

www.operanow.co.uk

April 2022

# OperaNow

THE OPERA LOVER'S ESSENTIAL GUIDE

## JOYCE DIDONATO

A force of Nature

### Special focus on opera in the USA

- Women take charge in Florida, Houston and Seattle
- How America trains its young artists
- The wild, weird and wonderful US Fringe

#### PLUS

Ethel Smyth's *The Wreckers* – neglected masterpiece or white elephant?  
Sondra Radvanovsky's thrilling *Three Queens* in Naples

Live Reviews • Danielle De Niese • New Releases • Worldwide opera guide





# Zen and the art of the mezzo voice

By **Helena Matheopoulos**

Joyce DiDonato is more than just an opera singer. Her global recital tours, the most recent of which is *Eden*, have galvanised audiences into thinking differently about music, urging us to explore the deep spiritual connection between singing, the world around us, the challenges that face us, and the humanity within us



Joyce DiDonato is at the pinnacle of a glorious career that has won her global fame, bringing a thrilling sense of drama and an all-absorbing commitment both on the operatic stage and on the concert platform. She also devises original, innovative projects that combine many artistic disciplines, highlighting topics crucial to contemporary life. Through dedicated, relentless hard work, she has achieved total technical control over her astonishing mezzo voice.

I will never forget the first time I saw DiDonato perform: at the Barbican in March 2006, as Dejanira in Handel's *Hercules* with Les Arts Florissants under William Christie. The role is fiendish – mind-bogglingly difficult, featuring arias both with bravura coloratura and with long, arching legato lines. Her note-perfect, electrifying performance took the audience's breath away. It remains one of the most special defining moments in my long opera-going life.

DiDonato singles out this evening as one of her own defining moments in a performing life that includes nearly 40 roles, by Mozart, Bellini, Donizetti, Massenet, Berlioz, Janáček, Strauss and especially Rossini and Handel. Although her leading roles in *La cenerentola*, *l'Italiana in Algeri*, *Le Comte Ory*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and *Semiramide* were superbly taken, she is not singing so much Rossini as before. Handel seems to have taken over, with triumphant portrayals of the title role in *Agrippina* and Irene in *Theodora*.

'I never like to say I have a favourite composer, but at the end of the day it has to be Handel, because he's taught me so much. The scope of the characters

I've been able to sing, the breadth of emotion – from jubilation to total desolation and despair – which is there in every measure. And there is a purity about the orchestration that demands that the performer fill in the blanks and bring a three-

dimensionality to everything he/she does. So I've had to figure out how to do that, musically, emotionally and dramatically.

'In roles by Berlioz or Massenet, everything is written on the page: all the dynamics, all the articulation, all the tempi, down to the markings, down to the metronome. There is very little choice to make in those roles that are so complete on the page, in the score. That doesn't exist in Handel. So the performer has to fill in those blanks and *expand* them. And because the content is so inspired and pure, it gives you a great deal of freedom as an interpreter. And I love that. I find that each time I come back to those roles, there is *space* for new direction, new consideration and new exploration, because so little is dictated on the page. That is why, as an artist, I find Handel's operas so deeply fulfilling.

'Another reason is that his music gives so much psychological space for the performer, as well as the character at hand and the audience to enter. You can have an eight-minute aria with one thought, one grammatical sentence. But within that, the human psychology works, constantly twisting and turning. You can say the same thing and experience the same thought, but with so many different colours and a different realisation, and go deeper and deeper, probing and probing and probing... I could go on about this for hours!'

Before any of this can happen, of course, the artist has to have reached a point of utmost technical vocal mastery and have absolute control over the voice, Handel's music is, after all, among the most demanding in all opera... 'Yes, both in its pyrotechnics and in the simplicity of its form. The music in *Theodora*, for instance, is not complicated. It's not a dense piece of music, there is no coloratura to master. But there is a simplicity in the vocal line that has to come through the legato and the direction of the phrasing. It's like Mozart in a way. You have to engage completely, with everything you have: your spirit, your voice, your intellect, your theatricality... And at the same time you have to wash your hands, stand away and let the music arrive. Activating and allowing – sometimes it's tricky to find the right balance of being in and out at the same time...'

I observe that it almost a Zen discipline. 'Yes, that's it exactly! That's why I say that Handel has taught me more than any other composer. It's like a good meditation when you're alert, allowing but not forcing. If you get this right in a performance, if you find that Zen balance, you can feel it in the audience's response as they too enter that sort of "splendid bubble": everybody's engaged, they hardly breathe. We all start to enter another dimension, >





Opposite, top: As Irene with Julia Bullock as Theodora at the Royal Opera House

Opposite, bottom: DiDonato's War and Peace toured the globe in 2016, and seems more relevant than ever today

Below: As Agrippina at the Royal Opera House: 'Handel has to be my favourite composer because of the scope of his characters, the breadth of emotion – from jubilation to total desolation and despair'

together. It's a totally different experience from singing a Verdi aria with a high C. This reminds me of the *Hercules* you've mentioned – one of the most deeply exhilarating experiences in my career. Several moments in particular – such as the "Jealousy Chorus", where they are all pointing at me, like snakes coiling around me – demented, fantastic! The moment I lay down on the floor was amazing, a moment of total despair. I remember it as an occasion when time stood still...'

As I was fortunate enough to share this moment, so I wanted Joyce DiDonato to clarify her earlier statement that Handel's kind of purity is different from Mozart's. Is Mozart vocally easier? 'Mmm... probably yes, although some arias, such as Sesto's "Parto, parto" (in *La clemenza di Tito*) are quite challenging. The difference is in the coloraturas. Mozart's are always purely vocal, whereas Handel's are more instrumental – and those are tricky, more acrobatic and not always intrinsic to what a voice can do. I can think of some weird arpeggios in Handel which don't feel vocally natural, whereas Mozart's music always does, he does it for you. Another difference is that in Handel there is often very sparse instrumentation. Sometimes you have an aria with nothing under you, so you feel more exposed. Mozart rarely disappears under you the way Handel does. You're still very exposed sometimes in Mozart, but

he tends to support you with the orchestra, whereas in Handel at times you feel as if you're treading on a live wire!

'Take *Agrippina*, for instance, which I love. It's a dark comedy, a dark look at the underside of power and all that goes with it. A towering role, unlike any other I've played and a gift to me as an actress, which came about at the perfect moment in my career, when I no longer had any fears. The same is true of *Semiramide*. In those two roles, I had the time of my life. They felt like a five-course meal, a Shakespearean kind of drama with intelligence of text – both libretti are extraordinary – and the composers at their very best. And both heroines are such rich characters, although it's easy to put them across as one-dimensional. But I like to go deeper and find that pain, the broken hearts that allowed them to dig in and become who they are. I love to find and explore that part of Handel, so different from his more serene roles, such as Irene in *Theodora*.'

DiDonato sang the role of Irene in concert at in several cities last autumn and winter before performing it on stage at London's Royal Opera House in Katie Mitchell's production earlier this season. When we spoke, just before the Covent Garden run, she was 'still in the process of discovering the character of Irene'. The four concerts were, she says, like an incubation period leading up to the Royal Opera House staging. 'Irene is an elusive character,' DiDonato admits. 'I look at her as more of a Cassandra sort of figure, or as a figure playing the part of the chorus in an ancient Greek drama. She's there to act as a confidante to Theodora, but apart from their duet, she acts much more like a commentator. I see her as someone who's trying to bring everybody back to focus. As in her world things are dispersing and getting more separated and diverse, she's trying to bring people back to the task at hand: pray, bring back the light, focus on the morning, don't fall asleep, stay awake until the sun comes up, stay in vigil with me... Handel leaves you room to take that sort of faith in one direction or another. My own sense of Irene is that I don't know how much faith she really has, because there is a kind of "mantra" in what she sings: "We sing and pray, we sing and pray, defend her, defend her". And I have the sense that she's saying that in an effort to *will* back her faith. I don't feel it's a hundred per cent there. Because she's not the one sacrificing her life. I think she's very much caught between this feverish faith and a profound humanity.'

'I don't think she's a saintly figure who has it all figured out in the sense of "let's all sing and pray and all will be fine". Because her music is too deep and, in many ways, too earthbound. It doesn't take off to other planes, unlike Theodora's music, which feels as if she's already there, on that other plane, secure in the knowledge that we'll all see each other >











Above: In the title role of Rossini's *Semiramide* at the ROH in London

Opposite: 'We're seeing a lot of the struggle, the darkness, the anxiety and sheer difficulty of life right now. so it's not as easy as it was for me to be in the light'

again in heaven. Irene's music on the other hand is not celestial. It's sort of searching and churning. She keeps asking for help, asking for light, and this indicates to me that she doesn't have it yet. She tries constantly to master that faith and she tries to bring other people with her. That's why I think she pulls the chorus to her, to help find that faith. But I don't know that she's there.'

Like St Paul, in a way, I suggest, who keeps urging and persuading and warning the faithful. Unlike St John (the Evangelist), who is there, in the light and draws everybody towards it. 'This is a fantastic comparison! Because in Paul you see the human struggle – and I think that probably more people identify with Paul than with John. And I can't help thinking that what you just brought up relates to what we're living today. Because if I had I sung Irene ten years ago, it would have been an easier role, in a way. I think that her singing, "Oh yes we sing in hope we sing in prayer", would have suggested an easier ascendance to portray. But we're living in 2022 and seeing a lot of the struggle, the darkness, the anxiety and sheer difficulty of life right now. And this means that it's not as easy for me to go to that place of faith, not as easy for me to be in the light. I have to work to get there.

'And this is the beauty of *Theodora* for me. It's 350 years old, yet it feels so fundamentally perfect for today. In his first aria the tenor, Septimus, talks about "kind pity" descending from heaven and blessing each heart with "sympathising woe". And I'm sitting onstage in tears listening to this music and thinking, "Please bring that state to us. We need that today, that blessing that was really palpable 350 ago and is

just as powerful today. It's like saying, Wait a second! This is not the first time humanity has been asked to endure difficult times. We got through them and will go through them again. But we have to ask for help and we have to be conscious as to how we're going through it.'

Di Donato feels a compulsion to use her voice 'to go straight into the hearts of my listeners, make them feel how precious our lives are, how wondrous our vast earth is and how vital our connection to one another is'. The respite from a busy performing life during Covid gave her time to think. 'The lockdown meant that there was a long sabbatical that was not intentional or voluntary. But when it came, I realised it was something I needed and welcomed. The catalyst of *War and Peace* was the random terrorism of the time – and especially the attacks in Paris in autumn 2015, including on the Bataclan concert hall. We launched the project just after the election that brought Donald Trump to power. And when we saw the impact it had on audiences we decided to make it a global project. And that's how *Eden* was also born – out of a time of great challenge. Having live music and the communal experience of sharing taken away from us brought home the power of experiencing music and its creation together. This is what most of us missed most. What we had to do during the pandemic was to assemble music rather than create it. Someone would be playing the piano in one place while another was singing somewhere else. It wasn't an act of creation. And having this experience taken away from us made me treasure it even more.'

I asked DiDonato about the inspiration that lay



behind *Eden*. Where did the seed of an idea come from? 'Looking at the world today. There is, of course, the climate situation and there are so many social upheavals, there's so much anger and heart-wrenching division and damage. What is it in us that is causing this and allowing it all to happen? I think it's because of a real separation from our nature. We're so disconnected from our natural selves, our knowledge, our memory, the realisation that we're all connected, not just to each other, but also to trees, animals – to all living things. We're literally, organically, scientifically made of earth, we are made of the same elements of hydrogen and carbon, the basis of all life. But we're living through a period of such decadence and superficiality that I fear we've lost this connection.'

*Eden* is a wide-ranging project dealing with a huge subject through DiDonato's careful and curation of a broad repertoire. She again collaborates with conductor Maxim Emelyanychev and his Il Pomo d'Oro ensemble, as well as French stage director Marie Lambert and Academy-award winning composer Rachel Portman, whose music joins pieces by Vivaldi, Handel, Gluck, Copland, Ives, Mahler and Wagner. 'It goes the whole gamut! Because a story told through centuries of great music has considerable power. It says, "Look, we've been singing the same songs, and have been witnessing both the pure ecstasy of nature and the failure of humanity for centuries". And what intrigues me at this moment in time, is the question: what are we going to do about it this time? Are we going to fall back into the old pattern of destruction, or will we engage and connect more deeply to the harmony of the world around us, creating more harmony?'

With the recording of *Eden* released in February, the staged concert version continues to tour until 2024, from its premiere in Brussels to Amsterdam and London, and on to 43 more venues including The Temple of Philae in Egypt, Manaus in the Amazon Jungle, the Carrara Marble Caves in Tuscany, and the Vatican. And in each venue, there will be an educational dimension, 'where we will bring kids into it and have them contemplate what it is to think about the world around them, the nature around them, and use their voice and talk about it.'

After such a rich and joyous career, are there any roles that DiDonato would regret not singing by the time she retires? 'You know I've honestly not thought about this! I've had this run of titanic roles recently – Agrippina, Sister Helen in *Dead Man Walking*, and I am too filled up to feel that anything is missing.' Nevertheless, during the Covid period she recorded the *Wesendock Lieder* in Wagner's chamber music version. 'I found the experience so surprising and so fulfilling! These evocative, profound songs have been a beautiful addition to my repertoire, along with Mahler's *Ruckert Lieder*. These things, which came to

*'What are we using our voice for? And what are we contributing to the world around us?'*





Main Stage

Joyce DiDonato

*'Take Agrippina, which I love. It's a dark comedy, a dark look at the underside of power and all that goes with it'*



MARTIN SCHULZ/METROPOLITAN OPERA

me at the time of Covid, were totally unpredictable. So was Schubert's *Winterreise*, which Yannick Nézet-Séguin [music director of the Metropolitan Opera] invited me to sing. I thought he was crazy as this was not a world I had delved into before. But he said that he wanted to hear me in Mahler and all that world, into which *Winterreise* was the doorway. Envisaging what a singer might be capable of is the sign of a great maestro. And it has been a real discovery and a gift for me.

'My interest and aim in all the performing I do is to try and come back to what we really are, to encourage people to participate in the world around them and consider what is really nourishing. Are we taking care of the earth, are we planting, taking care of our back yard, of our planet? Or are we just contributing to its destruction? But also, are we thinking in terms of developing the culture and humanity within ourselves? I'm trying to keep it simple because it's a huge topic. What are we using our voice for? And what are we contributing to the world around us?'

DiDonato has an ingrained sense of service to the world, almost spiritual calling, instilled in her by her Irish Catholic parents – her beloved architect father and schoolteacher mother – who supported her switch from music teaching to a performing career by pointing out that 'there are many ways to serve'. This dedication to a life of service to music and, through music, to humanity, has never left her. Her sunny disposition must also have been a help in her personal

life: two marriages ended in divorce (she retains her first husband's surname), before she embarked on her happy longstanding present partnership which includes two dearly loved stepsons.

Back in the day, as Joyce Flaherty, born in Prairie Village in Kansas, did she ever dream that her singing could take her to such heights? How did her younger self imagine her future? 'In truth, I wasn't brave enough to visualise anything,' she admits. 'I just kept listening to this thing inside me that wanted to come out. What drove me, and continues to drive me, is the need to connect with people. Being a diva or a vocal superstar was never part of the plan. But a real need to connect with people, to communicate, to lift them up, to inspire them – that has been my driving force: the message through the music. This is what has led me to projects such as *War and Peace* and *Eden*. The fact that I *know* the transformative power of music, the perfect tool to connect us through our hearts, not just our heads. I *know* it. The world has forgotten it. And I don't want it to forget!' **ON**

Joyce DiDonato's latest album *Eden* is now available on the



Erato label from Warner Classics, as a CD and as a digital download.

Subscribe to Opera Now for the year and we'll send you a free copy of Joyce DiDonato's *Eden* on CD. See p25 for details. Offer ends 31 May 2022