

Sylvie Valayre

I was born in Paris, only steps away from the Bastille, on October 10 like Verdi. When I was four, I had already decided that life was better spent on a stage.

In our home, my two musical brothers and I would listen to all kinds of music. By the end of my teens, I had two passions, music and the theatre, and saw no reason to favor one over the other. What if I went for both? Wouldn't the scales be in perfect equilibrium? My parents decided for me: No theatre until you graduate from high school! And after that, the path of reason: a master's in Anglo-American Studies, and then a pre-doctoral dissertation on the golden age of American movies. But you can't fight nature: As I was getting ready for a Ph.D., I heard a scream inside of me, Edvard Munch loud and Sammy Davis Jr. clear: No! I can't. I can't become a professional student. I need to act, play, move, speak, mime, and why not? Sing!

Ah yes, but what? And where? The golden age of American musicals - my favorite? Too late. Theatres? Concert halls? Major attraction, no idea how to get from the hall up onto the stage. Opera houses? Never been there - at age twenty! - except via the roundabout way of operatic movies: Bergman's *Magic Flute*, Losey's *Don Giovanni*, Zeffirelli's *Traviata* and *Otello* - where I saw M^o Placido Domingo for the first time and felt my life would never be the same again - Francesco Rosi's *Carmen* - with the same magnificent Domingo.

The die was cast: If I ever managed to use my vocal cords "the operatic way" - a bit of a challenge for someone who loved mimicking Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez, Ella Fitzgerald or Groucho Marx - I had a chance, or so I thought.

I promptly studied enough musical theory and interpretation to be admitted at the Paris Conservatoire. My mentors and professors were the always wonderful and good-humored Christiane Eda-Pierre and Gabriel Bacquier. I also sat in Régine Crespin's class on occasions, when Christiane Eda-Pierre performed abroad. During those Conservatoire years, however, I felt like a fife trying to imitate the power and grandeur of Notre-Dame's organ. At the same time, I was lucky enough to attend the master classes of Cathy Berberian, Galina Vichnevskaia, Gino Bechi, Paul von Schilawsky in Florence, and in Montpellier, Giuseppe Di Stefano who later chose me to perform with him in concert at Théâtre du Chatelet, in Paris.

I knew I was a soprano, but what manner of a soprano? A coloratura? A "simple" lyric soprano? A lirico-spinto? A "dramatic" soprano? Or, as some suggested, a light mezzo? Everyone I talked to had a different opinion. What was I to do with an immature range of three octaves?

In 1990, in Verona, I was lucky to meet Italian tenor Sergio Tedesco, who greatly assisted me in bringing my voice to a level of competence and maturity that allowed me to premiere in *La Traviata* and *Tosca* within two months of each other. Since the Fall of 2002, I have also benefited from the valuable advice of mezzo-soprano Catherine Green, who has become a very dear friend.

At the beginning of my career, I was immediately offered major parts in Mozart's operas. Soon after, M^o Mstislav Rostropovitch and M^o Galina Vichnevskaia asked me to perform the title role in their production of Rimsky Korsakov's *The Czar's Bride* at the Rome Opera. Then came *Mimi* in *La Bohème*, *Tosca* in *Tosca*, *Magda* in *La Rondine*, *Violetta* in *La Traviata*, *Norma* in *Norma*, *Leonora* in *Fidelio*, *Manon* in *Manon Lescaut*, *Thaïs* in *Thaïs*, *Adina* in *L'Elisire d'Amore*, *Liú* in *Turandot*, the *Infante* in *The Dwarf* [or *The Infante's Birthday*] by Zemlinsky, *La Voix humaine* by Poulenc, and more.

People who called themselves "reasonable" kept telling me that my repertoire had "too much breadth and too little homogeneity." It made it difficult for people in the profession to label me into a recognized vocal category. So, who needs to be labeled? Had I been reasonable, I would still be poring over my

Ph.D. Besides, my ventures outside the recognized categories led me to a career that lacked nothing but monotony.

In 1995 for the first time, in a production touring the Netherlands, I performed the part of Lady Macbeth, which was to become one of my signature parts.

Starting in 1994, I was performing in all major Italian houses in the most diverse selection of works and parts: La Voix humaine (Trieste, Genova, Naples), Cavalleria Rusticana (Trieste, Bologna), L'heure Espagnole and Le Secret De Suzanne (Trieste), Madama Butterfly (Naples, Venice, Cagliari, Torino), Macbeth (Genova, Cagliari, Torino).

In 1996, with the production of Venice's Fenice Theatre, I made my début in Warsaw in the wonderful part of Elisabetta in Don Carlo. A few months later in London, I made my concurrent débuts in Nabucco at the Covent Garden Opera, and in the five-acts Italian version of Don Carlo at the Royal Albert Hall, conducted by M° Bernard Haitink.

After London, in 1997, Milan invited me onto the famous stage of La Scala to perform Ponchielli's La Gioconda. My début in Milan was soon followed by other débuts in other famous houses: Puccini's Madama Butterfly at the San Francisco Opera, Verdi's Jerusalem at Carnegie Hall in New York, Nabucco, Aida, and Tosca in the Roman arena of Verona, Nabucco in Zurich, Macbeth in Paris, and Tosca in Berlin.

My constant hopscotch from one country to another was not without flattering rewards. For example, in 1997, the Graz Opera in Austria had asked me to hop on a plane and replace their indisposed soprano in Madama Butterfly. During the dress rehearsal, as I was worried on stage as to whether they would like my Butterfly, they were worrying in the wing as to whether I would accept the monumental part of Salome, which, to my complete surprise, they offered me the moment I walked off stage. It took me months to find the strength to accept the part. Not until 1999 did I return to Graz as Salome, a part that has since brought me so much satisfaction and appreciation.

Then came Aida in Munich and, in 2000, first performances of Madama Butterfly at the Metropolitan Opera, Manon Lescaut at Opera Pacific, Ernani at the Madrid Opera, Aida at Macerata, Tosca in Paris and Tokyo, and Macbeth in Berlin. The year 2001 brought me Tosca, again in Paris and in Chicago for my début there, Macbeth at Brussels' Théâtre de la Monnaie, and Norma in Macerata.

The year 2002 was equally prolific, as I sang Elektra's Chrysothemis in Madrid under M° Daniel Barenboim's baton, Butterfly in Tokyo under M° Chung, and the title part of Salome at the Kennedy Center in Washington. In September and October, I had the privilege of returning to the Metropolitan Opera with M° Placido Domingo and M° James Levine to give my first performance of Andrea Chénier's Magdalena.

The 2003-2004 season was characterized by some significant first performances: the title part of Turandot in Berlin with M° Kent Nagano; the part of the Empress in Strauss's Die Frau Ohne Schatten, also in Berlin with M° Thielemann; the part of Minnie in Puccini's La Fanciulla Del West in Zurich, the part of Amelia in Ballo in Maschera in Torino; Tosca at the Met and in Vienna, Butterfly in Chicago and Naples, as well as Nabucco and La Gioconda in Zurich.

The abundance of 2003-2004 carried over to the 2004-2005 season: Salome in Braunschweig and Athens with the Vienna Philharmonic, and in Rome with the Santa Cecilia Orchestra; Tosca, Nabucco and Fedora in Vienna; Salome in Tokyo; Tosca in Zurich, at the New York Metropolitan Opera, and in Washington, D.C.; and Aida in the Caracalla Therms of Rome, directed by M° Placido Domingo.

And now, if you feel like it, click on the News link for more information about the upcoming season.

See you soon!

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