

Diana Skavronskaya: “Opera is the magic of the voice”

Ivan Fedorov , 12/20/2023 at 09:47

In 2023, the music world celebrates the 150th anniversary of the birth of Sergei Rachmaninoff. The outstanding composer, pianist and conductor Sergei Rachmaninoff is a symbol of Russian national culture. Concerts were held in his honor around the world, including at New York's Carnegie

Hall. The organizer was the Cultural Exchange Foundation, headed by the chief conductor of the New York City Opera, Constantine Orbelian. We bring to your attention an interview with opera singer **Diana Skavronskaya**, who performed at this concert.

Diana Skavronskaya is a graduate of the Tchaikovsky Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory (class of Galina Pisarenko). From 2019 to 2021, she completed a two-year internship at the Galina Vishnevskaya Center for Opera Singing in the class of Makvala Kasrashvili. Winner of the International Ippolitov-Ivanov Competition (2014) and the International Boris Tchaikovsky Competition (2019), winner of 3rd place at the International Romansiada Competition (2019).

The singer, originally from Tashkent (Uzbekistan), currently lives and develops her career in San Francisco (USA). In 2021, she was accredited by the American Guild of Musical Artists as an “international operatic soprano” and “classical singer.”

— Diana, how did you discover the world of opera?

“I am grateful to my first vocal teacher, Mukaddas Nishanovna Rizayeva, for the fact that opera has become my life. I was brought to an audition at the Tashkent State Conservatory when I was 13 years old. On the very first day, Mukaddas Nishanovna gave me a book about Elena Vasilyevna Obraztsova, which I read without sleeping a wink all night, discovering for myself the world of opera and the image of a real opera diva. I think I will never forget this moment. Early in the morning, everyone in my family knew that I would become an opera singer.

From an early age I realized that music is my life, my path, and I must follow it. Mukaddas Nishanovna told me more than once: “Music is very jealous, and you must be devoted to it.” I have been convinced of this more than once.

— Who later helped you develop your vocal skills?

— Galina Pisarenko occupies a special place. Five incredible years from 2014 to 2019 under her leadership will forever remain in my heart. For me, Galina Alekseevna is a person who believed in me like no one else. From her I gained confidence in myself and that opera would become my life. She believed that I was a worthy representative of her vocal school. Every lesson with

Pisarenko was magical: she not only taught you how to sing, but created an atmosphere in which you were completely immersed in your character. In a warm, friendly, creatively fruitful atmosphere, I lived for five years within the walls of the Tchaikovsky Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory. Before her death, Galina Alekseevna had a handwritten list of her best and favorite students, and I was among them.

Her vocal technique goes back to Manuel García himself, the great singer of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Thus, through Galina Pisarenko and Nina Lvovna Dorliak, I acquired knowledge directly related to the bel canto tradition of Garcia himself. My vocal education can be seen as a continuation of his legacy.

Galina Alekseevna believed that it was important to know languages for an opera career. They are the key to a deep understanding of operatic works and their convincing performance. She herself spoke five foreign languages, and this was a strong motivation for me.

— Your diploma work was the role of Tatyana in the opera “Eugene Onegin”. How did you work on this part?

— Galina Pisarenko convinced me from the very beginning that I would always sing Tatyana. And she herself was considered one of the best Tatyana performers of the 20th century. Therefore, the role of Tatyana was my final work. Already in my fourth year I performed this part with an orchestra at the Pushkin State Museum. The role of Onegin was played by the stunning baritone Konstantin Artemiev, now a soloist of the Bolshoi Theater. This was his last performance as a baritone. Now he sings Lensky as a tenor, which is very rare for singers, because changing the repertoire and voice is for the bravest and most talented.

And of course, my thesis was a significant moment. At the end of the performance, Galina Alekseevna told me: “Dianochka, you are a born Tatyana, you have a wonderful combination of acting talent, a strong, sincere and very beautiful voice! Go ahead my dear! Conquer the world! You can!” Her words will forever remain in my memory; they inspire me to new achievements.

— After graduating from the conservatory, you entered the Galina Vishnevskaya Center, who became your mentor?

— For two wonderful years, from 2019 to 2021, I studied with Makvala Filimonovna Kasrashvili, People’s Artist of Russia and Georgia. Makvala Filimonovna is incredible, very kind and intelligent. She told me a lot about how she sang my beloved Tatyana - this was one of her first roles at the Bolshoi Theater, in which the singer collaborated with the great director Boris Pokrovsky. Makvala Filimonovna also worked with me on the role of Zemfira from Rachmaninoff’s opera “Aleko”, Micaela from Bizet’s opera “Carmen”, Magda from Puccini’s opera “La Rondine”, Marfa from Rimsky-Korsakov’s “The Tsar’s Bride”. Kasrashvili sang in many theaters around the world, including the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and she has enormous experience. She talked a lot about what it was like to be an opera singer. As a

teacher, she is an amazing person, moreover, she is Georgian, and I was very interested in her, because my mother is also from Georgia.

— **What did you learn from Makvala Kasrashvili?**

— I learned to quickly master the repertoire, be collected, and quickly get involved in the work process. Performances in the theater took place very often; there was no time for long learning of roles. All this developed in me the memory speed of a true professional. I got an idea of how an opera house works. For me, this was important preparation for the opera stage. Makvala Filimonovna taught me the technique of performing large works, the ability to withstand complex parts and perform all arias with a long breath, from beginning to end with an even sound. Thanks to her, I learned what performing arts is, first of all, and how important the health of the vocal apparatus is and how important it is to constantly keep it in shape.

Makvala Kasrashvili actually showed me what opera singing is like at the world level. She was also well versed in the specifics of international competitions. Overall, it prepared me for an international career. And to this day she is for me an example of an opera diva. She is great and at the same time very easy to talk to. It is a great joy for me that I had the opportunity to learn from her.

— **You also worked with Dmitry Vdovin at the Bolshoi Theater.**

— In 2019, at the Yuri Bashmet Festival, I met Dmitry Vdovin, artistic director of the Bolshoi Theater Youth Opera Program, then he became my vocal teacher.

I especially remember how Dmitry Vdovin knew how to adjust his methodology to everyone's individuality. His attention to detail set him apart from others. And with him I discovered a new world for myself - Baroque music. He masters all styles of classical music. However, the Baroque style was ideal for my voice at that moment. We worked a lot on operas in this style, on the music of Handel, which holds a special place in my work. With him, I mastered the role of Rodelinda from Handel's opera of the same name and prepared the part of Susanna from the opera "The Marriage of Figaro," which I sang in 2019 in Italy.

We did not stop at Handel and Mozart, we worked a lot and diligently on Puccini's operas. Under his guidance, I performed the role of Mimi from the opera *La Bohème* at the Batumi State Music Center. Dmitry Yuryevich instilled in me even greater confidence in my abilities. He always said that the level of singers in the world is now very high, and you need to be a bright individual, to find something in yourself that no one else has. You have to sing better than everyone else and overcome yourself every day.

— **What projects are you implementing and planning in the USA?**

— I gave a lot of recitals in San Francisco, but I always wanted to tell people about what makes opera so beautiful. This is how my idea to organize an Opera Club was born. These are not so

much concerts with opera singers and musicians as events where the public is immersed in the history of opera and learns about the peculiarities of the creation of a particular work. Accompanied by a chamber ensemble, we sing arias, duets, scenes from operas by various composers, and before that we introduce the audience to the opera characters, their experiences and talk a little about the context in which the work was created, about the composer.

Over the next year, we plan to perform at venues such as the Taube Atrium Theater at the War Memorial Veterans Building, the Caroline H. Hume Recital Hall at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, the Saint Joseph's Arts Society, and more.

I am impressed by the interest of American listeners in Russian classics, and this unites me with conductor Constantine Orbelian. He organized the concert in honor of Sergei Rachmaninoff's 150th birthday at Carnegie Hall in New York in October 2023. I remember this day with warmth as a great event in my life and am grateful to him for inviting me to sing Rachmaninoff.

In 2024, I will perform the role of Mimi in nine performances in a number of theaters in San Francisco. I conduct master classes for young singers. Next year I want to organize a big concert with students in collaboration with the Veksler Academy of Music & Dance at Carnegie Hall. In general, there are a huge number of plans and ideas.

— How did you meet Constantine Orbelian?

— When I was still studying at the conservatory, I often went to concerts with such stars as Dmitri Hvorostovsky and Anna Netrebko, which took place on Red Square and at the Bolshoi Theater under the direction of maestro Constantine Orbelian. His talent and professionalism always inspired me, and I dreamed of someday meeting him in person. Fate smiled on me in San Francisco. He heard my voice at one of my performances and we became friends.

Constantine Garrievich is an excellent conductor and professional. It's easy and pleasant to work with him. His sensitivity and understanding create a special atmosphere. Performing at Carnegie Hall was a very important experience for me: singing on one of the largest and most famous stages

in America, where Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff performed, was an honor and joy for me. We have developed a warm relationship with Constantine Orbelian, we have many ideas for joint performances. I hope to have the opportunity to perform at the New York City Opera under his direction in the future.

— Let's go back to the opera. Your performance of the role of Mimi is planned for 2024. What emotions do you associate with this role?

— For me, the role of Mimi is one of the most poignant and touching. Singing Mimi is always a complete emotional immersion in the role. The music of Giacomo Puccini is permeated with

passion, love and charm. In this role, I truly feel the depth of the heroine. A tragic ending awaits her, but she remains eternal in her beauty of soul! For me, returning to Mimi is a new challenge, especially considering that I have to perform the role in nine performances in front of American audiences. But I'm looking forward to collaborating with American conductors and directors, as well as tenor Nicholas Huff as Rodolfo.

— **Sometimes modern opera productions are discouraging...**

— I'm open to new interpretations. I like to embody directors' concepts. But at the same time, I love classical opera productions. It still seems to me that the artist's voice can convey much more than excessive scenery, mise-en-scène or unnecessary movements that make it difficult to understand the essence of the music. And sometimes they completely prevent the artist from concentrating on singing. Still, it is important for us to adapt to the requirements of the new generation, so in some theaters we are forced to take on various challenges. In my understanding, opera is something divine, it is the magic of the voice merging with the playing of the orchestra, and its sound alone carries convincing power for the viewer.

— **Who is helping you improve your voice and work on your acting skills now?**

— I am actively working with the director of the San Francisco Opera and the Metropolitan Yefim Maizel on roles, including Mimi. Yefim has incredible experience; he once staged the opera "Madama Butterfly", where Placido Domingo was invited as a conductor. I am deeply grateful for the work he has done. I believe that every artist needs classes with professional directors to work on his acting skills, regardless of whether he sings in the theater or at concerts. Each appearance on stage requires careful study - the transformation and living of the role begins behind the stage, so the rehearsal process is very important. As the director of the Bolshoi Theater, who staged the opera *Eugene Onegin* at the Tchaikovsky Moscow State Concert Hall, Igor Ushakov, said, we must work out the role 250% in order to be able to bring 100% to the stage.

In addition, I have a vocal coach, my mentor is Dr. Julia Hunt Nielsen. She guides me and helps me develop my voice. We are working on my future roles, chamber music and also repertoire in English. I am grateful to her for her highly professional work.

— **Tell us about the project you are currently working on.**

— "Diana Montara Ocean" - I create it in collaboration with the artist Mihail Kivachitsky, the first professional Kyrgyz artist in history to depict Hawaii and the Far West. For almost ten years he has been painting the ocean and coast of Montara. This is a beautiful place on the ocean in California, a place where music and the ocean go hand in hand. Mihail was inspired by my voice, and he

decided to combine the world of opera with the splendor of the ocean. He noted the parallels between my work and the skill of Maria Callas, one of my favorite opera divas.

At the concert-performance there will be 22 paintings four meters wide each, three two-meter statues depicting me in full height. A circulation of books will be released documenting the history of the project. The musical content will be arias from the repertoire of Maria Callas, accompanied by piano and harp. And to convey the weightlessness of art in space, ballet dancers will take part in the production. This project will combine music, history and art to bring new experiences and, hopefully, inspiration to Californians!

The conversation was conducted by Ivan Fedorov

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