

Even when playing royalty, soprano

Lucia Popp (1939–93)

touched audiences on the deepest human level.



Queen of Hearts

By Louise T. Guinther

What do we want most in a diva? Are we looking for the naïve, unspoiled innocence of the girl next door? The bright, insouciant charm of the irresistible flirt? Mature, womanly wisdom to comfort our souls? It is a *Hoffmann*-esque conundrum; yet one artist comes to mind whose mysterious gift was to fulfill all fantasies at once — the great Czech soprano Lucia Popp.

In such soubrette showcases as *Adele* and *Zerbinetta*, Popp's ability to shoot off cascades of coruscating fioritura made her seem magical — a creature not quite of this world. On other occasions, as the ingénue — Sophie in *Rosenkavalier*, Marenka in *The Bartered Bride* — she was all dewy freshness and radiant simplicity, a quality she retained throughout her career, right up to her untimely death at fifty-four. She could produce a sound so effortless and crystal-clear that it was almost childlike in its purity. But what made Popp unique was the sense of depth and understanding, of tender vulnerability and rare compassion that shone through those luminous eyes and gave all her characterizations an added dimension. However youthful and lighthearted the role, however familiar the plot line, Popp tapped a vein of universal humanity that made it impossible not to connect with her on the most basic level — to feel her trials and heartbreaks, and to sense that she was feeling ours as well.

Popp's was a minutely descriptive art. In a piece such as Schubert's "Die Forelle," she could pour forth a burbling stream of notes that perfectly illustrated the dancing droplets of the "Bächlein" she was describing; her ever-bright timbre and feather-light touch could not have been better suited to conjuring the mercurial flashing of the frolicking trout. The sheer exuberance of her *Frühlingsstimmen Walzer*, captured on video in 1966, epitomizes the carefree euphoria of youth and spring, her laughter as effervescent as champagne. The men in



A 1986 recording session, above:
as Sophie in *Der Rosenkavalier*
at Bayerische Staatsoper, 1972

the box watching Popp's performance look the way we feel — utterly enchanted.

Her joy in what she was doing surely had something to do with our joy in hearing her. "If I didn't make music as a profession," she said, "I would surely make it as a hobby." But Popp's most striking quality was the sensitive soul that lay just beneath that sparkling surface, evident in a hint of tension in the vocal line, a barely perceptible frisson of angst, like the tightness in one's chest at a moment of joy so intense one fears it can't quite be real. *Rusalka's* song to the moon provided a perfect vehicle for her distinctive art — all the young girl's joy in her hopes and dreams tinged with the melancholy of desire as yet unfulfilled and the sense that the dream may never come true.

Popp's was a sound apart — silvery rather than golden yet, unlike many other Slavic singers, never cool in effect. An inner warmth irradiated her every utterance. The timbre of her voice — honeyed, tender, sweet yet penetrating and almost painfully poignant — can produce a physical thrill like sunshine on the back of one's neck or the unexpected touch of a loved one. Ethereal as it could be, it was not the voice of an angel but that of a human being, full of ebullience and enthusiasm and yet, like the rest of us, prone to griefs and fears. Her face suited her voice — trusting and youthful (even later in life), but with a hint of worry in her brow that suggested wisdom beyond her years. Above all, there was a sense of grace — physical, vocal, personal and spiritual — that permeated everything she did.

It all began with Mozart's *Queen of the Night*, a role that didn't make use of any of the endearing qualities that would come to be associated with Popp. It might almost have seemed a waste of her natural charms were it not for the stunning pinpoint accuracy and fearsome brilliance of tone she brought to this most daunting of soprano challenges. The *Queen* was her calling-card role, in Bratislava in 1963, on her first major recording, under Klemperer that same year, and at the Met in 1967. She had, in her own words, a "*hassliebe*" — a love-hate relationship — with that fiendish part, but there was much more to come.

In Popp's biography one can find hints of the diverse personality traits that manifested themselves in so many richly nuanced characterizations onstage. Born in 1939 in Uhorská Ves, in what is now Slovakia, to a highly cultured family (her mother was a soprano, with whom the young Lucia often sang duets at home — sometimes as Pinkerton or Rodolfo; her father, an engineer, was at one time a cultural attaché to the British embassy), she described herself to OPERA NEWS as a child of nature who "went barefoot with the geese." No wonder she was equally adept at the aristocratic poise of a Marschallin or Countess and the country-girl charm of an Adina or Marzelline and could combine the two so adeptly in a dual role such as Lady Harriet in *Martha*. Popp studied medicine for a time, with a view toward becoming a pediatrician, but as she put it to *Opera's* Alan Blyth, "I suddenly realized I must be an actress, or something like that." Certainly, the dichotomy between the intelligence and seriousness of purpose required for medical training and the buoyant spirits and extrovert personality that lend themselves to a life in theater could be felt in her pert yet laser-sharp Susanna, her unusually thoughtful yet typically radiant Arabella, her innocent yet strangely knowing Pamina.

Popp entered the Bratislava Academy as an actress, but when she was cast as Nicole in Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, a role that required her to sing, her vocal talent was spotted, and serious lessons began. After four years' conservatory study and her debut in Bratislava, a visit to relatives in Vienna led to an unplanned audition at the Staatsoper. She was offered a contract and had to make the difficult decision to remain in Vienna. "I always felt I was Slovakian," she told a German interviewer who asked about her emigration, "and

hoped the whole matter could be put on a formal basis later, but this was not possible. Thus it was a long time before I could set foot again on Slovakian soil." Her family had remained there, and it is not too great a stretch to imagine that that experience was behind the sense of wistful yearning that added pathos to so many of her otherwise sunny portrayals.

After her debut season in Vienna, Popp found her early days at the Staatsoper both thrilling and terrifying as she set about "building the house from the roof down." (After a significant stint in Cologne, where she took leading roles in Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's Mozart cycle, Vienna was to be her home base throughout her career — she was made a Kammersängerin there in 1978 — though she also sang in top houses the world over and had especially fruitful relationships with Munich and Covent Garden.) The tenacity that was essential in those early establishing years was no doubt a resource to draw on in fashioning her spunky, determined characterizations in roles such as *Blonde* and *Marenka*.

Whatever the contributing factors, a Popp performance was always filled with a sense of life in all its joys, sorrows and infinite complexities. The development



As Arabella to Wolfgang Brendel's Mandryka in Munich, 1983

of her repertoire encompassed a wide range of fachs: how many other sopranos sang not only the *Queen of the Night* and *Pamina* but *Sophie* and the *Marschallin*; *Barbarina*, *Susanna* and the *Countess*; *Adele* and *Rosalinde*; *Zdenka* and *Arabella*; *Mimi* and *Musetta*; *Valencienne* and *Hanna Glawari*; as well as Wagner's *Eva* and *Elsa*? Yet this progression was not so much a matter of the usual vocal evolution that comes with age as of a delicately shifting balance, for in Popp's case, the aura of maturity — artistic and humanistic — was there from the beginning, and (equally miraculous) the mercurial lightness and youthful purity remained to the end. Perhaps the

regular experience of singing multiple roles in a single opera contributed to her extraordinarily multi-dimensional interpretations, in which she always seemed to have considered her character's plight from every conceivable point of view.

There was no artifice to Popp's art, no aura of diva remove in her relationship with the audience, which always felt deeply personal. What never wavered was a quality Zachary Lewis described in these pages as "the keen emotional sincerity and integrity of her readings." Take, for example, her breathtaking "Deh vieni," an aria in which Susanna knowingly torments her jealousy-ridden husband. Though one could not ask for a lighter-hearted, more girlish timbre, there is not a trace of capriciousness or unkindness in her teasing. Something in the way she spins out each note — like an expert glassblower breathing forth a precious object of matchless splendor and fragility — suggests a love and care that transcend any momentary caprice and heal potential wounds before they can even be felt.

Such indelible moments help explain why Popp, throughout her career, was not merely admired but beloved. Crusty old critics dotted their prose with terms such as "endearing," "delectable," "enchanting" — these all from a single *Opera* review of her Christine in a 1981 recording of *Intermezzo*, not generally thought of as the most loveable of roles.

Popp was as dearly cherished by her fellow artists as by her fans. "She was beautiful, she was witty, she was smart," recalls baritone Wolfgang Brendel, a frequent Popp collaborator. "Of course, her voice was beautiful. She had such an aura! But she was also a wonderful colleague. It was easy to work with her. It's the ability to concentrate on what's important — she understood that it can't be me, me, me, it only can be us, us, us. *Together* we are good." Popp herself once summed up the art of ensemble with the telling phrase "One swallow doesn't make a summer."

"She was patient," Brendel goes on. "If

you needed to do something again, she would do it until it was right. And when she was onstage, she was *in* the part." The two made their role debuts together as Mandryka and Arabella, and their rapport was such that Brendel relates, "When it was over, my wife said to me, 'It can't be that you haven't had an affair with her.' And of course, it wasn't true, but..."

Popp was also an avid recitalist, believing that "singing lieder cleanses the voice," and certainly the remarkably unchanged basic sound that lasted right up until her death supports her theory. Happily for future generations, Popp's limpid voice and ravishing personality live on in a vast recorded legacy that reflects the scope of her onstage career in opera and in lieder. "Recording is a fraud, but I like it," she said in a 1985 *OPERA NEWS* profile that included a "selected discography" of some thirty-five recordings, from Bach through Weinberger! (If you want to understand what is meant by keeping the hearth fires burning, listen to the sheer

rapture of her Dorota as she anticipates her wayward husband's return on CBS's irresistible *Schwanda*.) "I try to fulfill all the recording offers I get," Popp once said. "It makes me so anxious to think that so little remains of our craft. If I were an author or a painter, there would be something that could be hung on a wall. It's not that I take myself so seriously or think myself so important, but it's such a pity that there are so many beautiful, magical moments, and they're so fleeting. The disc isn't really an accurate rendition, but at least it keeps *something* for a certain time."

In 1993, Lucia Popp succumbed to a brain tumor, and the opera world grieved for a cherished artist lost in her prime. That year, the soprano had sung a Dvořák Requiem (preserved on DVD) as transcendent and ethereal as any of her youthful efforts. We are blessed that through this document and her many other recordings, Popp lives on in the hearts and ears of her admirers, forever young. □



As Mozart's Susanna
at Bayerische Staatsoper, 1982

"Magical Moments": Lucia Popp on CD

Weinberger, *Schwanda der Dudelsackpfeifer* (in German), with Gwendolyn Killebrew; Siegfried Jerusalem, Hermann Prey, Siegmund Nimsgern; Bavarian Radio Chorus and Orchestra, Heinz Wallberg. CBS Masterworks 36926 (2 discs)

Mozart, *Die Zauberflöte*, with Edita Gruberova; Siegfried Jerusalem, Wolfgang Brendel; Bavarian Radio Chorus and Orchestra, Bernard Haitink. EMI Classics 47951 (3 discs)

R. Strauss, *Vier Letzte Lieder* (with *Tod und Verklärung* and orchestral excerpts from *Götterdämmerung*). London Philharmonic, Berlin Philharmonic, Klaus Tennstedt. EMI 64920 (1 disc)

Lucia Popp: *Handel & Mozart Arias* Arias from *Rodelinda*, *Serse*, *Ottone*, *Joshua*, "Exultate, Jubilate," *Vesperae Solennes de Confessore*, *Vesperae de Domenica*. English Chamber Orchestra, Georg Fischer. EMI 7695462 (1 disc)

Lucia Popp: *Slavonic Arias* Arias by Dvořák, Janáček, Smetana, Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky. Bavarian Radio Orchestra, Stefan Soltesz. EMI Classics 69854 (1 disc)