

## **The translation of the interview**

Diana Skavronskaya:

"Bringing light and love to people through the voice"

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Diana Skavronskaya, a rising star of the opera stage and graduate of the Moscow Conservatory, performed at Carnegie Hall in October 2023.

The concert of chamber and vocal music in honor of the 150th anniversary of S. V. Rachmaninoff's birth was organized by Constantine Orbelian, Principal Conductor of New York City Opera.

The maestro personally invited the young singer, recognized by the American Guild of Musical Artists as an international Opera Soprano.

**- Diana, can you tell us how the idea for this concert came about?**

- This year is the 150th anniversary of Rachmaninoff's birth, and Constantine Garrievich (Orbelian) wanted to have a concert dedicated to his music at Carnegie Hall. Rachmaninoff is his favorite composer and one of my favorite composers as well.

Constantine Garrievich put together all of Rachmaninoff's most famous works. We had a long talk with him on what program to choose, what pieces are closest to him, what would be interesting to hear.

**- And how did the American public receive this program?**

- In the USA, Rachmaninoff's music is idolized! But perhaps there were about 60 percent of the Russian-speaking audience in the audience, that is, it was our people who love the Russian classics. The funny thing is that I even personally know an American citizen in the U.S. who was named after Rachmaninoff because his parents had admired Sergei Vasilyevich's music all their lives, and they go to Russian classical concerts with their whole family, although they don't speak Russian.

I believe that at Carnegie Hall, the majority of the audience was Russian-speaking, who love Russian classical music. There were people from NYC, Boston, Washington, D.C., from many different cities attending our concert.

**- Who else participated in the concert?**

- I was accompanied by the outstanding pianist Dmitry Yudin. The concert featured piano, cello, harp and violin. It was the first time that the choir of Morgan State University, one of the most prestigious student choirs in the world, performed the All-Night Vigil in the Russian language.

The remarkable cellist Christina Cooper, who flew all the way from Israel, also performed. The amazing singer Sarah Coburn also gave a performance, she is a superstar in New York!

On the harp played Alisa Sadikova, who has been performing with Sarah Brightman's orchestra since she was 9 years old and accompanied her on tours all over the world. Now Alisa and I are planning a concert in San Francisco.

**- You have performed in Italy, Georgia, Germany, Belgium, two years ago you moved to San Francisco, where you give concerts and even founded the Opera Club, and here you are on the stage of Carnegie Hall! Let's go back to the beginning of your international career. After all, you came to America, where nobody knew you, where there are a lot of talented singers, how did this path go?**

- As one of my mentors, Dmitry Vdovin, Artistic Director of the Bolshoi Theatre Youth Program, used to say, "You have to be a fan of what you do!"

Music takes diligence and a deep immersion in the repertoire. If you completely give yourself to it, you will be able to convey to the audience what comes from your heart and soul.

As a child, my repertoire consisted of popular and jazz music. At the age of 13, I first came to an opera vocal lesson with Professor Mukaddas Nishanovna Rizaeva of the Tashkent Conservatory. At that time I did not imagine that I would be an opera singer. I just liked to sing.

I participated in the contests "Morning Star" in Moscow, "Slavic Bazaar" in Vitebsk, won the first place in the nomination "The Vocal Princess" in the international contest in Tashkent. I was fond of pop music and jazz, and at my audition with Mukaddas Rizaeva I sang a jazz song Hello, Dolly! from Ella Fitzgerald's album of the same name. The professor looked at me in surprise and said: "Yes, the voice is there, but please don't ever sing that song again. We're going to study bel canto."

**- Didn't it discourage you?**

- I had no idea what opera was! I came home, sat down and cried. And then I opened the book about opera singer Elena Obraztsova that Mukaddas Nishanovna handed over to me, and I spent the whole night reading it. And everything in my mind turned upside down - I realized that I was fascinated by it. The following day I was already running to my opera vocal classes.

Those were two wonderful years of rewarding lessons, and then our family went to Moscow, and I continued my studies in Russia. At the Moscow Conservatory, I found myself in the class of the outstanding Galina Alekseevna Pisarenko.

And then there was a two-year internship at the Galina Vishnevskaya Opera Singing Center with the magnificent Makvala Filimonovna Kasrashvili.

I have had several wise mentors in my life, including Kristina Mkhitarian, a guest soloist at the Bolshoi Theater as well as the Metropolitan Opera. She taught me many technical nuances, and I use her advice to this day. She always paid special attention to the technicalities of playing the top notes on the divine pianissimo. Perhaps there is nothing more satisfying than a competently performed piece of music supported by a rich sensual realization of the voice.

**- And after that you went to conquer America. Was that decision easy for you?**

- Surprisingly, when I left for the USA, my close friend, baritone Andrei Zhilikhovsky, told me that I first had to achieve success in Europe. And then America would welcome you with open arms. In other words, it is very difficult to achieve something from scratch in the USA, because there is a lot of competition here, a huge competition. But I never doubted whether I would succeed or not. And, you won't believe it, in the first month of my stay in the USA, I was walking down the street with a friend, and she played my recording on her phone. All of a sudden, two men walked up to us and asked what we were listening to.

It turned out that both of them had connections with opera. One was an opera producer and a lifelong singer himself - we became friends, and in the next few months we started performing and giving concerts together. The other was a television producer, and he invited me to perform on TV, where I sang three operatic pieces live on his program.

**- So you decided to promote opera in San Francisco?**

- First and foremost, my goal in founding the Opera Club was to bring talent together and create opera concerts where the public could see the amazing dedication of professionals singing and playing. Initially, there were about 150 people who came to the concerts. Now there are already about 500 people, all tickets are always sold out, and this is just the beginning!

I see my mission in bringing light and love to people through my voice, I want to be a guide so that the audience can experience art and feel something special during my performances. And it's well worth it when young artists are grateful for the opportunity to work, to communicate with the public, to expand their audience!

**- Can you give us more details about this project? What is the unique aspect of it?**

- It's not just a project, it's a new platform where we perform opera in a concert format with professional musicians, soloists from the Metropolitan Opera, the Royal Opera House in London, the Teatro alla Scala and many others. I select a famous composer and we prepare pieces from their most interesting and famous operas.

We sing opera arias, duets and scenes with accompaniment from piano, violin, harp and a chamber ensemble. We share details about the pieces, the characters, their emotions for each other and their relationships. We tell some interesting facts about the composer's life, what inspired them, what motivated them to write this work. So it's also an educational project.

**- Where do you hold these concerts? What are the venues?**

- In theaters and concert halls in San Francisco, on the chamber stages of the Herbst Theatre, the Wilsey Center. There's the beautiful Stanford Hall; it's located at Stanford University. There's a huge City Hall, the San Francisco City Hall, where I've sung before and where I was given an honorary award for my contribution to the musical arts in San Francisco.

I'm regularly giving concerts in all sorts of venues and looking for new ones to keep audiences interested in following our progression. "Opera Club" is rapidly gaining momentum, and I may be planning a series of concerts in Los Angeles next year.

**- Apart from this project, are you involved in something else in San Francisco?**

- I was cast in the title role of Mimi in Puccini's opera *La Bohème*. In June-July 2024, I will be playing it in nine performances before American audiences at the Pocket Opera and Cinnabar Theater in San Francisco.

For me, Mimi is one of my favorite roles, one of the most poignant and moving. Singing Mimi is always an emotional immersion into the story. She admires poetry and beauty as much as I do, her soul is filled with light. Even though she faces a tragic ending in the opera, she remains eternal in her beauty of soul! I look forward to working with American tenor Nicholas Huff in the role of Rodolfo.

**- But going back to Orbelian....**

- I met him already here in the USA. I planned to sing three pieces in my audition for him, but in the end the performance turned into a large recital - an hour-long recital of nine or ten pieces.

Surprisingly, he and I became great musical friends. And when Constantine Garrievich came around to the idea of organizing a concert in honor of Rachmaninoff, he called me and simply said to me: do not plan anything for October 21, please come, you will sing at Carnegie Hall!

**- When you compare the audiences in Russia and in San Francisco. How prepared would you say they are, how receptive they are? Perhaps you aim to teach the public certain things?**

- There are many music connoisseurs here, and they know a great deal about art. At my concerts I sometimes see people who know the pieces by heart, they know what chord is coming next. But there are also unprepared listeners who say that this is the first time they have heard an opera voice live or the first time they have come to an opera concert. I sometimes wish I could talk to each of them, find out their impressions. Maybe something inspired them, and something in their lives changed?

You know, once after a concert in Silicon Valley, I was approached by David Yang, a big entrepreneur whose company specializes in developing artificial intelligence. He said: "Diana, I have two children, and thanks to you they love opera"!

**- And a few more words about the future. What do you plan to surprise and inspire the public with?**

- One of my goals is to familiarize American audiences with Russian classical music and the Russian performing arts. A concert in honor of Rachmaninoff at Carnegie Hall served this purpose. There are also many performances planned with a variety of repertoire and in different languages.

As early as January 20, I'll be giving an opera recital in Mountain View, California. Next spring, I'm traveling to New York and Boston with a series of chamber recitals. In June and July, I have nine performances at San Francisco Opera Theaters, where I will be singing Mimi in Puccini's *La Bohème*.

"Diana Montara Ocean" is a unique project I am co-creating with artist Mihail Kivachitsky. He is the first ever professional Kyrgyz artist to paint Hawaii and the Far West. For the past several years, he has been painting scenic images of the ocean and nature of the Montara Coast. This is a famous oceanfront location in the state of California, a place where music and the ocean are inseparable.

This will be an opera evening with an exhibition of the artist's work. This has never happened before, all of California is in anticipation of an incredible event. Not only will our project include a collection of 22 paintings, each four meters wide, but also three two-meter tall, full-length statues of me that will be the sets on stage.

I will be performing arias from Maria Callas' repertoire, accompanied by guest musicians from New York. Mihail compares me to Maria Callas - he calls us his muses. There is a Renaissance spirit in his sculptures, so I think of performing baroque music. And in order to convey the lightness of art in the space, the performance will feature renowned ballet dancers from the San Francisco Ballet Theater.

This grand project is designed to bring together music, history and art. The concert-exhibition is planned at Saint Joseph's Arts Society in San Francisco.

And by the way, we made a deal with David Yang: when artificial intelligence writes high-quality music for the operatic voice, I will be the first opera singer on Earth to perform it!

You can follow all of Diana Skavronskaya's news on her official website ([dianaopera.com](http://dianaopera.com)).

**Interview by Jennet Arlt**