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VIVICA GENAUX

George Hall

Genaux sings Isabella in *L'italiana in Algeri* in Turin next month

One of today's most successful mezzo-sopranos, a familiar name in opera houses in mainland Europe and in North America, Vivica Genaux has, for some reason, scarcely touched base with British audiences as yet—her debut here was at the Barbican last March, as Polinesso in a concert performance of Handel's *Ariodante*. But she's busy everywhere else, and her burgeoning discography—including the title roles in Handel's *Rinaldo* and *Arminio*, as well as Vivaldi's *L'Atenaide* and *Bajazet*, Donizetti's *Alahor in Granata*, and an acclaimed collection of arias written for the castrato Farinelli—has won her many admirers internationally.

While she regards my questions about her Alaskan origins as a kind of 'regression therapy', it's clear that her upbringing was stimulating. For a start, Alaska is not the cultural desert the ignorant might suppose. When Genaux was growing up, she was able to take advantage of the fact that 'because the airspace over Russia was closed, the planes carrying artists travelling from Europe to the Orient stopped to refuel at Anchorage, and many of them took a short flight to Fairbanks to give concerts'. She remembers Martha Graham, Jean-Pierre Rampal, the Modern Jazz Quartet, the Ballet Folklórico de México and the Vienna Boys Choir.

At home her father, a professor of biochemistry, listened to lots of Bruckner and Mahler, while her mother liked opera. She herself played the violin for nine years. 'I was also involved in the orchestra, various choirs, big bands, things like that.' Her first solo stage appearance came about entirely through her own initiative. 'I was in sixth grade and the classes got together to do a historical musical. I didn't tell anyone that I was going to audition for this song sung by an Indian girl about how she saw the white man coming and her civilization changing and dying out. I got the part and we rehearsed and started doing the shows and my parents still didn't know. At one of our first performances one of the teachers called my mother and said, "What are you doing? Get over here quickly, your daughter is singing!" She's like, "She's what?!"'. At that time Genaux was not studying voice. 'I would hyperventilate every time I sang. I would practically pass out before I ended this three-minute song because I was breathing wrong. But I loved it—I just disappeared into these characters.'

Next she sang in the chorus of *The Music Man* at a camp for high-school students, then discovered that the following year they were planning *My Fair Lady*. 'It had

always been one of my favourite musicals. I loved Audrey Hepburn and I loved the songs, the character, the story.' Meanwhile, aged 13, she had gone with her parents to Japan during her father's sabbatical year. 'We were on a train from Osaka to Okinawa. In a station bookstore I found the script of *My Fair Lady*, so on the way down I memorized Act 1 and on the way back I memorized Act 2.' The family then spent four months in Texas. 'When we got to Galveston, we found a voice teacher—Dorothy Dow. She changed my life. I went and sang my scales and she took me on. Not only did we do the *My Fair Lady* songs but we also did the two Cherubino arias and "Quando me'n vo", because we didn't know if I was a soprano or a mezzo. She wanted to stretch the range to see where I could go. To the day she died she was convinced I was a soprano, and I still humbly beg to differ.'

Though the young Vivica had discovered her voice, she went to Rochester University to read genetics and only in the summers returned to Texas to study with Dow. 'The crisis came the second summer. When I was supposed to go back to Rochester, my dad came down to Galveston and I had a lesson in front of him. I stood up and started and it hit me that it was my last lesson for at least a year. I just started crying. My dad was shocked and Miss Dow was shocked and asked me what was wrong. I said I couldn't face not having this as my primary objective every day. And she said, "Well, if that's the way it is," and she went into the other room and looked up the phone number for Indiana University. She called and found out who was on faculty. She got the names of Virginia Zeani and Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, and she said, "You go, call this number for an audition; these are the people you need to study with." That was in September. In January I was accepted to study with Virginia for a semester.' That

■ *Vivica Genaux as Gluck's Orfeo at Los Angeles Opera in 2003*

■ *In Handelian trouser roles: (l.) as Rinaldo at Montpellier, summer 2002; (r.) as Ariodante at San Diego Opera, earlier the same year*

autumn Genaux moved from the distinguished soprano to her equally distinguished bass husband, who became like a grandfather to her. 'He looked after me. When I saw him in the hallways, he would say, "Vivica, I was thinking of you, you should sing such-and-such." In the meantime I saw the Callas documentary where he was interviewed and I was just blown away. I was studying with this person who was so integral to her career. It was a really rich time.'

She studied with Rossi-Lemeni until he died, then Zeani took her back into her studio. 'There had always been a discussion as to whether I was a soprano or a mezzo. I knew the entire soprano anthology but I didn't have five audition arias I was comfortable with. One day I was working with Zeani and I brought "Come scoglio" and really laid into the low notes. Zeani said, "My darling, if you sing like that then you must be a mezzo." My world fell apart again. As far as I knew there were just two roles for mezzo-soprano in the entire repertoire—Carmen and Rosina—and those could very well be sung by sopranos. Why become a mezzo? So I went through the card catalogue in the score library and the card catalogue in the recording library and wrote down the names of all the mezzo roles and mezzo singers and came out with a mighty fine list, including a lot more than just *Carmen* and *Barber of Seville*.'

For Genaux, deciding on becoming a mezzo broadened the dramatic parameters. 'Mezzos were the ones that got everyone else into trouble. I empathized with these characters, whereas I didn't with the sopranos.' Within two weeks of changing to

■ *Genaux (l.) as Cenerentola in Santiago, 2004; (r.) as Juno/Ino in 'Semele' at New York City Opera, 2006*

mezzo she was accepted for the Ezio Pinza Council for American Singers of Opera (EPCASO) programme in Italy, where she studied with Claudia Pinza—the daughter of the famous bass in whose memory EPCASO was founded.

'That summer in Italy [the agent] Robert Lombardo came to hear one of his singers. He heard me and he said, "Well, if you want, I can set up auditions for you in New York," and then Claudia wanted me to go back to Pittsburgh to study with her.' That was in 1992, and Genaux based herself in Pittsburgh for the next decade, working closely with Pinza and getting her first job singing Isabella in Rossini's *L'italiana in Algeri* at the Florentine Opera in Milwaukee in 1994. Isabella has been a regular assignment and remains a favourite. 'She was like the epitome of the American musical theatre character that had grit and energy and was in charge—kind of an Ethel Merman type of person. So I could identify with her.'

Rossini has remained central to Genaux's career, but for the first three years he was practically all she sang. 'That was lucky, because I had no stage experience and I was basically pulling one over on whoever hired me—they thought I knew what I was doing but I really didn't. I debuted Isabella, Rosina and Angelina, and then just kept doing them, which was great except that I was a Suzie-One-Note kind of girl. People wanted me to extend my repertoire but it was difficult in bel canto because the Bellini and Donizetti roles started getting heavier for my voice, which wasn't ready for it at

that time, while the Mozart roles were basically second soprano roles in a higher tessitura that I wasn't comfortable with then. But I got good stage time working with good conductors and stage directors, so I got to work through a lot of my fears and learn the craft.'

Rosina is the character she's played most. 'I've done about 150 performances. When I hit something like 115 it became clear that I wanted to move back from her. I was so young when I started and I did so many performances with different conductors and different stage directors, and everyone wants to put their own imprint on you. You end up under this glass bowl with all these people's stickers on it, and you can't see out any more, and you don't know where you are, who you are, or who your Rosina is. You've just become so invested with emulating other people's Rosinas. For instance, I did *The Barber* in the Ruth Berghaus production at the Berlin Staatsoper with an assistant who had worked with her. I did an interview with a fellow who had seen the original production, and he told me that of all the singers who had come into this role—it was something like 758 performances by then—I emulated most the original singer. Basically I had been taken through the Arthur Murray School of *Barber of Seville*, where there were footprints on the stage—you had to put your left foot here, your right foot there, move your arm this way—that was how we were taught that production. I was being a robot, and they were happy with that, but I wanted to understand the character and why they did it. Then the Lesson Scene is so difficult to stage in a believable way. It always comes off as slapstick, and I don't enjoy slapstick. I like real theatre where you can believe in what you're doing. But usually it doesn't get fleshed out because it's a piece that's in most big houses' repertoire, so you have 20 minutes of rehearsal and then you go.'

■ *Before she stepped back: as Rosina at the Vienna Staatsoper, 2003*

The second and ever-burgeoning strand to Genaux's repertoire is the Baroque. How did that develop? 'Baroque came after those three years of singing only Rossini. People were saying to my management, "Is that all she does?". I thought, "What am I supposed to do?". Somebody set up a meeting for me with Matthew Epstein and I went to see him and I explained my problem, and he said, "You need to sing Hasse." What, who's Hasse? He explained that he was a very important Baroque composer that no one knows any more. Great, but where the heck do you go to sing Hasse? I don't know if he already knew that they were doing a Hasse opera at the Berlin Staatsoper—he may have—but within a month I had an offer to audition for René Jacobs to do

■ *As Irene in Vivaldi's 'Bajazet' at Montpellier, 2006*

Solimano. Then before I actually went to do the Hasse I did *Ariodante* in Dallas—that was my first actual Baroque opera, though with a modern orchestra.'

Though Genaux has since worked with several major Baroque specialists—Christophe Rousset, Fabio Biondi, Alan Curtis, Ivor Bolton and Paul McCreesh—her meeting with Jacobs proved crucial. 'The first day I had three hours of coaching with René with no break. It was one of the most incredible experiences of my life—to have this guy with such high energy melding with my own, and taking me places I never thought I could go vocally! We were both really excited at the potential. Then I remember my first rehearsal with Concerto Köln. I had never heard a Baroque orchestra before, and it was like the moment in *The Wizard of Oz* where everything has been in black and white, and then the door opens and it's Technicolor. You hear those sounds, those trills, those attacks, the level of solo playing and the orchestra itself being another character responding to your emotion. I had never felt that before.'

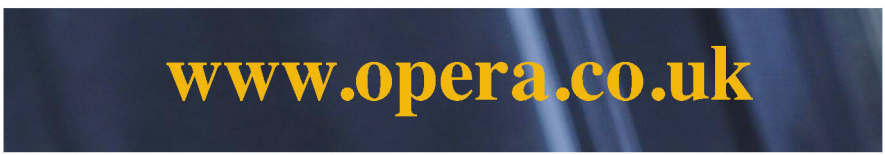
Solimano not only began her regular association with Jacobs, but also initiated her passion for the music of Johann Friedrich Hasse, a composer whom she prefers to Handel. 'Hasse for me is like a vocal day spa. It feels so good to sing. Beyond the fact that I did my first Hasse with René, there's a special connection between the two because of their understanding of the vocal line. Hasse has this because of his experience as a singer—he was a boy soprano and then continued as a tenor while beginning to work as a composer, and of course his wife Faustina Bordoni was one of the most famous singers of the time. René also has this as a singer, so for me singing Hasse with a singer-conductor was a unique blessing.'

In her plans, the crossover between Genaux's two repertories continues, with her first *Tancredi* (under Jacobs) staged in Vienna in September, plus her second Arsace in *Semiramide* in concert at the Caramoor Festival under Will Crutchfield. On the

Baroque front, there's a recording plus tour of Vivaldi arias with Biondi, together with a recording plus performances of his opera *Ercole su'l Termodonte* at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in Paris and a revival of David McVicar's production of *Semele* at the same address that will also come to the Barbican.

As well as the Baroque/bel canto divide, Genaux's repertoire is notably split between female and male roles. Is it roughly 50/50? 'Actually it's nearer two thirds. I have something like 25 major pants roles and 16 female roles. I enjoy the pants roles. They have really changed me as a person. Every role that you do changes who you are—it adds a factor to your personality, or it liberates you and gives you other reactive positions, in your everyday life as well as in your stage life.

'The first time I did a pants role was at the Teatro de la Maestranza in Seville—Donizetti's *Alahor in Granata*. I was a general, the leader of a conquering army, and for my entrance I rode in on a horse. I was rehearsing for six weeks. The director was following me around shoving my shoulders back the whole time. As a female you emote with the shoulders—as a man you don't do that. We would rehearse in the afternoons and evenings. So in the mornings I would go with my mother to the Plaza de España, walk around and sit on a bench. I would watch guys—men, grandfathers, young boys versus young girls; boyfriends with girlfriends; guys with lovers versus guys with wives; guys with friends, brothers, cousins; guys with other guys. I was so lucky that my first experience was in Spain because the Spanish still have this very strong masculine/feminine thing. Guys are not afraid of being physical with other men. I learned a lot from that.

'Later on I started to look at the artworks of the time and read about Farinelli and the other castrati, who were men who also sang female roles. If you look at the paintings, there's a great degree of androgyny. So I started to play off the androgyny rather than the male/female dichotomy. The male side will choose to express more on this side of the expressive range, but there's still some crossover. So I'm portraying a human being who has *his* expressive range further to this end of the range finder, or a human being who has *her* expressive range further towards that end.'

So it's more about a direction? 'And the possibility of reaction. Where a woman in a situation wouldn't have the opportunity of reacting aggressively to stress by pulling out a sword or standing up to somebody, a man has that. A man is given permission and encouraged to stand his ground, to protect his space and to occupy space, whereas women are encouraged to occupy as little a space as possible—to become small and minute and delicate and non-threatening in those situations. All those things have coloured my life and the options that are available to me, as Vivica, in talking to somebody—in rehearsal, in interview, in a supermarket. I'm much more confident than I was when I was just a girl. I think it's due to taking on male roles, and also due to exploring roles like Isabella, who has a wider range of expression. My range of emotion was really limited when I started to do this. I really enjoy stretching out now. I like the person I'm becoming.'