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Vivica Genaux Returns to Caramoor

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For more than a decade, the mezzo soprano Vivica Genaux has been a greatly esteemed exponent of the Baroque and bel canto repertoires, as visitors to the Caramoor International Music Festival will know. There she has flourished, notably in operas by Rossini, but Sunday afternoon she turns to Spain with a performance of Manuel de Falla's brief dramatic work "El Amor Brujo," or "Love, the Magician."

"I love the Spanish repertoire and am fascinated by this piece," Ms. Genaux said in an interview earlier this week, describing it as steeped in the tradition of the cantaora, or Flamenco singer, and gypsy lore. The work, about a gypsy plagued by visions of a former lover, will be performed in its original 1915 version, which calls for a chamber ensemble rather than the full orchestra of the more familiar ballet version. "The big orchestra softens the edges," she said, "where the chamber version is crasser and more intense. It's the difference between a skeleton and something with flesh on the bones."

She comes to Caramoor with a new degree of fame, having brought Baroque opera to a mass audience in the Gregory Hoblit's thriller film "Fracture," with Anthony Hopkins and Ryan Gosling, last year. In a scene filmed in Los Angeles's Disney Hall, she sings an aria by Riccardo Broschi. "I was really interested in the procedures and requirements of a different genre — film — and found it all very positive," she said. "The audience was full of a hundred extras, dressed up and wearing diamonds, and many told me on how much they enjoyed the aria."

The aria was included on her 2002 disc "Aria for Farinelli," an important achievement in a career that developed quickly. In 1994, two years after graduation from Indiana University, where she studied with Virginia Zeani and her husband, Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, the Alaska native made her professional debut with Milwaukee's Skylight Opera as Isabella in Rossini's "L'Italiana in Algeri." Engagements with leading opera houses quickly followed. Rossini became her niche, with Isabella, Rosina in "Il Barbiere di Siviglia," and Angelina in "La Cenerentola" as her signature roles. She established herself as a model of the modern mezzo, with a smooth voice of lovely timbre, flexible rather than heavy, coupled with a dazzling technique, good looks, and a winning stage manner.

Sensing the need to broaden her repertoire beyond Rossini, however, she looked to the Baroque. "I knew the restrained British approach to this music and was glad to find conductors like René Jacobs who wanted more emotion," she said.

The idea of an opera singer from Alaska may sound a little exotic, but her heritage is European: her father, an American of Welsh and Belgian decent, taught biochemistry at the University of Alaska, and her Swiss-German mother grew up in Mexico. "I really feel Spanish or Italian," she said in jest. As a child, she played the violin and participated in many other activities — singing, dance, poetry, pottery, aerobics — "anything to get out of the house and get through the long winters." And though not an Italian herself, she is married to one, a hydraulic engineer, who works on flood and irrigation control near Venice.

These days, Ms. Genaux is such an accomplished singer of Handel that it is surprising to learn she did not warm to him immediately. "There is something Germanic about the music. It is Italian but the bone structure underneath is very Teutonic. I prefer the reckless Italians."

With her Baroque expertise, she has participated in the current slew of recordings of Vivaldi operas but acknowledges reservations about his operatic greatness. She did "Bajazet," but pointed out that "many of its arias are actually taken from other composers."

By contrast, she is keenly interested in Johann Adolf Hasse, a thoroughly Italianized 18th-century German master of opera seria, whom she esteems for the beauty of his vocal writing. Having participated in a memorable production of "Solimano" conducted by Jacobs at the Berlin Staatsoper some years ago, she is convinced that another Hasse opera "would make a big statement if cast with people who know how to sing it."