

## **Nina Stemme: "I can be a piece of work"**

Nina Stemme is considered to be the leading dramatic soprano of her generation. She sings in all major venues some of the most demanding roles: Brünnhilde, Isolde, Salome. This year she makes her role debut as Elektra and takes back the role of Turandot at La Scala. But, is the Swedish soprano anything like the character she sings?

### **Does an international dramatic soprano like you get accustomed to success?**

It's very encouraging to continue my work with the support I have at the moment. (in a laugh) There are some times when it flips over me a little bit... but it's not like I say to myself (with a warrior tone) "I'm here! They say I am the best, I can rest upon my laurels etc." No that's not me, I would have stopped singing had I started to think that way. I enjoy the journey, the road, the everyday work; as much as I suffer when it's not to my taste. Of course I sing title-roles most of time, so, to the audiences, I put the crown on top of the teamwork. It's a huge responsibility but still I'm nothing more than any other, nothing more than a human being.

### **You mentioned your taste, if there were one production you've been in you would keep, which would it be?**

Going back to the Christof Loy production (of *Tristan und Isolde*) in London was very special with Pappano. It's a splendid theatre and team there at the Royal Opera House. Everybody was so committed that it helped me become an even better singer. I can't tell why. Stephen Gould said it was "to feel secure and yet challenged" and what can be better than that? There is still hope and room for development!

My first Isolde was a milestone. It changed my whole career. I could foresee it in one way but I could not really trust it until I had done it. But then I moved on. The ring cycle at the Proms was a fantastic moment too. After the Immolation Scene, the atmosphere was just crazy. I sang the last minute from above and I could reach the whole audience and I sensed that. That was really special.

### **You have sung Isolde quite a lot over the years, how do you do something new every night?**

I enter the stage with the state of mind of Isolde. It varies on the nights depending on what blood pressure you are in and also my colleagues and the orchestra, the conductor, the set... One Isolde is never like the other one. Of course over the years she has developed, the young lady (laughs) the young princess. She was much more like a princess actually when I was new in the part. I was enjoying being the high princess. And now, and in general I do my best to focus on the human sides of Wagner's characters so we can all recognize ourselves in them. Isolde has a terrible crush on Tristan; she has betrayed her country and herself. All these inner conflicts that she is dealing with, I think we all have experienced that kind of dilemma in our life, so I want to make that very down to earth, to make the audience understand that she is not a goddess of revenge or anything like that.

### **What is your understanding of the end of the Opera? Does she also die?**

It's a little bit different in each production. In the Claus Guth production (in Zurich) it's unsure. The second act is like bliss, with a few problems but still bliss. At the end of the second act, she is convinced she is going to die with Tristan. The thing is he goes ahead before her. So she is left alone, and back with King Marke. But Tristan can't die if he doesn't see her again. So it's a story of character but also ideas and ideals. None of them think they are worthy of love, or what they feel for each other. So when she is back and Tristan dies, she realizes that this must be true love, and it doesn't matter if she lives or not. In London she does, she lives with the memory and knowledge of Tristan within herself. In the Claus Guth production maybe she dies, maybe she... it doesn't matter: it's a transfiguration.

**Which part do you prefer singing: the *liebestod* or the first lamento when Isolde enter the stage again in act 3?**

One can't live without the other. The first lamento is probably the most difficult part. You've been quiet for an hour and a half with the intermission, and then you have to go into that quite high position of the voice. Wagner wants to say something here. And now that I have sung Brünnhilde as well it's like a pre-Siegfried Brünnhilde who doesn't realize that Tristan is dead. She thinks he will come to life again when she arrives. That's when starts the lamentations, *die klage*. She wants to heal the wound again and she realizes it's too late and begins to dream about what life could have been, another love meeting. He denies her that and she enters into rage. This piece of music has everything from Mimi to the most dramatic left alone woman feeling on earth. The *liebestod* is all that is left. She sings it from the death realm to the audience and everybody on stage.

**How do you fell in-between these two dramatic moments? Do you rest and think « ok I have 5 minutes to get ready for that part all the audience has been waiting for »?**

I'm so much in the character that I forgot to prepare for the *liebestod* sometimes (laughs) It's like « oh yes I'm a singer, I should prepare for this ». You've sung those dramatic high notes and you've been around for 5 hours of opera and you are supposed to sing this « *mild und leise* » and sometimes your voice is not really with you... but you have to be generous with yourself and the audience.

**How do you adapt to the other singers around you?**

It happens intuitively I think. If one of your colleagues doesn't feel 100% well, why should I scream my vocal cords out? For example, my first Minnie was a bit rough. I had sung it with Antonenko in Stockholm who was also very straightforward in his interpretation of role. But in Vienna I sang with Jonas Kaufmann who is a very subtle singer so I changed my singing in consequence. I'm not going away from myself; I'm just exploring different shades of my Fanciulla. Sometimes I go a bit to far, but it's a learning experience. It's part of the job.

**Have you found your perfect Tristan in Stephen Gould, the press and audiences seem to believe so?**

He understands everything he sings and his voice keeps going and going and going and this I knew from the Siegfried we sang together in Vienna. So when I learned he was taking on the role of Tristan I thought: "this will be perfect for his voice". In that sense you feel really safe with a Tristan you know you won't have to support mentally on stage. He can be Tristan and I, Isolde, and we meet on stage on whichever production.

### **Do you know how many times you've sung Isolde?**

I think I've reached a hundred but I'm not a control freak, I should be much more probably... but I leave that to others. I want to keep my curiosity for other roles.

### **Let's talk about your future engagements and new roles then. Is Elektra a challenge?**

Yes. It's very difficult to learn for me. The text is beautiful but it's tricky. It's easy to play her like a maniac woman with only one focus. But that's not interesting for me. I want to find different aspects.

### **How do you proceed? Do you listen to recordings, watch DVDs?**

I wish I could have seen more live productions... because the DVDs don't give much. There is something about Strauss's characters. It takes a long time, he's such a skilful composer that you feel you are under his hands, like under hypnosis when you sing. I want to get away from that, find what I can really contribute in. In the end, usually something good comes out of it but it takes time. In the meantime I don't want to talk too much about a character I haven't premiered yet.

### **What have you found about Elektra?**

It's a vulnerable and wounded character, struggling with her relationship to her family. It's quite specific in the repertoire where you have a lot of parents/children patterns but here it's horizontal with the sister and brother and yet also with the mother. So for me it's also important not to have an old witch as the Klytemnestra.

### **Chereau explored that way: no monsters on stage, just a family with its history of violence...**

Yes but of course it's a criminal family, from the fathers to the daughters. Nobody is without guilt there. There are loads and loads of books to read about that story. That's why I'm not a director. Hofmannsthal has made its own take on this, he had everything on mind plus he lived by the time psychoanalysis was created... that's why I think he designed a "chamber piece".

Of course I went to Aix en Provence to see the dress rehearsal of the Chereau production where I could see that this would work very well. This is an interpretation I can really accept and I can make something out of even though I am very different from Evelyn Herlitzius. I really enjoyed her interpretation. I was almost afraid to meet Chereau after because I had sensed that he was so much involved with his artists that I didn't want to disturb. I didn't know Chereau was sick at that time, I found out later. So I'll use my 6<sup>th</sup>

sense in NYC to see where I fit best. Vincent Huguet (Chereau's assistant) and I are already working together now... I don't know, I have all these questions and aspects in mind and they are up for grabs.

**How do you work with stage directors? What do you like or dislike? What do you need from them?**

I like to feel secure yet challenged. I like a dialogue but I'm not the one who interrupts the rehearsal all the time. I like to find out for myself, without too many words because it's all in the music and in the text. Sometimes the director, he or she, has a very specific story he wants to tell. So it's really collaboration. I do my best to realize the "vision" of the team. Sometimes if it's too much over the top, I try to be a diplomat and sometimes I say "sorry I don't do that" but at this level it's very seldom. I am so intense on stage, that sometimes I am quite a piece of work for the directors and conductors.

**What is your opinion about "regie" theatre?**

All theatre should have regie because Opera is also about theatre. But if you just put a concept on top and you don't find the logic and the dramaturgy in the piece it doesn't speak to me emotionally. It becomes too intellectual. That's what I respect with a good director, it's if he or she is really well prepared and you can follow the logics and emotional paths of the characters. You don't have to go through Stanislavsky for every opera but still... I don't want to generalize but I see where the problem is with "regie" and that's why I think we should write more new operas.

**Talking about new operas you'll be taking part in the world creation of *Notorious* in Göteborg. Tell us more about it.**

It's from the movie Alfred Hitchcock made in 1946. I have the score and I just looked at the final act of it, at the end of January. It's a very interesting relationship drama. The music is accessible. I'm the female main character, Alicia, born of German origins. It starts in the USA and then in Rio, and that you will hear a little bit in the music as well. It's very exciting and time-consuming to be part of such a new product.

**Is this something you'd like to do more? Because it's quite an investment for a role you probably won't take back again, will you?**

We have worked a lot to sell this production and have it performed at other venues. Nobody dares. It's like they can't open a score and imagine. Or they want to see the production first, which I'm sorry but it will be too late: I won't have time! My schedule is full 5 years ahead. It's a shame but it's a fact we have to live with.

**Do you have time to attend performances? World creations maybe?**

My roles are such high-tension roles I don't have time... I would love to. I would love to have seen Castellucci's *Parsifal*, I would love to have seen *Brokeback Mountain* and all these new operas. Maybe there is a time for that later.

**Has preparing Elektra changed the way you sing other roles?**

My voice has changed since I've sung my first Salome (1992 in Barcelona), the 3 Brünnhilde and, and it's the most important, my first Turandot. I only sang one production as of now but it changed the focus of my voice, which made it really easy to tackle the heavy dramatic repertoire. I should sing much more Turandot and I will at la Scala, in Zurich and in Sweden in Dahalla... My husband will be "le metteur en scène" there.

**Let's play the guessing game. You can answer or not. Can you confirm there will be a new Wagnerian role next year?**

Hummm, couple of years, 2017. It's coming up, the Kundry.

**How about the Farberin?**

Yes it's another Strauss role. It is sort of in the field. It's so clear that it is almost "boring" (thinking again) Well, no. It's a luxury. But logical, when your voice is ready for the Brünnhilde then what is the next step? Elektra and then you will sing the Farberin etc. etc. Kundry is not so self-evident. 5 years ago I would have said "I'll sing Kundry and not the Brünnhilde". Then my voice changed. I got one note extra on the top and I felt much more at "ease" for those parts. I like challenges and what is the greatest challenge than Brünnhilde. So yes all these roles are in the pipeline.

**Do you need a staged version to take on a role?**

I need it to begin with. I need that in the back of my mind to then move on to another production or concert version. Recitals are more a hobby for me. I don't have time for them and I regret it.

**What about the Italian repertoire, new Italian roles?**

I think I should leave space for younger singers, the ones that are panting me at the back of my head (she laughs). We have to have that next generation coming. So I'll leave some space for them. I have a broad repertoire and I want to use it. I'm a bit reluctant to sing some Verdi roles, I'd need time to work on, the narrowness, the slancio etc.

**Though, you are going to sing Turandot, in La Scala, is it a bit scary?**

I don't want to think about it (laughs). I can hide my tension behind Turandot's tension. She is a bit tensed (laughs). It's such a huge challenge; I don't even know what I am throwing myself into. It's absolutely crazy. I haven't sung the part since I sang it in Stockholm. But that's the problem. When I realized this was something for me, my calendar was fully booked. The same thing happened why the Ring Cycle. But it's a huge investment for opera houses so I had to find other things to sing.

I haven't sung enough Ring cycles, I think. I want to do it NOW. There will be one more in Washington DC in May 2016; in 2018 in London and hopefully in Stockholm before that.

**Is there something special about singing home?**

It's more difficult to get the good conditions. You think that you are taken for granted in a way. In all venues, I have "carte blanche" more or less. In Stockholm it's nothing that easy. But I promised Placido Domingo when I won Operalia in 1993 that I would sing as often as I could in my own country. Oh, that night was a life-changing experience, to sing Elsa's dream in Garnier. The aura of the whole place. It did something to me.

**Do you have a specific relationship with a specific audience? You said you were surprised by the number of French fans following you?**

I feel I have a love story with the French audience, and I adore coming to France to sing, even though I didn't get that many chances to show it. It was a very special every time it happened. There are many French travelling to Vienna, to Zurich, London...and I meet them at the artists' door if they wait long enough. But the show finishes so late sometimes that I don't go through that door and I'm sorry, it's not very polite but I'm exhausted.

**Would you sing a French role?**

I was offered to. But I couldn't go for it mostly for schedule reasons. It's a pity, French is a balm for the voice and you have to be very precise with the words.

**Let's talk Nina Stemme, outside of the opera world. You've been named "rainbow soprano" after singing for the wedding of two Ugandan men. Is it important for you to get involved?**

Of course. It's about human rights in all perspective. I'm very happy to have that nickname in Sweden. And I'm very proud of being part in these good developments in the world. I wish I had more time to get involved. One of the men can now go back to Uganda and see his children he had when he was forced to marry. And two of his girls came to live in Sweden. Actually I should have been to one of his son's graduation. But "c'est la vie" I can't be everywhere.

**Moral standards do count for you. Is this why you decided not to pursue the Ring Cycle recording with Maestro Gergiev due to what is happening in Russia?**

It's one of the reasons. But also the planning was impossible. I discussed this a lot with many of my friends, rainbow friends, human rights friends etc. "What should I do? Should I go because music is music?" The problem is Russia is not well planned and my schedule would not allow it. But at the time there was so much happening (pause) I couldn't go and then stand up in front of my friends and say that I had gone to a place where you are not supposed to show human love in the streets. It's impossible for me. But in the meantime I would like to say something but... it is a role I have not conquered yet. I would like to stand up more. At that time, personally, I couldn't go. It's a pity because I haven't been recorded that much and I want to be documented. But the business now is all about live recordings. Plus, big voices don't record as well as other voices.

**Any regrets in your career?**

Not to have worked with or sung, and the list is rather long: Mélisande and the Composer. I would have loved to sing them. I did sing mezzo repertoire when I was at the opera school but it was more me being a "lazy soprano". Patrice Chereau, Neuenfels, Richard Jones, Olivier Py again - after the Tannhäuser in Geneva, say no more. I haven't work with Thielemann yet but that is coming up (Dresde in the upcoming season). We will see: I have interesting projects that come in 5 years. I am quite happy to see whatever comes across my path in the future.

**The interview took place in Zurich on January 31**