

She has been called the definitive Violetta of her generation, but there's much more to Marina Rebeka besides Verdi's tragic heroine to keep us all enchanted. George Jahn meets the radiant, deeply passionate Latvian soprano as she looks forward to a bright future in opera.



AMATI BACCARDI

Rise & shine

It all began with *Norma*, Bellini's tale of love, treachery and self-sacrifice. For the young soprano Marina Rebeka, this may ultimately be the most important opera ever written – yet she has never sung the title role of the opera, and has no plans to do so in the near future.

The gifted Latvian singer is perhaps best known as a stunning Violetta in Verdi's *La traviata*, the role that launched her career. It was *Norma*, however, that provided her first encounter with opera, and triggered her decision to become a singer. 'I remember, I sat there until the first interval, and I was shocked,' Rebeka says with a wistful smile, looking back to that evening as she sat transfixed next to her grandfather at Riga's opera house 20 years ago. 'Something,' she says pointing to her heart, 'something answered here. I call it "love from the first sound".' Since that defining moment, Rebeka has blossomed from a skinny 13-year old with a seemingly impossible dream, to an operatic shooting star with a magnetic aura on stage. Her track-record is impressive: she made her international debut at the Salzburg Festival aged 29; and she clearly has a glowing future, with a career that already spans the world, from the Met to Covent Garden, La Scala and Vienna State Opera. Coming up in December is her Lyric Opera of Chicago debut, followed by Bizet's *Les pêcheurs de perles* in Zurich.

Sitting in a luxurious suite of Vienna's Bristol Hotel with a view over the State Opera House, Rebeka looks every inch a prima donna in the making. Freshly

coiffed and immaculately made-up for a photo shoot, it's hard to tell if she's heading straight for the stage or the cat-walk. In fact, I discover that the Armand Ventilo blouse was a last-minute loan from a friend and she's in open-toed slippers for our interview, flashing bright red toenails in a way that suggests she has an unconventional side to her. This impression becomes stronger as she talks about her life on and off stage. Her fiercely blue eyes twinkle with humour or flash with anger, and spontaneous snatches of song delivered to make a musical point alternate with peals of laughter as she relives private and professional ups and downs, speaks of likes and dislikes and holds forth with equal joy of her roles as a singer, wife and mother.

Critics see Rebeka as a singer with a huge future. The *New York Times*' Anthony Tommasini praised her 'clear, bright sound and cool intensity' in her 2011 debut as Mozart's Donna Anna at the Met. Earlier this year, Shirley Apthorp of the *Financial Times* described her 'radiance,

technical precision and vitality' in the role of Mathilde in the Netherlands Opera production of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*.

Rebeka considers her voice as a work in progress, a still-growing instrument that should not be forced into narrow constraints: 'I'm a soprano, and it's clear that I'm not a light soprano; nor am I yet a dramatic soprano, but who knows about the future?' she says. 'I can already sing some things that are quite dramatic.' She describes her low register as 'slowly developing' ahead of her debut as Fiordiligi in Zurich next year, a role that tests the extremes of the soprano range. Her Violetta certainly suggests that meatier Verdi roles beckon, but she's not going to push her luck. For now, Rebeka is content to let nature take its course, equating a singer's voice with a rose that you cannot force open, 'because then it will just fall apart. You have to wait, and then it flourishes by itself. Then it's something natural; something true and something beautiful.'

Rebeka has impeccable credentials when it comes to her training: she graduated ►

'Violetta is a woman who has lived through the biggest story of her life, the biggest adventure and the biggest pain in her life. So it can never be boring.'



Signature role: as Violetta in Theater Erfurt's 2007 production of *La traviata*

LUTZ EDELHOFF



As Mathilde in *Guillaume Tell* at Pesaro's Rossini Opera Festival

AMATI BACCIARDI



Mozart to the fore: as Donna Anna at the Vienna State Opera

MICHAEL POEHN

in 2007 from the Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia in Rome and attended the Internationale Sommerakademie at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg, where she studied with Grace Bumbry, followed by the Accademia Rossiniana in Pesaro under Alberto Zedda. Her awards include first place at the renowned Neue Stimmen Competition in Germany.

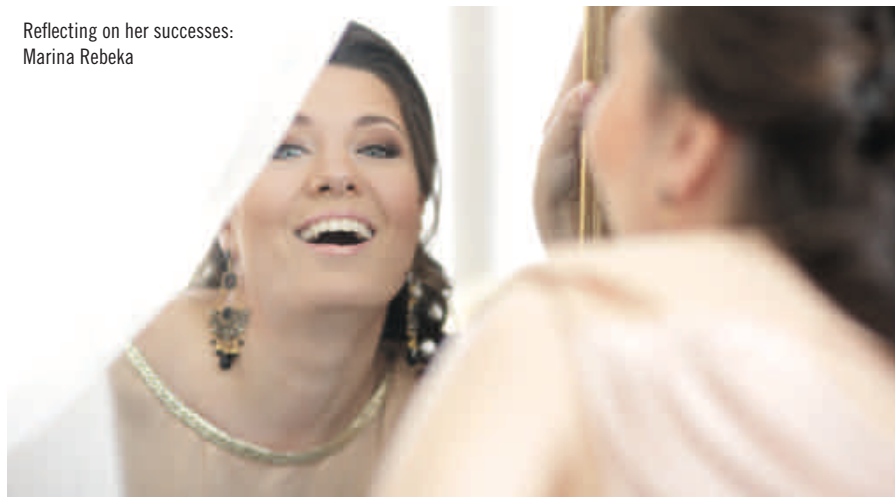
Persuading her family to support her wish to sing after the revelation brought about by *Norma* was the first hurdle she had to leap; but it was nothing compared with the obstacles that followed. Rebeka shudders when she looks back at her early steps into the world of opera singing as a young girl – and her horror at the memory is not just an act. She found herself out of her depth at Riga music school, aged 14 with an instructor playing intervals at a piano to older and much more theory-savvy peers. ‘She was sitting at the piano and all the people in the class were writing what she was playing. Me? I just sat crying! I was like, how do they do it?’

Intensive private studies allowed her to catch up in her classes, graduate – and face the next letdown. She was rejected by the prestigious Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music. It was crying time, again. ‘They said I didn’t have the skills and I would never make it as an opera singer,’ she recalls. ‘I was crying the whole night. I was 17 and for three years I had been taking private lessons because I was following my dream. And then they turn round and say I am not capable of doing it?’

Fortunately, redemption was at hand. Accepted by Riga’s Janis Medins College, Rebeka threw herself into her vocal education – and so came the realisation that her epiphany four years earlier while in the audience for *Norma* had not led her astray. ‘I realised that I did have skills and I would sing,’ she says, emphatically, with a glint of the steely determination that has set her apart from others with perhaps as much promise but less willpower. ‘I understood that for me, it was not important where I would end up singing, but to sing for the love of it, and to sing beautifully.’

Her breakthrough came in 2009 as Anai in Rossini’s *Moïse et Pharaon*, with Riccardo Muti in a Salzburg Festival production by Jürgen Flimm. It was a culmination of her focus on Rossini, which began at the Accademia Rossiniana and led her to roles such as Anna Erisso in *Maometto II* at Pesaro’s Rossini Opera Festival, and then as Contessa di Folleville in *Il viaggio a Reims* at La Scala.

Reflecting on her successes:
Marina Rebeka



Just two years before that triumph in Salzburg, she had won her first on-stage engagement as Violetta at the Erfurt Opera in 2007 – a role that essentially launched her career. Countless Violettas later, she says it remains not only one of her favourite roles, but that it feels different every time she sings it: ‘You can never have the same emotion for each performance,’ she says. ‘It always changes, depending on who your partner is, and on how you feel. I never think, “Oh, I’m just going to sing Violetta tonight”; I’m thinking, “Oh, I’m going to have fun tonight, because its is like living through someone else’s whole life”.’

Violetta’s psychological journey is one of the role’s most appealing aspects for Rebeka. Unlike *Don Giovanni*, which focuses on a few hours in the main characters’ lives, Violetta is all about transformation, says Rebeka, ‘from before she falls in love to a woman who has lived through the biggest story of her life, the biggest adventure and the biggest pain in her life. So it can never be boring.’

Other, heavier Verdi roles remain an elusive goal for Rebeka – though the likes of *Aida*, *Il trovatore* and *La forza del destino* are still just beyond her reach: ‘My voice has not yet grown enough for these masterpieces and I cannot say if it will ever be dramatic enough to face them,’ she says realistically. There’s still plenty of time for growth, however. ‘Verdi’s music is genius and must be done with heart, knowledge and maturity,’ says Rebeka, adding that singing Verdi’s great *Requiem* is among her biggest dreams.

Meanwhile, more Violettas are being served up all the time. Last September, covering Aleksandra Kurtsak, Rebeka made an impromptu Vienna State Opera debut in the role. She is currently making a

more planned debut at the Lyric Opera of Chicago with Joseph Calleja as Alfredo, and will sing in the Willy Decker production in the Met’s 2014/2015 season. She will also return to sing Violetta at Covent Garden in mid-2015, opposite the rising young Ukrainian tenor Dmytro Popov – who happens to be her husband. (London audiences may remember Popov as the singer who stepped so magnificently into the breach when Rolando Villazón found himself indisposed in Covent Garden’s *La bohème* at the start of this year.)

Away from the stage, the recording studio now beckons. *Mozart Arias*, Rebeka’s first operatic recital disc, has just been released by Warner Classics. The CD features the soprano showing off her emotional range and technical virtuosity in roles ranging from *Figaro*’s serene Countess to the furious Elettra (*Idomeneo*). Accompanying her is the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under Speranza Scappucci. Recording the disc, says Rebeka, was a harrowing experience at times: ‘I wanted to do arias over and over again and I was still not happy with the result,’ she recalls. ‘I’m a perfectionist,’ she says, ‘and being able to listen to what you have just sung again makes you able to pick out the tiniest mistakes.’ Whatever mistakes there might have been have certainly been ironed out in the final cut. Rebeka’s voice is made for Mozart, so clear as to be almost crystalline, with a flexibility that passes the test posed by the Queen of the Night with flying colours.

The recording provides documentary evidence of Rebeka’s stature as an artist in the current opera scene. These days, she can pick and choose where and what she sings, though she remains true to the conviction that everything begins and ends with the voice and how it is used to its full potential:

‘I don’t have a dream to sing anywhere in particular,’ she says. ‘My dream is to sing in interesting productions with wonderful colleagues, with good conductors and interesting direction. You can be singing in a great opera house, but in a horrible production with a bad conductor who will just kill your career.’ ■

Marina Rebeka: Mozart Arias is released by Warner Classics (6154972). A short documentary showing behind-the-scenes footage from recording sessions for the disc is also available on YouTube. www.warnerclassics.com



MARINA REBEKA’S DIARY

2013 | Nov 14-27

Munich, Germany
Die Zauberflöte/ Pamina
Bavarian State Opera

2013 | Nov 20 to Dec 20

Chicago, US
La traviata/ Violetta
Lyric Opera of Chicago

2014 | Jan 14 to Feb 1

Zurich, Switzerland
Les Pêcheurs de perles/ Leïla
Opernhaus Zürich

2014 | Feb 6 to 16

Zurich, Switzerland
Così fan tutte/ Fiordiligi
Opernhaus Zürich

2014 | Apr 19, 27

Berlin, Germany
La traviata/ Violetta
Deutsche Oper

2014 | May 23 to Jun 4

Vienna, Austria
Les contes d’Hoffmann/ Antonia
Vienna State Opera

www.marinarebeka.com