

The Royal Lady and the Majestic Mezzo: Anna Bonitatibus and Semiramide



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BY CARLA MARIA VERDINO-SÜLLWOLD

"Do you really want to know? It took me four years to put together." the vivacious mezzo laughs. "It was a very difficult project."

Difficult, perhaps, but magnificent! Italian mezzo-soprano Anna Bonitatibus's recently released two-CD set, titled *Semiramide, La Signora Regale*, is a thrilling collection of Baroque and *bel canto* arias and scenes inspired by the legendary Assyrian queen, assembled with meticulous research, presented with the lavish accompaniment of art and poetry, not to mention the brilliant musical partnership with Federico Ferri and the Accademia degli Astrusi and La Stagione Armonica. For Bonitatibus it has been a labor of love.

Just weeks before her appearances at the Bayerische Staatsoper in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, I spoke with the singer, whose performances throughout the great opera houses of Europe have been inspiring audiences since her debut in 1992. Bonitatibus, who is especially known for her interpretations of Baroque and *bel canto* operas as well as her trouser roles, has in recent years moved gradually into some of the heavier, darker 19th-century repertoire, including a recent performance of the Verdi Requiem.

In delightfully colorful and idiomatic English, Bonitatibus talked about the *Semiramide* project, her career, and her hopes and dreams for the future of opera.

This Semiramide project is an impressive feat not only because of the singing, but also for the research, the additions to the repertoire. What motivated you to embark on such an exhaustive undertaking?

It was my dream to realize a project based on Semiramide. I wanted to introduce unknown composers and try to make music a more accessible language using history, art, and literature. She caught my eye as one of the most fascinating possible subjects, and, as I learned more about her, I began to discover that knowledge about Semiramide was fragmented, and she seemed to be misunderstood.

Why were you drawn to Semiramide, herself? You said "she was not an easy woman."

When I found in numerous libraries hundreds of compositions inspired by her, I asked myself why so many composers were seduced by this woman. I had to learn more and try to explain the fascination musicians and artists had with this lady from a remote time and place.

What do you think of Semiramide now, after all your research?

The subject is magical. I read so many things; I discovered so many aspects to this woman. First of all, she was a queen. The title of the project is *La Signora Regale*, which is the very specific way she is referred to in the epitaph she composed for herself. She did not call herself a "queen" but a "lady of the palace." She was very probably part of a harem, but with special status and treatment. She was the mother of the child who would become the future king. She took full responsibility for her actions. She was a courageous person who tried to reform her nation. In order to rule at a difficult time, she invented a strategy for war, and she fought to continue her husband's line and pass it on to her son, preserving a dynasty. She had to be exceptional to survive and govern a large population bent on war and dominated by a male-centric administration. And, of course, there are still many mysteries about her, including those surrounding her death.

There is so much poetry and art in your CD booklet and the research you present. What is your background and interest in these fields, and did you consult with others to help enrich the project?

I love doing what I do: being on stage and expressing in words and music all those feelings and thoughts. For me, painting and poetry speak the same creative language—just in different forms. I tried to demonstrate this in this project. The composers led me to the painters and sculptors who drew her lineaments and depicted her so expressively. And poetry answered some of the questions about her in definite words and images. I loved doing this project because it allowed me to give voice to that part of myself that is a lover of beauty in all art. It was, naturally, a team effort. You see me on the cover because I am the singer, but the project required the commitment, passion, and skills of so many people to achieve the end result.

You worked with several musicologists, among them Philip Gossett. Tell us about your discoveries.

A subject like this has so many dimensions that it is difficult to find the roots. They are so old that I had to stop many times and re-evaluate what might be the best way to achieve the results I wanted. For the recording, I actually worked with two musicologists who were experts on 18th-century musical forms, and I consulted Philip Gossett on the Rossini aria. I wrote to him to let him know I was going to use his reconstruction of "Bel raggio lusinghier," which he had published for the Rossini Bicentennial. Rossini's original vocal version is in the autograph score in Venice. Most likely Isabella Colbran, Rossini's wife and the first interpreter of the role of Semiramide, was not happy about having a cavatina without a cabaletta, so he probably abandoned his first version and added the cabaletta to showcase her coloratura. In this first autograph version the orchestration had not been completed. [Gossett did that in his reconstruction.] Still, I decided to use this original version for my recording. I felt Rossini's instincts in this first rendition were right; it gave Semiramide a regal, elegant entrance and showed her grace and strength. The addition of the cabaletta makes a different effect: she becomes young and fresh, as she dreams about the love of her life. The two are very different! That's how Philip came into this project, and he was very happy to know that for the first time in the history of Rossini's opera, someone was going to

perform this first version.

How has your voice changed over the years? You started with Rossini, the bel canto, and then the Baroque repertoires, and now venture into even darker roles. Where do you see your voice going from here?

I can say that *bel canto* is the glove I wear best. I have sung Baroque music and many of the castrato roles as well, and then, of course, when you are young, you sing what you are offered. But it was all good training. I would like to work on improving the repertoire I already sing, which is quite large, actually. I want to find even more colors and explore that interior garden. I am also interested in the possibilities offered by 19th- and 20th-century opera—roles in French and German, as well as Italian—where the drama has real human dimensions.

You came onto the scene with the Rossini Bicentennial. Who were your role models in your early career, both among your contemporary singers and historical legends?

I know this may sound a little unusual, but it was often the male voices which attracted me. What inspired me in a voice was the quality of *appoggiato sul fiato*—that special kind of expressive breath support and line. And there were remarkable mezzos, too, but it would be hard to name just one.

Let's talk about ornamentation. You have said ornamenting is "bringing a piece to life." When you create ornaments for an aria, how much are you motivated by historical styles and how much do you try to give the piece a new personal dimension?

Composers paint eternity with their creations; we are just interpreters. But we do have the power of expressivity, and we can also achieve this with ornamentation. Ornaments require a great deal of work because you have to personalize the way you handle them; they are not written in the score. I have to consider the style of the work; one would never do a Bellini ornament on a Handel opera, for example. In the days of the castrati, the singers invented new ornaments every night. It became a kind of competition, but we really don't have any idea what they sounded like. Today if you add the tiniest notes, some purists will say you are "ruining the score." But I think the practice of ornamentation has merit. I believe it is fine to embellish the music, so long as you follow the rules—because music has its own rules—and use good taste. And if you are lucky enough to have a good conductor, you will not go wrong!

You are known for your trouser roles such as Cherubino and Sesto. What is your secret to performing these parts well dramatically and musically? How do you create the boyishness?

The principle for me is not to act like a man but to BE one! If after a performance of *Le nozze di Figaro* or *La clemenza di Tito*, I come out from the stage door and nobody recognizes me, that is the best endorsement I can have. It proves I was a good actor on stage.

How do you feel about Regietheater, especially with works that go back to the 18th century?

It is always difficult for us performers because at the time when we sign a contract, we don't know what the production will be like. But I am always open to new ideas and different ways to make the opera speak to our time. However, as a performer, I need to feel there is logic among the characters. I always try to think from the perspective of the audience. It is our responsibility as artists to help the audience to understand and to want to come back to the opera—to buy another ticket. My personal preference is for beautiful productions with wonderful sets and costumes that let people forget their daily difficulties and enter into a magical world—that make the audience feel fantastic and part of a huge, special experience. I believe in the strength of the stage to do that.

What is your own dramatic approach to a character?

I always study the story of the opera, the biography of the composer, and the historical context of the work; then I come to the music, which is the base for building your entire interpretation. I work note after note on the often difficult vocal parts, and build piece by piece until all this comes together on the stage. It's like a good wine. It needs time to mature!

How do you make 18th-century opera come alive for today's audiences?

That depends. Despite the fact that many people declared years ago that opera was dead, it is still alive! My wonderful generation of singers is making the past come alive in so many ways. In the past many of these operas were often cut, and now they are not. Then, too, today singers are required to be in good shape, to look great, to be athletic, and to be good actors. Young people are coming to the opera today, and that is fantastic, but there are still many challenges. In the past when opera was the public's only entertainment, audiences were more knowledgeable and educated about the art form. Today there are so many other forms of entertainment—some of them much less costly. Modern opera houses are making lots of efforts to show young people that there is nothing boring about opera! Today's young generation is so used to blaring music that they are often amazed when they come to the opera and hear fireworks of a different kind in an aria. This is almost like an acoustic miracle to them. To be able to give these people that experience—to touch them and let them experience those emotions—is fantastic for me as an artist.

Do you see a difference in today's audiences from when you began your career more than 20 years ago?

I have seen some changes. In Italy, with the enormous patrimony we have, I see people becoming a little detached. I have been to Russia, for example, and the people there admire Italian opera (and cars and dresses) so much that they stand up after every aria! They are so grateful to you for bringing them a foreign art form. Or in Germany, where many people listen to classical music and attend lots of performances, you feel you are talking to people who know what they are hearing, and there is a wonderful exchange of ideas and emotions.

Are there places you would like to perform that you may not yet have?

My performances in North America are very rare, and this is certainly not the way I would wish it. The American audiences are some of the best I have ever met. I performed twice with the Cleveland Orchestra in Rossini's *Stabat Mater* and Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, and I will never forget how involved the audience was. They followed every single word and each detail taking place on stage, and at the end their enthusiasm was incalculable! I would like to come back to the States as soon as possible and share with my friends across the Atlantic music and emotions.

Do you have any dream projects you would like to pursue in the future or artistic wishes to fulfill?

I recently realized one of my dreams, which I thought would never happen. I got to sing the Verdi Requiem, and it was an unforgettable experience! I do plan to start another CD project after a rest this summer. And then, I have another big dream. I wish that everyone would shut down his or her computer and Internet and go out to enjoy music in the opera house or concert hall or wherever art is live. I wish for them to experience the beauty that comes from this amazing exchange of ideas and emotions.