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Joyce DiDonato
QUEEN OF OPERA

The brilliant mezzo squares up to music's most terrifying monarchs on a triumphant new recording

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From Ancient Egypt to Tudor England, history's most capricious yet captivating royal heroines are the perfect challenge for Joyce DiDonato, opera's ruling mezzo-soprano, says *Neil Fisher*

Exactly how do you call someone a vile bastard? Joyce DiDonato is still thinking about the best way to deliver one of opera's most infamous put-downs – spat out by the heroine of Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* (Mary Stuart) in her great confrontation with Queen Elizabeth I – when we meet in the American mezzo-soprano's hotel in London's West End. As the china clinks and the Earl Grey is poured, DiDonato warms to her theme. 'I could be a little dirty…' she suggests, conspiratorially, 'but Maria is a queen and she's rising to the occasion when she says that'. Regal hauteur, DiDonato decides, will prevail. At least until Mary Queen of Scots, as she must, loses her head entirely. ▶

FIT FOR A QUEEN: Joyce DiDonato appears in Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* at Houston Grand Opera

FELIX SANCHEZ/HOUSTON GRAND OPERA, GETTY

DIDONATO'S FIRST MARIA, which happened at Houston Grand Opera, is now behind her (she will next take the role at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in December). In Texas, the critics praised this particular queen's pride and not her pique. 'The subjugated Mary retaliates in DiDonato's masterly delivery with due deliberation,' approved the *Financial Times*. 'When Mary exclaims "Vil bastarda", you know it is her considered opinion.'

Considered she always is. Yet DiDonato is also unafraid to voice strident opinions about the issues that matter to her. Such as standing up for classical music in an America which, she fears, is being squeezed out along with all so-called 'high culture'. 'I'm starting to get a little bit tired of hearing people apologise for opera,' she says. 'I'm getting tired of people in power telling the public "well, you know, opera is really outdated so we have to work really hard to bring it into the modern age", or that we have to make it "more relevant". I don't know of any art form that is more relevant than opera. Because it talks about real emotions.'

On the surface, DiDonato's newest album, *Drama Queens*, another collaboration with the early music specialist Alan Curtis and the players of his ensemble Il Complesso Barocco, seems quite far from real emotions. Here is a pot-pourri of Baroque opera arias, loosely linked by the theme of regal heroines in history and myth. If these grand ladies and their grand utterances have anything in common, it's surely that the 17th- and 18th-century worlds they spring from – theatres devoted to the spectacular and the sublime – are as much about a flight from reality as a depiction of authentic people in authentic situations.

> **'At the end, we want you to come out completely drained'**

'But you'll see the whole spectrum of emotions here,' argues DiDonato. 'From love and abandonment to joy, through rage and betrayal, to seduction, to regret. At the end we want you to come out completely drained. That's what we want opera to do to us.' And it's a drain for the singer, too, she says. 'Baroque music is simply the most demanding. It demands such purity of approach. There's nowhere to hide in this music: if your pitch sags, or you smudge a *coloratura* run, then you are dead on arrival.'

A few months later I am permitted a short stay at the court of the drama queens. The disc is being recorded in an enormous 18th-century palace in the small town of Lonigo, midway between Verona and Vicenza. That's not just because DiDonato and Il Complesso Barocco can perform in a romantic and authentically Baroque setting, but because – rather more prosaically – part of the building is a charitable hostel in which all the performers can sleep, and be fed and watered, within a tight budget.

On the musical menu for my visit is a rarity: Porta's aria 'Madre diletto' from his 1738 opera *Ifigenia in Aulide*. Less regal harrumph than softly exquisite lament, the aria is the eponymous princess's farewell to her mother before death: 'in pace morirò' she intones, quietly ('at peace I will die') over gently wafting strings. Only the cicadas outside the window dare to intrude.

If the mezzo-soprano is in a frazzled mood – reportedly she was suffering from a cold the preceding week, delaying some of the sessions – it doesn't show. Except in her perfectionism. DiDonato is surprisingly forthright about finessing the orchestra's accompaniment as well as her own contributions, suggesting changes to the string articulation and phrasing which Curtis mildly accepts. At one point, the unseen producer almost apologetically requests that she redo part of the number – 'though it's almost nothing,' he adds. 'Almost nothing is everything,' she replies, and takes it from the top.

You will recognise a few of the women portrayed on *Drama Queens*, particularly the more fiery ones such as Handel's quintessential *femme fatales*, Cleopatra and Alcina, who are both represented. Although both parts are usually sung by sopranos, DiDonato believes she could sing the Egyptian queen on stage at Baroque pitch, and has considered the full role of Alcina in the theatre, too – 'though I would not ornament it the way sopranos do, but the way that it's written'.

The meat of *Drama Queens*, however, comes from lesser (or barely) known works – Porta's *Ifigenia* a good example – unearthed by Curtis, often after some detective work. He found the score for Orlandini's *Berenice*, for example, lying unloved in an archive of the library at Berkeley University in California. Orlandini, an Italian composer who wrote in the florid, Handelian style, was also a sometime London rival to George Frideric himself. 'Orlandini's Berenice is a spicy, virtuosic lady,' DiDonato observes. 'She's talking about revenge and about us feeling her power, with all these syncopations and off-beats, a lot of coloratura leaps – really quite aggressive.'

Another Queen of Egypt joins Cleo on *Drama Queens*: Orontea, the eponymous heroine of Antonio Cesti's 1656 opera *Orontea* – little-loved now, but one of the most performed operas of the 17th-century. It's a seduction aria with a difference, DiDonato explains, since the object of Orontea's affections, the young painter Alidoro, is asleep when she sings it to him. 'So it's very sensual. She calls upon the breezes, then she starts writing a letter to Alidoro, in which she pours out her feelings, calling herself his 'regina amante', a 'loving queen', and sings him back to sleep, not sure if she will ever see him again. ▶

ROYAL FLUSH

A quick guide to five monarchs in DiDonato's regal coterie

Semiramide (Ninth century BC)
Take a stroll around the great antiquities of Iran, and you'll see that many of them are dedicated to 'Semiramis'. Kept alive as a baby by doves and brought up by a shepherd, Semiramis eventually married King Ninas and, following his death in battle, went on to conquer most of Asia and parts of Africa.

Cleopatra (c69-30 BC)
A highly intelligent woman, Cleopatra ruled Egypt from 51 BC. Two years later Egypt became involved in the war between Julius Caesar and Pompey, and Cleopatra and Caesar became lovers. But it is the later affair – with Mark Anthony – for which she is best known. After a defeat in 30 BC the couple both took their own lives.

Octavia (39-62 AD)
Born in Rome, Claudia Octavia eventually married Nero, who hated her and tried to kill her. He engaged in numerous affairs too, one of which was with Poppaea whom he later married. Octavia was banished to the island of Pandateria where, after her veins were slit, she was suffocated in a vapour bath and decapitated.

Fredegund (c550-97 AD)
Starting out as the servant of the wife of Merovingian Frankish king, Chilperic I, Fredegund eventually won the king's affections, but was cast aside when the king married Galswintha. Fredegund strangled her and succeeded her as queen. In 584 AD, when Chilperic was assassinated, Fredegund stole his fortune and hid in Paris's Notre Dame.

Mary Stuart (1542-87)
Born in West Lothian, Mary became Queen of Scots when she was six days old and was a political pawn throughout her life. She's most famous as the focus for numerous Catholic plots against Elizabeth I, including the Babington plot to assassinate the English monarch, for which she was eventually executed.

LEADING LADIES: (left) Mary Queen of Scots championed the Catholic cause; (above, middle) Fredegund sought King Chilperic I's affection

ROLE OF HONOUR: the mezzo takes centre stage in Massenet's *Cendrillon* at the Royal Opera House in 2011

ROH/BILL COOPER 2011

And if Alan and I can do this correctly, then you should be able to close your eyes, listen to this aria and you will be in this bedroom with just a little bit of candlelight.'

Is the move into musicological archaeology a sign that DiDonato is running out of star mezzo repertory and having to delve into some dusty corners? 'Actually, the opposite is true. I feel like there's too much repertoire and there's not enough time to do what I would like to do. There was a string of years where I just did debut after debut and I did these roles just once. So I've been revisiting them: *Cendrillon* [Massenet's *Cinderella*, which DiDonato performed at the Royal Opera House in summer 2011], Octavian [from *Der Rosenkavalier*], Sister Helen in Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*. And I'll be doing Sesto in *La clemenza di Tito* and Bellini's Romeo [in *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*] again.'

A formal mezzo/soprano distinction is of less interest to DiDonato. After all, none of the singers who created the roles in *Drama Queens* would have acknowledged a distinction in the two voice types. Nor has DiDonato's extensive

'I love doing new work: the public don't know what's coming next'

work in the *bel canto* repertoire drawn a vocal line between the roles traditionally allocated to mezzos and those given to sopranos. Instead she has dipped freely into the pool of roles created by those two astonishing 19th-century divas, Isabella Colbran and Maria Malibran: the former was the first Elena in Rossini's *La donna del lago* (DiDonato's portrayal comes to Covent Garden next year); the latter was Donizetti's first Maria Stuarda. Were they sopranos with comfortable low registers or mezzos with extensions?

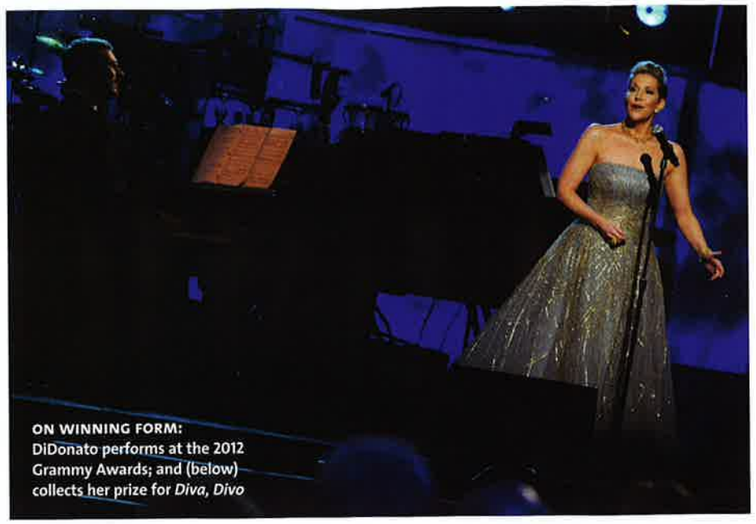
'It's a moot point,' says DiDonato, flatly. 'My criteria for looking at a role is "can I sing it, can I do it justice?", and if I could list you another ten people who I'd rather hear sing it today, then there's other things I can do. I want to bring my voice to roles where I think I have something special to offer – something that hasn't been heard a million times over.'

Spontaneity and surprise is a key weapon in DiDonato's armoury, whether it's her on-stage presence or her ever-inventive choices on record. 'Well, that's one of the ghosts we're up against in the opera world – that people think they know how it goes, so they stop listening. It's one of the reasons I love doing new work: the public has to listen because they don't know what's coming next. You get the same energy in *bel canto* and Baroque roles, too, because with variations and ornamentation, the public will say "Oh, we didn't expect that", so they have to listen.'

Expect Maria Stuarda to be joined by more *bel canto* heroines in the future. Most notably, DiDonato has her eye on another fearsome Colbran role, and a drama queen really without equal in opera: Rossini's *Semiramide*, one of Joan Sutherland's signature roles (and another one originally created by Colbran). 'That's next on my radar screen. Yes, it's a big sing, but it's Rossini's masterpiece, and it would seem a logical conclusion to what I've been doing.' Has any mezzo in the modern age gone near it? 'I can't think of one. But I just looked at the score and singing through it my voice knew where to go automatically.' Tantalisingly, DiDonato is also open to considering Bellini's Amina (*La sonnambula*) and Elvira (*I puritani*) in the mezzo-ish versions that were performed by Malibran.

But no lyric mezzo, however magpie like she roams around the repertory, can avoid being asked a question about a certain Spanish gypsy with castanets. On the surface it would seem as if DiDonato's fiery temperament, vocal flexibility and warm, not chesty, tone would be a good fit for Bizet's Carmen. 'I'm not saying no,' she concedes. 'And I may give myself that gift, just to try it out, if the right director or conductor came along. But vocally I'm so intrigued by other things that show off my voice and play to my strengths in a better way.'

DiDonato is much more excited about the next new role that is being created for her, by the *Dead Man Walking* composer Jake Heggie. Well, it's partly new and partly old. In Terrence McNally's libretto for Dallas Opera's forthcoming *Great Scott*, DiDonato will play ▶



ON WINNING FORM: DiDonato performs at the 2012 Grammy Awards; and (below) collects her prize for *Diva, Divo*

an opera singer, Arden Scott, who has come back to her home town to give a performance of an (invented) Donizetti opera, with the preposterous title of *Rosa Dolorosa, Figlia di Pompeii*. 'So, a bit like *Ariadne auf Naxos*: you've got the behind-the-scenes part and the actual opera happening. And Terrence tells me I'll have not one, but two mad scenes, one backstage and one in the opera. It's a piece that celebrates opera but also looks at what it is to come home – what's the mask we put on, who are we really?'

It's a good time for DiDonato to be asking those questions of herself, too. Born Joyce Flaherty (she has kept her surname from her first marriage to Alex DiDonato), she grew up in a quiet suburb of Kansas City as one of seven brothers and sisters. Her initial career ambitions did not look beyond becoming a music teacher in a high school, just as her father had led a choir in which the young Joyce had sung as a girl. Having taken the plunge into opera, she promptly hit a vocal crisis during her time as an apprentice at Houston Opera. 'My teacher said you won't be singing after five years because you're singing on youth and muscle.' Ten years later, after effectively relearning everything about technique, DiDonato had worked herself to the top of the opera tree.

She also found time to meet and marry her second husband, the Italian conductor Leonardo Vordoni. Delightfully, they tied the knot at the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas during a run of *Cendrillon* in Santa Fe – 'and I literally got married on a gondola'. But if that was a glamorous escapade, she scoops even more showbiz points for her star turn at this year's Grammy Awards in Los Angeles. DiDonato did not only win a gong (for her beguiling *Diva, Divo* album) but also became the first classical vocalist to perform at the ceremony alongside America's pop music royalty.

So DiDonato is in many senses not in Kansas any more. 'It is a different world,' she admits, 'and I think my "home team" has had a learning curve, just as I have.' Meaning?

> 'I think my "home team" has had a learning curve, just as I have'

'I grew up in a very democratic household. There was no prejudice against minorities of any kind. But there was this unspoken misunderstanding about people with money, people that were successful. Then I enter a world that from the outside is all luxury, glamour, red carpet treatment and my family didn't really understand that that is a very small part of what I do.'

So what really happens when the international diva jets back home? 'Now things have calmed down. Enough time has passed and they just see me as Joyce. It's come to a really good place that I can really share what I'm doing with them.' And *Joyce DiDonato – Drama Queen* remains safely in the CD rack. ■

Joyce DiDonato's disc 'Drama Queens' is released on Virgin Classics on 5 November

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DIDONATO ON DISC

The best of the mezzo so far...

Cendrillon (DVD) (2011)
Virgin Classics 602 5099
£19.99
A neglected Massenet bauble comes up sparkling at Covent Garden as DiDonato plays Cinders to Alice Coote's sensational Prince Charming, recorded during last summer's performances of Laurent Pelly's witty staging.

Diva, Divo (2011)
Virgin Classics 641 9860
£13.99
Bravura gender-swapping as DiDonato flits between male and female characters, either drawn from within the same opera or exploring the same character as depicted in different ones. Less confusing than it sounds.

Colbran, the Muse (2010)
Virgin Classics 694 5790
£13.99
DiDonato immerses herself in some of Rossini's most treacherous music and emerges in triumph, in music from *Armida, Otello, La donna del lago* and more.

Alcina (2009)
DG Archiv 477 7374 ***£29.99***
It's casting against type, but in the familiar company of Alan Curtis and Il Complesso Barocco, DiDonato excels as the vengeful but vulnerable sorceress in one of Handel's finest operas.

The Deepest Desire (2006)
Eloquentia 3760107400048
£13.99
A more intimate side to the mezzo's musical personality is showcased in this programme of American song; Copland's masterful Emily Dickinson settings are the glowing highlight.