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Mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux on her BBC Proms debut

'Music has always been a huge part of my life.'

By Dominic McHugh

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We're a couple of weeks into the BBC Proms now, but the excitement doesn't stop. Next week, the **BBC Philharmonic** takes to the stage for two contrasting programmes, the second of which includes a concert of music with an Italian theme in tribute to the orchestra's Principal Conductor, **Gianandrea Noseda**.

The centrepiece of the concert is a two-aria performance by American mezzo-soprano **Vivica Genaux**, who has been dazzling audiences the world over with her baroque and *bel canto* performances. She'll be singing two arias by Rossini: Angelina's thrilling rondo-finale from *La Cenerentola* and Malcolm's 'Mura felici' from *La donna del lago*. Genaux's Proms debut is an important event for the mezzo, who I caught up with in advance of her appearance to ask about her preparations for the concert, as well as her forthcoming Vivaldi recordings.



Photo Credit: Harry Heleotis

To start, Genaux elaborates on the challenge of coming onstage and singing just two showcase arias, rather than a longer, mixed programme: 'It used to be quite difficult for me because I was more accustomed to singing entire operas. The energy and concentration one uses for a concert are quite different, and I used to watch a lot of sports on TV to see how athletes prepared themselves for different events. A lot of sporting events like figure skating, skiing and track have athletes preparing for both longer programmes or courses, versus shorter, more technically intense events.'

'Singing an opera takes the strategy of a longer marathon where you are working with prolonged concentration and endurance, short bursts of sprinting and moments where you're still working but saving energy for the next sprint. Singing a concert seems more like Super G where you're working with as much technical precision as possible right out of the gate. Having added many more concerts to my schedule in the past few years I've become much more comfortable with this, and really enjoy it.'

Rossini is one of the three main parts of her repertoire, along with the baroque and classical periods. How does performing this type of music compare to the earlier repertoire that she regularly performs? 'I don't really have an *extensive* classical repertoire,' she contends, 'though I've been adding to it this season. Rossini and baroque tend to be my main focus points, and I feel they complement one another very well. The roles I sing in baroque music are typically ones written for *castrati*, and I most often play the part of the young hero. This is generally the same kind of role I find myself playing in the Rossini operas as well, as he composed many, many of the young heroic roles for the mezzo-soprano voice. The range is very comparable to what I would be singing in baroque, often with a two and a half octave extension, and with a lot of flexibility in ornamentation and interpretation so by the time you've prepared a role you feel like it's been created especially for you. Really "haute-couture" music!'



Photo Credit: Harry Heleotis

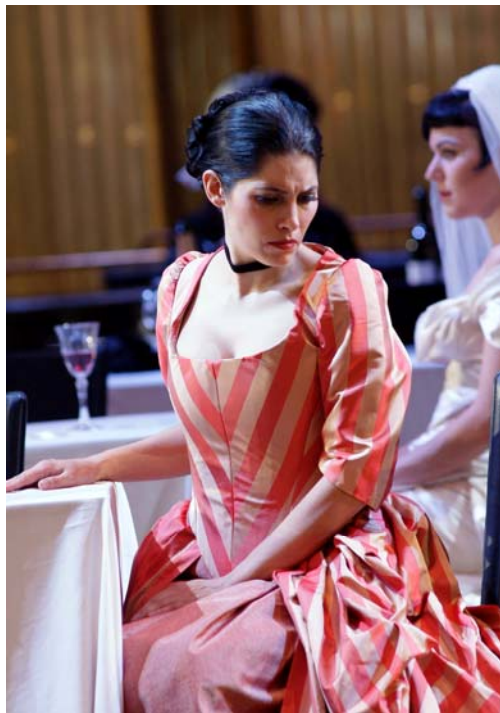
Showing off a strong technique is clearly the main aim of 'Non piu mesta', but does she think there's also a dramatic point to be made in this aria? 'Oh, there's definitely a very strong dramatic point in this aria for me,' she says. 'I have learned so much from the character of Angelina, her steadfastness, her altruism. There is so much antagonism in today's society; people concerned more with criticising and attacking others than with addressing their own shortcomings. I find Angelina to be a great refuge from that. This aria for me is a confirmation of the existence of *karma*, the wonderful feeling that if you truly give your best every single day, remain true to yourself and treat others with compassion, you will find joy.'

'Mura felici' is more serious and introverted: does she change anything about her manner of singing or the colour of her voice when performing this aria, compared to 'Non piu mesta'? 'While "Nacqui all'affanno" represents the joyful culmination of an entire opera for Angelina, Malcolm in "Mura felici" is just beginning his journey,' says Genaux. 'It is much more introspective and full of longing, and I do think the colour of the voice reflects that. I don't think it's anything one does consciously; it comes from the text itself and just being in the character.'

Genaux is looking forward to working with Gianandrea Nosedà. 'This will be my first performance with Mo. Nosedà, and I am thrilled to be working with him. I first met him in Pittsburgh where he often conducts the Pittsburgh Symphony. He invited me to perform Rossini's *La Cenerentola* with him at the Stresa Festival in Italy this year, as well as this concert for the Proms. From the performances I have seen him conduct, I find he has a remarkable attention and understanding of the voice, and I am really looking forward to this collaboration.'

The Proms is one of the world's biggest festivals, and the Royal Albert Hall is an enormous venue: is the scale of the concert intimidating? 'Generally I don't pay too much attention to the scale of the hall in which I am working, as I can't let it affect my approach to my performance. I usually enjoy smaller venues a lot more because I feel more connected to the audience. I have seen many of the Proms concerts on television, though, and the audience seems to have a special energy which I am excited to experience!'

Genaux's love of music has been with her almost since birth. 'Music, dance and the arts in general have been a part of my life since I can remember,' she says. 'My father had an extensive record collection which he listened to constantly. Living in a small log-cabin, when he was listening to Bruckner, Mahler, Beethoven, Mozart, we all listened! It was a great education for me even though I only discovered the names and composers of those familiar works years later when I was studying music at Indiana University. I played violin for nine years, danced ballet, modern, jazz, sang in every kind of vocal ensemble imaginable and fell madly in love with ABBA when I was 12 – music has always been a huge part of my life.'



Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno in Madrid
Photo Credit: Javier del Real

Why did she decide to pursue a career in opera? 'I first went to university for a degree in science, but was absolutely miserable without music as a primary focus in my life. While through high school I'd been able to balance a challenging academic schedule with a rich extra-curricular life of music, that was no longer possible in college. I felt like a crucial part of my personality was repressed, and I finally decided that if I was going to be that miserable I might as well do it being a starving artist rather than a lab-rat! I made the decision to transfer to Indiana University, and gave myself a window of 5 years after which I would reassess and see if my progress had been sufficient to merit staying the course. Within that five-year time frame I had won several big vocal competitions, made my debuts at various opera companies including the Dresden Semperoper and the Teatro Filarmonico in Verona, Italy; I decided that signs looked pretty good for having a professional career, so I kept going and haven't looked back since!'

How challenging did she find her professional training? 'I think I consciously tried to make it as challenging as possible. I always had a nice voice, but I would say that my technique is "learned" rather than "natural" and that can be a very difficult path to find. Teaching/learning vocal technique can be very tricky because the concepts of correct breathing, vowel formation, etc are fairly abstract. Coming from a science background I was programmed for analytical thinking, and it took me a long time to come to terms with this new way of learning. Even the violin and dance study I had done was more concrete, in that a teacher could physically correct your arm/finger position or posture. Singing was totally different, and that was awfully frustrating for a while. Lucky for me, I am very stubborn so through the tears and the doubts and the misgivings I persevered.'

How easy was it for her to establish her career in opera? 'My career took off quite quickly, so one could say it was quite easy. On the other hand, I had no stage experience and began working in important theatres right from the beginning, so it was a lot of responsibility. I took that feeling of responsibility quite seriously and worked twice as hard in order to make up for my lack of experience. So in that respect, establishing my career was pretty hard work.'

Genaux lists several highlights of her career so far: 'I will always remember my first baroque opera with original instruments, Hasse's *Solimano* at the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, with René Jacobs conducting. I had not had that much experience with baroque music before that, and the sound of Concerto Köln playing that amazing music was a turning-point in my life. Realizing that this entire world of baroque music was open to me was so thrilling. I am also very, very proud of a Vivaldi arias CD that will be coming out this fall with Fabio Biondi and Europa Galante. It is my first recording of Vivaldi arias and I am so excited at the prospect of this coming season which includes the CD release as well as several concerts with Maestro Biondi and Europa Galante.'

One of her other upcoming recordings is of Vivaldi's scarcely-known *Ercole*: having performed several of his operas now, why does she think it's worth reviving all these completely unknown Vivaldi operas? 'I think the revival of Vivaldi operas is worthwhile in several ways. For one, the operas themselves are very interesting because often they are "pastiche" which include works by other composers contemporary to Vivaldi. At least vicariously, an audience who is familiar with Vivaldi's music and is willing to pay the ticket or CD price because they *like* Vivaldi also gets some exposure to other baroque composers. If they ever actually find out that the aria they liked so much in Vivaldi's *Bajazet* is actually by Hasse, they might actually want to buy a ticket or CD of a Hasse opera next time! Another benefit of recording the whole oeuvre of a composer is that someone who doesn't read music can listen to a series of works representative of a composer's life and actually hear the evolution of his/her style throughout the career.'



Rosina in Paris (Photo Credit: Eric Mahoudeau)

Another of her personal projects is reviving the music of Hasse. 'I was very fortunate to sing my first Hasse with René Jacobs; Hasse's music coupled with Mo. Jacobs' ornamentation was phenomenal,' she explains. 'I love doing concerts which include both Handel and Hasse arias, as both composers had such similar backgrounds yet such disparate styles. Hasse, to me, completely adopted the Italianate style of singing, and is luxurious to sing. The fact that he himself was a singer, married to Faustina Bordoni, one of the most prominent international singers of the time, gave him a special perspective on the voice. His music is very challenging, but at the same time feels like it fits my voice like a glove.'

Having sung over forty roles now, I ask Genaux what roles she plans to add to her repertoire. 'Undoubtedly there will be more Handel and more Rossini in my future, also I hope more Hasse, Leo, Porpora, Vinci, perhaps Mozart and Piccinni,' she says. 'I would also like to explore the recital and concert repertoire a lot more; I love singing recitals and am very enthusiastic about Pauline Viardot's compositions. I would also like to add some Hahn, Berlioz, and perhaps some Offenbach.'

To end, I ask Genaux about her plans for the coming season – a typically rich mixture of engagements. 'I have my first Tancredi coming up at the Theater an der Wien under the baton of Maestro Jacobs, as well as my first Ernesto in Haydn's *Il mondo della luna* again at the Theater an der Wien. I love Vienna and I adore the Theater an der Wien, both for the history of the house as well as the wonderful people currently working there, so I'm quite happy at the prospect of having four months with the company! I also have very exciting concerts planned for the coming season, including concerts of the Vivaldi aria CD with Fabio Biondi and Europa Galante in Paris, Krakow, Torino, Bologna, and Napoli, as well as a concert (again with Biondi and Europa Galante) of Hasse's opera *Piramo e Tisbe* in Salzburg. I will also be returning to the Theatre des Champs-Élysées for performances of Handel's *Semele* with Christophe Rousset and Les Talens Lyriques.'

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