

awful lot of what was going on,” Christie told *The Guardian*.

Christie’s scorn for the status quo is likely the source of his understanding that very old music can help make sense of a chaotic modern existence. As preserved on DVD, his performance of Handel’s *Hercules*, featuring Joyce DiDonato’s Dejanira, is as psychologically riveting as any present-day war-time drama on Netflix. And the 2004 run of *Les Paladins* that Christie conducted at the Théâtre du Châtelet featured brilliant video projections and breakdancing as outrageously technicolored as Rameau’s score. As conducted by Christie, Jonathan Kent’s more recent production of *The Fairy Queen* emerged as one of the most riotously funny shows to play in an opera house in recent memory; it also

revealed Purcell to be one of the most cosmopolitan composers who ever lived.

If Christie’s reputation rested only on the music that has been played under his baton, his legacy would be secure. But in addition to founding Les Arts Florissants, he has established the ensemble’s academy for young singers, Le Jardin des Voix, and taught for more than a decade at the Paris Conservatoire; he serves as an artist in residence at Juilliard’s Historical Performance division, and his tireless work has spawned numerous successive generations of singers and conducting protégées. Through careful tending, Christie has made his garden grow. How fortunate that he has left the gate open to let us visit.

—ADAM WASSERMAN



© DENIS ROUVRE (CHRISTIE); © BEATRIZ SCHILLER (BOHÈME, RIGHT, AND TURANDOT ON FOLLOWING SPREAD)



Hong as Mimi, her most frequent Met role, in 2005, with Roberto Aronica (Rodolfo)

# hei-kyung HONG

## soprano

### HEI-KYUNG HONG

embodies grace and elegance, both in her wide range of onstage roles and in her personal life as a devoted wife and mother and a proud representative of Korean-American culture.

The soprano, who hails from Kang Won Do, South Korea, was among the first Korean singers to appear on top international stages. “Asians were still marginalized in U.S. society at that time, and explicit discrimination was all around,” she told *Korea JoongAng Daily*. “I had this

feeling I was representing Asian society as a whole, so I wanted to become a formidable soprano who would gain everyone’s respect, regardless of the color of their skin.” In that, she has succeeded, her exquisite singing, committed acting and physical beauty breaking through all barriers.

In a career spanning four decades, Hong has projected a rare blend of radiance and vulnerability that is ideal for many of opera’s tragic heroines; her paradoxical air of precarious vitality lends these characters a

febrile lifeblood that draws audiences fully into her emotional world. Particularly memorable was her Mimi in a transformative *Bohème* at the Met. I had just seen the same surrounding cast in a performance that came across as dutiful and bland. But with Hong at its center, the whole ensemble came to vibrant life. Hong’s Mimi was lovely in face and figure, tenderly melting in timbre and phrasing, generous with her emotions and devastating in her frailty. Still more striking was the way these qualities



Hong's enchanting Liù graced the Met's *Turandot* in 2007, with Oren Gradus (Timur) and Andrea Gruber (Turandot)



seemed to inspire her colleagues to a heightened engagement.

The delicate purity of Hong's singing and the porcelain beauty of her presence give her a natural penchant for the virginal and vulnerable, suiting her well to the likes of Micaela, Gilda and Juliette; but her twinkling eyes, unshakable poise and piquant charm lend themselves equally well to the vivacious and the flirtatious, such as Manon, Despina, Zerlina and Susanna. An air of physical fragility undergirded by moral strength serves her particularly well as Violetta, Pamina and Liù—all vulnerable figures who suffer deeply but are rendered heroic by their willingness to sacrifice for love.

Hong knows firsthand about sacrifices, having placed family above career not only early on, when she gave up star-making offers to care for her young children, but at the height of her fame, when her husband's battle with cancer led her to withdraw from performing for several seasons. It was a risky move, but thanks to her undiminished vocal excellence, her lasting popularity and her unwavering integrity, she has been welcomed back with open arms by companies and audiences alike.

There is no showing off in a Hong performance: she inhabits her characters quietly, subtly, but with palpating humanity. Diva mannerisms are bypassed in favor of small but telling gestures; dazzling vocal display gives place to expressive phrasing.

"Singers love to talk about the voice—how to produce it, how to support it, how to breathe," she told the AP in 1999. "That bores me. I want to talk about the person—what kind of life they had, how many children, what they love, what makes them fill with emotions." As a result, what makes audiences fill with emotions is Hong herself.

—LOUISE T. GUINThER