

TWO AMERICANS IN PARIS

*MARIA NOCKIN talks to
Vivica Genaux and Lawrence Brownlee*

On 11 September 2010, L'Opéra de Paris presented Gioachino Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri* at the Palais Garnier with two fine young American artists who are noted for their ability to sing coloratura in the leading roles. In this production of the comic opera, Vivica Genaux sings Isabella and Lawrence Brownlee sings Lindoro. I conducted this interview by email and telephone while they were in rehearsal.

Maria Nockin: How did you first get interested in music?

Vivica Genaux: In Fairbanks, Alaska, where I grew up, music and the arts have always been a very important part of the community because of the long, cold, dark winters. My mother taught me to read music using flash cards when I was probably about four years old. I studied piano and violin, and I sang in various choirs and in musicals as a child. I began voice lessons when I was thirteen because I wanted to get the lead in a summer fine arts camp production of *My Fair Lady*.



Vivica Genaux in 'Tancredi' at Theater an der Wien.
Photo © Armin Bardel

After that, I continued singing in choirs but did not study voice again until I was seventeen. I had been warned that studying too early, or with the wrong person, could do more harm than good. My first voice teacher was Dorothy Dow. She recommended that I not take a degree in voice, but rather in some other subject that interested me so that I would have something to fall back on in the event that music did not work out as a career. I did try to follow that advice, but became depressed when I no longer had as much music in my life as I'd been accustomed to in the past. She then recommended that if I really needed that focus on music, I should transfer to [Indiana University](#) School of Music. That's when I made the commitment to study voice as a profession rather than a hobby.

Lawrence Brownlee: When I was young I sang with my family and in church as well. I also took lessons in drums, guitar, piano and trumpet, so I guess I have been surrounded by music my whole life. My first voice lesson occurred when I was a senior in high school because I was chosen to take part in a music program for gifted music students. It wasn't until my junior year of college, however, that I decided definitely to pursue music as a career.

MN: Who were your most important teachers?

VG: After working with Dorothy Dow, I studied with Virginia Zeani and Nicola Rossi-Lemeni at Indiana University. After graduation I met Claudia Pinza, the daughter of operatic bass Ezio Pinza, with whom I continue to study today.

LB: I have had four voice teachers, and all have been important for my vocal development. David Starkey was the teacher who told me when I was still in high school that I had a special voice and should do something with it. Before I met him, I had never thought of singing classical music. He introduced me to it and gave me the basic tools with which to sing it. I made great strides when I got to college and started working with Fritz Robertson. He was all about voice production and he gave me a very natural approach from the beginning. He still teaches at Anderson University in Indiana.



Lawrence Brownlee in 'Armida'. Photo © Ken Howard

I studied with Virginia Botkin when I first came to Indiana University. She left after three years and, unfortunately, has since passed away. For my last year at Indiana, I studied with Costanza Cuccaro who is still my voice teacher.

MN: What competitions did you win? How much did they help you establish your career?

VG: Competitions were very helpful to me, and I think I was quite good at them. Not all singers are good competition singers. Not everyone can impress the judges with their repertoire at a young age. I always had good coloratura, though, so I brought Rossini and Handel arias to contests. Generally, they made a big splash and set me apart from the other competitors. The Marguerite McCammon Competition was the first one, which really helped my career. Jonathan Pell, then Artistic Director of The Dallas Opera, was on the panel and he immediately offered me main-stage roles in future productions. He also spoke very highly of me after the competition and it was invaluable for me to have such a wonderful supporter.

I also won an ARIA Award and prizes from the Baltimore Opera, the McAllister Vocal Competition, and the Palm Beach Opera Competition. The latter company offered me smaller roles and the opportunity of working with the bel canto conductor, Anton Guadagno.

LB: I have won many competitions and have been awarded prizes by organizations including the National Association of Teachers of Singing and the National Society of Arts and Letters. In 2001, I was a finalist at the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. I received a Richard Tucker Career Grant in 2003 and the Richard Tucker Award in 2006. I have also won the Marian Anderson and ARIA Awards.

MN: Where and in what opera did you make your début?

VG: I made my professional début in *L'Italiana in Algeri* at Florentine Opera in Milwaukee. I was singing the same role I'm now singing in Paris. San Diego Opera general director Ian Campbell very generously offered me the chance to make my recital début in October of 1997. The next year I made my concert début in *El Amor Brujo* with The Alabama Symphony.

LB: In 2002, I made my professional opera début at Virginia Opera as Count Almaviva in *The Barber of Seville*. That same year I was able to make my professional recital début in collaboration with the Marilyn Horne Foundation in Huntsville, AL. Before that, in 2000, I had made what I consider my professional concert début with the Anderson Symphony Orchestra in Messiah.

MN: What are some of your favorite roles?

VG: Isabella in *L'Italiana in Algeri*, Angelina in *La Cenerentola* and Sesto in Giulio Cesare are roles I love to sing. I enjoy the Rossini comic roles because of the wonderful spirit of the characters and their

music, the great ensembles, and the fact that they provide a great opportunity to bring children to the opera.

Sesto, on the other hand, represents the 'trouser-roles' in my repertoire, and these I enjoy because of the depth of character development they experience throughout the story. Most often these are juvenile roles, so one has the chance to explore a lot of different colors and emotions as they take on the responsibility of becoming adults.

LB: Some of my favorite roles are: Count Almaviva in *The Barber of Seville*, Tonio in *La Fille du Régiment*, and Arturo in *I Puritani*. I enjoy performing them because they contain challenging music and their melodies are gorgeous.

MN: What draws you to a character?

VG: Generally, apart from the music, I prefer to have a character that is well written and has some sort of development or learning process taking him or her through the opera. I try to find some seedling in the role with which I can identify at the beginning; even if it is something seemingly unimportant that can provide me with an emotional connection. Then, as I explore the character together with guidance from the stage director and conductor, I find my own personality changes and develops along with the character.

LB: I always try to humanize a character, and play him in my own particular way. He does not have to fit my temperament. I always try to discover who he is and play him so that his unique identity comes across the footlights.

MN: Are there some roles you would love to sing but have not yet had the opportunity to perform?

VG: There are some roles I would love to do because I think the music is glorious, but I know that, vocally, I'm not right for them. Temperamentally I would love to be able to do some of the more dramatic, late nineteenth century repertoire, but that won't happen in this lifetime!

LB: Some of the roles that I would love to sing in the future are Ferrando in *Così fan tutte* and Belmonte in *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. I would love to perform more Mozart.

MN: Do you ever give master classes?

VG: I do enjoy giving master classes, however I don't believe anyone can revolutionize a student's technique or interpretation in a few minutes. I think it is a valid forum for giving students pointers on areas in which they need to work with their teachers. I can point out study habits that young singers might find helpful in their continuing development. I encourage them to try to become fluent in the languages in which they're singing. This past summer I taught a two-week master class in Baroque singing and that, I felt, was more useful because I was able to spend time with each student, and could follow the progress of each person over a longer period.

LB: I have given many master classes, and I enjoy it a great deal. A master class can give the student a different approach to material that the teacher has been trying to get across. It can sometimes unlock doors because the information is coming from someone who has substantial impact in that particular area of study. That might make the student listen more carefully than usual. I enjoy teaching master classes and hope to do many more of them.

MN: How often have you sung in France?

VG: Very often, fortunately!

LB: I have only performed once before in Paris. We did a concert performance of *Tancredi* with the Orchestre des Champs Elysées conducted by René Jacobs. I did *Il Turco in Italia* and *Carmina Burana* in Toulouse, however.

MN: What do you like best about singing there?

VG: It's a cliché to say so, but I love Paris! Just stepping out of the metro in front of the Palais Garnier, knowing that you are lucky enough to work in that magnificent building, is an amazing experience every single time. I sing a lot of Baroque music and it is not as well known in the States as it is in Europe. In France, it has become a part of many theaters' repertoire. The public is now familiar with the style and will come to the theater to see a Baroque opera. Interestingly enough, it was American conductor and musicologist William Christie who was instrumental in bringing the Baroque to the attention of the French public. I hope one day we will be able to make it more familiar in the States!

LB: Honestly, I don't have much experience with the Parisian audience, but in the concert I sang there, I found the public knowledgeable and very appreciative.

MN: Do you enjoy the ambiance, the food, the sights, artwork, fashion, etc?

VG: I love being able to go to any number of museums here in Paris, including the Marmottan with its fabulous collection of Monet and the Louvre, of course, where I'm sure I will never succeed in seeing everything. I also enjoy window-shopping, and there is an infinite number of wonderful places to discover here. Generally, when I'm working I don't get out very much because our rehearsal and performing schedule is quite strenuous. I do have friends come and visit once in a while, however, and then I get to see more of the city. I will never see Notre-Dame often enough, I love stepping out of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in the evening and seeing the Eiffel Tower all lit up, I enjoy walking on a day off all the way from the Arc de Triomphe down to the Tuilleries. In January I rented an apartment in the Latin Quarter, and the energy there was fantastic. Every neighborhood has its own identity and spirit and it's great to experience them all.

LB: Yes, I love being here. Paris is famous for its history, its fashion and its cuisine. I am already enjoying the food and culture and I look forward to visiting the Louvre and other museums.

MN: What are some of your favorite places to eat?

VG: Ah, now here I have to say I'm not a huge fan of French cuisine. However, I do enjoy the many ethnic restaurants, which are omnipresent here. I love Indian food, as well as Thai, Mexican and Japanese dishes. You can find anything your taste buds desire here. I love 'Le train bleu' for its amazing history and décor, The Blue Elephant has wonderful tropical plants, and Anahuacalli has super authentic Mexican food.

LB: Sushi and Korean cuisines are my favorites and I have been able to indulge in them while here. My favorite restaurant is a small Korean place called Bar-B-Que.

MN: What can you tell us about *L'Italiana* in Paris?

VG: It is at the Palais Garnier. The conductor is Maurizio Benini, an expert on Rossini, and the director is Andrei Serban who has devised a modern, kind of comic-book presentation.

LB: I'm looking forward to this production because I am working with several colleagues with whom I have been friends over the years. Serban is a well-known film director who teaches at Columbia

University in NYC. I've worked with the conductor several times in New York and in Toulouse.

MN: What version of the score are you using?

VG: We are using the critical edition by Ricordi and we are working out our embellishments individually with Maestro Benini.

LB: In this edition there is an aria in the addendum at the back, called 'Concedi amor pietosa'. It was written by Rossini but is rarely sung. Some time ago when I spoke with Maestro Benini, he said that he wanted to do it with me, and we are performing it here in Paris. Of course, it will be decorated. We have spent a great deal of time on embellishments and I think the audience will enjoy it.

MN: Since styles of opera presentation seem to change every few years, how do you keep up with it all?

VG: I think musical style doesn't change that quickly, but it's true that every conductor has his own ideas on appropriate interpretation. As a singer, you very quickly grow accustomed to being stylistically flexible according to whom you're working with. We must develop great short-term memories or something, because as soon as you finish one production with one set of stylistic guidelines, you're off to the next production of the same opera with someone who gives you a new set of rules to follow! I have to say, I found that very frustrating as a young singer, but now I realize there are many ways of interpreting a phrase and I have fun playing with the differences.

LB: My goal is to always grow with the character. As I repeatedly perform my roles, the characters evolve over time, in line with my experiences.

VG: I supposed the biggest difference I've seen since the beginning of my career is that now I often have the opportunity of creating a role in a new production. As a young singer, one is often thrown into productions that have already been performed by the company. Most of the time the original stage director is not present during the rehearsal process, and one learns the staging from a company assistant. This assistant does not have any authority to change the original staging, and generally doesn't know much about the psychology behind the movement. Their responsibility is to teach you the steps, period. I call it the 'Arthur Murray School of Opera' where you can practically see the footprints on the floor of all the performers who have done the role before you, and you're expected to hop from one to the other whether it's comfortable for your body or not! As my

career has developed, though, I am more often hired to perform in new productions, meaning I have a part in determining how my character is going to behave throughout the show. The stage director is almost always influenced in his vision by the artists he has in front of him, so being a performer in a new production almost certainly means you're going to have the role designed around you. That is an amazing and luxurious feeling and, even though it involves a lot of hard work, it's worth it!

LB: I've seen an increase in importance on the aesthetics of a singer, and with that in mind I have made a conscious effort to slim down and become more physically fit.

MN: What are your ideas for attracting young opera and concertgoers to the theater?

VG: I think music needs to go to the young people first. There is no reason why our art can't come out of the theaters and concert halls once in a while. I'm a big believer in school programs where young people are introduced to musicians and their art in a more familiar setting. I also think that schools need to provide music education beginning at a very young age. There need to be choirs, orchestras and bands. Music and dance are hugely beneficial to young children. They develop different parts of the brain. They teach discipline and how to work well with others. Unfortunately, music and the arts are always the first subjects to suffer in the public school system when there are budget cuts. I feel they should be much more strongly championed and protected.

LB: I think younger opera and concertgoers are interested in artists that are human and approachable. The day of the diva and divo is long gone.

MN: What are your newest recordings?

VG: My newest CD is *Vivaldi Opera Arias -- Pyrotechnics* with Fabio Biondi and Europa Galante, a compilation of amazing arias composed by the Venetian 'Prete Rosso' (Red Priest), Antonio Vivaldi, who had bright red hair.

LB: I've recently recorded Rossini's *Stabat Mater* with EMI. My recording of *L'Italiana in Algeri* ('The Italian Girl in Algiers') was recently released on Naxos.

MN: What are you most excited about for the future?

VG: I don't think too much about the future right now because I'm so busy keeping up with the present! My current season has me singing a lot of new repertoire so I'm just keeping my nose to the grindstone!

LB: My wife, Kendra, and I are anxiously anticipating the birth of our son. I am very excited about being a father. Kendra is due the day before my last Paris performance, but I'm hoping the baby will take his time and wait for me to get home.

MN: How do you manage to combine a personal life with such a big career?

VG: I have a wonderful husband whose job also keeps him very busy. The husband of one of my singer friends once said that the trick to a good marriage with a singer is to have a time-consuming job. I agree with that. If one person is sitting at home twiddling their thumbs waiting for the other to come home, it doesn't work too well. My personal life is very much entwined with my career, and there is time every day for both.

LB: It is a struggle sometimes to mesh the two, but it is essential to stay closely connected with my wife, family and friends. It also helps that I have hobbies outside of my profession.

VG: I don't really have any hobbies. I do relax by putting manuscript for my Baroque repertoire into modern notation on my computer. I do a lot of research and when I choose an aria for a concert or recording, I generally put the music notation into the computer so I can print out orchestral scores and parts for the groups with whom I am working. It takes some time to do, but I enjoy it.

LB: My hobbies include salsa dancing, fantasy football, American football. Generally I enjoy all sports as well as board and card games. I also love collecting music.

MN: How has travel to various countries influenced your view of the world?



Vivica Genaux as Juno/Ino in 'Semele' at New York City Opera. Photo © Carol Rosenegg

VG: I've always traveled internationally since I was a child, so I don't know how much my business travel has changed my view of the world. I was lucky enough to grow up in a very international community, and I enjoy being in a multi-cultural work environment. I think that one of the things I like most about my career is the opportunity of working with people from all over the world on a daily basis.

LB: I enjoy traveling and consider myself a citizen of the world. I have a growing interest in culture and languages. I speak Italian fluently, and I am currently brushing up my French with a private teacher.

VG: I do enjoy France a lot more now that I speak the language better! Probably my view of the United States has changed the most since I began working more. I realize how isolated we are from the rest of the world. In every country in which I work, there is recognition of international politics and news from various countries including from the United States. When I'm in the States, however, I very rarely see news from anywhere else in the world unless I look for it on the internet.

LB: From my experience, I can say that stereotypes are just

stereotypes. You can find true and genuine people all over the world.

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VIVICA GENAUX

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