

OPERA NEWS

Features

April 2011 — Vol. 75, No. 10 (http://www.operanews.org/Opera_News_Magazine/2011/4/April_2011.html).

Patricia Racette

by OUSSAMA ZAHR



Photographed in New York by Dario Acosta at the Nancy Wiener Gallery

Makeup and hair by Affan Malik

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It's easy to identify good technique in coloratura singing, with its ostentation and note-for-note precision in fast music, but Patricia Racette embodies a different kind of technical prowess. Her full lyric soprano, with its even registers, solid projection, youthful elasticity and wide dynamic range, uniquely suits the music of Puccini, Verdi and Janáček. The tone is distinctive — round yet tangy, bright yet full-bodied. She doesn't have to pump up the volume or sacrifice musical specificity to cut through an orchestra, because her resonance is so meticulously judged that she can always be heard. As Eric Myers wrote in

OPERA NEWS in 2002, her gift is to "turn up the heat so high without destroying the musical line — or overacting. Racette always seems to strike that elusive balance." Indeed, her voice remains remarkably fresh and pliable after a long evening of singing, and she offers true lyricism in some of the most daunting music written for the soprano voice.

When Racette explained her decision to discuss her homosexuality on the record in OPERA NEWS in 2002, she said, "You know, this career is so all-encompassing that to try and disengage such a huge aspect of my life is not logical, not feasible." It's an idea that resonates just as well with her artistry. When Racette is singing — particularly in dramatically vulnerable moments such as Suor Angelica's confrontation with her fearsome aunt, the Principessa, or Blanche de la Force's farewell to her brother in *Dialogues des Carmélites* — we seem to be experiencing a personal confession. Where an indestructible wall goes up for other sopranos who take a more heroic approach to opera's Romantic heroines, Racette opens a window into a very private soul.



Racette acts with remarkable efficiency, probably because her singing is doing so much of the dramatic work. I cannot forget the image of her dignified Elisabetta buckling slightly at the knees, delivering the vaulting phrases of "Tu che le vanità" as a cogent dramatic statement. Given the soprano's sympathetic persona, secure legato and textual projection, it is unsurprising that she has been a favorite of American composers, creating leading roles for Carlisle Floyd (*Cold Sassy Tree*), Tobias Picker (*Emmeline, An American Tragedy*) and Paul Moravec (*The Letter*). But then, she is a particularly American singer: her technical polish and versatility are the hallmarks of American training, allowing her to handle new music alongside Poulenc and Puccini.

Racette's voice, with its tart flavor and lean construction, might not seem on paper the right fit for the Italian repertoire, but after a performance, she leaves her audiences with a lingering feeling that they're not likely to see certain of her roles — Elisabetta (*Don Carlo*), Alice (*Falstaff*), Suor Angelica, Madama Butterfly — performed better today. It is rare to hear Puccini's Tosca sung with such beauty and dynamic variety, as well as accuracy in pitch and attack. Her Suor Angelica at the Met in 2009 was three-dimensional — by turns joyous, petty, devastated, beleaguered — and in "Senza mamma," she used the *tenuto* marking on the second syllable of "mamma" to imbue the word with tenderness as she told her dead child, "Quanto t'amava questa tua mamma" (How much your mother loved you). It's the kind of singing that affirms the power of the lyric art.

Despite all this, Anthony Tommasini was not wide of the mark when he described her in *The New York Times* last year as an "inexplicably underrated soprano." Racette manages to be superlative yet unshowy. She turns in detailed, intelligently wrought performances and guides the evening toward a wrenching emotional climax, but she does so with an invisible hand.

Racette's Butterfly is perhaps her finest achievement to date. When she sings "Un bel dì vedremo," one of Puccini's most familiar melodies, you may think of a few things. Her formidable technique means she doesn't have to modify the vowels of the difficult opening phrase, sung hushed, at the top of the staff. Her registers are beautifully knit, from a bottom that is just expansive enough, through a plangent middle voice, to a radiant top. Her textual emphasis seems spontaneous, giving the sense that Butterfly is suddenly overwhelmed by the very story she is telling. Best of all, Racette reminds us what the aria is about: Butterfly, in a moment of emotional desperation, shares with Suzuki her deeply personal fantasy of her lover's return, right down to the way she'll modestly hide her face when he calls for her. She is so honest and pitiful in her certainty that it is hard to watch her. Just beneath the surface of the ecstatic imagined reunion, you feel the humiliation and misery she is too proud to name.

Racette exposes her characters to a harsh world that seems ready to crush them, but her ability to make herself vulnerable in performance seems to assert the vibrancy of their emotional life, and also hers. It's a quality that makes her, fifteen years into an international career, a treasurable artist today. ■

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