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Magdalena
Kožená

BY ADAM WASSERMAN





The Velvet Revolutionary



A dozen years into her career, Czech mezzo **Magdalena Kožená** is firing on all cylinders — releasing albums, scoping out new rep and reveling in the quiet joys of family life. ADAM WASSERMAN talks to the onetime student-revolutionary about what the future holds.

When Magdalena Kožená took the stage of Alice Tully Hall on November 19 of last year for her “Art of the Song” recital, the event seemed to be less an endeavor in the stand-and-sing formalities of the New York recital scene than a post-feminist repertory revival. Attended by a capacity audience, which included esteemed playwright and former Czech president Václav Havel — drawn downtown from his residency at Columbia University — the mezzo made her way through a set of breezy Mendelssohn lieder before launching into one of the most moving renditions of Schumann’s *Frauenliebe und -leben* in recent memory. Joined at the piano by Malcolm Martineau, Kožená brought heartbreakingly incandescent vocalism to Adelbert von Chamisso’s musty, at times risible, text of a young girl’s transfiguration from lovestruck youth to new mother to withdrawn, grieving widow. Kožená’s transition from the maternal ecstasy of “An meinem Herzen, an meiner Brust” (At my heart, at my breast) to the disconsolation of “Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan” (Now have you caused me my first pain) registered, through her shadings of text and unadulterated tone, as nothing less than an acutely etched progression of mortality.

“People are asking me, ‘Why are you singing this? It’s so old-fashioned!’ And it is, of course,” laughs the mezzo-soprano two weeks later, as we lounge in the Aeron chairs that populate the conference room of her record label’s New York headquarters. “But from the other hand, if you look at teenage girls, fifteen, when they fall in love with a pop-star — it’s pathetic somehow, but it still exists. You can actually put it in a more modern context.” Romantic lieder, the singer has said in the past, have not always been a great fit with her temperament or her musical approach — particularly the songs of Brahms, which she says “need kind of this voice which is like a very broad river.” On this occasion, at least, the meeting of voice and repertoire seemed to fit nigh perfectly.

The day we meet, Kožená is between performances in a run of Met *Idomeneos*, wherein her ardently sung Idamante wholly transcends the uninspired staging; she also happens to be taking some time to promote her rousing album of Mozart arias, made with Simon Rattle — her partner and the father of her two-year-old son — leading the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. However fervent her onstage emoting, the mezzo seems a model of soft-spoken nonchalance in person. She comes across as discreetly charming yet a tad deferential — a sparkling conversationalist who still seems to worry just a little about speaking out of turn.

One quickly gets the impression that Kožená, a native of Brno, has an understated way of doing things that doesn’t necessarily adhere to operatic norms. Since her 1995 win at Salzburg’s

PHOTOGRAPHED IN PRAGUE BY JOHANNES IFKOVITS
on the portico roof of the Church of the Holy Savior at Charles Bridge; view of the city from the roof (top left)
Makeup and hair by Jitka Chramostová; clothes design and styling by E.daniely/Prague

Kožená is thoroughly assured in what she will and won't sing.

International Mozart Competition, she has risen into the upper echelon of the lyric-mezzo ranks, while remaining largely true to the Baroque repertoire in which she first came to attention. She now finds herself in enormous demand on many major European concert and opera stages, yet she is thoroughly assured in what she will and won't, can and can't sing. Her high-flying mezzo, a distinctive, bell-like, copper-colored instrument with soprano-esque flecks of cooler metal in its upper range, seems to straddle the border between Fachs. With its easy production, natural vibrato and remarkably flexible dynamic range, the voice sounds fully at home in repertoire that has largely ranged from forays into Bach, Handel, Rameau and Gluck, to Mozart and Mysliveček, to lieder, chanson and French Impressionism. The latter comes to the fore in the immediate future, with performances next month as Mélisande in a new production of Debussy's opera at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, conducted by Bernard Haitink.

"I don't find this jump so big," explains the mezzo, when asked about what some might perceive as a meandering approach to repertoire. "I somehow feel that Debussy is much closer to Bach and Handel than singing Rossini or Schumann or Brahms. The feeling that the twentieth century somehow came back to this Baroque aesthetic, in terms of looking at the text, makes it much more interesting."

Future projects promise to push the scope of Kožená's musicianship even further: next season she takes on the title character in the world premiere of Hans Werner Henze's *Phaedra* — a role written especially for her voice — at Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin and Brussels's Monnaie, as well as making her Covent Garden debut in the title role of *Cenerentola*. The mezzo says she's planning her first onstage Carmen for 2011, while Massenet's *Cendrillon* remains another brass ring to be grabbed.

Kožená remains something of a foreign property to audiences in the U.S. In-house Met performances since her 2003 debut as Cherubino have been limited to the recent Idamantes, some winning Dorabellas in the 2005–06 season and performances of *Káťa's* Varvara in 2004–05, in which her conspicuous pregnancy hardly inhibited her remarkable onstage agility and energy. Her next scheduled appearance at the New York house is as Mélisande in distant 2010. While she has taken to the concert stage in San Francisco, she has yet to make her opera debut at any other large U.S. house. Consequently, Americans have been left to discover her talents by way of her prodigious recorded catalogue — she is an exclusive artist with Deutsche Grammophon — which ranges from numerous collaborations with Marc Minkowski (Baroque and otherwise) to a 2006 *Clemenza di Tito* conducted by Charles Mackerras and an eclectic 2004 song recital again accompanied by Martineau. October brings the release of a new album of Handel arias, with Andrea Marcon and the Venice Baroque Orchestra. The mezzo is currently at work on a recorded survey of Czech songs, ranging from the Baroque hymns of Adam Václav Michna to the contemporary music of composer Petr Eben.

One of the most successful CD releases of Kožená's career to date has been *Lamento*, her vibrant 2005 disc of arias, cantatas and scenes by the Bach family, recorded with Reinhard Goebel



As Zeriina in *Don Giovanni* at Salzburg, 2002, with Melanie Diener (Donna Elvira)

and early-music ensemble Musica Antiqua Köln. One of the touchstones of that disc, J. S. Bach's *Vergnügte Ruh, Beliebte Seelenlust*, highlights the appeal of the mezzo's instrument perhaps better than any other recording she's made. Elsewhere, the piece has seemed a sedentary excursion into a remote liturgy; here it moves with the alacrity of a weary soul's inexorable progress toward redemption. The pulsing final aria, "Mir ekelt mehr zu leben," an understated apotheosis, finds a perfect foil in Kožená's exuberant singing — by turns breathy, straight-toned and vigorous.

"I was really very surprised by the success of *Lamento*," professes Kožená. "Because, while it was a lovely project and I had fun doing it, I thought, 'Oh, it is mainly unknown pieces, which people who are interested in unknown Baroque music will buy.' So you never know."

One quickly gets the impression that Kožená's incredulity over her success doesn't end with a single recording's reception but might apply to her entire career. Raised in Brno in the years leading up to the Velvet Revolution, which marked the nonviolent end to Communist rule in then Czechoslovakia, Kožená claims she was a "strange child," who repeated melodies from the television before she had even learned to speak. Her father, a mathematician, and her mother, a biologist, enrolled her in piano lessons and a children's choir, and she continued her studies in both when she entered the Brno Conservatoire at the age of fourteen.

"Gradually I had to decide what I was going to do," she says. "And singing won. I actually had quite a bit of stage fright when I was playing piano. Funnily enough, I was much more nervous than as a singer. But I think it was also luck in teachers. My piano teacher thought that the best way to make me play better was to

tell me that I was really bad. This was kind of common in our culture. We were always told, 'You are very bad.' And it was a way to encourage people to work more. But it didn't work for me. I probably needed to be praised more than that. So I lost a bit of my confidence. My singing teacher was the opposite, very encouraging."

The mezzo's connection with Baroque repertoire began when, while still in the conservatory, she met a lute player with whom she established an ensemble and began giving successful local concerts. In addition to bolstering her confidence and providing a means of making some money, it also made Kožená the quintessential student-artist at the exact moment of her country's Perestroika, stoking the flames of nascent revolution with Renaissance songs. "I was the one who made the revolution, because it was a students' revolution. I was sixteen, and I was in the middle of all these students, ringing with their keys," she proclaims, referring to the way protestors shook keys as a death knell for the Communist regime.

Still, Kožená admits that her time in pre-revolutionary



Two Met roles for Kožená: Dorabella in *Così fan Tutte*, 2005, above, and Varvara in *Káťa Kabanová*, 2004

Brno was not so hardscrabble as the travails her parents' generation was forced to endure. In fact, those expecting her to claim that her years spent under the waning Communist regime worked to the detriment of her latent artistry are likely to be surprised. "I grew up in a society which, of course, wasn't ideal. But we got a really good education. And, you know, the fact that everybody had the same thing meant nothing — we always had things to eat and things to wear. I never suffered as a child, from anything. That there were no

rich people, and no poor people ... your *talent* was the thing that mattered. We really didn't have to think, 'Oh, maybe it would be better if I did that or this.' That didn't exist. Which I actually found not so bad, because you could really concentrate, and you didn't have to be distracted by so many different things."

Kožená went on to win several national Czech prizes and graduate from Bratislava's College of Performing Arts in 1995. A year-long stint as a fest artist at the Vienna Volksoper followed, an experience she refers to as "a good life lesson" that "wasn't really good for my voice." Even at that point in her career, though, Kožená had already begun getting offers that were "much more interesting than to sing Sandman in *Hänsel und Gretel*."

Minkowski first met Kožená while conducting her as Un Plaisir for his 1999 recording of Gluck's *Armide*. He has since paced her first Mélisande in Leipzig, as well as her first Idamante at Flanders Opera. He recalls their initial meeting clearly: "When she arrived, she was like a real Czech caricature — a very sweet young girl, but very shy, hermetic. She had an incredible haircut that made her look like Heidi, or a very beautiful Czech peasant. We were all a bit charmed and impressed by this creature," he says. "After presenting herself, Magdalena opened her mouth to sing, and it was like a fountain of harmonics — an incredibly pure and full sound. It was clear that something was going to happen with this voice."

Dorabella at Salzburg's 2004 Easter Festival, with Barbara Bonney (Despina) and Cecilia Bartoli (Fiordiligi), right; as Idamante to Philip Langridge's *Idomeneo* at Glyndebourne, 2003, below



For her part, Kožená seems acutely aware of the pitfalls that await attractive young singers at the beginning of their careers; she looks back at her early successes and trials with a pragmatism that makes plain her commitment to her craft. “I think there was this point where people stopped [taking] me as a young artist, and they actually took me seriously,” she says. “But what was a little bit difficult was my connection to Deutsche Grammophon and the way I was presented at the beginning. It was the period when the company thought, ‘If there is going to be a pretty picture on the cover, then it is going to attract people.’ Maybe it did attract some people, but for serious people or for critics, it was a bad sign. Because [it appeared as if] they just took such a young person, who is not actually ready for the job, because of how she looks like in a picture.” Kožená is equally canny about defying the facile labels applied to her early career: “At the beginning, I was very much considered to be a Baroque singer. There was a point where I didn’t like it anymore, because everybody put me in the box. The truth is, though, I will always come back to that, even though, of course, I do other things.”

Today, Kožená lives in Berlin, where Rattle — who declined to be interviewed for this article — leads the Berlin Philharmonic, and where the two are raising their two-year-old son, Jonas. Kožená obviously relishes the opportunity the city affords to raise her high-profile family marginally out of the public eye. “I

never imagined that I would be living in Germany,” she says, “but Berlin is a very special place. It’s extremely cosmopolitan. It’s very open-minded. I like that there is a lot of space. I think after the Wall came down, everybody from Germany thought that everyone would move to Berlin, and they didn’t. Even though it is a huge city, there is a lot of green and a lot of space to breathe.”

Space to breathe is a commodity Kožená and Rattle — who met when he conducted her in a Glyndebourne *Idomeneo* — have rarely been granted. In 2004, when it was revealed that the two had begun living together after leaving their spouses, a frenzy erupted in the U.K. press. “Knight at the Opera Finally Takes Centre Stage with his Czech Mate,” read one headline from *The Scotsman*. “Boring” is how Kožená now describes the tumult, which included paparazzi stalking the couple as they took walks in the park. “I thought that this happens to David Beckham and Madonna — I would never imagine that it could happen to someone who sings classical music. There’s no word for it, basically. It was very unpleasant, but it didn’t last that long.”

Kožená seems relatively unfazed by turmoil that might send other singers into hiding. But the experience of watching her personal life laid bare, along with becoming a mother, seems to have galvanized her artistic confidence. Her ability to stand onstage and affect an audience in extraordinary ways with her voice seems, now more than ever, to emanate from the mindset of an impetuous student revolutionary, well aware of her capacity to dramatically change the world in which she lives.

“I have to say, I kind of had a quite easy journey, because I didn’t have any main problems. Some singers, they come and they have the wrong teacher, and then they have to spend two years to change their technique. Or some people really just have a very slow and difficult development, and they manage to be great. Somehow, things went very easy for me,” she says, with no false modesty. “I was very lucky that I could kind of choose and was doing things which were wonderful for me. It is a certain psychological pressure if you go onstage and feel that you have to prove something. But I think that in the last two years, there was a kind of a change. It is a mixture of me probably getting better and people realizing that I am ten years already singing — that I am probably not going to go home tomorrow.” □