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Nina Stemme

ADAM WASSERMAN celebrates the remarkable Swedish soprano, whose abundant talents have shone a bright light into the dramatic repertoire and earned her an OPERA NEWS Award.



Photographed in New York by James Salzano
Makeup and hair by Affan Malik / Gown by Per Backjanis
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More than two centuries after the births of Verdi and Wagner and 150 years after the birth of Richard Strauss, the towering soprano voice of Nina Stemme has reaffirmed not only that opera's most dramatic heroines can be sung by a mortal but that they can be presented with a beauty, technical security and dramatic nuance that we might not heretofore have imagined. Stemme's voice harkens back to a golden age of opera while simultaneously proclaiming her as a dramatic soprano built for the twenty-first century; if today's audiences are not used to hearing opera's greatest heroines sung with such an uncanny combination of grace and nerve, sumptuousness and steel, it's probably because Stemme is a singing actress such as we've seldom seen or heard before.



Listen to the Marek Janowski–Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra recording of her rightly celebrated *Isolde* — a role that Met audiences are still waiting to hear live. Stemme's soprano emerges in one moment as a molten stream, wielded with laser-like focus and preternatural volume; later, the same live performance shows off her soprano as a gleaming column of sound, capable of evincing a youthful sparkle in the upper register and transcendental pianissimos that come through loud and clear over full orchestral forces. The recording attests that Stemme's extraordinary voice somehow finds its most perfect expression in repertoire that has often been diminished by musical compromises and technical negotiations. Hers is not an instrument that grapples with a composer's demands but one that manifests the creator's intentions with absolute transparency.

Witness the soprano's peerless *Walküre* Brünnhilde, which has been cheered by audiences in San Francisco, Milan, Paris, Vienna and London. Preserved on a DVD documenting Guy Cassiers's La Scala production, Stemme deploys her otherworldly instrument fearlessly. Her first "Hojotoho"s pierce the orchestral wall and the onstage gloom like a shaft of light streaming into a dark room. And her assumption of the role only increases in impact as the evening proceeds. Her Act III plea to Wotan that she may know him better than he knows himself, "Der diese Liebe mir ins Herz gehaucht," emerges as one of the most astounding moments of Wagnerian vocalism I'm ever likely to experience. The line's perfect legato begins in the voice of a wounded child, then gradually crescendoes into that of a knowing, powerful woman, a goddess who has seen enough to recognize the human faults in her own parent. Perhaps more than any other soprano who has taken on the role in recent memory, Stemme's Valkyrie is affecting because we watch her grow up before our very eyes.

Stemme's feral, genuinely shocking *Salome* manages the exact opposite effect, although with equally thrilling results. Heard in a 2012 concert performance at Carnegie Hall with the Cleveland Orchestra, the soprano's interpretation of Strauss's siren is a bit like watching Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*: one moment she's girlish and coy, the next she's spewing demonic rage. Listen to Stemme's recording of the opera's climax — made with Antonio Pappano and the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House — and note how she makes a perverse mini-*Liebestod* out of the line "Warum sind sie geschlossen? Öffne doch die Augen!" ("Why are they closed? Open the eyes!"). In Stemme's portrayal, it sounds as if Strauss's wish that his heroine be sung by a sixteen-year-old princess with the voice of an *Isolde* had actually been granted.

At the other end of the temperamental spectrum is the soprano's appealingly gawky *Minnie*, as seen in Christof Loy's 2012 staging of *La Fanciulla del West* for the Royal Swedish Opera. Equal parts heart-on-sleeve disappointment and brawling barmaid, Stemme's spaghetti-western heroine seems as perfect a verismo characterization as one can hope to encounter in the opera house today — the musical directive *con fuoco* brought to life onstage. Her gorgeously dusky "Laggiù nel Soledad" — the musical essence of

a desert sunset — seems suffused with Minnie's regret that life will likely never compare to nostalgia. Anyone who has been attentive to the trajectory of Stemme's career should not be surprised by the emotional specificity and honesty that have always marked her characterizations. Yet maybe because audiences have been so enraptured by the brilliance of her voice, some remain oblivious to her natural gifts as an actress. Pop the DVD chronicling her heartbreaking 2005 Barcelona performance of *Jenîfa* into your laptop, and watch as she sheds honest-to-god tears during her prayer to the Virgin Mary. It's a performance that gives new breadth to the term "dramatic soprano."

One can't help wondering where else Stemme might want to go, what challenges remain for a singer of apparently limitless gifts. "Funnily enough, the most dramatic parts are the easiest for me. If I know them and I perform them with the right emotions, it isn't such a strain on my voice," Stemme told OPERA NEWS when she appeared on the cover of its eleventh annual Diva Issue in November 2012. "I think maybe it's something in the Swedish mentality. We're well grounded in our relationship to nature and in our ability to relax and not take in the stress of city life. When you're grounded, you can tackle these extremely demanding parts without destroying yourself. If you develop tension, then it goes to your voice." Fortunately for us, hearing Stemme conquer the most daunting roles in opera continues to sound like the most natural thing in the world. ■

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