

Interview for the Carmen Production of Mauritius 2010

Can you briefly explain to our readers in your own terms what a mezzo soprano is? Did you choose that voice or it chose you? How?

Mezzo-soprano means "middle" "soprano". It is a type of classical female singing voice, whose range lies between soprano and contralto. The sound is darker and heavier than that of a soprano. In general, the difference in the size of the vocal folds causes differently pitched voices, which means that the range of one's voice is primarily a genetic gift. In my case, I can sing also many contralto parts and even feel comfortable with some soprano parts.

You appear as modern singer on your website. Is it also a way to fight the old misconceptions that sometimes surround classical music?

Times have changed for everybody. I am aware of the clichés that surround especially classical singers, but I don't have the impression that I have to fight them. It is more a source of amusement for me to see people's surprise when I tell them my profession.

How did you come to western classical music? Parents? Teacher? Radio? When did that happen?

My mother listened to classical composers such as Bach and Brahms and sang quite a lot with my brothers and me. I was lucky to have very good musical teachers in school, who awoke my love for the immense world of classical music. I sang in many choirs and later joined a band, where we also played jazz and rock music.

How many languages do you sing? Is it easy to pass from one language to the other?

My native language is German, but I also have sung in English, Italian, French, Spanish and Russian. Each language requires a different placement of the voice, and of course I feel more comfortable singing a language that I also speak.

How did the practice of music support the way you are?

I cannot imagine my life without music, that's for sure!
As research has shown, the pursuit of music helps to connect the two sides of the brain, and that has its advantages in all sorts of life situations. A good argument, by the way, for obligatory music education for everyone!

Do you consider yourself as a Diva in the traditional way?

On the one hand, the concept of "Diva" has become one that we find in many forms of show business. On the other hand, artists in general have changed: making classical music has become more of an encounter with one's own inner life in the service of the music. I see myself, even when I'm singing Carmen, as part of a larger process, and I enjoy participating in a creative team effort.

Why record Fanny Hensel?

Fanny Hensel's music is still unjustly neglected, due to the fame of her brother, Felix Mendelssohn. Even today, songs she composed are published under his name. Their parents saw to it that both enjoyed an outstanding musical education; and it was only because she was a woman that Fanny Hensel was not given an equal chance as a composer. I consider it a sort of obligation to help her music now in getting attention it deserves.

Does your experience in operas serve you when you tackle concert repertoire? You sang also baroque music. Do you feel at home with conductors who ask you to sing without vibrato and to obey the demands of ancient music?

I find that the fields of opera, oratorio and Lied, and how I sing them, influence each other. I have no problems with singing without vibrato - as a special effect, not only in Baroque music - but I feel more comfortable when I can sing in a way that lets the air flow naturally.

What did draw Zubin Mehta's attention on you in Munich?

I auditioned for him onstage at the National Theatre. He offered me at first a role as a Rhine daughter in a production of Rheingold, and other roles followed.

Cherubino, Idamante, Niklaus in Tales of Hoffman, the Composer in Ariadne of Naxos, Charlotte in Werther, Mignon, Joan of Arc and the successful role Carmen. Is Carmen your favorite role? Do you have another special affinity?

No, I tend to consider the role I'm singing at the moment my favorite role! But besides singing leading ladies I love to sing trouser roles, because you have to find a natural approach to moving like a boy. There is a little more freedom in movement- for instance, you don't have to worry about crossing your legs in a ladylike way while sitting!

Carmen is the most popular opera character in the repertoire. There are so many incarnations. Is this intimidating for the artist?

The audience's view of Carmen is full of expectations fueled by projection. There are the archetypal poses and attitudes of the gypsy woman, the untamed character and her magical erotic spell on men. What interests me is finding a true human being inside the role of Carmen. In the last act, she talks mainly about herself in the third person, which is vital for me to understanding her personality. She is also imprisoned by her role and her belief in an unchangeable fate.

How demanding is the role on musical grounds?

Bizet wanted to have a chansonlike approach in the first half, with a more natural way of singing. The final ending, of course, requires dramatic abilities and strong high and low notes.

Can you describe the rehearsals before the actual performances? How do you work with other singers for example?

In CARMEN there are some tricky ensembles which need a brush up rehearsal now and then. We singers get together after having put on our makeup and costumes on and go through the score briefly. After this ensemble work I like to do some exercises for myself. But not only vocal ones. I also do some Yoga and dancing.

The website says you are at home on the stages of the opera houses as well as on concert and recital stages. How is life in your actual home, is it like an opera stage?

I don't mistake the stage for my private home, but I feel also at home on stage. When I am in my private home, I am happy to be a normal person who enjoys gardening, cooking, watching films but also likes to do go out into nature.