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Resource... for Career & Life



Wearing the Pants

A Conversation with
Vivica Genaux

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by Daniel Vasquez

Alaska-born mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux made a name for herself singing the lesser-known Baroque and Bel Canto roles. In the 10-plus years since beginning her career, Genaux has continued to expand her repertoire, adding five new roles this year alone. The young beauty sat down with *CS* writer Daniel Vasquez for this candid interview. Genaux discusses finally making the switch from soprano to mezzo, why she considers technique a movable foundation, and what it's really like to check your gender at the stage door.





As title role, San Diego Opera, Handel's *Ariodante*, 2002

One of the few problems in my otherwise perfect life is the fact that I have a terrible fear of flying. This limits my travel choices to my car, Amtrak, and the glamorous thing that is Greyhound. So I was delighted to discover that Vivica Genaux was slated to perform Angelina in Opera Carolina's production of Rossini's *La Cenerentola* this past March.

The opportunity to hear this young artist proved irresistible, not only because of the short drive, but because I had seen her onstage before, in Minnesota, where Genaux portrayed the heroic role of Arsace in Rossini's *Semiramide*. The Alaska-born singer projected a clear, honey-hued mezzo-soprano of the steadiest quality, and when the music called for flexibility, it came forth as a natural part of her instrument. To top it all, her figure could not be better suited for the trouser roles that make up the bulk of her repertoire, and attempts to describe the beauty of her dark features would plunge me into the poetic.

Genaux, however, is not one to rely solely on her considerable physical and vocal beauty. This year alone, Genaux adds five new roles to her repertoire, among them Neocle in Rossini's rarely staged *L'assedio di Corinto*, which promise to enhance her reputation as a Baroque and Bel Canto specialist of the highest order. It is this kind of work ethic and dedication that has thrust this young, vibrant woman, into the forefront of the operatic world. Indeed, she is among the few allowed to concentrate her attentions on the most exotic roles in the operatic lexicon, a privilege shared only by artists such as Ewa Podlès and Cecilia Bartoli.

I read that you decided to start singing while vacationing in Japan.

Even at 13, I was hardheaded and stubborn, so when I heard that my school back in Alaska was staging *My Fair Lady*, I just had to sing Eliza. In Osaka, I was able to find a libretto of *My Fair Lady* in English in the first place I looked, and on the train ride to Okinawa, I memorized the entire libretto. All the while, I kept bugging my mom about getting a voice teacher. We were scheduled to have a sabbatical in Texas that year, so my mom phoned Dorothy Dow. That's how it all started for me.

Initially, we worked on *My Fair Lady*, and eventually, she taught me some arias like "Musetta's Waltz" and Cherubino's "Voi che sapete." Later on, when I was at college in



photo by M.L. Hart

Rochester [N.Y.], we worked for a couple of summers, and in 1989 I rode up to see her for one last lesson. I stood in her living room, as usual, and it hit me that I was going back to being a science major in Rochester once the session was done. I sang one note, and I started crying my head off. Mrs. Dow realized that I didn't want to go back to Rochester, so she picked up the phone and dialed Indiana University.

This was the time when you started training under Virginia Zeani?

She was my first encounter with a consummate diva, and I learned a lot from her about interpretation. There was technique too—but I have a feeling that most teachers who come from that Italian tradition don't know how they do it, because it comes so naturally to them. I needed time anyway, because I was just a kid, and my voice itself needed work. I

As title role, Festival de Radio France et Montpellier, Handel's *Rinaldo*, 2002



photo by Marc Ginot

would start singing, and it wouldn't happen the way I knew I should be able to do it. It was like being in a dark room [and] not being able to find the exit door. So I would lock myself in a practice room and sing to the point where I would start crying. When I couldn't sing anymore, I would practice the piano until I could finally sing again.

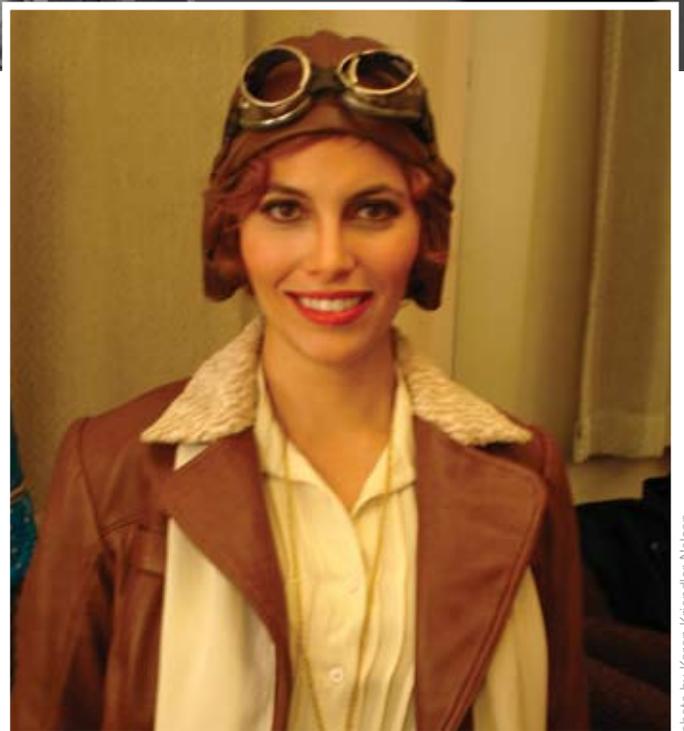
That was the way I had to learn how to sing. It was very frustrating.

On top of that, you faced a Fach crisis at IU because you were initially trained as a soprano. How did you happen to make the change to mezzo?

Dorothy Dow was of the opinion that one should work on the chest voice, and we always worked on it. A lot of singers are scared to go down there, perhaps fearing to harm their instrument, but chest is part of the voice's fabric, and if that section isn't developed, the rest of the vocal instrument isn't complete. Even in the soprano repertoire there's chest voice involved—but at IU they weren't used to hearing chest resonance from a young soprano.

During our first semester, Zeani wondered if I was a mezzo-soprano. Still, I graduated as a soprano in the fall of 1991, and I stayed at IU to work on my auditioning arias. While working on "Come Scoglio" from "Così," I started singing strong chest in some passages. To Zeani, it was the final straw: "You must for to sing like this, you must for sing mezzo-soprano."

I was devastated. I wanted to get out of school, but I also wanted to make it as an artist. Up until that point, the only roles available for mezzo-sopranos were, as far as I knew, Carmen and Rosina. Why bother retraining if I only have the opportunity to sing two roles? So I researched, and I filled up pages with the names of every working mezzo in various opera recordings. After realizing that there were plenty of roles in that world, I decided to try it.



As Isabella, San Francisco Opera, *L'italiana in Algeri*, 2005

photo by Karen Krienderer Nelson

How did you eventually start working with your current teacher, Claudia Pinza?

I had auditioned for the AIMS [American Institute of Musical Studies] program after making my switch to mezzo—but I had been to Graz the prior summer to learn German, and as much as I liked Austria, there was no sense in me returning over there. So I did another audition, for EPCASO [Ezio Pinza Council for American Singers of Opera], run



photo by Axel Zeininger

by Claudia Pinza, the daughter of Ezio Pinza, in the Italian town of Oderzo. I had never been to Italy before, and I was curious.

Going to Italy that summer started everything for me. I developed a great relationship with Claudia Pinza, and my career took off in a fabulous way.

So much so that by the time you made your professional stage debut, it was in a lead role.

That was a case of somebody putting the right material in my path at the right time. One of my first assignments at EPCASO was to learn a new role, and it happened to be Isabella in Rossini's *L'italiana in Algeri*. In the fall of 1993, I happened to audition for Florentine Opera, and was hired on the spot to sing the lead in their production of "L'italiana." I had a year to work on the role with Claudia Pinza, and also with Enza Ferrari, who knows everything about the Bel Canto tradition.

By the time rehearsals started, I was like a scared little monkey. I never brought up the fact that it was my stage debut, because I thought they knew, yet I was convinced that they were going to realize that I was just a kid and send me home. So I worked my tail off. I would go to rehearsal for three hours and come back home to study like a muskrat. Brad Williams was my Lindoro, and we both sang out through all the rehearsals. By the time the performances rolled around, I was so prepared that I nailed it every night.

From then on, you became known as a Rossini singer. How did you develop an interest in the Baroque roles for which you have become so renowned?

After three years of singing Rossini, I didn't know what to do anymore. I had tried Donizetti and Bellini, and while the roles were OK, they weren't really for me. Then I had a meeting with Matthew Epstein, who is known as an adviser of young singers. When I told him about my desire to expand my repertoire, he looked at me and said: "You need to sing [Johann Adolf] Hasse."

You must have stared blankly at him.

Exactly! Hasse? Who is that? Here was another instance of someone giving me the right name at the right time.

A month later, I went to Berlin to audition for an opera by Hasse called *Solimano*. The conductor was René Jacobs, and after auditioning for him, he hired me on the spot.

A year later, I went to Berlin for my first session with René.

I walked into that rehearsal room, and for three hours we worked like I have rarely worked in my life. He had so much energy, the kind that just carries you! He gave me new ideas as to how to manifest my energy. He also showed me that I could sing Baroque music. Until then, the only Baroque I had heard came from the straight-toned London school, and I wasn't interested in making that kind of sound.

With René, the sound was much more alive and passionate. The music would start, and it was like techno. You jumped in it and found yourself in a pool of sound all of a sudden. The experience was so liberating and beautiful that my next battle was to find more of that music to learn.

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Your collaboration with Jacobs yielded your first recording, *Arias for Farinelli*. Were you concerned that your freshman release pitted you against, arguably, the greatest singer in the world?

I wasn't stressed, because it was Farinelli. He was a beautiful singer and I felt truly honored to sing his repertoire. It was more the idea that René Jacobs had entrusted me with this that was daunting. He had his choice of singers for this record, yet he had chosen me. I have an enormous respect for him, and I didn't want to disappoint him.

In terms of virtuosity, the Farinelli arias are beyond ridiculous. Yet your ability to negotiate those vocal summersaults seems endless. Does this come to you naturally?

In terms of the speed, precision, and clarity, the coloratura was always there. I did, however,

learn to trill just in time for the recording. At the time, I was rehearsing the role of Arsace in Rossini's *Semiramide* in Minnesota, and Brenda Harris was the lead. Brenda has this amazing trill and she can do anything with it, so I approached her and said: "Honey, how do you do that?" Both she and her husband, Braeden, gave me a series of exercises that I felt terribly silly doing, but they got me out of that dark room I was in and made me available to other sensations.

I started with those exercises, and once I felt what it meant to trill, I started to manipulate [trills] on my own. The funny part came when we started recording "Farinelli", because I was singing like Mariah Carey during those sessions.

Oh no!

I am serious. I had no idea about the pacing of the recording process, and I was nervous. I had the mic in front of me, and my hand in one ear so I could hear myself, and whenever I would sing some of the fast scales and trills, I would move my hand up and down—sort of like Mariah Carey when she's making those prehistoric sounds of hers—and right before every trill I would move my fingers like that. Everyone in *Concerto Köln* was just looking at me like I was nuts, and the concertmaster at one point just asked: "Are you going to do another trill?" [Laughs.]

Nervous or not, what comes across is a singer with an amazing technique. We all have our own ideas as to the meaning of "technique." What does it mean to you?

Technique for me is the key and foundation for everything. Sometimes you forget the music because you're looking at the technique, but once you're ready, the technique becomes your foundation, and you stand on top of it. There was an interview with Frank Oz in which he was asked the same question. "Technique is the rocking chair that you sit in while you're practicing your craft," [he said]. And that's it! It's a movable foundation that provides a very comfortable feeling, always supporting you, no matter what you want to do.

My sister used to dance, and she once attended a performance where the dancer, after an incredibly long program, managed to execute a perfect leap at the end of the evening. Backstage, my sister asked how she managed to muster that much concentration, and the dancer said: "That's my technique."



photo by Harry Heleotis

You're performing in Rossini's *La Cenerentola* here at Opera Carolina this week. Rossini has put the big aria at the end of a long evening and it's packed with coloratura.

[Laughs.] And I put some more in it!

I know! Is that an example of technique taking over?

That's just love, actually! The entire opera funnels towards that moment. Rossini has constructed the character so well that, if you believe everything you have done up to that point, there's this wonderful feeling of love and equilibrium. Only then can you really do it.

I have worked with directors who don't want the reconciliation at the end, and I have a real hard time making it [to the end of the final aria]. In those instances, I have approached the director with: "Please, I need this. I need the energy onstage to be good, [the energy] from everybody." You can't sing the aria with a wall like that.

Singers feel uncomfortable doing what you just described. We live in a time when the operatic director holds, shall we say, a bit more influence than the singer.

Tons. One problem is that singers have to work with assistant directors quite a bit.

Assistant directors don't have any decision-making power, and if you question them regarding the motivation behind an action, they don't have an explanation. If you're asked to do something that you don't believe in, it shows immediately.

The director has to make you believe in what you're doing, and if he or she can't, then I wouldn't do it. I will feel like an idiot, and I will look like an idiot. Keep in mind, also, that if a director sees you're waiting to take orders, he or she is going to give you orders. But if they see that you have an innate sense as to what works, then they let you go. They're like horses: If you show any kind of fear or doubt, it's all over.

Thankfully, you don't have to deal with directors when choosing ornamentation. Have you noted major differences in the use of embellishments in Bel Canto as opposed to Baroque?

I can't think of it in a "theory" sort of way, because for me, they're different dialects. So for me, a Hasse-like cadenza in Rossini

"I'm so grateful to people like Marilyn Horne, the Messiah for us mezzos, who revised so many of these Baroque and Bel Canto roles because, frankly, she could sing them."

(and vice versa) would be terrible. The one composer that is different is Handel. Handel is the one composer that I am still trying to get a grip on. He has a lot of great moments, but I always feel that he is too intellectual and calculating about what he's doing. I'm more comfortable with the Rossini-like arch ... If I am singing Handel's more stepwise music, technically I feel more restrained. So I do more Handel, in the hopes that I [will] become more comfortable with it.

Do you ever improvise your ornamentation as singers in the Baroque era supposedly did?

As of now, no. Everyone in that time period knew that musical language, so if a

singer improvised some kind of formula, everyone knew what the structure of the next unit was going to be. Nowadays, orchestras don't know Baroque formulas, and in order for improvisation to work, everyone in the orchestra has to know where you're going. I'm also working with other singers who don't necessarily specialize in Baroque, and they would be confused. Frankly, I really appreciate the fact that I have been allowed to focus on Rossini and Baroque music. I'm becoming much freer in these musical languages than I would if I had to sing Puccini today and Stravinsky next week like most singers are required to do.

Had you been around 50 years ago, you would have been expected to sing Azucena and Eboli, and if you had gone there, your career would have been over.

Exactly. In those days there really was no repertoire for me. After three years of only singing Rossini, people stopped expecting me to do the standard repertoire. I'm so grateful to people like Marilyn Horne, the Messiah for us mezzos, who revised so many of these Baroque and Bel Canto roles because, frankly, she could sing them. Then came Cecilia Bartoli who renewed the visibility of this music before the public. Now, with the plethora of countertenors out there, maybe it's less difficult for people to accept a woman in the male roles. You see, at the beginning of my career, I really felt I had to justify myself in a pants role. Now, I understand that one of the primary characteristics of Baroque opera was androgyny. I mean, Farinelli sang female roles. I would love to see a countertenor sing Isabella one day, it would just be too cool!

You are an incredibly attractive woman onstage, regardless of the gender you play, and this can inspire some audience members in an extra-musical way. Have you ever felt uncomfortable with this?

Sometimes, after I perform a trouser role, women come backstage and I can tell that I reached them on a very specific level. Honestly, it's neat to reach people at any level. The beautiful thing about the music in this time period was that the emphasis was on humanity, not gender. Everyone always drools over the artwork from that period, but can one really identify whether that is a woman or a man just by looking at the expression? And yet, it still comes across as fabulous art. It's the

Vivica Genaux and Rod Gilfry, as Penelope and Ulisse, Bayerische Staatsoper, *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, 2001



photo by Wilfried Hölzl

same thing with the operas of that period. It's the humanity that's showing there, and not the dichotomy.

Everyone is always complaining about men and women not understanding each other, but I'm sure that there's a meeting place in the middle. Men and women have similar feelings, and it's how we act out [those feelings] that makes us different. A woman's vocabulary of reactions is hugely different from a man's, and that's what I try to interpret when I'm onstage as a man. I don't worry about acting a certain way or that I have to be butch. That doesn't mean anything. It's the human emotion in Baroque music that is so hot.

The first time I sang a guy part in costume was in Rossini's *Alahor in Granata*, so the ambiance was very Arabic. All the extras were

these dark, beautiful men, and here I'm in the middle, trying to be one of the guys. At one point, one of them told me he was glad that I was really a woman, otherwise he'd be in trouble. It was a big compliment, and I enjoyed the ability to bring everyone into that middle energy.

Not long ago at Los Angeles, you portrayed the ultimate trouser role in the repertoire: Gluck's *Orfeo*. This was also a departure from the hyper-ornate roles you sing. How have all your musical experiences contributed to your realization of this part?

The one opera that helped me was Monteverdi's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*. I love the declamatory opportunities in Monteverdi's music, and that was partially available in

Gluck's *Orfeo* because there were times when the text was in direct contrast with the music. The edge of the words had to accompany the music, and sometimes when you're singing these beautiful melodies, the words are just cutting and full of pain. After reading Gluck's comments to the original singers, I realized that it needed to be raw. The first two cries of "Euridice," for instance, must be sung as if someone had just cut your leg off.

The conductor, Hartmut Haenchen, also felt that we needed to go with the words, and not with the lilting calmness of the music. In moments like that, I want to be true to the piece—and a lot of the time I don't care what the audience thinks. I have to think that I'm doing the interpretation I believe needs to be done for that role. If I do perform the role again, I would love to sing the version that Berlioz did for [Pauline] Viardot.

What else have you learned from your experiences that the classroom didn't teach you?

I feel that I'm finally allowing myself to interpret rather than regurgitate. A lot of what we do is so intent on trying to sound exactly like recordings, singing music exactly as written, or pronouncing words perfectly. While you need to do that, you also need to get beyond that. Get yourself comfortable enough with the language so you don't have to worry about pronunciation. Become comfortable with the music itself so you don't have to worry about the dotted eighth note. Know it's a dotted eighth note, [and] sing it as a dotted eighth note because that is what it is.

I'm enjoying the music a lot more because, rather than just singing notes off the score, I get to be somebody inside the music. I make it my own. It's not just somebody singing Cenerentola, but it's *me* singing Cenerentola. Before, I was looking at myself always from the outside, because I was working with directors and conductors who wanted to put their stamp on what I was doing. I worried whether I was meeting other people's expectations of me, and I can't do that anymore. I mustn't do that anymore. I have to be the one that says: "It's my music, it's my soul, and my interpretation."

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