

KRISTINE OPOLAIS

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Kristine Opolais is one of the most sought-after sopranos on the international scene today, with a firmly established reputation amongst the world's pre-eminent singing actresses, combining lustrous tone and fierce dramatic intensity. Opolais appears at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Wiener Staatsoper, Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, Bayerische Staatsoper, Teatro alla Scala, Opernhaus Zürich and Royal Opera House Covent Garden. She is working with conductors such as Daniel Barenboim, Sir Antonio Pappano, Sir Simon Rattle, Sir Mark Elder, Daniel Harding, Andris Nelsons, Fabio Luisi, Kirill Petrenko and Semyon Bychkov.

Kristine Opolais is known for collaborations with the Metropolitan Opera, and in the last years her appearances in *La bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, the new productions of "Manon Lescaut" and *Rusalka* have all been broadcast in HD across the world.



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Kristine, thank you again for kindly accepting my invitation, for being the Cover Artist of our 4th issue! We had the chance to chat a little during the lockdown and I think that I am also talking for my readers when I say that we discovered such a greatly inspiring person, beyond the amazing artist we have already known that you are. You also kept us posted on Instagram with your daily activities and gave us a piece of your positivity. How did you spend these last months in order to remain in shape mentally, physically, but most of all, vocally?

Thank you for having me! I think the time we are living in is a very difficult one. It's a time for thinking and big changes for many people. There are, of course, good and bad changes happening everywhere. But if we think positively and we have love, in general, in our hearts, this kind of difficult time always turns into something better, for everyone. For me, this was a great time, because I finally had the opportunity to spend unlimited time at home with my daughter, which she really needed, as I've never been home enough for her. We couldn't travel together over the last year because she had started school. This time allowed me to get to know my daughter even better, she's changing quickly because she's eight - almost nine. She needed me and I needed her. It was also a time that I've come to understand more about myself, and what is most important for me. Who I am and what I want in my future. What I accept and what I do not accept anymore. In my job, with my team, in my personal life ... people show their true faces and selves in these times. I understood who really loves me and is really important in my life, and who is meant to be present for only a certain time in my life. I know myself better because I had the chance to stop and think a lot. We were all in the same situation, and we had no other choice. It was important to me not to stop singing at home. I missed singing, but not that much, so I'm proud of myself that I stayed calm and started to sing a little in my apartment. Then, I did some singing outside when the pandemic was over, and I could have a space in some music halls here in Latvia and at the Music Academy. I wanted to remain true to myself and to remind people that opera singers are like everyone else. We are all human. I wanted my fans - my Facebook and Instagram friends to really see who I am every day.

You recently had the experience of an online recital with IDAGIO from Teldex Studios in Berlin, entitled "Reflections – Italian & Russian Music", with feature music by Clara Schumann, Chopin, Verdi, Puccini and Tchaikovsky. Tell me more about it and about our great

Romanian pianist Alexandra Dariescu, who accompanied you on this journey. It must have been brand new experience. What do you miss the most, though, about the Live performance?

I'm thankful that I had this project with IDAGIO, because I had the chance to travel after five months of being in one place. It was a big experience already, to have this feeling and to understand how people normally feel when they travel twice a year for a vacation. It helped me to understand other people more. It was a big journey after five months of singing at home. Alexandra Dariescu is my new, dear friend, and we had a great time together. She is extremely professional and sensitive, so we had a great bond between us. She's talented, energetic, and positive, so it's been great to meet her. It was a fun experience for me, but of course, I miss the audience. When you do a recording there is typically no audience, and it was the same here, just the camera and audio people in the area, as well as Alexandra. I'm an imaginative person and I am someone whose soul needs energy from people, being next to me so that I can really perform. It was not easy to comprehend that there were a lot of people watching me right in the moment from home, it is a little different from what we usually do. It was a very new experience for me, and if it's part of our future it's a good way to perform and to stay in contact with our audiences and people who love music.

You declared yourself a huge lover of Puccini's music, of his female characters in particular. Since forever, those women have been one of the main subjects of discussions for singers, stage directors and for scholars and musicologists as well, due to their complexity, but also due to the many different ways in which they can be dramatically approached. Do you think that the so-called "Puccinian heroine" typology exists? Could all those women be defined by such things or instead, each one of them has her own unique personality?

For me, Puccini means freedom. I always say that, and I will never be tired of repeating it again and again. Puccini brings me freedom. Puccini also helps me to sing better as I understand these characters deeply. I'm a sensual and emotional person. I always hide my feelings, even when I seem in control, I never control myself very well because inside there is a storm of emotions, even when outside I am calm. Puccini brings me these very passionate emotions and feelings. It's difficult to explain in words, but Puccini is in my blood. I feel it. It's something very special.



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You need to have this kind of combination of tears and tragedy in your voice, and probably some in your heart, as well. I think the more experienced you are in your past with difficulties, or somehow with some emotional or relationship issues, the more this brings important points to light for you, as a Puccini singer. I never worry with Puccini, none of these women can ever be boring to me, even the smallest roles. And this special music - you hear it and you feel it - and if you don't feel it, it might mean you're a little bit blocked in your emotions and within your heart. Of course, there are those who don't understand and see the beauty of Puccini, but if you don't, you may not see all of the colors in this world and all of the emotions that we, as humans, are supposed to feel.

After saying for so many times on so many occasions that Giacomo Puccini is your voice's best friend, you have started to also explore the Verdian world lately, right? You offered us a few insights of what we could describe as the beginning of a beautiful and interesting friendship, haven't you?

I have a major interest right now in Verdi's roles. I've always been a big fan of Verdi operas, in particular a few special roles that I still have dreams to sing. I believe now I'm ready because I understand more about my body and my technique, so I have an interest to learn something new. There is a dream role that I'm still wishing about which I know will come to me very soon, I'm speaking of Desdemona. I would also love to sing Amelia from *Un ballo in maschera*. These are two beautiful arias, and an incredible duet in the second act after her aria, when she meets her lover. I have big feelings for this piece, it was my first opera while in the chorus of Latvian National Opera in Riga. It was a new production, and I fell in love with this opera and with this role, and my hopes and dreams focused a lot around this particular production. My voice responds well to this music, so for me, it's Desdemona and Amelia right now. And of course, Leonora in *La forza del Destino* and Aida, which I already sang in a few performances a long time ago at the beginning of my career in Riga. I will return with this role, opening the Festival with its new intendant in Riga next summer, so I am coming back for Aida and I'm preparing a lot before these performances. Verdi is not a free style, it's a very structured music. Verdi asks for more preparation, vocally. If Puccini gives freedom and you can interpret your way, it has to be brave and strong, then Verdi asks for structure. I'm happy to work on this, as I'm more calm - getting a little

older now! - and I love Verdi. These three roles I mentioned will be done in the next two years on many international opera stages.

In terms of style and vocality, how different are these two composers and what does the transition between a Puccinian role and a Verdian role mean to you?

With Puccini, it's important to have the right feelings and a strong technique, because the orchestration is huge. So, you basically just go "va-vank" with your voice - you need tears and passion, and to be a great actress to bring a strong character to the stage. Verdi is more structured and cultured vocally, and more disciplined. It's in a different box but it's a very beautiful box, a golden box with diamonds, which is good for your voice. There is no danger there, and that's the difference. Puccini does not take care of your voice, everything is up to you. Verdi really takes care of your voice. Puccini is dangerous, Verdi is not, but Verdi also requires a strong technique. With Puccini ... you can survive with a strong character, charisma, and strong vocal cords, and as I said, great acting. But there's no way you can sing Verdi well without a solid technique.

I know that you are very honest with yourself and with your public and very brave, so I allow myself to ask you... What was the most difficult moment of your career and what is the most important lesson that you have learnt during your career that you would like to share with your public and with the younger generation of singers, with whom I know that you are always in touch thanks to the social media and who are very much inspired by you?

The most difficult moment in my career was the one shortly before my divorce and during that time. It was a very bad time for art and any concentration, for me. There was no inspiration, and I felt very empty and unhappy, because a big part of me and my life was cut out. After fourteen years of being together with a person, with whom I have a child, it was impossible to be who I would like to be on stage. Sometimes some private life issues can help you on stage, but only if it's not as deep as my situation was. My health was also not very good because of these problems and changes. My advice to the younger generation is to trust your intuition. This is difficult because we're human, and we're supposed to think too, and can't make decisions in five seconds. However, the best decisions I've made have been in five seconds. What else can I say? Trust your intuition. In times when I trusted other opinions it was

worse, they were mistakes for me. Be more in contact with your inner voice and ask yourself what you really want and what you really like. For artists, it's difficult to do what we have to do. Everyone has an opinion - your manager, teacher, friends, parents - but what about yourself? What about you? Intuition and inner dialogue with yourself are the most important things.

Could you choose only one event in your life, one stage you stepped on and one role you performed that had a major impact on your career or even on yourself as a singer or as a person? Why?

Definitely *La Bohème* at The Metropolitan Opera. You may know this story already - if I have to choose or remember one role, one day, it's definitely this magic and scary HD performance that I stepped in for, which changed my career. It changed my position in the opera business. It was not the beginning of my career, but a great continuation which opened a lot of doors to me and also future contracts at The Met. It was a major and magic day. I didn't know at that moment that I was making history at The Metropolitan Opera with this crazy step-in, so I'm proud of this decision. I was very brave. I don't know if I would ever repeat this, but at that moment, someone woke me from my bed and said "go and do it." So I did.

What was the most difficult moment of your career and what is the most important lesson that you have learnt during your career that you would like to share with your public and with the younger generation of singers, with whom I know that you are always in touch thanks to the social media and who are very much inspired by you?

There was another difficult moment when I needed to make a change with my management. I felt that I didn't have power anymore and I was not enjoying my performances because I was chronically tired of working and traveling non-stop. I felt bad, lonely, and sick, and I missed my home and my child. It was also somehow a moment when, in every place or in every house there are coaches working on your language and style. We, as singers, always want to do our best, but some suggestions that people are offering us might not be good for our voices. What I learned is to stay strong. It's impossible and not necessary to be good for everybody. There are crazy situations when you have a lot of requests from conductors, stage directors, coaches ... it's important to stay within yourself and your body. Otherwise, it's easy to get tired and depressed if you're

trying to be good for all of these people involved with the production, all of the time. When you have a new production, you usually work for a director who's asking for a lot, and we aren't left with much for ourselves. It's difficult to leave something for ourselves. The biggest lesson I've learned is to say no to the people who are asking too much, or to anyone who wants you to work non-stop. It's very important to take breaks. We need to enjoy our profession, and when you are very tired, you cannot enjoy your profession or your performances, when you're struggling with the tiredness in your voice. Young singers who are starting a career with active management don't have much of a choice, and I started this way and made a big career because of this. But you need a manager who is protecting you and not going against you when you have any kind of struggle. It's difficult to find this, but times are changing now, and everyone should try to find a team who is taking care of them not only at the vocal level, but the mental, physical, and psychological level, as well. Otherwise, singers have to take care of themselves, too. It took a long time for me to learn how to say "no."

We all adore your way of communicating with your fans, mostly on Instagram, on so many subjects - sports, health, food, fashion and many others - and I was wondering if this habit of yours was born during the lockdown, in order to keep in touch with those who love you, or is it something that you've been doing since the beginning of your career? Do you think that this kind of communication is crucial for an artist in the 21st century?

Yes, it is my new way of communicating with my friends and fans, and people who love me. And even people who don't! During lockdown I started to get crazy doing nothing, and I didn't want to sing in my apartment, so little by little I had some interest to share more of my life with people. I never really did this before, and my PR team was asking me to send some photos to them. I didn't have time for this before, and had no real vacation during the last twelve years, and during the other times I was just trying to get my power back. I had no time for myself, which was crazy and a big mistake. So, now I try to live the life I should have been living before. I finally love myself, and I love to share this with my fans and the people who love me. I'm not a big fan of parties and these big events. I prefer to stay alone rather than go and have fun with a lot of people, it takes a lot of energy from me. It's very important at the beginning and into your active career,



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to bring your active energy back to yourself. Sports and exercise are important to love yourself, and for me, I've never been as active as now, and I have a lot of new followers of my artistic life. I'm trying to enjoy life, because in the last fifteen years I just worked, and I didn't enjoy life. I see now a lot of beautiful things every day. Sunset, sunrise, stars, good and bad weather ... in everything I find positive emotions and positive things. I am also setting a great example for my daughter. I also understood one important thing - if you do not love yourself, then it will be difficult for anyone to love you. My "new way" was born in lockdown, thanks to COVID!

What is the most *Charming* feature of the opera?

The most charming moment in my profession is that I am able to live so many different lives, and to go through so many different and difficult destinies on stage. For me it's very charming and very strong, this possibility to be so different every time. It's really great in terms of how to understand so many types of women and characters, and that's an amazing thing. Thank God for the possibility to live so many tragic and beautiful lives at the same time, when I'm living my own life.

Thank you very much, Kristine Opolais, for your inspiring answers & for being our 4th Lucky Charm!