



'How can we claim opera isn't political?'

Star mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato tells *Ben Lawrence* how working on a show about Death Row deepened her love for her art form

Considering that Joyce DiDonato is one of the world's most glamorous opera stars, I initially feel short-changed by the petite figure who sits opposite me in an overly bright meeting room in the bowels of the Royal Opera House. It's a crisp, cold day and she is hugging herself tightly in a white woollen polo neck, sharp-featured but unassuming. And then she opens her mouth, not to sing, alas, but to hold forth about the state of the world, her famous Kansas drawl only slightly softened by years of travelling. She's commanding and thoughtful, starry in the pizzazz of her proclamations but also un-diva like.

The conversation inevitably leads to talk about women in the arts. Abuse allegations are being aired on a regular basis, and DiDonato has been giving her role a lot of thought.

"In opera, the woman has always been celebrated, elevated and admired," says the 49-year-old mezzo-soprano. "We are always being given the white-glove treatment, given the last bow. I play astonishing women. Rossini's women are feminists. They are like, 'Honey, I am not taking any of that.' It's true that we don't have many women conductors or directors, but in the spotlight, where my life has been,

it is easy to lose your perspective a little bit."

However, DiDonato has not always been elevated and admired. Early on in her career, she was sent for a costume fitting when the male designer turned to a colleague and remarked in front of her: "What am I supposed to do with her?" DiDonato admits the inequity has preyed on her over the years. "We are the ones being photographed on the front of a newspaper talking about how much we weigh. When you are a size 14, an average-sized woman, everyone is talking about that. But no one is talking about your 500-pound male co-star."

Nevertheless, she's grateful for the relative progressiveness of the opera scene. "Look, a big woman can still be a big woman and be celebrated, and that doesn't happen in other industries." Of the wider world, she is scathing. "There is a sense that because you are three stone heavier, you have less worth, but we really need to start assessing who is judging whom and why. The man in a position of power has more value because he has a bigger pay cheque? Well, I am sorry, but he doesn't."

This idea of the individual worth of a human being lies at the heart of DiDonato's latest project, Jake Heggie's opera of *Dead Man Walking*.

The famous memoir of Sister Helen Prejean was previously turned into a 1995 film, starring Susan Sarandon, and deals with Prejean's fight to give



Joyce DiDonato: 'Now I understand prisoners, and that has changed the way I have walked on to the stage.' Above left, as Sister Helen

clemency to Matthew Poncet, a prisoner on *Death Row*. The opera premiered at San Francisco in 2000. DiDonato first performed the role of Sister Prejean in 2002 at New York City Opera and will reprise it in the UK premiere next week, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Previously performed all over the world, it's an extraordinary piece that gives emotional erudition to the debate surrounding capital punishment, and it made Heggie a major player in modern opera.

Although it's nearly two decades old, the themes of *Dead Man Walking* are still relevant, as DiDonato explains: "It may have first been performed before 9/11 but the question it asks, about what a life is worth, is still paramount now. Are Christians more valuable than Muslims or atheists? Are the whites more valuable than the browns? We say, 'Oh, he has an education. Look what he can

contribute. Whereas she's just an actress, what does she have to say?' How dare we elevate one person's life over another?"

DiDonato has met Sister Helen Prejean, whom she describes as "a heroine for all the right reasons".

"She walks the walk, you know. She is passionate and fierce, and of course people think that nuns are devoid of passion. But she takes down state governors on social media [Prejean has recently criticised New Mexico's attempts to try and reinstate the death penalty, for example] calling them to account and holding a mirror up to their actions."

You could argue that DiDonato, smart, impassioned, committed, also walks the walk. Since 2016, she has worked regularly with high-risk prisoners at Sing Sing prison in New York, where the story of one man, Joseph Wilson, touched her heart.

"He was straight out of central

casting," she explains. "A big African-American who was looking at the world through this lowered, suspicious gaze. He had written this duet, *Cotton Needs a Pickin'*, to sing with me. I heard it and it was the story of the murder he had committed."

A little under a year later, DiDonato returned to find Joseph Wilson transformed ("standing tall, the light was on inside of him") and about to embark on writing his first opera.

This tale of the power of music to transform lives is, of course, terribly touching, but isn't there a sense that this is all too little, too late?

"Jesus..." says DiDonato, appalled at the suggestion. "I understand that it's too late if you're looking from the victim's perspective. But you have to zoom out the lens a little and think about Joseph's life. Music has given him a path towards repentance, and that has given his daughter, who could have been on her way towards a similar

trajectory [as her father], a different spin. How could that be too late?"

She says that her experiences at Sing Sing have made her change her approach to singing Sister Prejean. "Now I understand prisoners, and that has changed the way I have walked onto the stage. Before I was like 'maybe we're a little old fashioned, maybe we're not really relevant'."

"But [meeting prisoners] made me walk out and say: 'I know the power of the medium, and I am going to facilitate every part of my being so that everyone in the audience feels it'."

Of course there is much hand-wringing, particularly in the UK, about the relevance of opera to modern society, and DiDonato is certain that this very anxiety, the idea that opera is somehow concerned with arcane ideas or sugary romance, is ridiculous.

"How can we pretend that opera is not political? It is the nature of the beast. It's Beethoven, Verdi. I mean, many of the operatic masterpieces were born out of political rebellion."

"At the moment [we meet when she is about to take on the title role in *Semiramide* at Covent Garden], I am playing a queen who made a misguided grab for political power and is forging political alliances in the Middle East. You can't say that isn't political."

If someone can bring out the political power of opera, it's Joyce DiDonato. She may have an extraordinary technical prowess that dazzles in her interpretation of earlier works in the repertoire such as Handel and Mozart, but she is also a phenomenal actress who is able to capture the subtlest of emotions within the often over-blown canvas of the art form.

She says the problem opera has in today's world is that people are suspicious of the need to express emotion.

"It starts to feel old-fashioned because society thinks it's too sentimental."

Old-fashioned to whom, I ask. She laughs drily. "Old-fashioned to those people who are on their phones checking their stock prices."

That unfortunate costume fitting aside, DiDonato's career has been one of unsurpassed achievement, including performances in all of the world's greatest opera houses and at the Grammys. She has had the odd wobble, telling me that she has performed in "three or four opera productions that were very bad" and that she "felt horrible taking the stage because the director had given up".

Now, though, she feels in control of her career, and her other insecurity, about competing against the great operatic ghosts of the past, has vanished.

"I used to feel a sense of competition. When I sang Cherubino [in *The Marriage of Figaro*], I used to think of saying to the audience, 'I am so sorry I am not Frederica von Stade, but I will do the best I can.' Now I feel like every role I take is a blank slate, I feel much freer."

And when Joyce DiDonato takes to the Barbican stage on Tuesday night in *Dead Man Walking*, you know that she will free the hearts and minds of the audience, too.

Dead Man Walking will be performed at the Barbican Hall on Tuesday Feb 20. Tickets: 020 7638 8891; barbican.org.uk