INTERVIEW WITH

VIVICA GENAUX

“I LOVE VOCAL PYROTECHNICS, BUT IT TAKES MORE THAN THAT TO MAKE ME HAPPY!”

The American mezzo-soprano will be at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées on the 14th of December, with a program of virtuoso arias by Vivaldi. She returns to the TCE later for a reprise of La Cenerentola in January and February, then again for Semele in June and July.
The American mezzo-soprano, who just sang Tancredi in Vienna, will be at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on the 14th of December, with a program identical to that of her new album on Virgin Classics, dedicated to virtuoso arias by Vivaldi. She returns to the TCE later for a reprise of La Cenerentola in January and February, then again for Semele in June and July.

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Born in Alaska, you also grew up there. Living today in Italy, what are your memories?

It’s magnificent. Sure, winter there lasts nine months and it’s not exactly easy. But most of the people who, leaving to study somewhere else, vow not to return for a long time, do come back! The people are very warm, and the arts scene is extremely lively. They encourage you to practice the disciplines that interest you, by accepting you, no matter what level you’re at. I studied dance, violin, and piano, for my part, I did a lot of choral singing, classical and jazz at the same time. The important thing is to participate, with all your heart and soul, while concentrating on your own development. That’s what I learned in Alaska, and what I took away with me when I left for college, at the age of seventeen. I began by studying genetics. My father was a biochemistry professor, I lived surrounded by scientists, and I told myself that I’d easily find work in that field. I was admitted to Rochester University, in New York State, and I was, for a year and a half, extremely unhappy! Coming from a world that was much more “intimate,” I felt lost on campus, I didn’t know how to organize my schedule, I scattered myself among different courses and I missed the intensive practice of music. Moreover, I’m not cut out to study in a field like that. I need to maintain a personal, friendly relationship with my professors, not to be a “lambda” student.

Do you have a teacher today?

Sure! I regularly see Claudia Pinza, daughter of the famous Italian bass. She’s almost a second mother to me. When I study with her, there’s no credit-card machine on the piano, no hours to stick to. In a given period, depending on my schedule, we work together for two and a half hours, every day. Whether at her place,
Isabella in *L'Italiana in Algeri* at The Teatro Regio in Torino (2009). Photo Credit: Ramella & Giannese
INTERVIEW WITH Vivica Genaux

when I’m in the United States, or at my place, when she’s in Italy, during the summer months.

How did you meet her?
It’s a long story. When I left Rochester University, after eighteen months, I got into the vocal department of Indiana University, in Bloomington, on the advice of Dorothy Dow, who was my singing teacher from the age of thirteen. I wanted to see whether anything might come of it, if I had what it takes to hope for an artistic career, since genetics wasn’t really the path ahead of me. In 1991, I received my Bachelor of Science degree (only logical, considering my initial training!) in Voice, with Virginia Zeani and her husband, Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, as singing teachers, and I also decided to leave. As I said to you, I’m not comfortable in a university setting. I did stay on for another semester anyway, during which time we realized that I’m a mezzo-soprano! Up until then, in effect, I worked as a soprano. Dorothy Dow was convinced that that was my true voice, and right up until she was on her deathbed, she didn’t want to let go of the idea. Rossi-Lemeni, for his part, had his doubts. And I didn’t have any idea what the difference might represent! I didn’t know anything about opera, except for therias they asked me to prepare, among others those of Rosina and Carmen, which can be sung just as well by a soprano as by a mezzo. Finally, it was Virginia Zeani who said to me one day, after hearing me sing Fiordiligí’s “Come scoglio,” that I was a mezzo-soprano and that I ought to accept the consequences. I didn’t sleep for three nights! What was I going to do? Where was I going, now that I already had my diploma in hand? I went to the university library; I left with a list of roles to look at more closely, and a list of the greatest singers who’d made a career as a mezzo to listen to. A revelation! I realized that I’d finally found my path, not just vocally — already, at the time when I was singing with choirs, I systematically avoided first-soprano parts — but also as far as the psychology of the characters was concerned. I hated, for example, Mimi in La Bohème: I didn’t feel comfortable in the role of a victim, any more than I do today! During the years of my studies at Bloomington, I literally break down in tears of frustration while working on certain arias. I felt, deep inside me, that they weren’t right for me, but I didn’t see any way to get out of them. Rossi-Lemeni, as singing teachers, and I also decided to leave. As I said to you, I’m not comfortable in a university setting. I did stay on for another semester anyway, during which time we realized that I’m a mezzo-soprano! Up until then, in effect, I worked as a soprano. Dorothy Dow was convinced that that was my true voice, and right up until she was on her deathbed, she didn’t want to let go of the idea. Rossi-Lemeni, for his part, had his doubts. And I didn’t have any idea what the difference might represent! I didn’t know anything about opera, except for therias they asked me to prepare, among others those of Rosina and Carmen, which can be sung just as well by a soprano as by a mezzo. Finally, it was Virginia Zeani who said to me one day, after hearing me sing Fiordiligí’s “Come scoglio,” that I was a mezzo-soprano and that I ought to accept the consequences. I didn’t sleep for three nights! What was I going to do? Where was I going, now that I already had my diploma in hand? I went to the university library; I left with a list of roles to look at more closely, and a list of the greatest singers who’d made a career as a mezzo to listen to. A revelation! I realized that I’d finally found my path, not just vocally — already, at the time when I was singing with choirs, I systematically avoided first-soprano parts — but also as far as the psychology of the characters was concerned. I hated, for example, Mimi in La Bohème: I didn’t feel comfortable in the role of a victim, any more than I do today! During the years of my studies at Bloomington, I literally break down in tears of frustration while working on certain arias. I felt, deep inside me, that they weren’t right for me, but I didn’t see any way to get out of them.

Did you really know so little about opera?
When I was a child, my mother listened to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts on the radio. At the time, there was no opera company in Fairbanks, my hometown; they founded one only two years ago. The nearest one was in Anchorage, eight hours by car from my home! Yes, there were a few concerts of excerpts, some opera workshops, but the genre itself didn’t appeal to me. I preferred symphonic repertory: Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Mahler. When I started to take singing lessons, that was the vocal work that interested me. I didn’t have any more desire to listen to opera than I’d had before. The first one that I attended, was Il Trovatore at the Met, during my first stay in New York, in that very dark staging originally conceived for Luciano Pavarotti, with an enormous staircase.

Let’s go back to the moment when you realized you were a mezzo-soprano. What happened after that?
About two weeks after that fatal class with Virginia Zeani, I auditioned to get into the EPCASO program (Ezio Pinza Council for American Singers of Opera), which takes place every year in Italy, under the artistic direction of Claudia Pinza. A country I’d never been to before, and which was very attractive to me, the fatherland of opera! I’d been accepted and I left, in that summer of 1992, determined never to return to Bloomington. What was I going to do after the internship? I had no idea. I figured I would audition in Europe, maybe find a spot in a company. For five weeks, I worked on nothing but arias and roles for mezzo, starting with Isabella in L’Italiana in Algeri. A real stroke of luck! There, as in La Cenerentola, I found an incredible pleasure in vocalizing across the entire range of my register, in exploiting parts of my voice I’d never explored before. With only one goal in mind: to show everybody that I really was a mezzo-soprano. I needed time to let go of this obsession, as if I were unable to get Dorothy Dow’s fingerprints out of my head. I had confidence in her judgment, and it was she, after all, who was in part responsible for launching my career.

And after the internship?
Robert Lombardo, subsequently became my agent, heard me during the sessions. He put forward the idea of organizing a few auditions for me in the United States. As I said to you, I didn’t have much desire to go back there, but Claudia Pinza had also suggested that I come to her home, in Pittsburgh to prepare me in the best possible conditions. I accepted, and the next year, I landed my first contract: L’Italiana in Algeri in Milwaukee, for the fall of 1994. I had no stage experience at all and I learned everything on the fly, during the five or six years following my debut. For my first Angelina in La Cenerentola at the Semperoper in Dresden, for example, I had only four rehearsals! In retrospect, I’m not at all satisfied with what I did on the night of the premiere; at the same time, I’m extremely proud to have gotten through it, considering the conditions.

TIMELINE
1969 Birth in Fairbanks, Alaska
1994 Professional debut in Milwaukee in L’Italiana in Algeri
1997 Metropolitan Opera debut in Il Barbiere di Siviglia
1998 Revival of Donizetti’s Alahor in Granada, in Seville
1999 Meeting with René Jacobs: Hasse’s Solimano, at Berlin’s Staatsoper unter den Linden
2001 Paris début in Hasse’s Marc’Antonio e Cleopatra, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées
2002 Rinaldo at the Festival de Radio France et Montpellier
2003 Debut at the Opéra National de Paris, in Il Barbiere di Siviglia
What do you remember about L’Italiana in Algeri in Milwaukee?  
I had the luck to work with a stage director, Leon Major, and a conductor, Joseph Rescigno (nephew of Nicola) who understood just how terrified I was! But they hadn’t grasped that this was my debut. I can still see Joe and the general director of Florentine Opera, Dennis Hanthorn, bursting into my dressing room, livid, five minutes before the curtain. In opening up the playbill, they had just discovered that this was my stage debut! For a second, I thought they were going to kick me out of the production. And then, I realized that that was impossible: the orchestra was already in the pit, I had my wig on, and there was nobody in the theater to replace me. So I made my entrance on the stage. At intermission, the director of San Diego Opera was already backstage, offering me L’Italiana in Algeri, Il Barbiere di Siviglia, and a world premiere for the upcoming seasons…

So it was already Rossini…  
That’s what I was singing in auditions, and I felt comfortable from the start in this repertory. I went on to add La Gazza Ladra, La Donna del Lago, Semiramide, Bianca e Falliero, L’Assedio di Corinto, and now Tancredi at the Theater an der Wien. Tancredi, Malcolm and Arsace lie lower than Rosina or Angelina, but they don’t pose any problems for me. Thanks to Dorothy Dow, among others, I have an easy, sonorous chest register. Above all, all these jobs allow me to vocalize from low to high notes, and vice versa, which is what I prefer. When I take on roles written by Handel for high castrato, I’m already less at ease, because many of the virtuoso passages are sung in the middle, with only a few incursions toward the high or toward the low.

And speaking of that, when did the so-called “Baroque” repertory enter your life?  
Three years into my career, people started to criticize me for singing nothing but Rossini. I remember one review that appeared the day after a concert in San Diego, in which the reviewer exclaimed, “Even for her encores, she does Rossini!” Which way should I turn? As far as other bel canto composers, I’d interpreted Maffio Orsini in Lucrezia Borgia, Romeo in I Capuleti e i Montecchi, but the range of roles that were offered to me — and are still being offered — isn’t very broad, even if I do some day take on Giovanna Seymour in Anna Bolena. The Baroque was another area to explore. Matthew Epstein, of Columbia Artists Management, advised me to sing some Hasse. Twelve years ago, I had absolutely no idea what that meant, but I thought, “Why not?” At the same moment, or nearly so, the Staatsoper unter den Linden in Berlin invited me to audition for René Jacobs, precisely for an opera by Hasse, Solimano. They sent me two arias, with which I immediately felt comfortable. René engaged me after the audition; that was the second time that happened, after L’Italiana in Algeri in Milwaukee! Solimano wasn’t exactly my first Baroque opera, since I took on, between the auditions and the Berlin performances, Handel’s Ariodante in Dallas. But that was with an orchestra playing modern instruments. I really understood the pleasure that one gets from performing this music during the rehearsals for Solimano, with the period instruments of the Concerto Köln. I had the same feeling of going from black-and-white to color on a television screen! I still remember the first rehearsal: three hours of happiness! Working with René is like nothing else. You sense in him an energy and an enthusiasm that literally sweep you off your feet, that draw vocal colors and emotions from you that you never would have thought yourself capable of. I adore his conception of the Baroque, entirely focused on the drama, the theater and the passions, without being mannered or bombastic, as in a certain Anglo-Saxon tradition. And then, each time he writes cadenzas or ornaments for me, I really feel like an important customer in the shop of a great couturier! It’s as if he were tailoring an expensive garment to my exact measurements; that’s how comfortable I feel.
As far as technique goes, is Hasse more or less difficult than singing Rossini?

I feel freer in Hasse, and it’s always a joy for perform his music. I don’t want to say that I’m tired of singing Rossini, but sometimes, I admit, it’s my voice that gets tired!

What about Handel?

I needed some time to find real pleasure in singing his operas, but it’s coming along. I loved Ariodante, in which I’ve played not only the title role but also Polinesso, and also certain passages of Rinaldo, Alcina and Giulio Cesare where, there again, I’ve played the title role and also Sesto, unless I’m much mistaken! I remember one day when we were rehearsing, Ewa Podles and I, in the final scenes of the piece, at San Diego Opera. I surprised myself by cutting loose with one of Cesare’s lines, to the great astonishment of Ewa, who was about to sing the same line! I’m very attached to the role of Sesto, who’s so much like Arsace: a young hero, not yet completely emerged from adolescence, who progressively comes to realize the force of his character and comes into his own as a man. Polinesio and Bradamante, as far as they’re concerned, have one point in common: the tessitura isn’t very long, almost everything lies in the middle register, exactly where I don’t really feel at ease. But I adore the music of Alcina, and I’m about to take on Ruggiero, which lies higher than Bradamante.

The production of Rinaldo mounted at the Opéra de Montpellier in 2002 deliberately pulled the stunt of updating to the contemporary period. What did you think about that?

There’s something very modern in Baroque opera, probably because it relies as much on the emotions as on the situations. That’s why it’s easier to update it than other chunks of the repertory: the conflicts that motivate the characters, the way they react, are exactly the same as in our time.

Your most recent disc is entirely devoted to the virtuoso arias of Vivaldi. Did the project start with you?

Not at all! The program was suggested to me by Virgin Classics, with arias chosen by the musicologist Frédéric Delaméa. I’ve already recorded several times for this company, which always has very interesting projects.

Collaborating with Fabio is as unique an experience as working with René Jacobs, probably because one started as a violinist, the other as a singer. The idea of this recording is to show how virtuosity, in Vivaldi, is never gratuitous. It’s constantly in the service of a dramatic context or an emotion that words alone can’t express, and this is equally true in the heroic singing and in the more gracious lines. I adore vocal pyrotechnics, and I know that’s what many people expect from me at first. But it takes more than that to make me happy! I need to challenge myself with other styles, that of L’Isola Disabitata and Il Mondo della Luna, for example, in this bicentennial of Haydn’s death. I always yearn to explore new territories. I believed for a long time, for example, that Mozart wasn’t for me, in so far as, in his work, the mezzos are often second sopranos. But now I feel ready for Cherubino or, why not? Sesto in La Clemenza di Tito. I don’t believe, on the other hand, that I have the right vocal color for Idamante.

And French opera?

My experience is limited to Urbain in Les Huguenots in Bilbao, without the rondo that Meyerbeer added for Marietta Alboni (“Non … vous n’avez jamais, je gage”), which would have lent a little spice to what is after all a secondary role! The theater told me that they couldn’t get their hands on the orchestra materials. As far as the rest goes, nobody has ever suggested any other French role. But I feel ready for Carmen under certain conditions! I don’t correspond to several stereotypes that are attached to the character, and if I set out on that adventure, it would be with the guarantee to present the portrayal I have in mind. I could also take on Charlotte in Werther, but other people do it better than I would. So I’d rather abstain.

Interview conducted by Richard Martet
Translated by William V. Madison