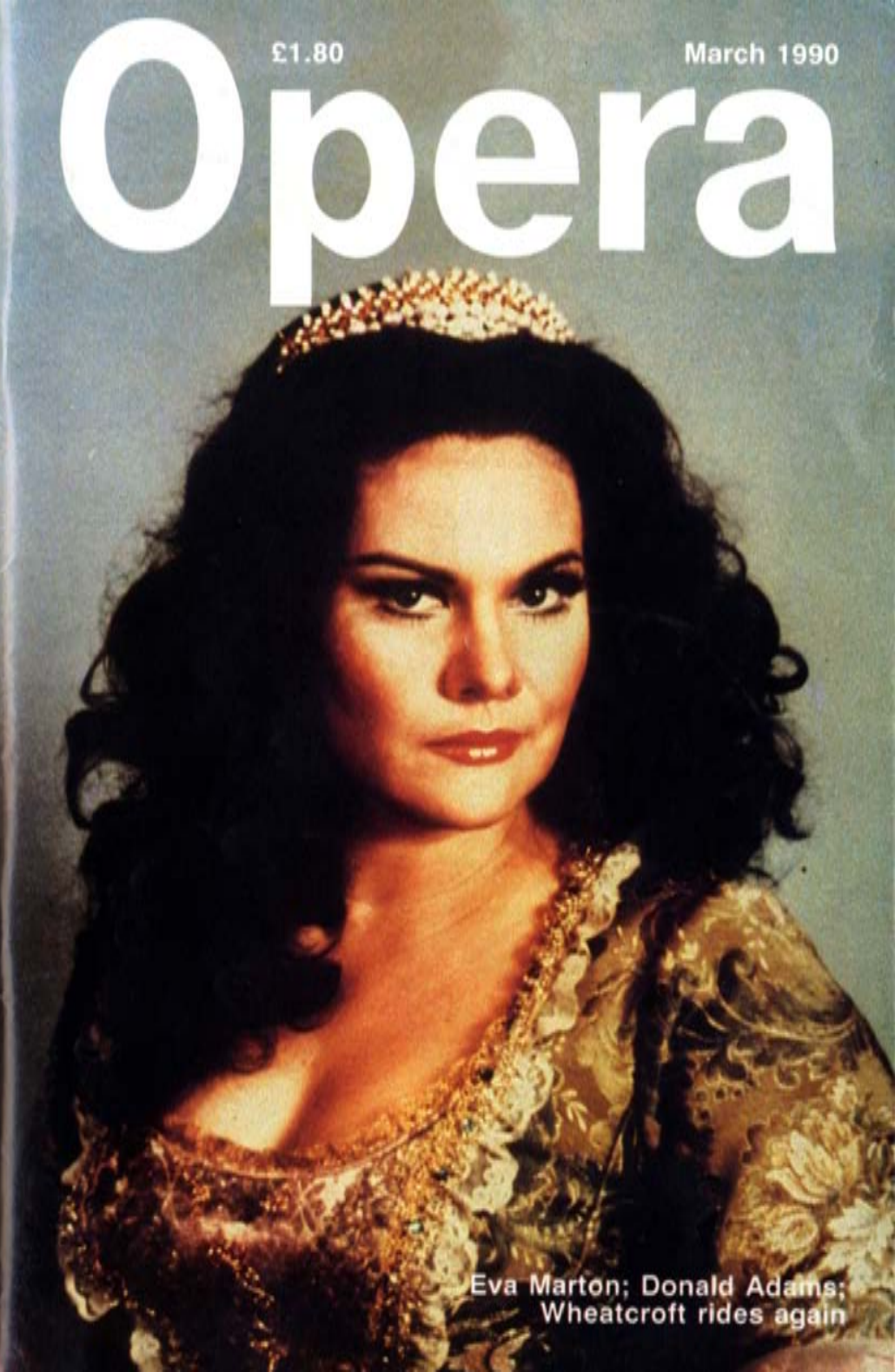
£1.80 March 1990

Opera



Eva Marton; Donald Adams; Wheatcroft rides again

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Eva Marton

Alan Blyth

'Luxury, absolute luxury,' exclaimed Gianandrea Gavazzeni when he heard the Celestial Voice coming down from 'heaven' at the National Theatre in Budapest at a performance of *Don Carlos* circa 1971. The voice was owned by Eva Marton (as the soprano gleefully told me when we met at sessions for EMI's new recording of *Elektra* in Munich). Later she was to sing with him in Hamburg and she reminded him of the incident: 'See, your Celestial Voice has progressed to Aida.' In those early years at Budapest, the young artist sang other small parts such as Kate Pinkerton, but her worth was soon realized and she progressed to, among others, Countess Almaviva and Manon Lescaut. A Hungaroton LP exists from as early as 1971. Already in the solo from the Brahms Requiem the familiar Marton timbre is there—indeed it's my favourite item on the disc. She demurred, saying what she really enjoyed was the light singing in 'Bunte Schlagen' from the Mendelssohn *Midsummer Night's Dream* music. There are also the extracts from *Forza* made in 1972, and when they were issued here in 1974, the present Editor, in one of his early assignments for the magazine, commented prophetically: 'Eva Marton has a fine, strong, evenly placed dramatic soprano with plenty of bite, inclined to wobble when she sings softly (at least she *does* sing softly) and with notably clear diction.' That seems a fair assessment of Marton's singing, now as then.

But singing nearly lost out to sport. The young Marton, a well-built girl as she admits, was a champion volleyball player. She used to go straight from the court to practise her singing, until one day her teacher said she had to make up her mind. Was it to be sport or music? 'I reasoned that my time at the top of the volleyball world would hardly be more than four years while, if I was lucky, I might have a long career as a singer.' How right she was. In any case, nobody could understand how a girl could be good at volleyball and music at one and the same time.

By then she had already come through the hard times of the 1950s. 'Everything had been destroyed in the war. My parents had to start from nothing. It took a long

time for things to improve. I recall that only one day in the week could I have an ice cream, a day to be celebrated, and I was lucky to have chocolate once a month . . . Yet I consider those days of poverty and hard work the happiest of my life, because they were free and easy.'

She always felt an affinity with the voice. Singing as a child had always been fun: she took part in children's operas at school—'I usually sang the main roles'—also sang in a radio children's choir for a year, but as a child she was keener on the piano than singing (she now plays jazz in her spare time). Her voice 'broke' at 16, which is where the volleyball came in. When she had decided on singing as a career, she went to the Franz Liszt Academy, first studying with Endre Rösler, formerly a tenor at the Budapest Opera—'a most intelligent man, so no real tenor!'. When he died she went to Sipos for three years until 1972. 'Since then I've been on my own.' In the early days, she often sang solos with other young singers in Haydn Masses and works by Liszt in the St Matthew Church in Budapest, earning her first fees, which they immediately spent in the *Lokal*. 'Happy times!'

Marton left Hungary in 1972. Then she had a child (she is married to a Hungarian surgeon resident in Hamburg), only starting her career in the West properly in 1974 at the Frankfurt Opera, followed by a spell at Hamburg under Dohnányi. During these years she built a substantial repertory in both Italian and German opera. In 1984 she was allowed back to Hungary as she had a German passport, and she is now singing quite frequently in her own country. 'I'm proud at being born a Hungarian. After all that's happened, I feel I should give what help I can—and I can do that as an artist. I went back in November to sing Tosca with Dvorsky as Cavaradossi.'

Strauss has played an important part in her career. In spite of her affinity with his music, she considers him among the most difficult composers to sing, simply

Marton as Brünnhilde in 'Siegfried' in San Francisco, 1985

the spirit with which she imbued her singing helped her to suggest both the woman in love and the future saint. Her playing of the third act was magnificent.'

She was asked to take Sieglinde in the Peter Hall *Ring* at Bayreuth in 1983, but refused, feeling that she should have been offered Brünnhilde. Enough said. Her first Brünnhilde (in *Siegfried*) was at San Francisco in 1984 in Lehnhoff's staging. In 1985 she scored a notable success there as the *Götterdämmerung* Brünnhilde. Arthur Bloomfield wrote that she gave 'one of the most noble, reposeful, *evolving* Immolation Scenes in Wagnerian annals (with, by the way, a second "Alles" very husky and emotion-drenched)'. Nowadays she isn't that keen on singing a whole cycle (though she is recording one for EMI under Haitink). '*Walküre* is low for me, *Siegfried* is terribly high, *Götterdämmerung* terribly long!'

One of her main ambitions is to sing Isolde. 'That is my greatest dream. But it must be with the right conductor and producer. I wouldn't mind it being a revival, but we must have a good team, and one with whom I could prepare the work.' She is also looking forward to recording *Fidelio* with Colin Davis in Dresden, but she won't sing Leonore on stage—'The productions are always mad today'.

Marton's Covent Garden debut came rather late in the day. It was as Turandot in 1987. That role, perhaps her *cheval de bataille,* proved an undoubted triumph. Max Loppert reported ecstatically here: 'This was a Turandot loud where it counted, brilliant where it helped, and lustrous into the bargain . . . In spite of moments in her entrance aria when first-night nerves could be sensed . . . the general impression of solidity and confident ability to open up and soar was immensely encouraging . . . There was a wonderful vibrancy in the tone and stage presence, body colour, "juice"; and where melting had to be effected, in "Del primo pianto", the phrases were spun out with heady soft sensuality.' He was more reserved about her other main Puccini role, Tosca, a few months later. She is much looking forward to adding Minnie in *Fanciulla del West* to her Puccini repertory with Domingo as Dick Johnson, at the Met next season. She enjoys the verismo repertory, Fedora and Maddalena in particular. She has recently recorded *La Wally* for RCA, and she will commit Respighi's *Semiramis* to disc for CBS/Hungaroton in the Autumn. Marton is nothing if not adventurous in her repertory.

She struck me as a strikingly determined woman, who knows precisely what she wants from her career and her life, and doesn't suffer fools or rivals gladly. She is insistent on standing up for both artistic principles and her own *amour propre,* but she believes arguments with other artists should be confined to the theatre or recording studio. 'If I make a mistake, I like to admit it, and I expect others to do the same. Of course, we're very emotional people and things do arise that cause trouble just because of that. We work with emotions after all, but we're not children: we shouldn't make a big thing out of rows. If Bush and Gorbachev can agree . . .'

She is not backward in showing her Hungarian temperament. When, last season, the audience at the San Francisco Opera started tittering because of an unhappily phrased surtitle while she was singing Gioconda (another of her prominent roles, which she recently recorded), she literally stopped the show and told the audience, in no uncertain terms, that she didn't want them laughing at a serious matter, a reminder of a similar occasion at one of Callas's Juilliard master-classes, when the diva told an audience giggling at an unintended double-entendre that they were there for serious business and anyone who wanted to laugh could leave. On both occasions the result was total silence.

She is worried about the succession of singers in the heaviest roles. She believes

Marton at the Met: (l.) as Tosca; (r.) as Salome

that Cheryl Studer, who is Chrysothemis in the *Elektra* recording, may develop into a heroic soprano—'so talented, but at her early age she must be careful. But where are the tenors to succeed those now at the top?' There are assuredly few sopranos today who can match the sheer sustained power and attack that Marton can manage. That was clear in listening to her tackling Elektra on record. Few could actually hit and expand her top notes in the way that Marton does. To complement that, one heard her dramatic commitment to the role. Conducting herself, as many singers do in the studio, psyching herself up to the tension and hectic terror of Elektra's thinking, she managed to convey the sense of a live performance, even in the context of recording in unrelated sections (something that could be so detrimental to a through-composed work such as *Elektra*). She responded swiftly to Sawallisch's desire for ever more attention to note values and words. She was partnered here, as she will be at Covent Garden, by Marjana Lipvošek's exact and truly sung Clytemnestra. If similar pleasures, vocal and histrionic, are created at the Royal Opera House we should be in for a treat.

In spite of Marton's obvious dedication to her career, she is very much a family person. When we spoke, her greatest concern seemed to be over the education of her daughter, who is 15 and about to be sent to a boarding school in South Germany. Her son is 23, and likely to become a cameraman. The family has homes in Hamburg and Monte Carlo, but beneath the undoubted relish in being a prima donna and enjoying the conspicuous consumption that goes with it, the happy, carefree Hungarian

girl of her youth is not far to seek, and the touch of down-to-earth practicality that told me my new coat was too thin for Munich in icy January undoubtedly makes her endearing.

Eva Marton sings the title role in Götz Friedrich's new production of 'Elektra', conducted by Georg Solti, opening at Covent Garden on March 3; the cast also includes Nadine Secunde, Marjana Lipovšek and Robert Hale.