

## DIANA SOVIERO'S DREAM OF SINGING AT THE MET HAS COME TRUE

**N**ot long before the new Met's opening night in 1966, a slim figure in a construction worker's hard hat stepped out onto the

half-finished stage and tested the hall's acoustics with an a cappella rendition of Puccini's "Un bel dì." The impromptu Butterfly was young Diana Soviero, the audience her father and a crew of workmen, who applauded lustily from the scaffolding.

This past October, more than a quarter of a century later, the scaffolding was gone and the well-dressed audience applauded from red plush seats. Only the Butterfly was the same. Soviero, singing her first Cio-Cio-Sans at the Met, found her mind wandering back to that unofficial debut.

"My father was in charge of the ornamental plastering for Lincoln Center. They were working on the proscenium arch, and I ran in to have lunch with him," the soprano recalls. "My dream was to sing at the Met, and I said, 'Give me the hat, Dad, give me the hat.' I got up on the stage and started singing, and I said, 'Dad, I'm the first one to sing Butterfly at the new Met.' He said, 'Someday I'll see you there.'"

Amerigo Catani didn't live to see his daughter's Met debut. He died in 1983, three years before Soviero bowed at the house as Gounod's Juliette. His absence was especially poignant because it was he who first had noticed his daughter's gift. "My parents had no background in music. They didn't know what to do with me. My father said, 'You're singing so high, you're doing all these difficult things. We've got to get you to somebody who knows what the heck is going on.' That's when my piano teacher suggested I take the exam at the Juilliard prep school."

Soviero was admitted on the basis of an audition recital of twenty-three arias and songs, which she sheepishly confesses was "one of the longest programs they'd ever seen." Her first teacher was Florence



Berggren, then associated with Temple University as well as Juilliard. "I was going from Juilliard on Saturdays all the way down to Philadelphia, back and forth. It was quite a grueling childhood. I followed her wherever she went so I could have more lessons. I was like a sponge. I wanted to know everything."

Soviero went on to the upper school at Juilliard, still under Berggren's tutelage, and later studied for fifteen years with Marenka Gurewich. She spent some time in Italy but considers herself essentially "an American product." It was Berggren, along with Soviero's first coach, Martin Rich, who prepared the soprano for her professional debut. Rich was conducting the Chautauqua Institution's *La Bohème* in July 1965, and he and Berggren agreed that their young charge was ready for her first Mimi. "I was in good hands at a very fragile age. Martin knew how to control the orchestra, and he took care of me. Then I got bitten by that bug, and that was it."

Beginning in 1974, Soviero spent ten years at New York City Opera, gaining valuable experience in many of her now familiar roles. During that time, she received numerous offers from Europe but rejected them all. "I wanted to be an American singer. I wanted to stay here and be a star." Her determination to establish herself in the U.S. harks back to her great-grandfather, Iacopo Pietro Catani, the last professional musician in the family before Diana. "He was first violist with Pietro Mascagni," she relates. "The orchestra had a concert tour to America, and when my great-grandfather saw this place, he said, 'This is where I want to be.'"

Soviero appeared as a guest artist with all the major U.S. companies, making her debut in Chicago as Mimi in 1979 and in San Francisco as Anne Trulove in 1982. Despite successes all across the country, she had yet to make her way from City Opera across Lincoln Center to what she unreservedly calls "the greatest opera



BY LOUISE T. GUINThER



house in the world. After ten years I realized that if I wanted an international career I had to go abroad. And as soon as I went to Europe, the Met took notice."

It had been a long haul since the private audition for her father and his crew, but for Soviero it was well worth the wait. In the end, her eagerly anticipated debut came ahead of schedule, on November 15, 1986, when Cecilia Gasdia canceled as Juliette. Soviero sang opposite Alfredo Kraus, under the baton of Plácido Domingo in one of his first conducting assignments. "I cannot tell you how emotional that evening was," she says now. "Ever since I was a kid, that was what I wanted to do. It was a dream come true. I lived to see my dream." She smiles wryly. "I told my mother, 'Now I can die.'"

The dream was born when Diana, growing up in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, was taken to her first opera. "As a little girl, I wanted to be a dancer. Then my parents took me to the old Met, and we sat up in

the family circle. It was *Tosca*, with Tebaldi and Corelli, and I leaned over and said, 'You know, Dad, I changed my mind. I'm going to be an opera singer.'" She laughs, remembering her father's reaction. "He said, 'Are you crazy? Do you know what that takes — the sacrifice?' And I said, 'Well, I'm going to give it a try.' And they helped me every minute of the way. My mother is still at every performance."

Soviero discovered over the years exactly what it takes. She recalls a painful performance of Violetta at City Opera after a car accident had left her in a neck brace. "I could barely stand up. I was holding onto a chair, because I was so dizzy with vertigo. The audience thought it was characterization. They thought I was the greatest thing since peanut butter."

Playing hurt goes with the territory for Soviero, who now wears a back brace for support during performances as a result of a lumbar problem. She speaks resignedly of the countless factors that can affect a performance. "It's like driving a car. If you know the car is going to start flooding the minute you touch that gas pedal, you're nervous when you're driving. If your vocal equipment is not working well, you cannot put your whole body into your work."

The soprano recalls distractions from less predictable sources as well. "I was in the last of a run of *Bohèmes* at City Opera, and I got to 'O com'è bello e morbido,' which is 'Oh how soft and cuddly.' I put my hand in the muff and there was a ripe banana. And I saw my tenor, who will remain nameless, strewn over my bed." She demonstrates with convulsive jerks of her shoulders. "The audience thought he was crying, and he was laughing his head off." On another occasion, in the early days of projected titles, Soviero, playing Norina in *Don Pasquale*, found herself out of sync with the projections. "I had the vase in my hand, and before I broke it, the audience laughed. I looked at them and said, 'I didn't break it yet. Now you can laugh!'" Soviero has since been convinced of the importance of titles in attracting younger audiences. Still, she jokingly suggests, "They ought to write directions, so the audience knows exactly what to do — 'Laugh,' 'Ap-

plaud,' 'Cry,' 'Stamp your feet.'"

When Soviero is onstage, no such prompting is necessary. The soprano has gained notice for the depth of her dramatic commitment. John Ardoin of *The Dallas Morning News* calls her "a giver, an artist to be valued in a time of takers." Surprisingly, her teachers deliberately downplayed that aspect of her training.

"I remember running to Florence Berggren and telling her, 'They want me to be in the Opera Workshop. They don't ask everybody. I'm honored! I have to do it!' She said, 'Diana, if I let you do that now, the way you are, so outgoing, you'll be throwing yourself around, acting your pants off, and you won't be worrying about your voice. When you learn how to sing, then you will be a fine actress.'"

Soviero considers this the best advice she ever received. "There aren't two things happening, your voice singing and your acting aside. They have to be one thing. I never separate the drama from my voice." She recalls a breakthrough when she was working with Gurewich. She had been bringing the *Butterfly* score to her voice lessons regularly, begging Gurewich to let her try Cio-Cio-San. "All right," she'd say, "let's open it," and we'd look at it, and I'd start to cry. And she'd just close the book

and say, 'That's it for *Madama Butterfly*.' Then one day I went through it from beginning to end without one tear. Mme. Gurewich said, 'Congratulations,' and I said, 'Was I that good?' 'No,' she said. 'You've finally learned to control yourself.' You have to make the audience cry without crying yourself. I have to break *their* hearts. I can't break my own."

Soviero credits Bernard Uzan, her husband of seven years, with completing her education as an actress. Uzan, the general and artistic director of the Opéra de Montréal, is a producer, designer, stage director and former actor. "I did my first *Tosca* with Bernard, my first *Mefistofele*, my first *Butterfly*. He knows about acting. I would always pat myself on the back and say I was a good actress, but I would do things that let my audience be distracted. I never knew how to focus long enough to take them and pull them right into my guts."



*continued on page 44*



## SOVIERO, continued from page 13

For Soviero, audience involvement is the bottom line. She tries not to let reviews affect her, whether positive or negative. "If you read the good ones, and you believe the good ones," she reasons, "you have to read the bad ones and believe them too." But it's not always easy to ignore the critics, and she found a recent review referring to her Cio-Cio-San as a "tough broad" irresponsible. "Even if I don't read the papers, there's always going to be someone who says, 'Don't believe that silly reviewer,' or whatever. But to me, the review is only one person's opinion, and if I can move my audience, which is many more people than this one reviewer, that to me is enough."

If the ovations that greeted her Met *Butterflies* are any indication, Soviero is doing fine. Cio-Cio-San has become something of a signature role for the soprano, who this year alone will sing the geisha at Paris' Bastille Opera, London's Covent Garden, Vienna's Staatsoper and L'Opéra de Montréal. Though she is most at home in the Puccini roles that form the core of her repertory, she has had considerable success in French repertory as well. She sings her first Carmen under her husband's guidance in a new Montreal production in 1994 before taking the Gypsy to Palermo. She has made it a rule to try out all new roles with Uzan, but there are exceptions. One example is the Met's current *Bohème*, in which she made her debut as Musetta on December 30.

Though she loves the role of Mimi, Soviero finds Musetta a welcome change. "I always used to say as a joke that Mimi excuses herself from the minute she opens her mouth to the minute she falls dead." Soviero illustrates with tiny excerpts from the familiar role: "'Scusi,' and then in the third act, 'Sa dirmi, scusi.' She's always 'scusi-ing' herself. Musetta is another case. To scream and show your ankle in public in those days was like Madonna today."

After countless Mimis, Musetta took some getting used to. "When I was learning the role, I kept hearing Mimi's part in the quartet and singing her line. This is the first time I'm not playing the leading lady. I think it's going to be a blast."

Soviero feels the flashy Bohemian is often overplayed, and she vows not to let her portrayal degenerate into caricature. "Musetta is so full of life, and she's so in love with Marcello that she'll do anything to get his attention. She's as big-hearted a person as you can imagine, because in the last act she gives up her diamonds. You couldn't be a hard-boiled chick and do that."

"I've always liked Musetta," she adds with a smile. "And what an entrance! What more could anybody ask?" □

## WAGNER: Tristan und Isolde

□ Meier, Schwarz; Kollo, Becht, Salminen; Bayreuth Festival, Barenboim. Philips 070 509-1; 3 videodiscs, 245 mins. In German, subtitled. Stereo, digitally remastered

### Parsifal

□ Randova; Jerusalem, Weikl, Sotin, Roar, Salminen; Bayreuth Festival, Stein. Philips 070 510-1; 3 videodiscs, 232 mins. In German, subtitled. Stereo, digitally remastered

*Tristan und Isolde* is probably the least suitable opera to watch on a television screen. The camera's literal eye, needing light, is inimical to Wagner's mystical poem of love, night and darkness. Love's unfathomability and imperceptibility have to be paramount — and they do not invite parsing, reduction or a follow spot. On a more pedestrian level, the composer's libretto is often compounded of involved word foreplay that makes reading subtitles a major headache. A line such as "Dying, still to yearn, not of yearning to die," split into halves to coordinate with musical time, may suggest the awkward match between word and medium.

Still, given the innate problems and the reality of an uneven performance, this 1983 Jean-Pierre Ponnelle (sets, costumes, staging) Bayreuth production merits attention. The late director brandishes a series of stunning images that usually serve the opera well. The Act I vision of Isolde imprisoned in a luminous, voluminous cape and feathered crown at once establishes the pre-potion predicament. The end of the *Liebesnacht* and the discovery of the careless lovers arrives with a ghastly invasion of day and the ripping away of the protective scrim at the back of the stage. Only during the final moments does Ponnelle resort to unfortunate tricks of thematic refocusing — here, the arrival of Isolde and the entire *Liebestod* as products of Tristan's delirium just before his death. Isolde, never actually reaching her dying lover, thus becomes a suspect figure, perhaps in the end her vengeance on Tristan for slaying Morold emerging triumphant over what the potion accomplished. Whether or not this was Ponnelle's intention, his sleight of hand breeds undermining, even trivializing, speculation.

Johanna Meier and René Kollo are best in Act I, the soprano especially good at spitting forth rage and anguish. The tenor makes the most of the suicidal, flesh-tearing distraction that precedes his death. But the central episode, the epic love duet, is unsatisfactory, with neither artist able to sustain the long-breathed lines of declaration and passion. Even the usually exemplary Hanna Schwarz finds the Act II demands of seamless phrasing in Brangäne's warning uncongenial. Elsewhere,

however, she is first-rate, as is Matti Salminen, a warm, believable King Marke. Hermann Becht vocally overplays Kurwenal's gruffness, but otherwise the fit of singer to role is apt. Daniel Barenboim turns in a supportive and sensible if rather faceless orchestral job. Although the accompanying booklet does not specify, this appears to be an adapted-for-television effort, one that obviously allows for greater photographic freedom, rather than an actual performance.

From the same Bayreuth era (1981, a year before the far more talked-of centenary production) comes a Wolfgang Wagner *Parsifal*. It is of most immediate interest for the opportunity to observe a decade-younger Siegfried Jerusalem. Fresher of voice and more convincingly artless in manner, the tenor here still has a lot to learn about projecting a characterization. This *Parsifal* has little of the fierce sense of self-discovery that Jerusalem underlines nowadays. Bernd Weikl's Amfortas also invites self-comparison, the baritone here capable of a far more malleable vocal texture, also of some eye-rolling histrionics. Still, Amfortas' plea not to be made to uncover the Grail is a heartrending Act I moment. The Gurnemanz of Hans Sotin is solid but colorless, the long monologues rolling by without much involving differentiation. Leif Roar's Klingsor is surprisingly benign, amid the hackneyed claptrap and dry ice of black-magic treachery. Making more of small moments, Salminen as Titurel booms from his offstage perch between life and death.

Eva Randova, despite hideous red wig and orange-and-mauve costuming (by Reinhard Heinrich) for the seduction, delivers an effective Kundry. Neither singing nor acting is particularly subtle, and as with so many mezzos in this assignment, the end of Act II suffers from strain. However, the voice owns natural, useful steel that sees her through. Horst Stein conducts throughout with a praiseworthy brisk efficiency.

The real drawback of this *Parsifal* lies in its visual clunkiness. In addition to the unfortunate costumes (the blue-and-red squires and knights possess all the Technicolor subtlety of M-G-M circa 1951), the surviving Wagner grandson designed sets of either tedious literalness (the "nature" scenes of Acts I and III) or Nazi-era architectural brutishness (the Temple interior). The most satisfying moments arise when Brian Large's cameras pull back — an arresting overhead sequence, for example — from the too frequently awkward stage action. In the plus column: excellent sound, allowing voices to come through with stagelike directionality.

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