



NORWEGIAN
SOPRANO **LISE**
DAVIDSEN
ARRIVES AT
THE MET THIS
MONTH, AS
LISA IN *THE*
QUEEN OF
SPADES.

A TOUCH OF THE
SPECTACULAR

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As Agathe in
Der Freischütz
at Zurich Opera,
2016, with
Mélissa Petit
(Ännchen)

BY LOUISE T. GUINTHER

LISE DAVIDSEN IS A BONA FIDE PHENOMENON—a fresh, youthful singer with a voice of dazzling radiance and amplitude, wielded with rare authority. At thirty-two, the Norwegian soprano has soared to the pinnacle of the opera world, with debuts at Munich, Glyndebourne, Vienna, Covent Garden and Bayreuth under her belt. Her debut album shot to the top of the British classical charts last spring. The *Financial Times* described her as having “sprung forth, like Athene born from Zeus’s head, fully armed and ready to take on the world.”

No one is more taken aback by the hype than Davidsen, who describes her path to stardom in the plain terms of the small-town girl she still clearly is at heart. “I started in a local sort of mixed church choir, very low-key—a choir of about ten people who didn’t have anything else to do. I got my first guitar when I was fifteen and played random pop songs, some Norwegian songs—everything I could manage to play and sing at the same time. And then I just kept on singing.”

Davidsen was a mezzo when she began undergraduate studies at the Grieg Academy in Bergen. On the advice of fellow students, she went to Copenhagen’s



Opera Academy to sing for Susanna Eken. "Everyone talked about this goddess of a teacher, so I figured I should try," she recalls. "I had two sessions with her, and it didn't go well. She told me I was not a mezzo, I was a soprano, and I really had to get a grip, because my body wasn't right, I didn't look right, everything was wrong."

"I went home thinking, 'I'm not tough enough for this business.' I couldn't understand why I deserved such a slam. So I got a little distance and thought a lot about whether I was going to keep on doing this or not. It took some time, but I realized that I liked what she did purely technically. And she also said good things. She said, 'You should do the big soprano roles, and it will take time, but it's there, and your voice should be in that fach.' But all I could hear was 'You are not good enough,' so I sort of blocked out the positive comments."

Davidsen returned to Eken and the Academy to earn her master's degree as a soprano. "Of course, it wasn't really a *change*, because I was still a student,"

she says, "but I think when you're twenty-one—I was looking for an identity, so it felt like a change. When I look at it now, it was just a good development." Those years laid the foundation of Davidsen's rigorous work ethic. "[My teacher] said, 'Lise, you *will* sing a marathon, but you can't lie down and wait for it to happen. You have to do your scales and your technique every day,'" Davidsen says. "You can't run a marathon right off—you have to work!"

DAVIDSEN'S MEZZO ORIGINS show in the extraordinary depth and richness of her middle and lower registers. In arias such as Elisabeth's "Dich teure Halle" and Ariadne's "Es gibt ein reich," ideal repertoire for this singer, her voice *caresses* the ear with a broad, rounded arc of sound like an aural rainbow—intense and colorful but soft-edged and glowing. It's a voice full of paradoxes—focused without being piercing, girlish in its purity yet fully ripe and mature. Despite the power and volume, she is capable of almost transparent lightness in a song such as Grieg's "Ved Rondane," which she sang at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in 2015.

That was a transformative year: the budding soprano won Norway's Queen Sonja competition, as well as three top prizes at Operalia. Her approach to the competition circuit was typically diffident. "Since I had this sort of voice that needed time, I didn't do much auditions when I was studying," she says. "I applied to the competitions thinking, 'I don't have anything else to do.' I went into this quite naïve and not realizing how big it is until I was there. When the final came, I was super-nervous! But from those two competitions, people suddenly knew who I was in many houses where I think I never would have gotten an audition.

"It's a weird part of art," she adds thoughtfully, "because it doesn't have anything to do with art. You want to sing—to move people—but then you have to compete. But winning those competitions put me in a situation where I could say no. That's really a gift—to be able to say, 'I don't want to sing this now.' Or 'No, I'm not ready for that house.'"

Davidsen is in no hurry to get to the marathon roles. "Right now, I'm sort of *holding on* to the lyric-dramatic part of my voice," she says with a giggle. "People keep saying 'dramatic,' and I say, 'No-no-no! Lyric-dramatic!' I would love to do Elisabetta in *Don Carlos* and Marschallin in *Rosenkavalier*. Those are on the 'I would like to do before I die' list."

Asked about her tremendous critical success, Davidsen replies almost sheepishly, "The truth is, I haven't read any of those reviews—but my people have, so they are happy, and then I am happy. I don't know what it is with reviews and me, but I think I'll sit down and read all of it when I stop singing," she says with a smile. "For now, I don't want a single person's opinion to affect what I'm doing." ■

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