

Sweet success

ROBERT KOLODIAN

By Adrian Mourby

Following the triumph of her starring role in Welsh National Opera's *Sicilian Vespers* earlier this year, Armenian soprano Anush Hovhannisyán has been focusing her attentions on helping a new generation of opera singers to negotiate the storms and upheavals that have transformed the opera world in recent times. *Opera Now* meets a future star who likes to think big, whether she's taking on a challenging new stage role, casting for new talent or simply ordering breakfast in her favourite café...

Imagine an absurdly wet and windy February morning in Cardiff as Storm Ciara rips in from the Atlantic. Last night, on a gloriously sunny evening, Anush Hovhannisyán wowed audiences in the Welsh capital as Duchess Héléne in Verdi's rarely performed *Les vêpres siciliennes*. 'I didn't sleep much last night,' says the tall Armenian soprano as she sits down. 'I was so excited!' This was, of course, in the halcyon days before COVID-19, and we are in Coffi, a converted Victorian landing station for the ferries that used travel across Cardiff Bay, and currently Anush's favourite café within easy reach of the Wales Millennium Centre. 'I thought afterwards, I've done it! I can still sing! I still have a voice. I can still smile.'

A waiter has approached our table but before he can offer us a menu, Anush orders a cappuccino and The Big One – a 'Fully Loaded Welsh Breakfast Bap' with warm bacon which certainly looks like the kind of sandwich you need after making it all the way through five acts of Verdi's epic *Vêpres*. 'Tell me, honestly what did you think?' she asks.

Interviewing Anush Hovhannisyán is not a conventional experience. You end up wondering who

is interviewing whom. At one point she asks me if I like jazz, and later to name my favourite five operas. 'Don't worry. I ask everyone that!' She has tremendous energy and in no way resembles the complex, stately Héléne of last night's performance. This is not to say that she lacks complexity, but Héléne employs deep and shifting stratagems to bring about the assassination of her enemy. Anush's energy is wholly outward – certainly this morning. 'Ooh look!' she laughs as two swans, exhausted by Storm Ciara, tuck themselves up on the shoreline below Coffi and hide their beaks from the gale-force wind.

I ask about this Armenian's long relationship with Cardiff. 'Well I first came here when I was at the Scottish Academy for a lesson with the adorable Dennis O'Neill. And then I came back for Cardiff Singer of the World when I was 26, and then for *La Traviata* in 2018, which I adore. I couldn't believe my luck when David Pountney then offered me *Vêpres siciliennes*. It is such a challenge. I have grown so much through the rehearsal period! I was petrified at first, but everyone has been so supportive: all the cast but also the WNO chorus.' Being supportive is important >

As Héléne in Verdi's *Les vêpres siciliennes*:
'The opera is a palette of everything Verdi could write'



JOHAN PERSSON

to Anush, who tells me that even as a student she was helping friends find agents when she didn't have one herself. It is a subject we return to later.

'I have never sung a role like *Hélène*,' Anush declares over her dauntingly large coffee cup (she clearly likes a challenge). 'It asks 150 per cent of you. *Hélène* is *Abigail*. She is *Lady Macbeth*. She is *Violetta*. She is *Gilda*. And at the end with the marriage she is like *Desdemona*. This opera is a palette of everything Verdi could write. But now, today, this morning I know I can do it!! And I now I know I can do this, I will be able to risk more!'

The critics agreed that she did indeed meet the considerable demands of Verdi's opera head on. Rupert Christiansen in the *Telegraph* wrote: 'The cast's one outstanding member was the Armenian soprano Anush Hovhannisyán, as the militant heroine *Hélène*. Blessed with an alluring ruby-red timbre, she sang with a refinement of phrasing and musical imagination absent from her male colleagues...' The *Times*, meanwhile, declared her 'The Face to Watch in Opera 2020'.

Anush asks me again what I thought of David Pountney's production conducted by WNO veteran, Carlo Rizzi. I admit that I could have done without the ballet which the Paris Opera obliged Verdi to compose even though it interrupts the story just

when it's starting to get interesting. 'Oh no,' she declares, 'I needed the ballet. My voice needed to rest!' Anush is talking and laughing so much that I'm worried The Big One on her plate is getting cold. 'No, no I'm fine,' she says. 'You just stop me if I'm saying anything silly.' I have interviewed plenty of singers and most of them are interesting to talk to, but all of them were more guarded than this. I get the impression that Anush treats everyone she meets as if they're immediately her best friend, and it's giddy fun to catch up.

Hovhannisyán's surname translates – rather too plainly for such an exotic figure – as 'Johnson' from the Armenian. Her first name gives more of a sense of her. The meaning of Anush, she explains, is 'like *dolce* in Italian: sweet, soft, smooth, tender and luscious'. Her father, Professor Hovhannes Hovhannisyán, has headed the opera department at the State Conservatory in Yerevan for the past 20 years (Anush studied there herself). As director of the Yerevan Opera Studio, he is the teacher and mentor behind the current generation of great Armenian opera singers. 'I am lucky to have been around all of them when I was growing up,' says Anush. 'Nowadays I get to work with them around the globe. Most of them

In Opera North's *La Bohème*: 'I am *Musetta*. I do not have to act.'



RICHARD HEBERT SMITH

have become very good friends of mine despite the age difference. Apart from inspiring all of his students (and me!), one of my father's greatest achievements is to have raised us as one big family of singers who always support each other. I also inherited his musical taste – our favourite way of spending time together is to watch a good old bel canto comedy. You'll often find us singing along to *The Barber of Seville!*

Later she attended the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, graduating in 2013. By 2017, she was representing her tiny country (population less than 3 million) at the Cardiff Singer of the World Competition. In the intervening years a raft of prizes came her way. She was a member of the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme at Covent Garden between 2013 and 2015. In 2014 she was winner of the Ernst Haefliger Competition, and one of three winners of the Stella Maris Competition in 2016. Other awards include the Haidee Saretski Prize at Les Azuriales Competition, the Clonter Opera Prize, and the Bayreuth Prize from the Wagner Society of Scotland. She has been a Samling Artist, a Georg Solti Foundation scholar, and when she made her debut as Violetta in Glasgow in 2018 the *Sunday Times* – perhaps forgetting the origin of the movie phrase – called it a 'star is born' moment.

Roles that have come her way since include Adina in *L'elisir d'amore* in Florence – she has a natural talent for pitch-perfect comedy and flawless coloratura – Maria Stuarda in Klagenfurt, Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* at the Teatro Verdi, Trieste, and Emma Khovanshchina in Musorgsky's opera with the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the 2017 BBC Proms. Her discography includes two volumes of Vivat's *A Century of Song* alongside Sarah Connolly, John Mark Ainsley and Christopher Maltman, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Romances* (Stone Records) and Scriabin's Complete Works (Decca). She is also the soprano soloist with the Royal Opera House Orchestra, Covent Garden in *Wolf Works*. This Opus Arte Blu-ray disc records Wayne McGregor's ballet about Virginia Woolf narrated by Gillian Anderson and sung by Anush. When I tell her she has done so much in her seven years since graduation, she asks in all honesty, 'Have I?' Well I reckon you must be only 29, I tell her. She laughs, 'All sopranos say they are 29.'

Well, I think she has done a lot, particularly given her work beyond the opera house and concert hall. Anush is heavily involved in the New Generation Festival in Florence where they've appointed her head of artistic relations and she's also on the artistic advisory board of the Mascarade Opera Studio, a major new young artist initiative providing promising nine months of fully funded opera training in Florence for its lucky participants. Mascarade, which launches this September, is headed by Ralph Strehle, associate head of vocal performance at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and has a number of innovative aims including using the lessons of sports >

FABIO ANTONIANNI



As Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* at the Teatro Verdi, Trieste, Italy



La Traviata at Welsh National Opera (with Roland Wood as Germont): 'Violetta is a role I adore'

psychology to help young singers cope with the mental demands and stresses of a musical career.

'I have taken on these positions for New Generation Festival founders, Maximilian Fane, Roger Granville and Frankie Parham. I headhunt the singers, conductors and directors. I also set up artistic collaborations and artistic ties with other institutions. At the moment, we have a great relationship with a number of young artist schemes, including those at the Salzburg Festspiele, Staatsoper Hamburg and Opera di Roma. I act as a casting director of sorts but, since I do much more than that, we try to avoid the term. I am more of a casting director on steroids!

'What we all felt was that for rising young singers, masterclass tutors are usually people who have done great things but most of them 20 years ago – and much has changed since the year 2000. At Mascarade we want to bring in the younger members of our industry [to tutor]. People who have had to grapple with the new and ever-changing order of the industry caused by financial upheaval, technological advancements and the development of varied management styles in recent years.' Added to that bag of challenges are the whole new set of complications that performers will face in the age of COVID-19.

'When I was starting out as a young singer, the most important thing for me was to talk to those who had made it in the business and learn from their experience. Which doesn't always mean

people who have been around longest: I remember speaking to a renowned singer who thrived in the 1980s, a charming lady, who answered my question about how to audition by saying: "Audition? I never needed to audition!" Sometimes those who have gone through what we are about to face are the best people to ask, even if they are still relatively young. What's certain is that times have changed: singers today need to be equipped with more than a beautiful voice to achieve success.'

I can't help stepping in and asking if all this altruism is counterproductive. Surely the great artist is ultimately selfish? I have certainly known writers and musicians who were pleasant and generous but usually only after they achieved success. Many lacked altruism early on. Anush disagrees: 'No, maybe they feel the benefit of less anxiety in their lives when they became successful, but my credo is that we have to help each other and we don't have to wait until we're successful to do so. I believe that great things happen to kind people. I also believe that one doesn't have to wait to conquer the world before starting to help others. I like the idea of supporting colleagues on the never ending journey of self-discovery. I had my share of inspirational colleagues to whom I look up and am grateful for shaping my personality, giving me courage when I was going through some of my most important and formative early years in this industry. My role models, my heroes are the ever so wonderful

Michael Spyres and Albina Shagimuratova – two of my most favourite people in the business and some of the best singers of this generation. It was truly life-changing to get to know and work with those generous artists. Their kindness, humility, support and example is before my eyes every day and I hope to have a similar impact on younger colleagues of mine, who will now or in the future be looking up to me as a lighthouse in the turbulent waters of the classical music industry.'

Her commanding appearance certainly gives the impression of an operatic colossus – she is 5'9" and bears a passing resemblance to Callas. But Anush has no truck with singers who behave like divas. 'The infrastructure of the opera world can no longer support the idea of the diva,' she declaims, cutting up her breakfast bap with vigour. One woman she clearly admires is the Princess Giorgiana Corsini, the matriarch of one of Florence's oldest and most distinguished noble families, in whose home the New Generation Festival and Mascarade Opera Studio has been based. 'She is quite elderly now, but she comes and cooks risotto for all of us some nights.' The princess and her family have handed over the spectacular formal gardens of her palazzo and its grand ballroom for the creative endeavours of Anush and her three colleagues. I can easily imagine the venerable aristocrat being swept up in Anush's enthusiasm: I'm sure I'd hand over my garden if Anush asked.

This summer, in deference to the pandemic and the need for social distancing, the NGF will be rebranded the 'Regeneration Festival' and will move out of the Palazzo Corsini to be held in the Boboli Gardens of the Pitti Palace in collaboration with the Uffizi Gallery. The change of venue provides more space for social distancing and for a larger audience too, while maintaining the distinctive ambience of a historic Tuscan garden. Anush, meanwhile, will be taking part in the annual jazz concert on 28 August, a traditional feature of the festival. Never less than hands-on in any project which involves her, Anush has also helped the three directors of the New Generation Festival set up the Andermatt Music Summer Festival, based in Switzerland's newest concert hall built in the midst of a ski resort in an area of outstanding natural beauty in the Swiss Alps.

Looking to the future, as opera houses start functioning again, there will be more Violettas and Musettas to sing. 'I love Musetta. I *am* Musetta. I do not have to act.' Opera lovers have been sadly deprived of Anush's first Tatiana following the postponement of Opera Holland Park's *Eugene Onegin* in the summer of lockdown. 'I adore Tchaikovsky,' she says. 'I call him my "Mr Inspiration".' Longer-term aims include Arabella, Salome, the Marschallin in *Rosenkavalier* and Marie in *Wozzeck*. 'A big part of my opera love goes to the 20th-century Viennese school. Women with striking characters, with willpower and

strength to overcome the most dangerous situations. But I'm also a big-time comedy girl with dreams to sing in *Il viaggio a Reims*, *Turco in Italia*, *Barbiere*, *Don Pasquale* and *Falstaff*. But the dream of the dreams is Lady Macbeth before I retire!'

Our hour has flown past as a truly vicious storm has battered the glass structure of Coffi and white-topped waves surged past us across the Bay. 'Thank you so much for coming to talk to me,' she says as we hug goodbye. Really, they do not make many divas like this. **ON**

The New Generation Festival has re-branded itself 'The Regeneration Festival' for its 2020 edition and is due to take place from 26 to 29 August in Florence at the Boboli Gardens of the Pitti Palace in collaboration with the Uffizi Gallery. Live events will be subject to social distancing measures, and many of this year's performances will be streamed online. For details, visit newgenerationfestival.org

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