

THE GRATEFUL HEART

In the Lucian and Nancy Morrison Theater, located in Brockman Hall for Opera, at Rice University

Belted gown courtesy of Elizabeth Anthony

Soprano Ana María Martínez wants her artistry to illuminate the world.

By Louise T. Guinther

ANA MARÍA MARTÍNEZ is a diva who cares. The “Cuba-Rican” soprano wants her work and her life to affect the world in a positive way. That commitment shows in Martínez’s deep and genuine interest in everyone around her, and in her luminous and meticulous performances. It shows as well in the directions her career has taken.

The depth and range of Martínez’s artistry are extraordinary. If it’s possible to be saucy, sincere and vulnerable at once, Martínez achieves it in Pablo Luna’s “De España vengo.” Eyes flashing, hand on hip, she is the prototypical flirt, yet one so utterly human and so connected to the audience that she comes across as the flirt next door. In a piano-accompanied “Vissi d’arte,” from a gala in Puerto Rico in 2019, she pours forth round, creamy, almost mezzo-like tone of enveloping warmth and ravishing, unbroken legato; yet despite the fullness of her sound,

*Photographed by Cedric Angeles
at Rice University in Houston*

Hair and Makeup by Darcie Teasley

GOWN COURTESY OF ELIZABETH ANTHONY (ELIZABETHANTHONYHOUSTON.COM)

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From left: as Nedda at Palm Beach Opera, 2021; as Mozart's Fiordiligi at Lyric Opera of Chicago, 2018; as Cio-Cio-San at Paris Opéra, 2019, with Giorgio Berrugi (Pinkerton)

the tender, devotional delicacy of her singing gives her Tosca an unusually youthful and fragile quality, reminding us that the piece is, after all, a prayer.

Reflecting on life during a pandemic, Martínez characteristically keeps the focus on others. “The first thing is the tragedy and the loss of life—and the loss of life as we knew it,” she says. “We’ve had this false sense of security that we can plan and do what we’ve set out to do. And overnight the rug was taken out from under everybody, worldwide. So, I

“Find, from the gifts you are born with, the one through which you want to reach your greatest potential.”

have this motto, which is ‘Gratitude attitude.’ It’s short, it’s sweet, but it helps me to get my head in the right space for perspective. We need to remember to be grateful when we still have our health, our life, when those around us are okay and we can still put food on the table—that’s an incredible blessing. That said, we’ve all, as artists, lost opportunities to do what we love. We just have to hope that people have in their hearts the blissful memory of what a live operatic performance can offer.

“As I’m beginning to enter the realm of teaching and guiding, which I love, the time has given me the opportunity to focus on that,” she adds. “The artists worst hit, I would say, are the ones that are just beginning their careers. It’s devastated them on many levels. So to be able to hold their hand—of course not physically, but just emotionally give them some sustenance—that’s been extremely rewarding.”

Martínez hopes the coronavirus “break” will offer a chance to reset the pace of our modern life, which, she says, “is instantaneous. You have to answer your texts almost before you receive them. I find it exhausting. Everybody gets in a burnout mode, and they have no patience to listen to things or to even think about nurturing. So I wonder if one positive thing we could take away from Covid—besides please let’s be kind to each other and protect one another—is let’s take time to nurture talent that has been so wounded and bruised by not being able to do what they’ve trained to do.”

Martínez’s determination to leave the opera world a better place than she found it has taken her down new paths in recent years, starting with her relationship with Rice University. She has been artist in residence there since 2019 and will take up a faculty position in July. Her eagerness to pass on her own wealth of musical artistry, knowledge and understanding springs from her gratitude to her many mentors—starting with her mother. “She

tells me this funny story,” Martínez says. “We were at Florida State University. I was, at the time, two. My father was getting his PhD in psychology, my mother her doctorate in music. She had to learn *Les Illuminations*, and she kept playing the LP, and then she’d go and plunk out the notes on the piano. I was in my playpen, hearing it over and over, and during one of her trips to the piano, I made up my own French, and I sang the whole thing, and then I said, ‘Ha ha, I can do it better than you.’ I *am* a music nerd, there’s just no other way of putting it.

“My Dad and my stepmother were mentors in terms of life and vision and direction, discipline, focus,” she continues. “He told me, ‘Find, from the gifts you are born with, the *one* through which you want to reach your greatest potential.’” Her fourth-grade teacher, Miss Perlmutter, encouraged Martínez’s early dream of being an astronaut. “I told her, ‘I don’t know if I can succeed—you have to be so strong in math and science, and I see myself more in arts and music and poetry.’ And she said, ‘But there is so much poetry in the study and the quest for the unknown!’ So that kind of opening your mind. Miss Saud, our religion teacher, said, ‘The definition of freedom is the ability to reach your greatest potential without hindering anybody from reaching theirs.’ That quote has accompanied me throughout my life in a very competitive field.” Martínez also refers warmly to “the incred-

ible presence Plácido Domingo has had in my life, in my career. He taught me so much about how to be the best and most supportive colleague you can be to *everybody*. And that is an example that I follow every day.”

The soprano outlines a typically thoughtful approach to guiding her students. “I start with ‘What is it you want to focus on?’” she says. “It will vary from the style of the piece to some technical things that they might encounter as hurdles. My other love—and I thank my father for that—is psychology. I’ve always delved deeply into the psychology of the relationships—the importance of filling every moment with subtext. It’s fascinating to talk to young singers about that, because it doesn’t always occur to them. There are so many things that a young singer is juggling. However, [the subtext] does free them up a lot. It’s not just ‘Do the dynamic marking.’ It’s ‘*Why* are you doing that marking?’”

Martínez believes an individual approach is crucial. “The instructor must have access to every possible vocabulary to get the message across,” she says. “When I talk about technique, some just want the nuts and bolts, the physiology. But if you incorporate the abstract, that’s another language. Sometimes there’s an *emotional* language. Sometime a spiritual approach might open their mind and their heart. Because obviously we want the heart to be open, and that’s a tough thing. Especially when you’re young, the most exposed feeling, the most naked feeling is to sing. The very sensitive ones, the ones that have more of an introverted side—which is my makeup—have to get into another mindset of ‘I’m presenting this gift to you.’ When you give a gift to someone, they’re free to do with it whatever they want, but still, you’re giving it with an open heart.”



MARTÍNEZ’S OTHER NEW POST, as artistic advisor to Houston Grand Opera, is a first for both her and the company. “Every now and then, I would reach out to Patrick Summers, if I had heard an exciting artist or seen a wonderful production of a piece I wasn’t aware of, and say, ‘I think it behooves you to lend an ear,’” she says. “I always felt the comfort, because HGO is my home company—and especially if you’re there to spread the love, because people did that for me. So I was calling Patrick for something else, and he said, ‘Would you consider being our first artistic advisor?’ It caught me off guard, and I’m pinching myself, thinking, ‘Wow! I would love to!’

“Whenever you’re the first in anything, you start to sort of carve it out. It is my duty and also my freedom to contact different departments and say, ‘After observing this and this, my recommendation is the following.’ I’ve had the good fortune of working in many different companies, and I see what works and what doesn’t work. Sometimes that can sprout

In the Patron's Suite, located in Brockman Hall for Opera

“There’s an ebb and flow in that journey of finding out who we are, and it takes a lifetime.”

GOWNS AND NECKLACE COURTESY OF ELIZABETH ANTHONY (ELIZABETHANTHONYHOUSTON.COM)

In the Brockman Hall Grand Foyer

Gowns and necklace courtesy of Elizabeth Anthony

a new idea, or I can edit something that I saw working in some other place and recommend it here.”

Martínez, always a proud representative of her Latin heritage, recognizes in her position an opportunity to extend Houston’s outreach to the Hispanic community. “I’m trying to campaign new Spanish projects—and always with the spirit of inclusivity. Being Latina brought up in the U.S., [I feel] the importance of championing the *universal* art form that this is.” One HGO project was *Suite Española*, recorded digitally and streamed online last March. “I feel very connected to that music,” she says. “When I won the Pepita Embil award at Operalia,

ates the positive. “I’ve seen a lot more risk-taking in production values in the U.S., where the main objective is not necessarily to aesthetically please everybody. Some of the stuff can be in-your-face and quite aggressive, but it definitely makes you think, and that’s one of our jobs. We’re ambassadors for unity and for peace and connection, but also to inspire you to think. The best experience is to leave a museum exhibit or a performance or a film and want to have a conversation about it.

“Something that I love, love, love is much more diversity in casting,” she adds. “That is *way* long overdue. I want to celebrate Lin-Manuel Miranda, because he insisted that every member of [the *Hamilton*] cast has to be some combination ethnic background. Now everybody is seen by the audience through the eyes of perceiving greatness, no matter the color of their skin. It is about art, it is about beauty, it is about moving the soul.”

On the down side, Martínez expresses concern that the industry has become “a revolving door, with very young singers—talented, brilliant, fantastic—being cast in repertory that’s slightly too heavy. When I address young singers, I remind them, ‘You want to be the long-distance runner. Don’t you love what you do? Don’t you want to be doing it for a good thirty years?’ Now I’m in a position—shall I say, a Latina female in a position of power—to say, ‘Please, young singers, value this gift that you have, so that you can sing—and I quote my mother here—‘as young

as you can and as long as you can.’”

As for onstage plans, Martínez was looking forward to her first Tosca, an abridged outdoor concert version at Opera Philadelphia in May, her Zurich debut this summer, as Cio-Cio-San, and a return to Chicago, in the title role in *Florencia en el Amazonas*. “Now, having the lens of a teacher, I find that everything I do, I take special note what everything feels like, so I can pass that on.

“We’re always in flux,” she adds. “There’s an ebb and flow in that journey of finding out who we are, and it takes a lifetime. We are still a work in progress—if you’re finished, you’re done. My son once asked me, ‘When is somebody old?’ And I said, ‘I would say once you stop wanting to learn, once that sparkle in your eye starts to fade, and the interest in being surprised by something you hadn’t discovered yet, that’s when you start to get old.’ As long as you still want to learn, heck, you’re still young.” ■



Palm Beach Opera's *Pagliacci*, 2021

Plácido said, ‘I want you to do everything you can to further zarzuela,’ and I took it very seriously. It’s the first repertoire that really liberated me as a young singer, and then I was able to apply that same passion and freedom and lack of inhibition in other repertoire, once I discovered what that felt like in Spanish repertoire.” A DVD of an all-Spanish concert from Salzburg in 2007 amply demonstrates what she means. Her vocal and dramatic variety and seemingly infinite capacity for nuance are on full display in a program that shows the subtlest gradations from nostalgia to regret, lighthearted flirtation to full-blown passion. At the end of the duet “Cállate, corazón,” from *Luisa Fernanda*, the look on her face—wistful, heartbroken and unflinchingly focused on her partner—tells us all we need to know about this character’s conflicted journey.

Reflecting on the many changes she has seen in the opera industry, Martínez typically accentu-

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