

**SONDRA
RADVANOVSKY
CONTINUES
TO CHALLENGE
HERSELF.**

BY LOUISE T. GUINThER

PHOTOGRAPHED
BY CEDRIC ANGELES
AT CANADIAN
OPERA COMPANY

HAIR AND MAKEUP
BY DELIA LUPAN

DREAM

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HE OPERA WORLD has undergone seismic changes since Sondra Radvanovsky and I last spoke, in the midst of the pandemic lockdown, but they pale by comparison with the upheaval in the diva's personal landscape. "My life this year has been really turned upside down," she says with characteristic forthrightness. "My mum died at the end of January, and her last words to me were, 'Please go and be happy—and I know that you're not.' And I proceeded a few weeks later to separate from my husband, because mums always know, and my mum knew that things weren't right in my world." Radvanovsky, who remembers her grandfather's telling her, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," has not allowed these devastating events to derail her; instead, she has used her professional life as a form of therapy.

KEEPER

“It’s cathartic, I’m telling you,” she says. “Music has been the one and only thing that has kept me together and sane, and in many ways, it’s made my singing and my art better. It’s where all my emotion has been poured.”

Radvanovsky has Zoomed in to our interview from Munich, where she’s spending June as Amelia in *Un Ballo in Maschera*. She has just come from her best friend’s wedding in the South of England. “Somehow he thought it was a good idea to renovate their fourteen-bedroom estate before they got married,” she says with a laugh. “So I was project manager, I was wedding planner, I was best friend, I was counselor, I was therapist. It’s what you do for your best friend—he’s been very loving and caring to me—but *I’m tired!*”

Radvanovsky has found, to her surprise, that allowing the public a glimpse into her personal life has aided the healing process. “Social media was never a part of my growing up in this business. I was always taught your personal life is your personal life,” she says. “But we’re in 2022, and people kind of demand to know a bit about you.” Learning how, when and how much to share has been an important part of her journey. Radvanovsky’s wildly popular YouTube interview series with her friend and fellow soprano Keri Alkema significantly altered her perspective. “Once I started with *Screaming Divas*, I really started opening up about who I was more—not just ‘Sandy Singer’ but Sondra, the person, and I felt better, and I felt closer not just to my fans but friends and everybody in the business. As long as I have control of what I’m putting out there, I’m okay with that.”

Reflecting on her path to top diva status, Radvanovsky notes that for every early dream that came true, there have been many more moments that have confounded her expectations. “I am a bit of a type A personality, who sets goals and really wants to achieve them,” she says. “Very early on, I said, ‘I want to sing a leading role at the Metropolitan Opera, and I want to sing with Plácido Domingo.’ And this is when I get teary, because on my birthday in 2005, we started rehearsals for *Cyrano de Bergerac* at the Met, and he was Cyrano, and I was Roxane. I said to Plácido, ‘This was my dream,’ and he said, ‘Sondra, you’re going to have to go and get a different dream.’”

The divergences from the map she drew for herself have been equally formative. “We can plan all we want to, but there are so many things that can change the course of your life that are out of your control. Your father can die, or your mother can die, or you can have a vocal injury, like I did. I learned to sing with a bump on my vocal cords, but as my career started progressing, it got worse and worse. I needed two days off between shows, and I had to live like a nun. I finally said, ‘Living life is more important.’ So I had the surgery in 2002. I was



As *Tosca* at the Met to Brian Jagde’s Cavaradossi, 2021

Ballo curtain call at La Scala, 2022

Maria Stuarda in *The Three Queens* in Chicago, 2019

thirty-two years old, going into singing *Aida* and the heavier rep. Then when I had vocal cords that didn’t have an impediment, there was that fork in the road, and I found bel canto. I never in my wildest dreams thought I would sing the three queens,” she says, referring to Donizetti’s Tudor heroines. “I remember when the Met offered them to me, I said, ‘What’s that?’” She laughs. “And then *Norma*—I *never* thought I would sing *Norma*. I thought by the time I was forty I’d be singing *Turandot*.

“Life gives you curveballs, and you run with it, or you hit a wall and you don’t grow,” she adds. “Most singers go always one step forward. You sing *Traviata*, then *Trovatore*, then *Ballo*, maybe a little *Tosca*. I went one step back, then another step back, then another step back, repertoire-wise—but I embraced it. I say this to all singers—in this career, if you don’t have somebody that you trust, go out and find someone, because what we hear coming out of our mouth is not necessarily what the public hears. You have to have that second, third, fourth set of ears. The two people I trusted the most with my voice at that point, Ruth Falcon and Tony Manoli,

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both said, ‘This is right for you.’ And gosh darn it, weren’t they right? And I’m so grateful!”

The detour through bel canto has now led her back to the roles she expected to be singing a decade ago. She sang her first *Lady Macbeth* in Chicago in 2021, her first *Turandot* in concert with Rome’s Accademia di Santa Cecilia earlier this year. As Puccini’s *Ice Princess*, Radvanovsky illuminates the challenging music with warmth, passion and an extraordinary palette of colors. She recalls coming offstage after the performance and asking her manager, “Would it be bad of me to say that was easy?”

“When I was offered *Turandot*, with Maestro Pappano, whom I trust implicitly, he didn’t want me to sing it in the vein of, say, Birgit Nilsson,” Radvanovsky says. “I’m more the Joan Sutherland school, where we have a very strong top of our voice, but not as heavy a bottom voice. Whereas Birgit Nilsson’s voice was built like a column, mine is a bit more like a funnel. Maestro Pappano said, ‘I want you to sing *Turandot* with *your* voice.’ And it was really eye-opening for me. I thought, ‘Wow, I can bring this femininity into it.’ I’m Danish, so I have the steel in my voice, but I’m also Czech, so I have the more lyrical side.”

RADVANSKY credits her healthy vocal development to trusted advisers, strong instincts and, above all, technique. “Technique is like the foundation of the house,” she says. “I had a good foundation before my vocal surgery, and now I have the concrete rebar foundation. Because I learned how to sing with the impediment, and I relearned how to sing after.

“After singing *Turandot*, my chest voice has come in a bit more naturally,” she adds. “Your voice matures and ages naturally, but I’ve never tried to push it into repertoire that I wasn’t ready for. Now we have some other bigger roles—I’m taking on *Forza del Destino*, and we’re jostling around the idea of some German repertoire, which I *never* said I would do. So, once again, that fork in the road. I’m doing a Carnegie Hall recital in November, and there will be German repertoire on that. I’m kind of putting the feelers out.”

The Carnegie Hall recital includes another project that is very near to her heart—a new Jake Heggie song cycle, to be called *If I Had Known*, based on Radvanovsky’s own texts about her mother’s late-life struggles with brain illness. “A mother–daughter relationship is unlike any other,” she says. “It’s nurturing, and it’s loving, but it’s also, woof!—so many levels, you know? My mother had, in the end, Parkinson’s, but also Lewy Body Dementia. To see a parent struggle with who they are and where they are, and day by day losing who they were....” She



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trails off, overcome by emotion. “I want to tell my mother’s story through my eyes and through my words, to bring awareness to brain illness, because people are not talking about it. There’s a stigma attached to it—just like voice issues. I want to open doors—not just open them but kick them open and keep them open and scream at the top of my lungs. So it’s been cathartic for me, because it’s my therapy, reliving this journey—my mum’s life, and our story together.” Radvanovsky will unveil parts of the cycle in other venues before the Carnegie Hall recital,

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Lady Macbeth
at Lyric Opera of
Chicago, 2021

—
Amelia in *Ballo* at
La Scala, 2022



where she will sing three of the songs. “I don’t think I could get through seven or eight songs. It would be really hard,” she says, wiping away tears.

RIGHT NOW, her biggest challenge is her first Medea, which opens the Met season this month. “I like challenges, and this is a pretty darn big one,” she says. “First off, we have to address the elephant in the room, and that is Maria Callas. I’m standing in the shadow of a huge iconic figure. All my singing career, I have looked to Maria and her career as a reference, like everyone else out there, and I’m going to be looking to her as a reference here too. But then, I will say, ‘Chapeau!’ and thank you very much to Maria, but Frank Sinatra said it best—‘I did it my way.’”

She will find her way with the help of director David McVicar, “whom I feel safe with,” she says, “and whom I adore more than any other director out there. Really, what making art is all about is trusting, and I trust David. He knows what buttons to push on me to get me out of my safe acting, Sandy Singer place, and to get me into character.”

McVicar says Radvanovsky “has an intrinsic talent, but she also *works* at this, really works hard as a woman, as an artist, as an actress. She is never complacent or satisfied with any performance that she gives, never content if she’s not giving the best that she can give.” As Medea, he adds, “You’ve got to go to some incredibly dark and angry places, which of course is dangerous for a singer. Sondra is very well aware of the challenge of having the resources to sing this well and also to be truthful to the savage nature of the story and the very complicated sexual politics of the Medea story. I think she wants to be engaged in the role artistically and emotionally, but also there’s lots of intellectual curiosity going on.”

The difficult year Radvanovsky has come through has no doubt steeled her for this soul-searching assignment. “This opera is all about raw emotions,” she says. “We beat ourselves up because we don’t know how to deal with all the emotions that we’re dealing with. Bad emotions find a way of encroaching into our lives in an unhealthy way.

“There are so many layers to this woman and her relationships, and David is so brilliant at bringing out all those layers. So working with him, and doing the production in Italian—because the Met is so large it is impossible in my mind to do spoken dialogue in French—and to have Carlo Rizzi, an Italian, as the conductor—it’s a great team! And opening night at the Met, I mean! Remember Plácido said, ‘You need a new goal in life.’ My one after Plácido was the three queens, and *this* is my next dream. And after Medea, hey everyone out there, I’m looking for another dream.” ■

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“FIRST OFF, WE HAVE TO ADDRESS THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM, AND THAT IS MARIA CALLAS. I’M STANDING IN THE SHADOW OF A HUGE ICONIC FIGURE.”

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