

The Washington Opera

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The Washington Opera



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BRING ON THE NEW



The great Paolo Montarsolo, basso-buffo extraordinaire, returns to direct and sing the title role in *Don Pasquale*.

Above, Paolo Montarsolo starred in our 1979 production of *Don Pasquale* with Barbara Daniels as Norina. (Photo by Richard Braaten) **Left,** our popular 1986 production of *The Tsar's Bride* featured Elizabeth Knighton in the title role. (Photo by Joan Marcus)



With Eva Marton in the title role and a dazzling new production designed by our own Zack Brown, our *Turandot* is sure to be a smash hit.

Right, our new production of *Turandot* will feature the debuts of soprano Maria Spacagna as Liu and tenor Lando Bartolini as Calaf. (Photo by Opera Pacific/Prasad & Valerie Photography) **Below right**, our production of *La Cenerentola* is due for an Eisenhower Theater revival this season. (Photo by Joan Marcus)

Cenerentola and since Rossini celebrations are taking place this year, we decided to revive our production, last done here in 1984. Steven Mercurio, our conductor for *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, will wield the baton.

Back to the Opera House for our first production of *Turandot*. In our audience polls of recent years, this is the opera most requested by our audience. Patience is not necessarily a virtue, but in this case I think it has paid off. We didn't want to do *Turandot* until we had two things in place: a great *Turandot* and a handsome new production. I think we have both. Eva Marton, the *Turandot* of the day, will sing the title role. Zack Brown will design our new production, which will be staged by Lotfi Mansouri, director of the San Francisco Opera.

Finally, *The Cunning Little Vixen*. I've wanted to do Janacek operas here for some time. This is a composer whose works have never won the popularity they deserve. Frankly, I don't understand why. His operas are tonal, melodic, moving, and easily accessible. Two



years ago, while in London, I was invited to see a new production of *The Cunning Little Vixen* at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden. The production was one of the most beautiful and theatrical I had ever seen—but technically very difficult. I decided we simply had to overcome all the problems involved and give our public the opportunity to see a production that had all the British critics tumbling over one another to use the

most enthusiastic and superlative adjectives they could find. At the end of the performance, a student matinee, I thought I was at a rock concert. The screaming, squealing, cheering, standing ovation was clear testimony to the success of the opera. In our production, Deidra Palmour, Stephen West, Dana Krueger and a whole flock (or should it be litter?) of children will provide a delightful evening. The opera will be sung in English with surtitles. And I'm very pleased to have the head of another opera company working with us. An ardent Janacek advocate, Christopher Keene, director of the New York City Opera, will be the conductor of this great production, designed by William Dudley and originally directed by Bill Bryden.

There's the season; it looks like a good one. And I'm so pleased with the enthusiastic comments subscribers have made to me about it. Better yet, the subscriptions which we have already received are solid testimony to their support. Thank you!



A Turandot for All Time
EVA MARTON

"It

was Birgit who told me."

Soprano Eva Marton is sitting in a Chicago apartment, midway through an eight-performance stint as the Chinese princess Turandot, a role she brings to The Washington Opera this season in her capital debut. No one disputes that Marton is the world's leading interpreter of the icy heroine, a deadly beauty who condemns her unlucky suitors to death.

But it wasn't Marton who saw herself in this role. Birgit Nilsson, perhaps the greatest Turandot of the century, came up with the idea. Back in 1981, the two were together onstage at the Metropolitan Opera, one soprano at the end of an astonishing career, the other on the verge. Nilsson, at 63, was creating her last great role, the Dyer's wife in the mythical Strauss opera *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. Marton, who had yet to make it big, was singing the Empress, who finds herself in the service of the Dyer's wife.

"Birgit looked down at the stage during the orchestra rehearsal and said, very matter-of-factly, 'You are the next Turandot. Did you ever think about that?' I said 'Oh, no.' She said, 'But you will be.'

"It was such a surprise to me to hear her say it. I mean, Birgit was and is for me the greatest and biggest singer and human being. I was not prepared to hear it. I just shrugged and said okay. That same evening, my husband called me and I told him, 'The funniest thing happened. Birgit says I am the next Turandot.' And we laughed over it, kind of nervously, between ourselves, as a husband and wife will do."

by Nancy Malitz

No one disputes that Eva Marton is the world's leading interpreter of the icy Chinese princess. She has starred in 19 different productions of *Turandot*, whose high As and Bs she rules with thrilling command.



Opposite and above, Eva Marton in the title role of *Turandot* (with Vladimir Popov as Calaf). (Photo by Jim Caldwell/Houston Grand Opera).



The young Eva was able to take advantage of a state-supported education, enrolling in music at the Liszt Academy and playing on the national volleyball team, an involvement she says "did wonders for my breathing technique and stamina."

Above, in the title role of *La Gioconda*. Right, Eva Marton's first *Turandot* at the Vienna Staatsoper. Opposite, as Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*. (Photo by Jim Caldwell/Houston Grand Opera)

But such advice is not to be ignored. Zoltan Marton, who handles all business related to his wife's career, heard that Vienna wanted to do a new production of the opera in 1983 but had no Turandot. "Zoltan called my agent and asked if he had thought about proposing me," she says. "Of course, no one had thought of it. But when my agent called the opera and said, 'Why not Eva?' they immediately said, 'Sure, why not Eva?' and it was done."

SINCE THEN, EVA Marton has starred in 19 different productions of *Turandot*, whose high As and Bs she rules with thrilling command. In Chicago, she is a startling presence on new sets by the celebrated artist David Hockney, wearing yet another variation of the shimmering costumes and elaborate headdresses that are the princess' trademark. Today, though, the diva relaxes in a simple dress and flat shoes, her chestnut hair falling loosely to her shoulders. Like a schoolgirl, she bounds about the room, opening cards from Chicago admirers and re-telling with obvious delight the story of how her engagement grew from four to six to eight shows in order to meet ticket demand.

"There are some roles that are just yours, like this," she says, snapping her fingers in the air as she shakes her head in wonder. "That was the way I felt with *Turandot* the first time I did it in Vienna. It was a difficult production with very, very dangerous steps. Harold Prince directed it, and Lorin Maazel was the conductor. The feeling was wonderful from the start. I learned it, and I had it. I didn't need to push myself or exercise too much. It happens only once or twice in life that you can say that about a role. We were taping it for TV and for a record, and that should have scared me because I was singing it for the first time. But I was not scared because it felt so natural."

That breakthrough production is available to home viewers on video tape and laser disc, with José Carreras as Calaf and Katia Ricciarelli as Liu.

Marton's voice soars majestically above the Vienna Opera orchestra, flooding the house with those powerful high notes, so solid and unwavering that *Time* magazine described them as "buttressed like a Gothic cathedral."

FOR EVA MARTON, *Turandot* was the last big step to a major career that has expanded to include all three Brünnhildes in the *Ring* cycle and other Wagnerian heroines, as well as Strauss' Elektra and Salome and the bravura Italian opera heroines. "Before this, I did many, many performances and many new productions, but I always had the feeling after I finished that there was a wall, again a wall. I had big successes, applause, everything, a lot of money.

"But the next morning I would have a wall. I would have to prove myself all over again. *Die Frau ohne Schatten* opened the doors for me in New York, but not in Europe. It was *Turandot* that opened the doors for me there. After *Turandot*, there was no doubt. And it has been nine years."

For this woman at the top, the beginnings were meager. Born in Budapest, Hungary, to parents who were destitute after World War II, the young Eva nevertheless was able to take advantage of a state-





supported education, enrolling in music at the Liszt Academy and playing on the national volleyball team, an involvement she says "did wonders for my breathing technique and stamina."

When she married Zoltan, a physician like his father, the young couple turned the elder doctor's examining room into their living quarters. Her voice got them out. In 1972, the conductor Christoph von Dohnanyi put her on the roster of the Frankfurt Opera, where she cut her teeth on many roles and matured from the lighter spinto repertoire into the meatier parts. All the while, she sent money back to Hungary, where she was still a citizen. "We were happy but we were very poor," she says of those first years. "From my first paycheck, after the tax and the agent and the hotel, I had two marks."

By 1977, Eva Marton was getting enough lucrative guest engagements to quit Frankfurt and free-lance. The couple took up residence in Hamburg and became German citizens. "It was a wonderful period," she says. "I could sing in Vienna at night and be back in Hamburg by the time my kids (Diane and Zoltan, Jr.) woke up."

AS SUCH SUPPORTERS AS Gerard Mortier, head of the Brussels Opera and now the Salzburg Festival, pushed her into the bigger Strauss and Wagner roles, Marton began working her American and European debuts "like a ping pong ball—*Frau* and *La Gioconda* at the Met, *Turandot* in Vienna, Brünnhilde in San Francisco, *La Gioconda* in Vienna.

"I was noticed big in America first. Already in 1977 in San Francisco, I sang *Aïda* and the newspapers said it was the greatest voice they had heard in the last 10 years. But that's America. Here they say what they think directly. They are not ashamed to admit that you did well, even if they have never heard of you before. In Europe, the newspapers are more timid. They say, 'Maybe she will be big. We will see. Let's wait to see what happens with the records, with the videos.' They would never make such a prediction straight out."

Indeed, in 1986, when she persisted in carrying on with *Tosca*'s famous aria "Vissi d'arte" in spite of an unwitting sock to her jaw by baritone Juan Pons, *New York Times* chief critic Donal Henahan rated it so fine that "perhaps the Met should consider stipulating that all future *Toscas* have their jaws fractured." He praised her as the first diva with a sense of drama and energy big enough to fill Zeffirelli's lavish sets.

Marton's favorite *Tosca* is a Houston Grand Opera production by Jonathan Miller that updated the story to 1943, when women wore short skirts and the black coats of Nazi troops were everywhere. "It was the first time I felt anxious just walking into a church as *Tosca*," she says. "In this production it was a place for leaving messages, for partisans to meet, for a black market. It was super. Jonathan Miller was writing it anew, for our own time. In the second act, there was a big black table with a telephone that went straight to Hitler or Mussolini or someone like that. There



was a war map. And someone was there to write down everything I said."

As she travels throughout the world, eventually performing in all the important productions of each role she sings, she admits the daring ones intrigue her most. "We have to think about our contemporary audience. I believe the public is more educated, more grounded, than it ever was. It is okay to do something different. It must be true to the original, of course, but it should show the viewpoint of our own time."

"When we only sing, that's not theater. We need to bring in directors from the outside, from theater and film. It is not so important to read music. Reading the text is what is important."

Inside Marton is a would-be director, she admits, who can hardly restrain herself. She knows that now is not the time to put aside singing for something else, but someday she'll direct her own *Turandot*, and it will be different. "We must not talk about it," she says again and again, dropping hints in spite of herself.

"Mine won't have a happy end, I can tell you that much," she says. "I can use Alfano's music and end it another way. No, *Turandot* would not die. That's not what I mean. I don't want to talk about it."

"But in most *Turandots*, one can't do much as an actress. There's a protocol that she follows, and that is that. That does not mean there are not legitimate questions to be asked. For example, about Liu's death, how does *Turandot* react? Does it mean anything to *Turandot* that Liu kills herself? Was she dead anyway, as far as *Turandot* is concerned? Does it touch her? Is it a big surprise? And when the first prince fails her riddles, what does she feel? Then there is the whole issue of the chorus . . . but what am I saying?" she says, laughing, anticipating her life's next chapter.

Nancy Malitz is the music critic for the *Detroit News*.

A would-be director, someday she'll direct her own *Turandot*, and it will be different. "We must not talk about it," she says, dropping hints in spite of herself.

Right, Eva Marton as *Turandot*, with Vladimir Popov as Calaf. (Photo by Jim Caldwell/Houston Grand Opera)