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## Rhapsody for Horne

As MARILYN HORNE approaches her seventieth birthday, FRED PLOTKIN recalls how his early admiration for her developed into a warm friendship.

Marilyn Horne dazzled me with the ease and freedom with which she sang — long before I had any understanding of what vocal technique was. When I listened to her recordings while reading the score, I was stunned by her fidelity to the notes as written, perfectly nailing an endless Rossinian concatenation of quarter, eighth and sixteenth notes. But this was not mere math. Horne found the spirit in those notes and made it memorable, like a master chef who takes recipes and turns them into feasts.

Her artistry was the result of prodigious gifts: a gorgeous, unmistakable voice, radiant intelligence and an innate humanity that connected to every word and note she sang. In addition to flawless diction, she gave each word considered weight and meaning. Those gifts were enriched by years of intense work and preparation, plus the rare ability to be a great listener, and the essential skill that all great performers have: to leave all of the effort behind in the wings and embrace spontaneity. Opera is a live art, and the greatest singers are the ones who rise to this occasion.

I recall thinking early on that Horne was a generous singer, even if I did not know what I meant by that. I understood more when I started going to vocal recitals. Horne, Victoria de los Angeles and Christa Ludwig did more of these than most of the opera singers I had seen, and as I came to learn about the art of song, these artists, along with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Hermann Prey, became my points of reference. All showed a generosity of emotion, a willingness to connect to the intimate and the personal in a way that opera seldom allows.

Many opera stars play the *role* of recitalist rather than call upon their most personal characteristics and insights to make a recital memorable. Ludwig was a master recitalist, and so was Elisabeth Söderström. But the largest emotional range I have seen in a recitalist was Horne's, though it is something for which she is seldom given credit. In the opera house, she was Isabella, Adalgisa, Carmen or Rinaldo. In recital, she was Marilyn Horne and, almost always, the woman (or man or child or barnyard animal) who was the voice in the song.

When I started working for opera companies in production and performance management, first at La Scala, then at the Met, I came to know Marilyn personally. It is fair to say that not every great singer is a great person, and there is no reason to expect that she should be. Talent is one thing, humanity another. But here was a person one could have adored even if she could not sing a note.

For her, the world is much bigger and more interesting than her voice. There are things to learn, people to meet, political issues to care about, sports teams to root for, family to love and people whose lives can be made better by her intervention. Alessandra Zorogniotti, who worked as Marilyn's assistant for a number of years, told me, "One of the first things I discovered about Marilyn is her extraordinary generosity, not only with money but in lending her name to ideas and institutions that she could help. When possible, she wrote not only a check but also letters, and she did benefit appearances if her presence could lead to greater respect for an organization."

In the 1980s, I was performance manager at the Metropolitan Opera and gave Alessandra her first job. She signed on for a two-year stint as junior performance manager and did wonderful work. I invited her to stay in the position for as long as she wished. But Marilyn was then looking for an assistant, a job that combined a lot of fun and travel with a great deal of responsibility.



As Isabella in Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's  
1973 Met production  
of *Italiana*

One day, Marilyn took me to lunch and told me she intended to offer Alessandra the job but wanted to know if it would cause me great inconvenience. When I asked Marilyn if there was any circumstance in which she might not hire Alessandra, the response was, "Only if Jesus Christ comes along to apply for it."

Though I had never had any hankering to be a singer's assistant, I asked Marilyn whether she might ever have considered me. "You'd be great," she said, "but I am not quite ready to have a male assistant see me in my underwear."



As Carmen at the Met, 1972

"But," I pointed out, "Jesus Christ would have been a male assistant."

"Yes," she replied, "but his mother was a virgin."

Marilyn likes to refer to a colleague she most respects as "a real pro." This is one of the best compliments she can give, because it is a recognition not only of talent but of character. She accords genuine interest to almost everyone she meets, even if they don't see eye to eye. Alessandra told me that Marilyn taught her "about graciousness. She treats everyone with utmost respect and kindness, whether it is a driver, a porter or a maestro. She treats presidents the same way — even Republican ones."

Recently, Marilyn walked into a McDonald's for a cold drink en route to an aquarobics class. Being near Carnegie Hall, this particular branch had a grand piano in the dining room and a young man at the keyboard. Startled by the incongruity of this combination of fast food and slow music, Marilyn went to speak with the pianist, Clint Edwards. Learning that he accompanies voice lessons, she took his number and, within twenty-four hours, found him work with vocal coach Robert White.

Marilyn was always a natural educator, long before it became her principal occupation. When she turned sixty, in 1994, she gradually began to wind down her singing career and established a foundation devoted to young singers and pianists who would keep the tradition of the vocal recital alive. In ten years, the Marilyn Horne Foundation has fostered a generation of talented young singers, including Stephanie Blythe and others who will soon become household names. They have sung in halls everywhere, not only in major cities but in rural Nebraska and Arkansas. Fifty years ago, at the start of Marilyn's career, major musicians traveled the highways and byways of this nation to perform. That tradition had declined until the Horne Foundation reintroduced the sound of the human voice to places where it had not resonated for decades.

Marilyn has also been a role model in terms of family values. She is a loving mother and grandmother. She had what she describes as a "failed divorce" with her late husband, Henry Lewis, the esteemed conductor to whom she was a devoted friend long after their marriage ended. But Marilyn's family extends well past blood relatives to countless colleagues, students, world leaders, neighbors and friends.

One night at the Met in 1987, just before going onstage as Dalila, Marilyn was given a painkiller for a foot injury. The medication had an adverse effect on her voice, and she had to withdraw from the performance. Rather than fret about herself, the first thing she asked me was the name of her understudy, Alexandrina Milcheva. "I want to help this girl," she said. Marilyn proceeded to write encouraging words using red lipstick on the dressing-room mirror. She then wrote a private note to Milcheva that I was to deliver as the young singer arrived. In the interim, Marilyn quickly vacated the star dressing room to make sure Milcheva could serenely prepare for her big night.

After a spectacular New Year's Eve concert at Carnegie Hall one Sunday evening, Marilyn and I were heading back to her home in a taxi. Wrapped in scarves and a heavy coat on this cold, snowy night, she turned to me, took my hand and said, "Fred, there's just one thing I need to know...."

"You were wonderful," I said. "It was a marvelous concert."

"No! Not that. What I want to know is — did the Bears win?"

I told her that they had.

"Oh good! That quarterback Jim MacMahon is a real pro."

It takes one to know one. □

*FRED PLOTKIN's most recent book is Classical Music 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Classical Music (Hyperion, 2002).*