

Interview with Vivica Genaux



Your recordings of Handel and Vivaldi have met with much praise in the press. Now we're going to have the chance to hear you in the city of Handel's birth, Halle an der Saale, in the gala concert at the 2011 Handel Festival.

How does it feel to be able to perform here?

I'm thrilled to be visiting Halle for the first time with my great friends from Concerto Köln! My work has taken me to many exciting places, the opportunity of singing in the city of Handel's birth is truly a highlight!

What does the ECHO Klassik prize mean to you?

I was immensely pleased to receive this unexpected recognition for my recording of Vivaldi arias with Fabio Biondi and Europa Galante. The recipients of ECHO Klassik prizes have always been artists I respect deeply, and it is amazing to be included in their company.

You began your singing career at school at the age of 13 in the musical "My Fair Lady". But you started off studying not music, but biology. When did you finally opt for a career as a singer, and when and how did you discover your love of Baroque music?

Music was always a very important part of my life growing up in Fairbanks, Alaska. I participated in as many of the arts as I could find time for in my life: dance, choir, violin, piano... singing always being my favourite, but always as a hobby. When I went to college, I decided that I now had to focus on something "serious" and spend less time with music and dance. This ended up being very difficult for me, as I missed the arts a great deal and felt like a part of me was no longer allowed to find expression. I finally decided that I would give myself the opportunity of exploring the arts as a profession rather than a hobby, and transferred to Indiana University School of Music where I subsequently graduated. My vocal studies at that time concentrated on the more "standard" *bel canto* repertoire, but in my third year as a professional I was invited to audition for René Jacobs, and there the world of Baroque music was opened to me. My first true Baroque performances were with Mo. Jacobs and Concerto Köln at the Berlin Staatsoper. I will never forget the first time I heard Concerto Köln play, the first time I heard a Baroque orchestra; to me it was like the moment in the movie "The Wizard of Oz" where Dorothy opens the door from her black and white house into the Technicolor land of Oz. I had never heard so many colours in music before, and I fell in love.

What are the nice things about being a professional singer?

Although the travel can sometimes be stressful, I would never give up my time in airports and airplanes! I love the feeling of going somewhere, being somewhere very intensely but temporarily, and the feeling of accomplishment once a production or concert is finished. I am also at a point in my career where I am fortunate enough to work with some of the most talented artists of our time, and I love learning from this experience with amazing colleagues.



What do you see as your strengths?

I'm a very stubborn person, which can, I suppose, be seen as a strength in some sense! I have a pretty good facility with languages, which is a great help when one is travelling constantly. Probably one of the strengths that I am most pleased with, and something which has developed over time, is a degree of flexibility in interpretation, the ability to take in a stage-director's or conductor's vision, without losing my own voice or identity in the music I'm performing.

How important is the conductor for a singer during performances? René Jacobs played an important role in your training as a Baroque singer. As a conductor or a singer?

For me, the conductor is most important during the rehearsal process. Conductors can be immensely helpful in finding the most effective way of interpreting a stage-director's vision; rather than working only visually, I love having a conductor who participates in the rehearsal process, helping the singers enrich their character with musical suggestions and support. René Jacobs to this day remains one of the conductors whom I respect the most in this business. Mo. Jacobs' experience as a singer undoubtedly sets him apart from most other conductors, but beyond that, the musicological preparation he puts into every single project is phenomenal. He prepares ornaments for all his singers, meaning everyone is using the same vocal style and the overall "sphere" of the piece is extremely homogeneous, without any anachronisms in style popping out from individual singers. His work throughout the rehearsal process is completely dedicated, and when one finally gets to the performance one knows exactly how the story of the opera/concert will be told to the audience.

Your repertoire consists of over 40 roles, many of them "Hosenrollen" – breeches parts where male characters are played by a woman. Do you interpret or sing those roles in a different way? Does it make any difference whether it's a female or a male character?

In the Baroque repertoire particularly, I no longer try to differentiate very much between male and female roles. To me, the fact that *castrati* sang both female and male roles indicates that the vocal style was probably very similar. I am also fascinated by the artwork of the 1700's where boys and young men are often quite androgynous in their features, indicating to me a focus on human beauty rather than male/female beauty. I do, however, think somewhat consciously of a difference in body language, and this does, I believe, transmit something to the voice. Basically in all my roles I try to focus on the human aspect of the emotions, and support them with the physical and psychological tools that their sex, class, history and personality have given them to work with.

Do you have a “master plan” for the years ahead?

I just had a vacation for the first time in about seven years, and I think planning a few more vacations in the future will play a big part in my new “master plan”! It felt very good to have a bit of a break in my hectic schedule! Other than that, I continue being very happy with the opportunities life and my friends have given me; I enjoy living each day as it comes without needing to know what’s around the corner.



What roles do you have planned for the next few years?

I do have a couple of new roles planned in the next few years, but I’m keeping them secret for the moment! Stay tuned...!

Does Handel play a part in your plans?

I do enjoy singing Handel, and because of his continued popularity with modern audiences I’m sure his works will continue playing a large part in my career.

And does your private life come after your career?

Private life can be balanced quite well with a career these days, I think. Communications have improved so much, even since I began singing; staying in contact with loved ones is much easier than it ever used to be. That said, I do think that one should chose one’s inner circle carefully; my teacher Claudia Pinza always says a singer needs to be happy in order to sing, and while singing can also be a great release in moments of distress, I’m a firm believer in happiness!

Verica Genaux
mezzo-soprano

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