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Chanson Triste

Sondra Radvanovsky, who sings Leonora in the Met's new *Trovatore*, has become that rare thing - a true Verdi soprano. So why isn't her star shining brighter? ADAM WASSERMAN reports.



Photographed by Dario Acosta in New York

Makeup and hair by Affan Malik

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In a vocal category as sparsely populated as that of the legitimate Verdi soprano, it probably amounts to both a blessing and a curse that Sondra Radvanovsky doesn't sound like anyone but herself. Her instrument, young by most standards, has the capacity to enthrall an audience with its cool precision, and an expressive vibrato that lends it thrust, along with a poignant, near sob-like quality; the volume of her voice comes across as both discreet and more than adequate, and the drama that she imparts to roles tends to feel less like a hammer over the head than like a gradual whittling away of a listener's emotional mettle. Yet, either because of repertoire or timbre, audience expectation inevitably leads to comparisons with the untouchable divas of yesteryear - voices that haven't been seen or heard on the opera stage in some time. In addition to the garden-variety challenges of a career in opera, Radvanovsky, at thirty-nine, seems obliged to take on the Sisyphean feat of

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competing with audiences' burnished memories of great singers of the past. The pressure alone is enough to make an old-fashioned diva shed a few tears.

Radvanovsky, though, has no intention of crying in her drink. Meeting me for lunch on a crisp autumn day near Lincoln Center, the soprano demurs when offered a glass of wine by our waiter: "Today's a working day," she says, half jokingly. She has just stepped off a morning flight from Toronto, where she and her husband/business manager, Duncan Lear, have for the past eight years made their home on Lake Ontario. Radvanovsky says she enjoys the area's relative quiet and seclusion - luxuries decidedly absent from her hectic fall schedule, which includes trips to and from Washington, D.C., for rehearsals of *Lucrezia Borgia* (sharing performances of the title role with Renée Fleming); preparations for "Sola, perduta, abbandonata" at the Richard Tucker Music Foundation gala concert; and meetings with her teacher and coach to work on new repertoire.

Over the past decade, Radvanovsky has established herself as one of the most affecting Verdi sopranos on the Met's roster, in roles that have included a pair of summer-concert Violettas in 2001; Luisa Miller, also in 2001; Elena in *I Vespri Siciliani* and Elisabetta di Valois during the 2004-05 season; and *Ernani's* Elvira last season. This month, audiences can witness her Leonora in the Met premiere of David McVicar's foreboding, Goya-inspired production of *Il Trovatore*, which - like the soprano herself - hails from Chicago. The performances will mark the third Met production of Verdi's knotty masterpiece in which Radvanovsky will take on the heroine (she sang her first Leonora onstage at the Met in 1999) and, somewhat surprisingly, the first new Verdi production she will essay with the company. Yet for all the excitement surrounding the high-profile staging, there's an unmistakable touch of sadness in her voice when the soprano, trying to put on a good face, conspicuously pronounces this Leonora as her "farewell to the Met." At the time of our meeting, Radvanovsky - a winner of the Met's National Council Auditions in 1995 and a graduate of the Lindemann Young Artist Development program - has no pending offers from the company.

This is not to say that the soprano intends to perform this Leonora as anything approaching a placid swan song. Radvanovsky feels that McVicar's unsettling production simply does not allow for the type of park-and-bark performance aesthetic endemic to so many forgettable stagings of the opera. "I have to say, of the hundreds of shows of *Trovatore* that I've done, this by far for me has been the best production, because it keeps the action moving," she says. "Oftentimes in *Trovatore* you have these huge breaks, because you change scenes so drastically - you go from the castle to the anvil chorus - but this is on a rotating stage, so the action keeps going, and that makes it more real." Radvanovsky's praise for McVicar's conception of the opera goes beyond mere *mise en scène*. "I think it's the first production that really seemed to stitch all the characters together in a way in that you can see how they related to each other. This staging really makes sense. And the Count in this production [sung at the Met by Dmitri Hvorostovsky] is really very visceral. I wouldn't say it's a rape scene, but we get down and dirty."

Asked about working with Radvanovsky during the production's Chicago run, Dolora Zajick, who reprises her inimitable Azucena in the Met performances, observes, "The great thing about working with Sondra is that she has such a fine attention to artistic detail and to Verdian craft. That's not so easy to find in this business. There are a lot of people that have a nice presence, but they are not really accurate musically, or they are accurate musically, but they don't really have a nice presence. Because she's so good at what she does, it's going to create an interesting foil for my character. She is never generalized - she doesn't have this meandering way. When she does a character, there is no question what she has in mind."



Suor Angelica at Los Angeles Opera, 2008

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Suor Angelica at Los Angeles Opera, 2008

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Leonora in LAO's Il Trovatore, 2004

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Leonora in LAO's *Il Trovatore*, 2004

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Roxane in Alfano's *Cyrano de Bergerac* at the Met, 2005
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Radvanovsky's family relocated from Chicago to Richmond, Indiana, when she was eleven. The voice lessons that she began to take around that time - inspired by a televised performance of *Tosca* starring Plácido Domingo - introduced her to straightforward art songs and little Vaccai vocalises. She arrived in Indiana as "a little girl with a big voice" and says she never seemed to find her place. She enrolled at the University of Southern California as a mezzo and eventually ended up studying in Santa Barbara with French baritone Martial Singher. She had been singing Mozart arias, but she recalls that Singher presented her with a recording of Leontyne Price and said, "I think you're going to be a Verdi soprano." She sang her first full opera role - Mimì, back in Richmond, Indiana - at the age of twenty-one and remembers being asked to sing softer, as she was drowning out the orchestra.

In addition to voice, Radvanovsky studied theater at UCLA. While Verdi revivals may not always have put her dramatic credentials on display, it's clear that she's embraced the chance to work with a director on the order of David McVicar as something of a regenerative experience. "He's out there, but in a good way," she says of the exacting, at times difficult McVicar, "because he really pushes you as the artist to think deeper about the characters. He wanted to bring out the younger, edgier side of Leonora, which I've always felt she has. She's this impulsive, skittish kind of girl who is in love for the first time. And she's a little crazy, too, so that adds another twist to it. He really prodded me with 'Why don't you try this?' or 'What did you think of that?' 'Does that work for you?' 'You are not Sondra playing Leonora - you *are* Leonora.' We would just sit and talk about it, and oftentimes he would say, 'You have such great instincts, but show me. Do it!'"

Having started studying *Trovatore* in her mid-twenties, she finds the role does not require her to concentrate on technique during a performance. "There were a few people who said, 'I don't think she's ready for that yet.' Being very young and sophomore, I said, 'Why not?' Knock on wood, it just really turned out to be right for me," Radvanovsky recalls. Despite being weaned on a steady diet of Callas, Price, Ponselle and Muzio during her career's nascence, the soprano says she's never tried to sing Leonora in anything but her own voice. "Renata Scotto and I have worked on it. Diana Soviero [her current teacher] and I have worked on it. And Maestro Levine worked on it with me. It's so ingrained in my head. It's the fallback role for me."



As Leonora in David McVicar's *Il Trovatore* staging in Chicago, with Walter Fraccaro (Manrico)
© Dan Rest/Lyric Opera of Chicago 2009

While this production, and the time spent working with McVicar, clearly amounts to something of a benchmark in her career, Radvanovsky reserves her most effusive praise for another recent colleague - William Friedkin, the Oscar-winning director of her recent role debut as Suor Angelica in Los Angeles Opera's *Il Trittico*. Her performances last fall had local and international critics gushing superlatives, and Radvanovsky seems cognizant of her artistic success in that production as well as the implications it may hold for the larger trajectory of her career. "Bill allowed me to try new things and find a route, and to take away all the operatic gestures, the operatic-ness of it, and made it more of a theatrical evening," says Radvanovsky. "For me it was a pivotal point, because it changed the way I looked at opera. Even if the stage is huge, the stillness the draws people in to you. Which is very theatrical. I don't know why all these years I've never thought about it that way."

The professional affection proves to be mutual, as Friedkin immediately likens the soprano's working methods to that of "the best actors" that he's encountered in any medium. "Because verismo and Puccini operas are so redolent of everyday speech, I tried to have her keep it as real as possible and not overact - not push any gestures," he says. "There was no need to. I felt that her voice was so beautiful that it would carry this piece, and she had to do very little to emphasize emotion. She just had to believe it inside, and we found certain things that she could relate to in her own life that I would refer to from time to time, very quietly, in rehearsal." Radvanovsky recalls the experience: "Bill and I had discussed how I had found my father dead of a massive heart attack when I was seventeen years old - the day before I started my senior year in high school. In rehearsals, he just leaned over to me and whispered - no one else could hear it - 'Think of your father.' He just knew how to push all those buttons."



Elvira to Marcello Giordani's *Ernani* at the Met in 2008

On the outside, Radvanovsky is all toothy smile and good cheer, yet there seems to be an underlying melancholy about the soprano - an inchoate mix of professional disappointment, personal tragedy and maybe even travel-induced fatigue that at her best moments can seem to endow her characterizations with a poignant vulnerability and at other times might make her seem out of place and coolly disconnected onstage. Indeed, the impression comes into focus as Radvanovsky speaks about the repertoire she has specialized in. "I like arias that are kind of sad. 'D'amor sull'ali rosee,' the 'Song to the Moon,' the *morendo*, the *morbido* kind of arias - not the 'Di tale amor che dirsi' happy stuff," she says. "I don't like singing happy stuff. I'm *not* funny. I'm a very happy person in life, but I don't like being happy onstage," she continues. "I have had a lot of great sadness in my life, and maybe that's my outlet of dealing with [it], by airing all of that onstage."



For all her training and precision, Radvanovsky still comes across as an artist who fundamentally relies on instinct while onstage - on the need to find herself part of a meticulously controlled emotional environment in which her performances can thrive. One can't help but wonder whether the emotional and aesthetic prerequisites with which Radvanovsky seems to have approached her art may at times have been to her professional detriment. "*Fledermaus* was fun and all of that. We had a great cast here at the Met, but it's not my cup of tea," she says of the 2005 Met revival of the operetta, in which she seemed temperamentally, if not exactly vocally, out of place. "Sometimes I think I get all this sadness just welled up in me. And we always have to be, as performers, 'on' onstage - all the time. People don't want to see sadness. When they ask you how you're doing, we can't respond, 'Well, do you really want to know? How much time do you have?'"

Like any savvy working singer, Radvanovsky is quick to express admiration for her colleagues, but she seems particularly drawn to singers who utilize an economy of gesture in service to dramatic expression. Chief among them is Italian bass Ferruccio Furlanetto, with whom Radvanovsky performed in the Met's *Ernani* revival last spring, as well as a staging of the opera in Trieste in November 2007, a run of *Don Carlo* at San Diego Opera in 2004 and Robert Lepage's production of *La Damnation de Faust* at the Paris Opera in 2001. "You can't help but watch him onstage," she says of Furlanetto. "He's so in the groove. Every gesture that he does, there's a meaning to it. When I did the *Don Carlo*, I was literally afraid when I was onstage with his King Philip in the chamber scene, because I didn't know what he was going to do. Every night it was different. It was exciting, and the look of rage in his eyes - I was like 'Okay, take it down a notch.'" It was in the Act IV scene in Philip's study in one of those performances that Radvanovsky fractured her arm onstage when Furlanetto inadvertently stepped on her dress's train as he threw her to the ground. "I went up and then I went down - right on my outstretched arm. I heard it go crack, and everyone in the audience took this collective gasp," she says. "I had to finish the scene, and I was crying. Ferruccio walked offstage and he said, 'Sondra, that was just so moving, your singing.' And I said, 'My arm is broken!'" Radvanovsky went on to finish the performance.

The soprano also counts her frequent colleague Plácido Domingo as a particular champion of her career. The tenor personally appealed to Radvanovsky to take on the role of Roxane opposite his tragic Cyrano for a new staging of Franco Alfano's little-known opera. That Francesca Zambello production, the first new Met staging of Radvanovsky's career, played at the house during the 2004-05 and 2005-06 seasons and has since traveled to Covent Garden, La Scala and Valencia, with Radvanovsky's heroine in tow. Domingo also recruited her to sing Suor Angelica in Los Angeles and conducted *Lucrezia Borgia*. But at the mention of his name, Radvanovsky immediately harks back to her first memory of the eternally youthful tenor - the public-television broadcast of *Tosca* that she witnessed at the age of eleven, which first piqued her interest in opera. "I pointed to the screen, and I said to my mom, 'I want to do that.' She said, 'Right, honey. That's good. Go eat your Cheerios. We started rehearsals for *Cyrano* on my thirty-fifth birthday,'" says Radvanovsky. "Plácido singing happy birthday to you - it doesn't get much better than that. That was the day that I told him the story about seeing him on TV when I was eleven, and telling my mom that I wanted to sing with him one day. And, of course, I started crying ... and it was just lovely." □

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