

The first time I heard Vivica Genaux live, at Palermo's Festival Scarlatti in 2003, she was a barely discernible shape within the poorly lit Chiesa di Santa Caterina, a nunnery of ominous Baroque pomp granting admission to secular visitors just once a year. I could but admire her assured intonation, sterling Italian diction, polished lower register and clear articulation of even the most intricate passagework in Alessandro Scarlatti's oratorio *La santissima Trinità*. In the following years, despite a short DVD footage in Vivaldi's *Bajazet* (a Virgin release of 2005), I hadn't quite realised her stunning stage artistry. Since I tend to mistrust recorded media, it took the semi-staged revival of the same opera, at Venice's Teatro Malibran in October 2007, to turn me from a Genaux sceptic into a regular believer.

Her appearance, although in the not-so-important role of Irene, raised a salvo of curtain calls from demanding local opera-goers. Clad in funereal black attire vaguely resembling a *chador*, she produced incredible amounts of vocal pyrotechnics in 'Qual guerriero', the treacherous coloratura piece written by Riccardo Broschi for his brother Farinelli, bristling with inter-registral leaps extending over two and a half octaves and featuring endless florid passages in semiquavers. In contrast, another Farinelli suitcase aria, 'Sposa, son disprezzata', gave evidence of her deep dramatic potential and faultless legato technique.

Desiring to learn more, I traced the Diva to Geneva's Grand Théâtre, for the umpteenth performance of her signature role of Angelina in Rossini's *Cenerentola*, one further predictable triumph (see review in July/August 2008 *Opera Now*). The day after, during an interview at the theatre's premises, I asked her what the concept of technique meant to her? 'Technique for me is the key to, and foundation for, everything. Sometimes you forget the music because you're looking at the technique, but once you're ready, technique becomes your foundation, and you stand on top of it. It's a movable platform that provides a comfortable feeling, always supporting you, no matter what you want to do.'

As the daughter of a chemistry professor of Belgian descent, young Vivica was expected to graduate in some domain of science. Biographies report that she pursued genetics. How did she come to the decision of studying singing? 'At 13, during a vacation to Japan, when I heard that my school in Alaska was staging *My Fair Lady*, I felt I had to sing Eliza. There were few music teachers in Fairbanks, and music didn't look like a career. Yet I started pestering Mom until she phoned Dorothy Dow and arranged singing lessons for me. That's how it all started. Reading Tito Gobbi's *My Life* was a seminal experience. Becoming a different person each night, seeing oneself from changing angles – that fascinated me.'

Later came graduation as a soprano in 1991, at Indiana University under Virginia Zeani and Nicola Rossi-Lemeni; then the switch to mezzo; and finally the landing in Italy – something of a

Opera Now meets opera people

The right trousers

Carlo Vitali meets the stylish mezzo Vivica Genaux

crucial event for most opera singers. 'I think that, while being Italian is not essential to sing opera, a good relationship with Italy is,' Genaux says. And she certainly has one, since she married an Italian expert in land-reclamation works, whom she met in the neighbourhood of Oderzo, some 60km north of Venice. What was she doing in that lovely provincial backwater? 'Following an audition for EPCASO [Ezio Pinza Council for American Singers of Opera], I was admitted to the courses run in Oderzo by Claudia Pinza, Ezio's daughter. Among my first assignments I had to learn the role of Isabella in Rossini's *Italiana in Algeri*. A further audition for Florentine Opera at Milwaukee resulted in my debut in that role. It was in the autumn of 1993.'

Since then, she has performed Isabella quite a few times. She does admit to having a particular soft spot for Isabella, second only to Angelina, whom she has played some 70 times. Two very different woman characters, to be sure. 'There is something of Angelina in me. As a little girl, I sometimes felt as lonely as she does. Not that my family abused me, quite the opposite, but, you know, Alaska is a lonely place, if rich in natural beauty. All in all, I feel Angelina is a girl with much hidden force and unyielding determination, not the little Orphan Annie type – thus not so far from Isabella.'

After exploring Rossini's mezzo leads, Genaux was running short of repertoire. 'Donizetti and Bellini were not for me, but fortunately Marilyn Horne had ploughed the field of bel canto for us mezzos, reviving all those exciting roles, including those originally written for castrati. Trouser roles, for one.' The Italian Baroque conductor Attilio Cremonesi, a former assistant to René Jacobs, once recounted to me how, during the auditions for Hasse's *Solimano* at Berlin's Staatsoper, an American girl whom nobody knew came in as from the blue. Both maestros were thunderstruck: 'Beautiful, clever, professional. She was hired on the spot for the [male] role of Selimo.'

'René was my first real Baroque conductor. Before I met him, the only Baroque I had heard came from the straight-toned London school (no names, thanks!), but I wasn't really interested in

that kind of sound. With René, it was much more alive and passionate. His pupil Cremonesi is also a learned musicologist, a reliable colleague and a wonderful person. Beside a couple of concert tours we made to Paris and Dresden, featuring Hasse and Handel arias, we have some exciting projects underway, including a Rossini recital on tour with the Kammerorchester Basel. He also helped me in preparing the role of Gluck's *Orfeo*, which is more about refinement than vocal acrobatics. I'm trying to sing more and more in that style – Handel at his most stepwise – hoping to become more comfortable with it.'

HARRY HELEOTS



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After a stage career of 14 years, Genaux has some 36 roles in her portfolio, of which 24 are trouser roles. The range of her repertoire as a recitalist is awe-inspiring for its variety of composers, styles and languages or dialects (Polish to Farsi, Chinese to Hebrew, and Neapolitan to Sevillano). The lonely girl from Fairbanks has developed into a full-fledged global star. Some people label her as 'Farinelli reborn'; however, as a reviewer soberly commented after her recent Baroque recital in Istanbul's İŞSanat auditorium, 'She is a singer of our time who simply must be heard.'

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