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Dizzy heights

Donna Leon on her friend Joyce DiDonato

Joyce DiDonato is unique among opera singers, not only for the beauty of her voice and her flawless technique, but for the fact that she has a social conscience. That's right, an opera singer with a social conscience. It's rather like hearing that a fashion designer is a committed ecologist, isn't it, save that Vivienne Westwood surely is.

Many people have somehow come to believe that the demands of a successful singing career, or perhaps the rarified air opera singers breathe, anesthetizes them from feeling concern about the fate of their fellow humans or from having any desire to improve the lives of the unfortunate. But why? After all, singers grew up in and live in the same world we do and see what we do, they read the newspaper, are linked to the world by social media, and so must be aware that there are haves and have nots and that social inequality flourishes. Yet we seldom read of their involvement in causes aimed at the relief of suffering and injustice.

We've known one another for a long time, Joyce and I, both of us raised, though more than a generation apart, in middle class families in a country that is now faced with not only the disappearance of the North Atlantic Right Whale but with the disappear-

ance of the middle class. Joyce grew up in Kansas, right smack in the middle of the country, raised in a large family and with the idea that one had the obligation to lead a decent life, work hard, and try to make the world a bit better while passing through it.

Then along came singing, and that led to success, and that led to fame, but the stuff about making the world better stayed along for the ride up to the dizzy heights of opera diva-dom. Many people reinvent themselves when they become famous, but Joyce has not forgotten, nor denied, Prairie Village, Kansas, as her birthplace, nor that she sang in the church choir and worked as a waitress while studying.

Recently she told me about one project she's involved with that aims at helping single, teen-aged mothers bond with their infants. Many of these girls, it turns out, are themselves the children of single, teen-aged mothers and received little or no affection from their mothers while they were growing up. What we believe to be the natural gushes of maternal love, it would seem, are not spontaneous or natural in mothers but are behavior patterns passed on from one generation to the next. But if your mommy didn't spend hours hugging and cuddling you, saying "goo goo goo," and letting you know from her every contact, glance, and word that



Joyce DiDonato
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you were the most precious thing in the world, you are not likely to think of doing those things with your own baby. It's not nice, but it's true. What we believe to be the fierce natural bond between mother and infant is not in our genes but in our experiences.

A program in New York is aimed at helping young mothers fashion this bond with their infants by means of music. Participants were asked to write the text and hum or sing the tune of a lullaby for their baby. Those whose lullabies showed the most musical promise were then able to work with a composer, who transformed their hummed or whistled or sung lullabies into a legible musical score. The completed lullabies were given to a jury of musicians, who selected the three best.

And here comes Joyce, animated by her social conscience, who chose to sing the three winning lullabies at her Carnegie Hall concert. AT HER CARNEGIE HALL CONCERT, I repeat, just in case anyone isn't paying attention.

At her request, the three teenaged composers were in the audience at the concert, and after she sang the lullabies, Joyce told the audience that the three composers were present in the audience and asked them to stand up and take a bow. The audience praised their talent with long and enthusiastic applause.

One of the composers had arrived accompanied by a guard, wearing the uniform of Riker's Island Prison, where she was incarcerated for a crime Joyce did not ask about. She was allowed to change into a dress to hear the concert. Afterwards, backstage, Joyce asked the three mothers if they found it exciting to be at Carnegie Hall, a place perhaps as alien to them as the Taj Mahal. The prisoner answered, "Anyplace is exciting. This is the first time in my life I've been out of Harlem."

The concert was not the first time Joyce was involved in the lives of the incarcerated. In 2009, The

Houston Opera presented Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, an opera based on the book by Sister Helen Prejean, with Joyce singing the role of the nun who befriended convicted murderer Joseph de Rocher and stayed with him until his execution, assuring him that hers would be the "face of love" he would see as he died.

For Joyce, this was not just a role sung in an opera, but a powerful and moving expression of her deep opposition to capital punishment, a belief she has expressed often and with great passion. She is equally fierce in her opposition to all forms of gender discrimination.

Recently she went to The Stonewall Inn, a New York gay bar where, in 1969, clients resisted violent police raids and, in the doing, gave birth to the gay rights movement. And there she sang Dido's Lament, an aria in which a person asks to be remembered after death. "If there's an intolerance or injustice being waged against people, we feel that. Because, in the end, we're all in this together," she told her audience. Way to go, Joyce.

Opera's about passion, isn't it, about the lives of the misunderstood and mistreated, about the weak who long for better things or who seek justice? It's about women and men who love or are loved by the wrong person, who do the wrong things and who make the wrong choices. So's life. The ability to understand that life's a rough place and that people are treated unjustly is a great asset for a person who is going to spend their life singing the roles of the people who are caught in these situations.

But it is also a necessary asset for a person who wants, somehow, to make life less rough for the unfortunate by doing something that will smooth the road for them. I see that desire put into action by my friend Joyce and praise her for it. She is as well – if I might finally get around to speaking of Joyce as the great artist she is – one of the finest and most moving singers I've heard in a lifetime of going to the opera.