

PROFILES OCTOBER 7, 2013 ISSUE

MASTERSINGER

How Joyce DiDonato, of Prairie Village, Kansas, conquered opera.

By Alex Ross

Monday night is karaoke night at the Applebee's on North Rock Road in Wichita. One evening in April, patrons lined up at a microphone to deliver such songs as "Desperado," "Sweet Home Alabama," and "You Raise Me Up." After someone bleated a selection from "Little Shop of Horrors"—"I am your dentist / And I get off on the pain I inflict"—the m.c. charitably said, "We've got a lot of talent in the house tonight."

They had more talent than they realized.

Sitting at a table in the back was the mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, one of the world's most celebrated opera singers. She had recently performed in Donizetti's "Maria



DiDonato executes florid bel-canto figures so precisely that they take on emotional weight, becoming structure rather than décor.

Photograph by Pari Dukovic

Stuarda," at the Metropolitan Opera, and was about to fly to London for Rossini's "La Donna del Lago," at the Royal Opera House. She had also toured Europe with a program of Baroque arias, called "Drama Queens," appearing each night in a voluminous scarlet silk gown designed for her by Vivienne Westwood. At Applebee's, DiDonato was dressed in jeans and a white top, her medium-length blond hair tucked under a gray trilby. A forty-four-year-old native of Kansas, she graduated from Wichita State University in 1992, and had returned to make appearances on campus and to see old friends. Although she travels for most of the year and has an apartment near Carnegie Hall, she also owns a condo in Kansas City; there, the previous night, she had sat by her west-facing windows, playing Mozart sonatas on her grandparents' old piano while a thunderstorm rolled in from the plains.

"Oh, my gosh, it's karaoke night!" DiDonato said to her friends. "This is wild. It feels like we all just came from choir." Everyone at the table had sung with her in the university chorus, and they used to gather weekly at this Applebee's to devour nachos. DiDonato bopped along to several numbers, her nostalgic smile turning quizzical when the singers ran into trouble. "A, B, C, / Simple as one,

two, three,” someone hollered.

“You should go up there, Joyce,” Tami Swope McDonald, DiDonato’s old roommate, who is a pianist at a local church, said. “Give them a master class in karaoke technique,” Mike Folsom, a Web designer who plays in country bands, added. “Should I?” DiDonato asked. “I could do a killer ‘Desperado.’” She applied an operatic timbre: “*Desss-pehr-ab-do*.” Her friends urged her on. “Oh, no,” she said, putting a hand to her throat and assuming a fragile-diva air. “I must rest the voice.”

The conversation meandered from Renaissance polyphony to the Wichita State basketball team, the Shockers, who had recently reached the Final Four. DiDonato said, authoritatively, “If the game had ended five minutes earlier, we would have won.” She had checked March Madness scores on the Internet after her “Drama Queens” performances.

The concert’s title plays with the stereotype of the diva as an affected, tempestuous creature. This does not describe DiDonato. The adjectives “cheery,” “upbeat,” and “down-to-earth” follow her around in the press; it’s often mentioned that she once dreamed of being a backup singer for Billy Joel. But there’s a sly, self-aware edge to her enthusiasm. Her conversation is mercurial, with personae flitting in and out: the Country Gal (“Ahm not soundin’ very erudite today”), the Airy Diva (“How glad I am that we had these few stolen moments”), the Young Person (“Um, oh, my God, Rossini is, like, amazing?”). She is ambitious, impatient with routine, and unintimidated by conductors and directors who condescend to her. In a business that abhors political controversy, she unabashedly expresses liberal views. Two years ago, she berated Sam Brownback, the governor of Kansas, for cutting arts funding, and this past summer she refused an invitation to appear with the Novaya Opera, in Moscow, in reaction to Russian legislation forbidding “propaganda of homosexuality to minors.” She is literate in pop culture and adept at social media, yet she is a classicist at heart, disciplined and tradition-minded.

*“I’ve decided to purge our material goods,
starting with your crap.”*

In the liner notes to “ReJoyce”—a new greatest-hits compilation, drawn from her thirty or so recordings—DiDonato characterizes her roles as “dreamers, princes, queens, sorceresses, mad ladies, lovers, fighters, teenagers, heroes, traitors, nuns.”

(Mezzos sometimes portray male characters.) The core of her repertory is bel-canto opera, which, defined broadly, stretches from Baroque fare to early-nineteenth-century works by Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti. On October 13th, she will perform a showpiece of the genre, Rossini’s cantata “Giovanna d’Arco,” with James Levine and the Met Orchestra, at Carnegie Hall. Such music requires agility in ornaments, trills, and rapid-fire runs. DiDonato executes these figures with such purposeful precision that they take on emotional weight, becoming structure rather than décor. There is a warmth in the voice that can intensify into fire.

“Tanti affetti” (“So many emotions”), the climactic aria of “La Donna del Lago,”

which she has sung more than a dozen times in the past year, contains a two-octave descent down the chromatic scale, as if a hand were being swept across a piano keyboard. DiDonato thinks like a pianist as she sings the passage. But she transforms this technical display into a dramatic gesture—a fusion of the airy and the earthy, a dream that turns into a demand. “It’s not just for the sake of being impressive,” she told me. “It’s such a wafty, fine, silver-spun web of a line. It’s something shivering inside of you. The closer to perfection I can get it, the more thrilling it can be.”

The morning after the Applebee’s reunion, DiDonato spoke at a Wichita State alumni breakfast, where she was introduced as “this beautiful Shocker diva.” After teaching a master class, she attended a gathering of Women United for the Shockers—a wealthy crowd, but not necessarily an opera-savvy one. “I perform in those places you see named on the bottom of your perfume bottles,” she told them. Although she kept her politics in check, she made a point of promoting the W.S.U. band: “They may not have recruiters giving them million-dollar contracts, but the guys in the band are every bit as talented as the guys on the court.”

That night, DiDonato drove us back to Kansas City. A pensive soundtrack of Edith Piaf and Ella Fitzgerald played on the stereo. Her life has not been without complication: she has been married twice, and is again single. “It’s strange being back,” she said. “My friends who are band teachers and choral directors, my sister who’s a schoolteacher—that was going to be my future, too.” She mentioned the Gwyneth Paltrow movie “Sliding Doors,” which shows how a woman’s life might have been different had she missed a train one day in London.

During her master class in Wichita, DiDonato told the students, “What has always been the key for me is the work. In these situations where things are overwhelming, or devastating, or where I’ve felt completely lost, or where I’ve been soaring on top of the world and getting a little out of touch, or where maybe I’m feeling all those things at once, my go-to tool is always the music in front of me. I warm up, I get into character, I look at my score, I go back and do the work. What interests me is the process: how do we get from this point to that point? The longer I do this, the less magical it seems. It’s just this physiological thing happening. But, as physiology goes, it’s pretty wonderful.”

In the Baroque period, when opera first took hold, female singers were generally described as sopranos, whatever their range. Some specialized in lower parts, and the term “mezzo-soprano”—now understood to mean a singer having a range of about two octaves, starting on the G or the A below middle C—was entering circulation. In practice, though, composers tended to limit female roles to a range that fits sopranos and mezzos alike. Indeed, some of the most sumptuous leading parts in Baroque opera are best suited to the kind of mezzo who can generate continuous heat in the middle register.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the stratospheric soprano had become an operatic staple, dazzling audiences with sustained high notes. DiDonato can hit a high C, but prefers not to linger there. “God, I’d love to sing Tosca or

Salome,” she told me. “But, fortunately, I have Rossini.” Rossini found inspiration in two singers with unusually strong lower ranges. For Geltrude Righetti-Giorgi, he wrote Rosina, in “The Barber of Seville,” and the title role of “La Cenerentola.” For Isabella Colbran, whom he eventually married, he created a string of parts, including Elena in “La Donna del Lago.” These low-flying, fleet-figured roles suit DiDonato’s voice uncannily.

The ascendancy of Wagnerian opera sent bel canto into decline. Wagner himself lambasted most of it as meaningless frippery. With the exception of “Barber” and a few other perennial hits, the older Italian repertory subsided. “La Donna del Lago” received no performances between 1860 and 1958. After the Second World War, the likes of Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland, Montserrat Caballé, Marilyn Horne, and Beverly Sills led a bel-canto revival, restoring dignity to music that had been dismissed as the equivalent of cheap sentimental fiction.

According to the musicologist Philip Gossett, whose 2006 book “Divas and Scholars: Performing Italian Opera” is a canonical text, DiDonato represents a further progression. “Her voice is perfect for bel canto,” Gossett told me, after watching DiDonato rehearse this summer. “She has worked through the *floritura*”—the florid line—“so carefully, and she finds great naturalness in it.” Sills and Callas, he said, “sang these pieces magnificently and brought them back to life, but if you’re really going to do them you have to understand how they *work*. Joyce understands.”

Prairie Village, Kansas, where DiDonato was born, evokes some lonely place out of a Willa Cather novel. Less romantically, it is a suburb of Kansas City. DiDonato’s father, Donald Flaherty, was a self-employed architect who designed houses in the area; a Bach and Bruckner fan, he also led the choir at St. Ann’s, the local Catholic church. There he met DiDonato’s mother, Claire, who was the church organist. DiDonato was the sixth of seven children. Her father died in 2006, her mother in 2007.

DiDonato took me on a tour of her youth in Prairie Village: the small Cape Cod-style house where she grew up; the former home of Tippin’s Restaurant and Pie Pantry, where she waited tables; the local shopping center, where she bought Billy Joel sheet music. “I guess it seems a little Norman Rockwell now,” she said. “Of course, it didn’t feel idyllic at the time. I was one more tortured adolescent.” She pointed out a boyfriend’s house. “I walked home from there on prom night,” she said. “*Alo-o-o-one*. He was gay.”

We stopped by St. Ann Catholic School, which DiDonato and her siblings attended. One of her sisters, Amy Hetherington, has been teaching music there for many years; DiDonato visited her first-grade class, and sang along with the kids.

“Are you famous?” one kid asked her.

DiDonato said, “Kinda, yeah. Let me ask—who are your favorite singers?” Adam Levine and Lady Gaga were named. “How about, like, One Direction?”

There was violent yelling, pro and con. “O.K., so, anyway, you have this whole world, with pop and rock and country—”

“And Justin!” a girl called out.

“And Justin Bieber. Totally! Then you have jazz, and rhythm and blues, which maybe your parents like. And over here you have a little pocket, a fabulous pocket, called classical music. People know me in that part of the world. But if you ask people in the other part”—she gestured back to the realm of Gaga—“they’ve probably never heard of me.”

DiDonato is content to be a star within classical music and not quite a household name outside it. She does have one pop-culture dream, however. “I’d love to be on ‘The Ellen DeGeneres Show,’” she told me. “I like how she celebrates music. I’d say, ‘Here’s another form of it, Ellen. I dare you to dance to opera!’ ”

After attending St. Ann, DiDonato went to Bishop Miege High School, where she began singing in musicals. In an early demonstration of her work ethic, she showed up for a “My Fair Lady” audition fully costumed as Eliza Doolittle. She also studied piano, wallowing in the opening movement of the “Moonlight” Sonata and struggling to master the finale. She keeps up her piano, and has a ritual of playing Bach during vocal warmups. Backstage at the Liceu, in Barcelona, I heard a fluent rendition of Bach’s Two-Part Invention in F emanating from her dressing room.

By the time she arrived at Wichita State, in 1987, she assumed that her future lay in teaching. As a music-education major, she led church groups and participated in training programs at Wichita schools. “I spent time at one really rough elementary school,” she recalled. “The kids had serious problems—abuse issues, other major issues. I found it very hard, very demoralizing. I have infinite admiration for anyone who sticks with it.”

Opera grabbed her suddenly. In her youth, she had paid little attention to the art, despite her father’s attempts to spark her interest; next to Shaun Cassidy and the Go-Go’s, operatic voices sounded artificial. She studied voice mainly to obtain more scholarship money. In 1990, though, she found herself mesmerized by a PBS telecast of “Don Giovanni.” Because the W.S.U. music school was relatively small, she was able to try out for lead roles. “If I’d been a music-ed major at Juilliard, that would never have happened,” she said.

“We’re the blue dot. We want to be at the red dot. Instead, we’re in prison.”

Shortly after graduating, she married her college sweetheart, Alex DiDonato. (The two stayed together for a decade, and she kept his name after the divorce.) In 1992, she enrolled at the Academy of Vocal Arts, in Philadelphia, where she entered the

hardest phase of her development. “In Wichita, I’d had this close, supportive community,” she told me. “At A.V.A., I felt isolated. I was definitely not one of the stars of the program. And I needed that—I had to attend to the most basic stuff. I worked very hard on my language, on Italian and French. Also, I learned

not to cry in front of the conductor.”

In 1995, she won a place in the apprentice program at the Santa Fe Opera, which amounts to a crash course in the opera life: performing bit parts, covering major roles, singing in the chorus. She participated in a master class given by the actor, director, and TV personality Charles Nelson Reilly, who asked DiDonato to sing Rossini’s “Una voce poco fa” while pretending to needlepoint. Bruce Donnell, a veteran Santa Fe director, remembers being transfixed by the “sight of Joyce maniacally knitting as she sang.”

The next year, she joined the young-singer studio at the Houston Grand Opera. Almost at once, the voice guru Stephen Smith, who at the time was an instructor in the program, warned her of impending disaster. Smith remembers saying, “Joyce, you’re talented and obviously very musical, but there is simply no future in the way you’re singing. You’re singing exclusively on youth and muscle.” He placed his hand under her chin and pointed out the extreme tension in her tongue muscle. DiDonato went into a corner and curled up in a fetal position.

With Smith’s help, she set about revising her technique. The process took several years and led to awkward moments. At a benefit in Houston, she performed “Non più mesta,” from “Cenerentola,” and cracked on all three high B’s, her voice splattering around the pitch. DiDonato was crestfallen, but Smith saw progress: she was letting go of the tightness. The next step was to recover control.

In 1998, she had a series of breakthroughs: she drew national notice singing in the première of Mark Adamo’s “Little Women,” in Houston; she won first prize from the George London Foundation for Singers; and she received second prize in Plácido Domingo’s Operalia competition, in Hamburg. Yet she aroused little interest from opera professionals—except in the case of Simon Goldstone, a British agent. He told me, “I was so enthusiastic that she thought there was something wrong with me.”

Goldstone, who still manages DiDonato’s career, sent her across Europe, where she had thirteen auditions in sixteen days. One leg of the trip involved an overnight bus ride in Spain with a chicken on board. After each audition, Goldstone heard such feedback as “Not quite ready” and “Very American, with all the hair.” (At the time, DiDonato had a fluffy mane.) But after her thirteenth audition, for the Paris Opéra, Goldstone received a call within fifteen minutes: Paris wanted her to sing Rosina in a 2002 production of “The Barber of Seville.” When that booking became known, other companies suddenly showed greater interest. DiDonato ended up appearing at La Scala in 2001, causing a sensation in “Cenerentola.” A few years later, Beverly Sills heard her in “Barber,” and let it be known that DiDonato had a “real trill.” She was on her way.

What might have happened if Paris, too, had turned her down? “I don’t think I was ever on the point of quitting, but I certainly had many moments when I questioned what I was doing,” DiDonato said. “I always tell younger singers,

MOST

- NEWS DESK**
1. A Doctor’s V
Trumpcare fr
By Charles Betl

RYAN LIZZA

 2. The Entire T
Tipping Poin
By Ryan Lizza

DAILY COMMENT

 - 3. Paul Ryan an
About Health
By Jeffrey Fran

CULTURE DESK

 - 4. The Vexing I
Season’s “Bac
By Doreen St. F

DAILY CARTOON

 - 5. Daily Cartoo
28th
By Emily Flake

Our Thirty Most Popular

‘Give yourself permission to walk away.’ There are so many other paths to follow. And I know that all this has a finite shelf life. You know the four phases of an opera career? ‘Who is Joyce DiDonato? Get me Joyce DiDonato! Get me someone like Joyce DiDonato! Who is Joyce DiDonato?’ ”

DiDonato was thirty-six when she made her Met debut, in “The Marriage of Figaro,” in 2005. Her slow maturation was not unusual. She needed not only to master technique but to absorb multiple styles, develop an artistic personality, adapt to the pressures of performing, and, she says, “live more of life.” Singers tend to acquire a thicker, darker timbre as they get older. Since entering her forties, DiDonato has begun setting aside some of the roles with which she made her name—Rosina in “Barber,” Cherubino in “Figaro”—and started tackling heavier parts. One is the lead in “Maria Stuarda,” which she first sang in Houston, in April and May of 2012, and then in the Met production, seven months later. To accomplish this shift, she must adjust her technique. In some ways, she is out to prove herself again—a position in which she seems to thrive.

“*Medicate!*”

Donizetti’s drama, about the imprisonment and execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, was composed in 1834 and 1835. The singers whom the composer had in mind for the title role, Giuseppina Ronzi De Begnis and Maria Malibran, had huge ranges, stretching from contralto depths to soprano heights. One of the few modern singers with a similar reach was Callas, and not for long. Although Callas never played Maria Stuarda, many fans expect the role to have the vivid colorings for which Callas was celebrated, as well as other extravagant touches. DiDonato resists this expectation. “At the Met, we weren’t going for hysterics,” she told me. She delivered an over-the-top version of the opera’s most famous line—her character’s hissing “Vil bastarda!” at Queen Elizabeth I. “We wanted to see if we could make more realistic theatre out of it. That’s my aesthetic. If people want histrionic behavior, I’m not their cup of tea.”

The Met production opened on New Year’s Eve. DiDonato’s immaculate musicianship and nuanced acting won widespread praise, although some critics had reservations. David Shengold, in a generally admiring review in *Opernwelt*, said that DiDonato had sounded “occasionally wiry”; the musicologist and blogger Micaela Baranello wrote skeptically of a tone “more thin than plush.” DiDonato herself, while confident of her portrayal, had concerns about her high notes. Although she was singing a version of the score—first devised for the great English mezzo Janet Baker—in which many passages had been transposed down a half step or a whole tone, some sustained A-naturals and A-flats were giving her trouble. DiDonato felt that her breath was “stalling out.” Bel canto is impossible without an exceptionally easy flow of air from the lungs to the vocal cords.

Two weeks later, midway through the run, DiDonato had an hour-long tuneup session with Deborah Birnbaum, a vocal coach who specializes in breath technique. They had been working together, off and on, for a couple of years.

Coming up was the live broadcast of “Maria Stuarda”—part of the Met’s HD Live series, which is transmitted to nearly two thousand movie theatres around the world.

DiDonato met Birnbaum at the Voice Studio, a space in midtown that is owned by the Broadway singer Kurt Peterson. Down the hall, someone was working on “The Man That Got Away.” Birnbaum began by looking at notes that she had jotted down during the previous night’s “Stuarda.” “One note, I felt, was out of tune,” she said.

“One note?” DiDonato asked, laughing. “It was a *lo-o-ong* night, Deborah.”

Birnbaum went on to observe that DiDonato sounded more comfortable descending rather than ascending. “You’re not using as much air on the way down,” she said.

“Ah, that makes sense,” DiDonato said.

They began some exercises. DiDonato vocalized down a fifth, from G to middle C—“oo-ee, oo-ee, oo-ee, oo-ee, oo-ee”—and repeated the descent on progressively higher notes, up to the next G. They discussed vowel sounds and the shapes that the mouth must make to form them. Creating an “ee” sound feels more constricted, particularly compared with “ah,” but Birnbaum noted that with sufficient breath it can become rich and expansive. “Allow your breath to travel on its fastest frequency,” she said. “You change the shape of it at the top, and that stalls out the air.”

Birnbaum compared DiDonato’s facial structure with Renée Fleming’s: “Renée’s face is round. She makes this very pure sound, which seems to keep getting wider. You have a very different facial architecture. It’s long. You can think about making the sound taller.” She had DiDonato scale up and down the octave, keeping her mouth narrower. The sound opened up more as she ascended.

“It’s fun to boss great singers around,” Birnbaum said to me.

Later, as DiDonato sang passages from “Stuarda,” Birnbaum advised her to breathe more deeply on the lower notes—“If you want to jump up, you have to go down first”—and had her think about “pulsing” rather than “pulling.” Birnbaum brought out an exercise band, and they pulled back and forth on it as DiDonato sang, acting out the “pulse” effect. “Wow!” DiDonato exclaimed. “I love it! The Met won’t mind if I bring rubber bands onstage, right? It’ll be like a German production!”

In the HD Live performance, those A-naturals and A-flats did seem to come a touch more easily. “That loud, sustained stuff is so hard,” she told me later. “But I felt those phrases worked better and better as it went along. Most of the roles that I’ve worked on, thankfully, have felt pretty consistent, once I get them up and running. This one is so challenging. It’s also an iconic prima-donna role. Beverly Sills sang it, Joan Sutherland sang it, Janet Baker sang it. To be able to enter that echelon, with a modicum of success, puts me in a different category.”

"Your reaction is not uncommon. A lot of my patients experience 'roid rage."

An hour after the session with Birnbaum, DiDonato went to Lincoln Center to give a master class, under the auspices of the Marcello Giordani Foundation. Many young singers idolize DiDonato, not only because of her voice but because of her blog (called Yankee Diva), her tweets (four thousand and counting), and her YouTube videos, in which she gives advice to novices. A woman in front of me wrote DiDonato's name in her notebook and drew a heart next to it.

In opera legend, a master class is a vehicle for a domineering personality to tell vain stories and stomp out vain hopes. DiDonato is sunny, avid, exhortatory. At the Giordani event, she declared that singing is something you never master, that the voice "is just a wild beast that you sort of just hold on to." She mentioned that she had just come from a lesson.

DiDonato makes it clear to students that a singing career is strewn with technical and psychological obstacles. She tells them of her own spells of doubt, gently suggesting that if the anxiety becomes overwhelming it may be time to quit. (In a YouTube video about loneliness on the road, she says, "It's not a life that everybody is cut out for.") In her buoyant manner, she fires off judgments that would sound brutal coming from anyone else: "I couldn't hear the words. Without the words, we don't care"; "We know exactly what's coming, and we stop listening." At Wichita State, she chided the vocal students for not attending the HD Live broadcasts: "It's like wanting to be a basketball player and never watching the N.B.A. on TV. If you don't go, I don't know what you're doing here."

Still, egos rarely seem bruised, and DiDonato's comments often yield improvements. She told one of the Giordani singers, "You make this lovely column of sound on all these vowels, but you need to put consonants into it." When, on the second try, consonants were stressed, words materialized where before there had been only sounds. And with the words came expression. DiDonato herself is a master of diction; the text always shines through.

When she is teaching, she often shows how she delves into the inner worlds of characters. In Wichita, she worked with the soprano Isabel Velázquez on "Senza mamma," from Puccini's "Suor Angelica." Angelica, banished to a convent by her family, addresses the illegitimate child who was taken from her and who is now dead.

"So what's happening inside her?" DiDonato asked. "Did she ever name him? If she didn't, maybe she couldn't. Maybe now's the only time—the first time—she's let herself think about him. Or maybe she thinks about him at 6:30 A.M., when she's the only one in the herb garden, and she lights one candle for him but doesn't say his name. Or she puts rocks in the garden that spell out, say, 'Antonio,' which nobody can see. That's the kind of process that makes it personal. Quadruple that 'm' on *morto*, so that it's full of angst and heartbreak. Everything you're singing is a way to bring him back to life—it's a way to hold him, it's a way to kiss him, it's a way to tell him, 'I'm so sorry.'"

After singing “Maria Stuarda” at the Met, DiDonato settled into the more familiar territory of “La Donna del Lago.” Because Rossini’s score fits her voice so snugly, the challenge is less vocal than dramatic: how to animate a work that is notable more for the brilliance of its vocal showpieces than for the coherence of its libretto. “Elena’s behavior is puzzling in a lot of ways,” DiDonato said. “But, like so many of Rossini’s women, she is strong and complex. I have yet to find a weak female character in Rossini. Cenerentola never wavers from her ideal. The Countess in ‘Comte Ory’ is five steps ahead of everybody.”

“Donna” is based on Sir Walter Scott’s 1810 poem “The Lady of the Lake.” King James V of Scotland, travelling incognito, happens upon Ellen Douglas, whose clan is feuding with him. Bewitched by the sight of her boating on Loch Katrine, he falls, vainly, in love. After a string of complications, the King pardons the rebels and blesses Ellen’s marriage to her true love, Malcolm. Rossini wrote the opera in haste, in 1819, delegating most of the recitative and one of the arias to an unknown collaborator. The libretto, by Andrea Tottola, is lacklustre. Yet the situation is arresting: the heroine refuses a man of power and suffers no consequences.

“You see? That noise you heard was just the man-monster Daddy cobbled together using stolen cadaver parts.”

DiDonato sang “Donna” at the Royal Opera in May and June. In July and August, she sang it again, at the Santa Fe Opera. The London production, directed by John Fuljames, was framed by a conceit in which figures representing Scott and Rossini join a gathering of Scottish aristocrats to summon

a fantasy of Highland life; the lead characters step out of display cases and enact the drama. The Santa Fe version, by Paul Curran, was more straightforward, with Scots in pelts trooping across rough terrain. Although some singers dislike nontraditional approaches—the mezzo Teresa Berganza recently declared that revisionist directors should be thrown in jail—DiDonato is open to different styles, provided that the director knows the score and can justify his or her choices. She enjoyed the London experience, and also a “Donna” directed by Christof Loy three years ago, in which Malcolm appeared to be Elena’s doppelgänger. However, a production in Milan and Paris frustrated her, because the director, Lluís Pasqual, seemed indifferent to the piece. “If you have nothing to say about an opera, just walk away,” she told me.

In late June, I went to Santa Fe to watch a week of “Donna” rehearsals. They had begun on June 17th; opening night was July 13th. The company is fairly young, having been launched in 1957, but its canny casting and wide-ranging repertory attract audiences from all over. The theatre is perched on a mesa a few miles north of the city, its sides open to the dry mountain air, its curving roof suspended from stays and cables. From afar, it resembles a satellite dish receiving operatic signals from deep space.

Singers call Santa Fe “opera camp”: the mood is serious but relaxed. I saw the tenors Lawrence Brownlee and René Barbera, who portrayed rivals for Elena’s love in “Donna,” playing Ping-Pong in the cantina. Of course, it’s a bit more

bohemian than most summer camps. Gay men have shaped the company's identity from the start, and remain a strong presence. DiDonato, many of whose closest friends are gay, was in her element. When the Supreme Court overturned the Defense of Marriage Act, on June 26th, DiDonato celebrated by turning up in a blue tank top and orange pants. "This is as much of the ROYGBIV spectrum as I could put together on short notice," she explained.

The singers rehearsed in Gaddes Hall, down the hill from the theatre. Barbera walked around with a sword hanging from his plaid shorts. The lush-voiced mezzo Marianna Pizzolato played Malcolm; the potent young bass-baritone Wayne Tigges was Douglas, Elena's father. Stephen Lord, a genial Santa Fe veteran, conducted, with Carol Anderson approximating the orchestra at the piano.

Act II opens with "Oh fiamma soave" ("Oh sweet flame"), an aria of romantic obsession sung by the King, who is disguised as a shepherd named Uberto. Brownlee, whose command of the Rossini style matches DiDonato's, sang it impeccably. Then Elena enters and fails to recognize Uberto, despite having sung duets with him in the first act. The oddity of the situation prompted jokes among the cast.

"Hey, I'm the tenor from the first act!" Brownlee said. "You don't remember me?"

DiDonato, in her Airy Diva voice, responded, "Oh, so many tenors come and go, I can hardly keep track."

"I feel like I'd stand out," Brownlee added, with a smile. "I'm a very tan Scot." Brownlee is African-American. He and DiDonato have worked together often; the night that she found out her mother had died, the two were singing "Barber" at the Met.

Curran cut short the banter. A compact, fast-talking Scot who has worked everywhere from Sydney to St. Petersburg, he has a wide frame of reference and a fine understanding of ritual. A former dancer, he wages war on the stock attitudes that opera singers recycle generation after generation—for example, the tenorial arm gesture that he characterizes as "Please examine our fine display of jewelry" or "Would you like a pie?"

In Curran's scheme, Elena's wayward behavior was the affect of a Romantic-era "flower child" who has been freed from social mores. The King's mercy toward Elena's lover and father at the end was portrayed as part of a larger political maneuver to unify Scotland and consolidate his power. As discussions spilled over into the lunch breaks, I had the sense that Curran and his cast had thought more about the story than the original creators had.

DiDonato was restless on the rehearsal stage, moving differently each time she sang a passage. For the phrase "Squarciami un cor che mai darti saprà mercé" ("Tear out the heart that will never show you mercy"), she initially clutched at her chest; next, she held her hands in front of her abdomen, extending her fingertips; another time, she thrust her hands away from her hips. She fired off

questions: In real life, could she grab the blade of a sword without cutting herself? Would the set have an uneven floor, to evoke the Scottish countryside? (She learned to be alert to such matters after slipping and fracturing her leg during a “Barber” in London. To the wonder of all, she kept singing.) She also goofed around, breaking into Bob Fosse moves, rocker-chick gyrations, and spread-handed hip-hop gestures. “I loosen up this way,” she told me. “Somehow, it makes me ready for whatever the director throws at me next.”

“New York Times,” Saturday crossword, 1999, twenty-two minutes, ballpoint.”

At the end of the week, the company arrived at “Tanti affetti,” Elena’s closing aria of thanks to the King:

So many emotions in this moment

Surround my heart

That I cannot explain to you

My enormous joy.

Let silence be speech . . .

Let all be told in a broken voice . . .

Ah Signor! Beautiful peace,

You knew how to give it to me.

The aria begins with undulating patterns in the orchestra, over which the singer has a descending three-note figure. (Think “Desperado.”) The vocal line grows more elaborate, with glittery runs, turns, and that downward chromatic scale. Yet the finery remains rooted in the serenity of the opening, embodying the paradox of the text: Elena is singing about her inability to speak.

Gossett, in “Divas and Scholars,” notes that bel-canto composers treated singers as collaborators, revising the music to suit their skills and limitations. An appendix to the critical edition of “La Donna del Lago” presents three sets of variants that Rossini devised for “Tanti affetti,” and DiDonato has spliced together her favorite elements. With her Sills-approved trill, she takes advantage of a sequence of three trills on B-flat. In a few places, she introduces passages of her own invention that are indistinguishable in style from the rest.

“The initial figure is like a little ripple on the water, setting the voice in motion,” DiDonato told me. “The real depth of the piece is when she sings, ‘Ah Signor! la bella pace.’ In every scene, she is talking about peace: ‘I don’t have peace, I’m never going to find peace, why can’t you all just find peace?’ Now, finally, she finds peace in her heart, which is also peace for her country. And we get to explore that feeling in slow motion. So often, opera gives us the luxury to stay in a single emotion for more than a moment. We need that so much in our technologically distracted world.”

Curran saw no need for excess physical activity. “It’s all in the words, in the music,” he said. He had DiDonato fix her gaze mostly on the King, turning occasionally to Malcolm and Douglas. As usual, she found a palpable

motivation for sending curlicues into the air. A run of sixteen thirty-second notes on the word “me” might seem self-indulgent, but she reached out her hand to Malcolm as her voice rose and fell, turning the notes into an invisible bond between the characters. The singers sitting in the back row stopped texting.

DiDonato was staying in a spacious house above the village of Tesuque, with a view toward Santa Fe. She was recovering from a turbulent year: her second marriage, to the conductor Leonardo Vordoni, had ended some months earlier, after seven years. Although she avoided discussing the relationship, she did mention the strangeness of singing emotionally heated repertory—the “Drama Queens” program included “Da torbida procella” (“I am tossed like a ship”) and “Lasciami piangere” (“Let me weep”)—while in an emotionally heated state. By the time she got to Santa Fe, she was feeling calmer. “It was a gruelling tour,” she told me. “But there was something healing in being forced to get out there and perform.”

When DiDonato arrives for a gig, she likes to sign up for some form of physical training. In Santa Fe, she opted for kickboxing. Her trainer was Marty Herrera, a man with a tough face and a sweet personality, who works at the Santa Fe Spa. DiDonato was impressed by the fact that he had been an extra on the TV show “Breaking Bad,” which filmed in Albuquerque. (In the swimming-pool massacre in Season 4, he is seen falling backward onto a deck chair.) Herrera told me, “Usually, the opera people, they’re, like, ‘I don’t want to hit anything,’ but she’s fierce.”

While warming up, DiDonato explained to Herrera why kickboxing might come in handy: “The kind of roles I play, almost half the time I’m portraying a boy or a young man, so I like to have more physical options. I want to be able to access some kind of masculine energy.” She was thinking ahead to her performance as Romeo in Bellini’s “I Capuleti e i Montecchi,” at the Lyric Opera of Kansas City, in September. “In my opening scene, it’s forty enemy men and me. I have to come on and own the stage.” She jabbed at Herrera’s mitts with her hands and feet.

*“The street’s lower than the sidewalk,
dear.”*

Herrera was awarded a cameo in a promotional video that DiDonato created for “ReJoyce,” the greatest-hits album. He shouts out the title amid a zany montage that also features such opera celebrities as Thomas Hampson, Samuel Ramey, and Frederica von Stade. DiDonato had assembled the record by crowdsourcing: her fans picked the title, chose the playlist, and took the cover photograph. They also provided guerrilla publicity. Harry Rose, a high-school sophomore who blogs under the name Opera Teen, went to Rockefeller Plaza for a taping of NBC’s “Today” show, and held up a sign reading, “ReJoyce!”

On August 14th, I returned to Santa Fe to see one of the final performances of “La Donna del Lago.” DiDonato generally avoids socializing in the hours before going onstage, but she had made an exception:

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the Supreme Court Justice, was in town to attend the opera, as she does almost every summer, and the company had organized a lunch in her honor. Ginsburg, an opera devotee since her teen-age years, has featured DiDonato in in-house musicales that she and music-loving colleagues on the Court present once or twice a year.

Opera dominated the lunchtime conversation. Ginsburg, in her elegant, sotto-voce manner, told of her early encounters with the art. She and others at the table quizzed DiDonato about the HD Live series. Does DiDonato ever find the cameras distracting? (A robot camera that zips along the lip of the stage does sometimes catch her eye.) Does she ever adjust her performances for the camera? (For “Maria Stuarda,” she had been employing a physical tremor to indicate the queen’s age and fragility; Peter Gelb, the Met’s general manager, suggested limiting the shaking slightly for the broadcast, to avoid distracting the audience during closeups.)

As the lunch wound down, DiDonato turned the conversation toward matters that were on everyone’s mind but that no one dared bring up. “Justice Ginsburg, I would love to say one thing, on a personal note,” she said. “I’m speaking for so many friends when I say that the whole DOMA decision—I was rehearsing here, actually, when it happened—it was just so beautiful to see . . .” For a moment, she was uncharacteristically tongue-tied.

Ginsburg smiled. “Joyce, I don’t deserve any credit for that,” she said. “It was all Tony Kennedy.”

The encounter with Ginsburg, who occasionally mentions opera scenes in her writings, reinforced DiDonato’s conviction that the art is not as aloof from modern life as popular stereotypes would suggest. In her post-college years, DiDonato had wondered whether she was wrong to abandon teaching in favor of a seemingly more frivolous pursuit. Her father had told her, “Don’t think that there’s only one way to teach.”

She is aware of the pitfalls of artist activism. “I have to choose my battles—I’m no politician,” she told me. “I know that, as an American artist, I’m not in a position to sit in judgment. Should I not sing in Texas, because of what’s happening to women’s rights there? But I can’t paralyze myself, either. I don’t know if turning down the opera in Moscow was the right decision. Should I have gone there and spoken out? Should I have got myself detained? If I don’t go, does it mean they’re winning? In the end, it was just an instinctive thing. I couldn’t do it.”

That evening, the Lady of the Lake made her entrance from upstage, silhouetted against the twilight. After a few steps, she stretched out her arms and turned to look at the terrain behind her. The line between opera and reality blurred: Rossini’s Romantic heroine was gazing out across the New Mexico mesas. At times, the more intricate aspects of Paul Curran’s conception got lost amid the prevailing loveliness. I wasn’t sure how many people grasped the idea that the King was transforming his personal obsession into a political tactic. Still, the opera held together as a drama and gathered momentum as it

went along.

Inevitably, “Tanti affetti” cast the deepest spell. At each performance, DiDonato had been listening to the crowd, gauging how quiet she could afford to be. In the cadenza, the orchestra drops out, putting the pacing in her hands. If the mood was right, she would extend the trills and take longer pauses. That night, she paused long enough that the silences could be felt, and, with them, a sense of the vastness beyond the theatre.

“I take it let him dress for a change?”

Afterward, DiDonato threw a party at her house in the hills. Singers, staffers, and a few friends from Kansas City gathered on the front porch. Among them was the composer Jake Heggie, whose opera “Dead Man Walking” provided the occasion for DiDonato’s New York début, at New York City Opera, in 2002. Heggie is now working with the playwright Terrence McNally on “Great Scott,” an opera about a famous American singer who returns to her home town to star in a problem-plagued production of a fictional bel-canto rarity, “Rosa Dolorosa, Daughter of Pompeii.” The lead character is partly inspired by DiDonato; needless to say, she will sing in the première, at the Dallas Opera, in 2015.

Around midnight, DiDonato led some friends up to a rocky outcrop above the house. She had been watching sunsets there on her nights off. In the group were two apprentice singers, Jonathan and David Blalock, who are brothers. David had a bit part in “Donna,” with one solo line: “Attendi: il Re fra poco ti ascolterà” (“Wait: the King will soon listen to you”).

DiDonato, who can still rattle off her own one-line début (as a Slave, in “Salome”), teased Blalock about his moment of glory. “David, you really were just *spectacular* tonight. But you need to put, like, a cadenza in there.” She offered a spuriously ornamented version of the line: “At-te-e-e-e-en-di . . .” She added, “Then *bis* it”—encore it—“straight up to the audience, with your hand on your heart.” She also offered a crossover pop adaptation, in an off-key voice reminiscent of karaoke night at Applebee’s. Blalock took the silliness in stride. “Oh, stop,” he said.

The group sat on the rocks awhile longer, discussing politics, gossiping about the opera business, and taking in the splendor of the night sky. The stars of the Big Dipper hovered just over the horizon, almost blending with the lights of Santa Fe. Although DiDonato didn’t get to bed until 3:45 A.M., six hours later she arrived on time for her kickboxing lesson. ◆



Alex Ross has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1993, and he became the magazine’s music critic in 1996. [Read more »](#)