly funded by comedian Anna Russell; and

**WHEREAS**, by 1960, Bumbry's career was clearly on its way. She made her debut at the Paris Opera as Amneris in Verdi's *Aida* and signed a two-year contract with the Opera House of Basel, Switzerland. However, these events were but preliminaries to the big break, which came later that year. Bumbry happened to be in Cologne, Germany, when conductor Wolfgang Sawallisch of Bavaria's Bayreuth Festival was searching for a possible Venus for Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhauser*. She sang for him and was invited to audition for Wieland Wagner, director of Bayreuth and grandson of the composer; and

**WHEREAS**, Bumbry's tour at the end of 1962 mared her as one of America's most distinguished artists. Lasting nine exhausting weeks, it consisted of a Carnegie Hall concert debut as well as 25 performances in 21 other cities, including St. Louis, where she sang for a packed 3,000-strong house in the same auditorium in which Marian Anderson had thrilled her eight years earlier. She reveled in the first family Christmas she had enjoyed in years and also visited her alma mater, Sumner High School, where she sat in on one of Mr. Billups's classes. The sight of the mentor who had set her on the road to stardom reportedly moved her to tears.

**NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** by the Board of Aldermen of the City of St. Louis that we pause in our deliberations to recognize opera legend, Grace Bumbry and we wish her continued success, achievement and accomplishment and we further direct the Clerk of this Board to spread a copy of this Resolution across the minutes of these proceedings and to prepare a commemorative copy to the end that it may be presented to our honoree at a time and place deemed appropriate by the Sponsor.

Introduced on the 21st day of February, 2009 by:

**Honorable Samuel L. Moore, Alderman 4th Ward**

Adopted this 21st day of February, 2009 as attested by:

---

David W. Sweeney  
Clerk, Board of Aldermen

---

Lewis E. Reed  
President, Board of Aldermen

