

Genaux takes her first steps on NYCO stage in *Semele*; Mercurio flexes compositional muscles with *Many Voices*; Stevens bio finally hits shelves.

BY BRIAN KELLOW

VIVICA GENAUX makes her long-awaited New York City Opera debut on September 13, as Juno in STEPHEN LAWLESS's new production of Handel's *Semele*. In recent seasons, Genaux has emerged as one of today's leading interpreters of Baroque music. She sang her first Handel role, Ariodante, in 1998 at Dallas Opera. Genaux recalls it as "the first time I was nervous about being onstage. It's a doozy of a role to take on the first time – eight or nine da capo arias, and long! I was just terrified I was going to get lost in the ornaments. I was trying to concentrate so hard, so I wouldn't miss entrances and would know what exits I was taking on the free-way, because we got going pretty fast."



Genaux: NYCO's Juno

Genaux finds that the similarity of many Handel arias can be daunting, but she notes, "You have to find your own story in order to find the vocal colors, and you have to sing the da capo because it's the only logical thing that could happen in that moment. You have to find that justification in yourself. I love the psychological work that goes on in Baroque. Baroque is more like reading a chart in jazz. You have a skeleton of what the piece is, and you have the liberty of filling it in."

She counts herself lucky to be specializing in music that allows for a certain amount of creative freedom. "I have to have fun onstage in order for the audience to get into it," she says, and she admits she isn't wild about singing in musty old productions covered with the footprints of other singers. "Every single step and every single hand motion and facial expression are given to you by the stage director, and oh, is that rough, because then you have to work backward and figure out in yourself what could I possibly be thinking that would make me point my finger at the tenor – because there's nothing in the text that could possibly make me want to do this!"

Earlier this year, Genaux filmed a brief scene for the upcoming New Line/Castle Rock suspense thriller *Fracture*, starring ANTHONY HOPKINS and RYAN GOSLING. She plays herself – a mezzo singing a recital at L.A.'s Walt Disney Concert Hall.

I have often thought it curious that the example of LEONARD BERNSTEIN, the great American composer-conductor, didn't inspire more young talents to follow in his footsteps. But most of the conductors I know have never given much time to writing their own music; they're mostly focused on their next guest engagement of *Rigoletto*. **STEVEN MERCURIO** is an exception: from the beginning, he wanted to succeed as both conductor and composer. He seemed poised to do just that in 1991, after ZUBIN MEHTA led the premiere of his large-scale Straussian piece *For Lost Loved Ones* with the New York Philharmonic. But other career commitments intervened, namely a busy conducting schedule and intensive work preparing the definitive editions of many of GIAN CARLO MENOTTI's

works – *Goya*, *The Consul*, *The Saint of Bleecker Street*. Mercurio also did dozens of arrangements for recordings by the likes of BEN HEPPNER, SUMI JO, PLÁCIDO DOMINGO and ANDREA BOCELLI. Finally, in the late 1990s, he was able to get back to his own work. The result is *Many Voices*, a just-released recording for Sony Classical of his own lushly romantic music, featuring a starry lineup of soloists: Bocelli, MARCELLO GIORDANI, Jo, GINO QUILICO and ANA MARÍA MARTÍNEZ.

Mercurio doesn't mind that it's taken him a while to find time in his schedule to concentrate on his own writing. "Composition winds up being what you can get away with, when you can do it," he says. He values

all the arranging work he has done, "because although it's not composing, it keeps the process moving in terms of putting pencil to paper. It's nice to have worked on my own pieces, instead of preparing everybody for somebody else. I wrote *For Lost Loved Ones* while working at Barnes and Noble, and then I took a year in Italy to orchestrate it. I hope that financially, I'm in a place where I can control my year better, so I can write big pieces again. I don't write to make money, and don't have to write to please the university standard. I don't dumb it down, but I write what moves me and what I think will be a moving experience for a listener."

Risë Stevens: A Life in Music

(Baskerville Press), a new book by **JOHN PENNINO**, had an unusually rocky road to publication. He began work on it in 1995 and spent two years, on and off, interviewing Stevens and her husband, the late WALTER SUROVY. A deal with Amadeus Press evaporated after Pennino missed a deadline he calls "pretty unrealistic," and he subsequently signed with Northeastern University Press, but the company folded before the book saw the light of day. Baskerville eventually picked it up, but after the book's publication, a plethora of printing errors resulted in its withdrawal from the market. The errors were fixed, and it was reissued. Now that the book is finally here, what does Stevens think of it? "It is not authorized," Pennino stresses. "They cooperated with the book but did not authorize it. But she called and said she liked it a lot."

LATONIA MOORE, one of the most gifted young sopranos around, makes her New York City Opera debut this month as Micaela in *Carmen*.... **MICHAEL HUNT** has been named the new chief executive of Wexford Festival Opera. The festival's 2006 offerings include Donizetti's *Don Gregorio* and Conrad Susa's *Transformations*.... Fans of great singing should appreciate **VICTORIA CLARK**'s contribution to PS Classics's recent release, *Jule Styne in Hollywood*. It's a compilation of the master's movie songs, and Clark's heartbreaking rendition of the overlooked gem "Winter Was Warm" is far and away the best cut. □