

SINFONICA

VIVICA GENAUX

A Talent who embraced the Solís with her singing

On May 30th, the Cultural Music Center presented one of the highlights of our musical season at the Solís Theater with the world famous Concerto Köln and the mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux, one of the most well-known contemporary singers who specializes in Baroque and *bel canto* styles. The day following the concert a few hours prior to leaving our country, she kindly agreed to an interview. What follows is our conversation with the singer who was born in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Sinfonica: Along with your diverse singing engagements, one of the most important aspects of your career is your dedication to restoring the name and bringing the works of Johann Adolf Hasse (1699-1783) to the public. In a recent interview you mentioned that Hasse's operas are exceptional, but are often disregarded and rarely performed.

Vivica Genaux: Certainly. This problem stems from how difficult it is to find a theater willing to produce an unknown opera. The easiest way to make Hasse known is for me and others to introduce his works in concerts. Then, hopefully in a few years, we will see more and more complete operas being staged.

S: Presenting operas like Hasse's is also problematic because they require the use of period instruments, as you have said, and many theaters have contracts with their own orchestras.

VG: That's exactly the problem. In South America, as here in Uruguay, this is not how it works, but in the United States, companies have contracts with orchestras and these orchestras have the right to play all of the operas that are produced there. Performing these works with a modern orchestra is absolutely different; the sound and the intonation are much lower with a Baroque orchestra and the instruments sound sweeter and softer. Also, with a Baroque orchestra you get the impression that all of the musicians are soloists and unified as an ensemble at the same time. A Baroque orchestra has a special dialogue with the singer that makes one never feel alone on stage.

S: What is it that most attracted you to Johann Adolf Hasse?

VG: Hasse is very different from other German composers, such as Handel, because he assimilated the Italian "heart". Hasse composed like an Italian, such as Porpora or Scarlatti, and when I sing his operas I feel that I can completely enter both the soul of the music as well as the lyrics. For me, singing Hasse is also wonderful, since his music utilizes the entire extent and breadth of my voice, from the lowest register to the highest and that is marvelous; I am not limited to five or six notes. It is similar to Rossini who uses the entire range of voice.

S: You also sing a great deal of Handel's music, as you did in the concert yesterday.

VG: Yes, but in his case it took me more time to appreciate his works. Once I told myself, “I don’t care much for Handel, but I am going to sing his operas because there must be something I am missing and perhaps I don’t yet comprehend the magic of his music.” Over time, I have come to understand his art, sing additional Handel works, and love as well as appreciate him more and more.

S: What special characteristics of Baroque singing would you like to highlight?

VG: To tackle this repertory you must have the best technique possible, because in Baroque music there is no room for error since every moment focuses on the voice. You have to be able to approach the music from every vocal position and have the most stable and unified extension possible, along with well-supported breathing.

S: Along with Baroque you also sing *bel canto*, Rossini for example.

VG: That is correct. In Baroque music arias are generally much longer and can last up to ten minutes. You need great concentration and the ability to construct a history of the mind-set, which means understanding, “who am I talking to,” “why am I saying what I am saying,” and “what happened to make me feel this way.” There is also the *da capo* in Baroque which is very different from *bel canto*. There is a type of *da capo* in arias by Rossini in which everything is maintained in the same spirit. Instead, in Baroque there is a Part B that is very different from Part A, which requires you to think and express something more.

Another difference in Rossini operas is that you sing less; two or three arias, as opposed to the Baroque where you can sing up to seven or eight arias. I remember an interview with Jennifer Larmore in which they asked her if *Barbieri di Siviglia* was difficult to sing. She answered, “When you have sung *Giulio Cesare*, a more than four-hour long opera with eight arias, *Barbieri* is like a walk in the park.”

S: Is there an audience for Baroque opera and another for traditional opera like Verdi, Puccini, etc.?

VG: Yes. They do share a fan base, but the audience for Baroque opera is younger, more energetic and dynamic, and that is gratifying to me. Baroque musicians normally want to “be there” and they play with an attention and energy that is marvelous. As I said earlier, every Baroque musician must be a soloist. On the other hand, I see that in classical music the same pieces are often being played. Performing Baroque music requires lengthy study and this Baroque repertory can be much more difficult. Of course, I could choose to interpret repertoire that is not so demanding, but I love this music so much and enjoy it thoroughly.

S: What factor attracts young people to Baroque music?

VG: I find that Baroque music resembles today’s “techno” music (S: our interview exemplifies a similar rhythm). But “techno” is much more linear than the Baroque, which has more movement.

S: How beautiful and important is it to make music with joy?

VG: Without a doubt and that is how I do it. On top of that, I always try carefully to choose my artistic ventures. I have always had the good fortune to work with wonderful people and great orchestras, such as was the case here yesterday in Montevideo with Concerto Köln. On the other hand, if I work with an orchestra that performs without joy, I won’t collaborate with them again. I sing because I love to sing and not because I have to. Of course money is necessary in life, but you can’t just sing for money.

S: The joy of singing is also an inseparable component of a professional environment of which criticism is a part. In a recent interview, the well-known Uruguayan soprano María José Siri lamented what she sees as a downward spiral that exists in criticism.

VG: Yes, it is quite true. On top of that it is often very cruel how some journalists focus their criticism. We are constantly being compared to other colleagues, but there are numerous factors which should be taken into account, such as the acoustical conditions of the hall or various timing circumstances. These can affect vocalists in a concert.

S: Siri told us that the criticism a conductor provides after a concert is very useful for future performances.

VG: What happens is that there are conductors, such as [Tulio] Serafin for example, who can determine the paths of certain singers. I have studied with Claudia Pinza, the daughter of Ezio Pinza, for seventeen years and she told me that once her father was working with Serafin when he asked him, "Have you started to study *Don Giovanni* yet?" When Ezio Pinza said that he had not, the Maestro told him, "Well, you better start tomorrow, because in ten years you should be singing it very well." Those types of conductors don't exist any longer, someone who will follow you throughout your career and give advice. Today it is more often about the moment and the concert you are performing that day. They usually don't think about the next step or what will happen in two, five, or ten years and because of this, many singers ruin their careers.

S: But in the case of Baroque music, you work with conductors who are recognized for specializing in a particular repertory through intensive study.

VG: Yes, though for many their major studies are in musicology and, with few exceptions, they are often not as interested in the singers as they are in the music. They want to have a particular performer for a particular production, but they do not help develop singers' careers or help them with other roles in the future. That virtually does not exist anymore.

S: At the risk of ruining singers' careers, there is a new generation of directors that personalize productions and remove operas from their original context. We have no problem with the idea of updating productions as long as it respects the original creation and inspiration of the composer. Today we often say that an opera by Verdi, Mozart, or Wagner is now the opera of such and such a director. Does this happen with the same intensity in Baroque opera?

VG: Not as much. For example I've rarely seen *Giulio Cesare* associated with a particular director. However, I have seen *Cenerentola* or *Barbiere di Siviglia* with the names of directors prominently featured.

S: Why do the directors re-adapt traditional operas? Is it a sign that there is a lack of contemporary composers?

VG: It is not that there is no contemporary opera. It is easier to adapt a traditional opera rather than work with a living composer. If you adapt a Verdi opera he is not around to say anything about your changes.

S: You are originally from Alaska. What is musical life like there?

VG: It is very active; there is always a lot of music. Before coming down to South America I sang a concert with Opera Fairbanks, in my hometown, to mark the 50th Anniversary of our becoming a State.

Music in Alaska is very significant because we have a nine-month winter. Our surroundings are very somber during that time; there is little light, little sun and it can be down to 40 or 50 degrees below zero. We always need excuses to go out and communicate. Music is a great reason to make everyone participate in something.

Interview with Diego Barreiro,
SINFONICA Magazine, URUGUAY,
held on May 31, 2009 in Montevideo.

July 2009 issue reprinted with the authorization of
SINFONICA Magazine
and the writer, Mr. Barreiro.