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OPERA NEWS

Mezzo Susanne Mentzer

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THE TALE OF RISING MEZZO SUSANNE MENTZER IS BECOMING A FAMILIAR FACE AT THE MET NICKLAUSSE

BY LOUISE T. GUINTHER

“THIS YEAR HAS BEEN TREMENDOUS,” DECLARES SUSANNE MENTZER WITH AN INGENUOUS AIR OF SURPRISE. “I DIDN’T EXPECT THINGS TO DEVELOP THE WAY THEY HAVE. TO SAY MY NAME AND HAVE SOMEBODY RECOGNIZE IT WAS REALLY NICE.” WHEN WE SPOKE,



Mentzer was between performances of the Composer, a favorite role, in the company's new *Ariadne auf Naxos*. She had just completed a run of widely admired Octavians, and in the fall of 1992 she opened the Met season in the dual role of Nicklausse and the Muse in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. That production marked the first time much of the character's music was heard at the Met, and the result was an unqualified success for Mentzer.

“Lesley Koenig [the stage director] and James Levine really made the most of it for me,” she says gratefully. “I was thrilled. There were a lot of jokes going around that it was *The Tales of Nicklausse*.” Surprisingly, Mentzer claims she never felt comfortable in the role. “I’m so used to doing things where you have a continuity of character,” she explains. “In *Hoffmann* you come on cold, do a couple of arias, and that’s it. You have to find imaginary situations while you’re offstage. But it was a tremendous success. I’ve had more re-

sponse on that than just about anything I’ve done.”

The mezzo is currently in New York for Cherubino and her first Met Rosina, a role she has recorded for Angel/EMI. She is steadily amassing an impressive discography, including Zerlina and Mendelssohn’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for EMI, Zaida (*Il Turco in Italia*) and Idamante (*Idomeneo*) for Philips and most recently Siebel for Teldec’s new *Faust*. Recordings, however, tell only half the tale. There is an exuberance, a heightened sense of life in her portrayals that can be appreciated fully only by a live audience. Her Met Composer, hair tousled and eyes shining across the footlights, projected youthful ardor and nervous energy to the farthest reaches of the house.

Mentzer’s vocal hallmarks are seamless legato, exquisite dynamic shading and a uniquely sensuous timbre, instantly recognizable by the goosebumps it provokes. Ironically, her distinctive vibrato was the

bane of her existence early in her career. “A lot of times all a critic would say about me was ‘her vibrato this,’ ‘her vibrato that.’ My ex-husband said, ‘You should make your middle name Vibrato, because that way they’ll already have mentioned it.’ I must have been doing something vocally that made people nuts. So I worked on it and sorted it out a bit, but I do have a vibrato that’s natural to my voice.”

It wasn’t always obvious, least of all to Mentzer, that she was headed for a distinguished career. Born in Philadelphia, she had what she remembers as “a really normal upbringing,” singing in church choirs and high school plays, but never seriously considered a singing career. “At the end of high school we moved to Santa Fe, and I worked as an usher at the opera. I started to study voice with a local teacher and did classes at the community college. My parents thought I was extremely talented — you know how parents are — and I didn’t think that at all.”

PORTRAITS: PAUL WHICHELOE

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Mentzer enrolled at the University of the Pacific as a music therapy major, because, she says, "I didn't think I was singer material." Faculty members thought otherwise and urged her to change her major to performance. Mentzer's voice teacher, Shirley Thompson, encouraged her young protégée to expand her horizons. "She took me to San Francisco Opera and told me to go down to L.A. and audition for the chorus at the Aspen Music Festival." The teenager was accepted into the chorus and cast as Nicklausse — "in the short, short version. That was just incredible for me, because I'd not done anything before."

From Aspen, Mentzer was encouraged to apply to Juilliard, where she spent four school years (1976–80) earning her bachelor's and master's degrees. She looks back with mixed feelings. "I was very excited to get into Juilliard, but I was not prepared for the difficulty of living in New York. To be nineteen years old and hit New York was pretty scary. I never have considered myself a 'prodigy,' and a lot of the people at Juilliard are prodigies. It's a very strange environment to be thrown into."

The aspiring mezzo gained national exposure as a student in a televised master class with Luciano Pavarotti in 1979. An apparently cool and confident Mentzer breezed through Cherubino's "Non so più" with such élan that she seemed poised on the brink of a major career. Mentzer insists that the self-assurance she exuded on that occasion was only

younger now than you were then."

After graduation, Mentzer was engaged to tour with Texas Opera Theater, singing in the chorus in *La Bohème* and making her professional debut as Rossini's Cenerentola. "At the end of that year I had *nothing* in my life. I was totally without money, without any relationship." She applied for a place in the Houston Opera Studio, the apprentice program of Houston Grand Opera, but was rejected. With no prospects in sight, she looked for temporary employment and wound up working as a receptionist for HGO.

At this low ebb, a series of lucky breaks set Mentzer back on track. Around that time, she met her future husband, Drew Landmesser, then technical director for HGO. His presence persuaded the struggling singer to remain in Houston. The next sign that things were looking up was a call from Joel Bloch of Columbia Artists Management, who had kept her name on file since the 1979 Pavarotti master class. "Are you still singing?" Bloch wanted to know. "I guess so," Mentzer replied. "I have no work, but I would like to be a singer." Bloch asked her to sing for him again and offered to manage her for a year on a trial basis. Last but far from least, one of the Opera Studio apprentices dropped out of the program, and Mentzer was offered the opening. This led to her association with Norma Newton, her teacher since 1981.

"Obviously, people were not pounding down the door, and I realized there must be something I wasn't doing correctly,"

Mentzer says. "So I went to Norma, and we fought for three months. I would come home from my lesson a wreck! I would tell Drew, 'I'm not going

back. She's going against everything I've learned.' " Mentzer smiles sheepishly at the recollection. "She was right. I was not singing correctly, but I didn't want to give up my old way. There's a certain feeling of 'That's my identity. I'm a singer, so if you

criticize my singing, I'm nobody.' After that three-month period, things started to click, and they've clicked ever since."

Singing correctly has become something of an obsession for Mentzer. "I'm kind of weird," she confesses. "Some singers think every day about singing and worry about whether their voice is going to be there. I can go for months without opening my mouth. But I am manic about singing as correctly as I can when I'm actually out there, because when I don't, I feel it. I tend to really concentrate, so that I don't hurt myself."

Mentzer also believes firmly in the importance of knowing how to say no. She credits Landmesser, Newton, Bloch and her current manager, Ken Benson, with guiding her through the hazards that have presented themselves throughout her career. "I trust them implicitly. When certain things would come up — I was once offered Countess Geschwitz in *Lulu* at age twenty-two! — I said no. But if they hadn't advised me, I would have said yes. You want so much. You want it all. And if you try for it all, sometimes you have a career too soon, and then it doesn't last."

Mentzer's career took a giant step forward in 1983, when she made her European debut as Cherubino in Cologne. The production's stage director, an assistant to Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, later recommended the young mezzo to the legendary director. "I sort of got on the Ponnelle list, which was very fortunate. I went right to a pretty high-power level in terms of the colleagues I was singing with. Those situations were incredibly scary. I always felt, 'I'm not worthy of this, I'm going to get fired, I'm not prepared enough.' But I learned so much."

All the while, the Met was in the back of her mind. "I think my manager drove the Met crazy suggesting my name, but I guess it paid off, because if they heard that I had done something, it would at least ring a bell." She was offered a contract for Cherubino in 1989 and made her debut in rather daunting circumstances. As part of the second cast, she had no stage rehearsal. "I'm sure I pushed my way through the whole opening night. It's an awfully big house. Then I ended up getting sick. I had four performances and was sick for two. The big moment in my life! It was really a bummer!"

That season was full of milestones, not all of them professional. "A lot happened to me that year," she says, displaying a knack for understatement. "I had my son, Benjamin, and he was four months old when I got to rehearsals for the Met, so I was a bit

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THE MEZZO'S COMPOSER AT THE MET

skin deep. "I was involved with a much older man, and I think that made me grow up very quickly, so I gave the impression of being much more together than I was. When I see people who knew me at Juilliard, they say, 'Gosh, you're so much

overweight and breast-feeding and feeling not very man-like. I had a lot of major debuts, and all I thought about was getting through it and being a good mom. In a way, that took the nerves away. My brain was always somewhere else."

For two years, Mentzer's son and an *au pair* accompanied her on a whirlwind world tour, while Landmesser visited as often as his schedule allowed. "I had seven countries the first year. It was really hard. We were in Houston, New York, London, Bonn, Paris. I did my first *Rosenkavalier*, my Salzburg debut. I was at La Scala. It was unbelievable — everything at once."

Mentzer's eyes, already luminous, grow brighter when she talks about her son. These days Benjamin, nearly five, stays at home in Riverside, Illinois, with his father, now technical director at Lyric Opera of Chicago. Mentzer's eleven-year marriage recently ended in divorce, but she and Landmesser remain close friends. Benjamin flies in to visit his mother whenever possible. "He's coming tonight," Mentzer says with an excited smile. "He'll watch the performance on Saturday. He loves opera. When he was two and a half, he sat through a six-hour orchestra rehearsal of *Don Giovanni*. Can you imagine?" She is quick to add that Benjamin is not a child prodigy. "He's a normal kid. He's into *Aladdin* right now. When I called the other night, he had the soundtrack on and was dancing around. He said, 'Mom, I can't talk now — I'm doing the *Aladdin* opera.'"

Mentzer has had her greatest successes to date in trouser roles. She acknowledges a preference for travesty parts as an outlet for her dramatic talents. "I haven't sung *Carmen*, and there aren't a lot of other dramatically interesting female roles for my voice type," she explains. "They're mostly stereotypical women. I mean, *Rosina* and *Cenerentola* are fun, but there's something to these pants roles. They have an emotional intensity that some of the female roles don't."

Mentzer, whose boyish stage presence has been as much admired as her singing, had no formal training in that area. "I wish I had," she says now. "I just think of any boy I used to date in high school. It's a mind-set. I never consciously think about moving my legs and arms a certain way."

"I've worked with a few wonderful directors who insisted that you play every moment in every scene, even if you're in the background," the mezzo continues. "And

I've worked with people who would tell me if I looked stupid. That hurts, but it's great to know, because you don't do it again."

Anyone who has seen Mentzer perform knows that dramatic values are as important to her as musical ones.

Remembering some of the more unusual productions she has done, she reflects that the success of any director's concept is largely dependent on the conviction of the performers. "My first *Rosenkavalier* was not traditional at all. We sang the second-act duet with our backs to the audience, looking in a moving mirror. We had to find the conductor in the mirror. In the opening scene, I didn't have pants or anything on, just a sheet wrapped around me. You could see bare shoulders and bare legs." She smiles wryly. "That was an interesting concept. But it worked. In performance, you have to be committed, because it's your bottom out there. You either commit or you get out. You cannot do a production halfway."

For Mentzer, one of the advantages of her current position is the liberty to pick and choose her engagements. She felt entitled to take two months off this past summer to be with Benjamin, and she thinks long and hard before accepting any engagement that is too far from home. "It's very easy to say, 'I've worked so hard these thirteen years, I deserve everything I'm getting,'" she observes. "But there are days when I wonder if the sacrifice on my family is worth it. I'm glad to be where I am, but there's always going to be some melancholy to it."

Between her busy schedule and the demands of motherhood, Mentzer manages to make time for other projects close to her heart. "I've always felt sort of a void as a singer, because you get very wrapped up in yourself," the mezzo confesses. "O.K., the audiences enjoy it, etc., but you really don't feel like you're doing anything for anybody." That changed in 1992 when she became the catalyst for a concert to benefit homeless people with AIDS. "I met Father Robert Rybicki by chance on a plane to Europe. It turned out that he runs a res-



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MENTZER AS NICKLAUSSE

idence called Bonaventure House in Chicago," she relates. "I told him I really wanted to do something, and two years later we put our heads together and came up with this concert."

The fund-raiser was Mentzer's first venture into producing. She recruited a lineup that included Samuel Ramey, Jerry Hadley, Barbara Daniels and the late William Parker. "I was a nervous wreck," she recalls. "Sam Ramey was flying in from New York, and every time the phone rang I thought, 'He's canceling! He can't come! He has a cold!' I know he wouldn't do that unless he was deathly ill, but for the first time I knew how an opera director feels." The benefit raised \$50,000, and a second annual concert this past October, again spearheaded by Mentzer, brought in \$80,000.

From the beginning of her career, Mentzer's performances have elicited comparisons to Frederica von Stade. Following this year's *Ariadne* opening, independent reviews in two major New York papers noted a resemblance. "When I was seventeen," she relates, "I sang for this man at Santa Fe Opera who said, 'Have you ever heard of Frederica von Stade? You're very similar to her.' And it has not stopped." Mentzer is both flattered and perplexed by the frequent allusions. "She's a wonderful person to be compared to. I shouldn't knock it. There are things she does incredibly well that I can't even attempt. I probably couldn't have had a career if it wasn't for Frederica von Stade, because she was so atypical. Without her, my 'type' maybe wouldn't have been successful. But I do feel I have a lot of different things to offer. I sort of hope one day people will see me in my own light." If Mentzer's recent reception at the Met is any indication, that day is not far off. □