

2009

Mundoclasico.com

## *Vivica Genaux: a voice like hot chocolate*



Photo Credit: Harry Heleotis

By Gustavo Gabriel Otero  
June 5, 2009

Mezzo soprano Vivica Genaux gave the following interview for **Mundoclásico.com** when she was in Alaska, where she was born, to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of its becoming a state. She was preparing to come to South America for debuts in Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina with the orchestra Concerto Köln, 26 and 27 of May in Sao Paulo, 28 in Rio de Janeiro, 30 in Montevideo and 1 and 2 of June in Buenos Aires, before crossing the Atlantic to sing in Saint Denis, France with Maestro Rousset and Les Talens Lyriques.

Her South American tour provided an excellent opportunity to explore several aspects of her career, voice and repertoire.

**Gustavo Gabriel Otero (GGO): How would you define your voice?**

**Vivica Genaux (VG):** I can't hear myself when I sing, so the only thing I can say is what people have told me they hear in my voice. I think my favorite description was that it was like "listening to hot chocolate"! I hope that's true! I know that in technical terms I'm a "lyric coloratura mezzo-soprano". In terms of repertoire my voice works very well in the music written for *castrati* in the Baroque period and in the mezzo-soprano roles by Rossini. For myself, I enjoy trying out new roles to see how the voice fits. Many times I think my performance or interpretation of a particular aria or role is not necessarily what people are used to hearing from other singers, but that can be a good thing!

**GGO: What is your repertoire, and what limits did you impose to it?**

**VG:** My repertoire has almost always been evenly balanced between Rossini and Baroque. The first three years of my career I sang almost exclusively Rossini, and as I had very little performing experience when I began my professional career, it was a fantastic opportunity to learn how to balance singing with stagecraft. The addition of Baroque music to my repertoire was an opportunity

extended to me by René Jacobs when he offered me the role of Selim in Hasse's "Solimano" in performances at the Staatsoper in Berlin. Since that production I've been adding more and more of this music to my repertoire, as I thoroughly enjoy working with Baroque orchestras and love the genre. I don't really impose limits on my repertoire, but try to understand and respect the natural abilities and limitations of my voice. One of my biggest goals in life is to continue singing as long as possible.

**GGO: Which roles or styles would you like to incorporate?**

**VG:** I adore Spanish music, and would *\*love\** to learn more Zarzuela arias and Spanish songs. I recently prepared a program of Andalusian and Neapolitan music with my accompanist Carlos de Aragon, demonstrating the similarities in the two cultures through their music, and really enjoyed that. I would also love to perform another Hasse opera in the future, and hope that through my performances of his music the public interest will grow enough to merit a production of one of his great operas.

**GGO: Are you more comfortable with a staged complete opera, or with a concert with arias and fragments?**

**VG:** I enjoy both concert and staged opera; the energy needed for the two is very, very different. In concert, one generally has more input as to repertoire, but the rehearsals are very limited so you have to arrive completely prepared to turn on the energy and perform immediately. With a staged opera one usually has anywhere from three to six weeks of rehearsal, so the energy level at the beginning is lower. One has plenty of time to explore the role, the relationships between characters, musical ideas with the conductor, and staging concepts with the director. By the end of the rehearsal process the energy level gets stronger and stronger, until one finally gets to the performances and turns on all the engines!

**GGO: What do you think of stage setup, in general?**

**VG:** I think the modern theaters of today, especially in the United States, are far too large for operatic repertoire. Many theaters are built to be multi-functional, in order to be used for opera, symphony, and ballet. Each of these genres has really different requirements acoustically, and one ends up making large compromises in order to increase availability. I enjoy working in older, smaller theaters where the audience can really see you (without binoculars!) and participate in the experience. Modern orchestras are also quite different from the instruments for which most of the operatic repertoire was written. They are much brighter sounding, louder, and often play at a higher pitch than was used at the time of composition. All of this makes a singer's job much more challenging, and I think also takes away from the audience's experience in general.

**GGO: What criteria did you use to choose the repertoire you will be presenting in Buenos Aires?**

**VG:** I was asked to suggest mostly Handel repertoire for the concerts in Buenos Aires, but managed to get one Hasse aria in as well! I think it is very interesting to juxtapose the two composers, the fact that they were both recognized as important international composers of the 1700's, both came from Germany, both trained in Italy and yet have such different styles. Handel to me remains a very Teutonic composer whereas Hasse absorbed the Italian style entirely. The Handel repertoire in this program includes some of my favorite florid music, "Dopo notte", "Sta nell'ircana", as well as some of Handel's softer, more introspective music, as heard in "Cara speme". The Hasse aria "Di quel acciaio al lampo" is one of my favorites, and displays his mastery of the heroic style of coloratura writing, a very interesting comparison/contrast to Handel's compositional style.

**GGO: What expectations do you have regarding your debut in Buenos Aires?**

**VG:** I don't know that I have any expectations from my debut in Buenos Aires; I am very happy to be performing there for the first time, especially in these concerts with Concerto Köln, still one of my favorite Baroque orchestras since my debut with them ten years ago! I hope the audience will enjoy the performance as much as I expect to do so myself!

**GGO: What are your next professional plans?**

**VG:** While I continue my career largely in the Baroque and *bel canto* genres, I am very excited to be adding two Haydn operas to my repertoire this year. I will be performing in "L'isola disabitata" in July, then in "Il mondo della luna" in December. This year I will also be adding a new Rossini role, with my first "Tancredi" in Vienna under the baton of René Jacobs. The coming season also brings collaborations with Mo. Harnoncourt, Mo. Nosedà at both the BBC Proms and the Stresa Festival, Mo. Rousset and Les Talens Lyriques at the Festival of St. Denis, and a new Vivaldi CD, "Pyrotechnics" with Fabio Biondi and Europa Galante to be released in the fall of '09, for which I'll also be doing a European concert tour. I'm looking forward to working with new and old friends!

**GGO: How has been your experience in Spain?**

**VG:** I have enjoyed all of my performance opportunities in Spain, and love the country, the culture and the people. I would love to add Spanish to my list of languages, and have been working on it gradually. I have had wonderful experiences in Madrid, Seville, Jerez de la Frontera, Bilbao, Santiago de Compostela, Lugo, Barcelona.... I hope the future holds many, many more Spanish engagements!

**GGO: What does singing mean to you, and what is at stake?**

**VG:** Singing to me is really a way of life; I love performing, I love the feeling of singing, and I've become used to putting my voice in the #1 slot in my list of priorities, meaning that I always have to be careful not to get sick, not to tire the voice too much by talking, to study and prepare the voice adequately before performances, to learn languages, continue to improve my stagecraft and vocal technique... everything else in my life basically has a function in protecting or facilitating my singing. It's interesting because I always said when I was young that I wanted to grow up to be a hermit and in a way I've achieved this! I'm almost always in my hotel room or rehearsing/performing in the theater, but even being on the stage one often has a sense of being alone in one's thoughts and emotions, so it fits the hermetic lifestyle as well! As for what is at stake, I suppose the challenge is always to balance one's performance schedule with one's physical limitations. The actual voice itself is at stake if one doesn't manage things well, and I still have a hard time saying "no" to performance offers, just because the projects at this point in my life are so interesting. I end up sacrificing a bit of personal space and time, but always feel replenished by the actual performing. I try to take good care of myself so that when I am facing a more challenging schedule I still have the chance to recuperate.

**GGO: Would you like to add anything else?**

**VG:** I'm looking forward to meeting Buenos Aires!

\* \* \* \* \*

To view original posting (in Spanish) visit:

<http://www.mundoclasico.com/2009/documentos/doc-ver.aspx?id=3db1db79-941a-4ce1-89e8-bcb7e4f6a953>