Encountering Leonie Rysanek

Opera MONTHLY

November 1988
$3.00



Joyce Castle: Mezzo of a Thousand Faces

A Conversation With Eva Marton

The New Age of Volunteerism

Meet the Los Angeles Music Center Opera

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With Klaus Konig in Houston Grand Opera's *Tannhäuser*, 1988

Jim Caldwell

Eva Marton: How To Become a Diva

The great Marton's meteoric rise to world fame could be the result of one performance. She thinks so, anyway. **By Sam H. Shirakawa**

Larry Williams



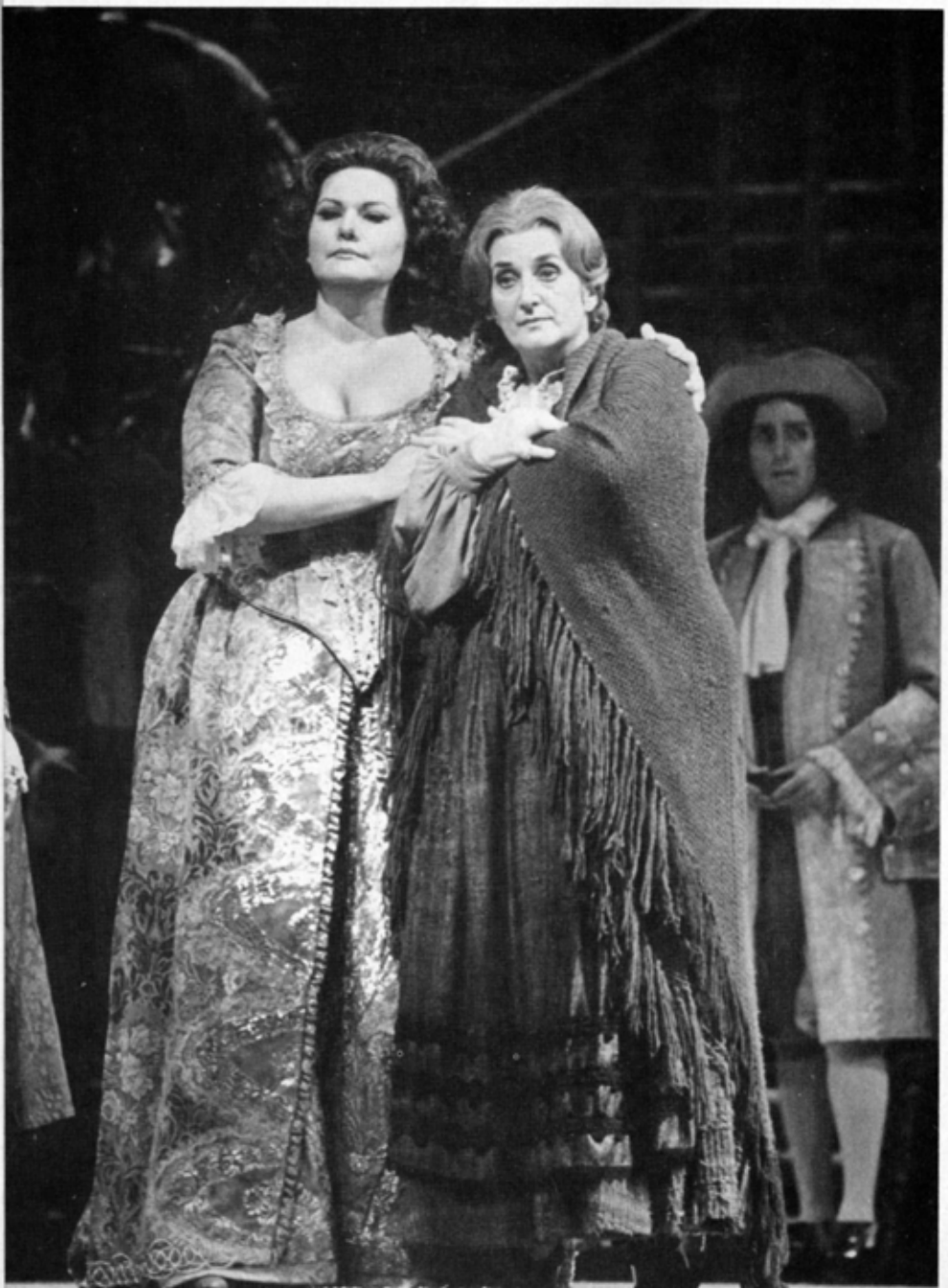


Opposite:
In *La Gioconda*, with Bianca Berini.

This page:
As Brünnhilde in the famous "Immolation Scene" of *Götterdämmerung* at San Francisco Opera, 1985.

"She's a real dame," says one of her associates, admiringly. Nobody who spends more than ten minutes with Eva Marton would dispute the observation. While she is every inch a diva, she is not above making jokes, or making a stranger at her hotel suite as comfortable as possible.

"Would you like an extra cushion?" she inquires helpfully. "Zoltan, please," she says to her husband without waiting for a response. Instantly, he produces a pillow from a nearby armchair. "Ah, better, yes?" She sits erect on a wide couch, while her husband moves away to a writing table. Her friend and translator Josef Krenusz sits at the other end of the couch ready to assist with any linguistic uncertainty.



David Powers

Eva Marton, however, is in full command of the situation, just as she is now in full command of her engagements, her roles, her fees. When I spoke with her, she was about to embark on a string of *Trovatores* at the Met with Luciano Pavarotti as her Manrico. This set of appearances included the opening night performance, always a reaffirming indication of any diva's standing. Later in the season she will take the lead in a new production of *Salome* conducted by Marek Janowski. In between, she'll be in San Francisco for *Gioconda* (November-December), and in Budapest to record *Tosca* (December). She will also appear in a concert version of *Fedora* with the Opera Orchestra of New York under Eve Queler on January 29.

"I love Pavarotti," she says, eyes brightening. "But I also love Domingo. And don't forget dear Alfredo [Kraus] too. Three great tenors. I never had a problem with a tenor in my life. They say Bonisolli is crazy, but I think he is wonderful. Carerras, thank God, is getting better from his illness. He will be all right," she says firmly. "A great singer."

At least, in front of a reporter's tape recorder, Marton loves everybody she works with, and tales of disputes or feuds with colleagues are hard to elicit. "We are all doing what we need to do," she continues. "Let others live their lives, and then you will be happy with your own."

There was a time in Marton's own life, however, when the Hungarian-born soprano was most unhappy. So unhappy, in fact, that she decided to leave the blandishments of being a privileged, but taken-for-granted artist on the roster of the Budapest State Opera, and try her luck in front of the Iron Curtain. "I made my debut at the Budapest Staatsoper in 1968. I sang the Countess in *Figaro*, *Onegin*, Tosca, Manon Lescaut, Amelia Boccanegra, Freia in *Rheingold*, but I was singing all my roles in Hungarian, not in the original language. And we had many other singers in my category who were singing the same parts. I was thirteenth or fourteenth in line. I wanted to—how you say?—fly alone."

Contrary to some of the stories circulating about her departure from Hungary, Marton explains she had no problems leaving the country. "I never had trouble with the Hungarian



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government. I think the Opera management were very happy to have me leave. I was one less problem for them in casting. But I never *had* to leave the country."

Arriving in Frankfurt with her husband, infant daughter, and 50 marks, Marton proceeded to make her conquest of the West. It was a difficult time for her, but she followed her husband's advice. She remained on the roster of the Frankfurt Opera, but rarely undertook poorly paid and inadequately rehearsed guest appearances. "You shouldn't give your talent away cheaply," she once told an interviewer.

She made her Met debut in 1976 as Eva, but there were no fireworks. She returned later as Chysothemis, yet applause always remained merely polite. She was rapidly becoming a star in Europe, but she continued to make an also-ran impression in America.

The turning point came in October 1981, when Leonie Rysanek withdrew from a revival of *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* at the Met. "I didn't know what to expect," she recalls. "I admire Rysanek very much and she was for 16 years *the* Kaiserin. All I had was my voice, my art, and my courage. Now when you do something well in America, no matter where you come from, people lift you up. It is like a judgment. I think Americans are very mature and take pleasure when an artist does well, and they share in that experience."

The first night of those *Fraus* (October 12, 1981) became an historic occasion. "I have sung the Kaiserin many times with different Farberins," says Marton. "But that night at the Met, I had *Birgit Nilsson*, a great star, at my side. The people heard two dramatic sopranos together in the same performance. The comparison was right in front of them. At the curtain call, she left me alone on the stage and said, 'This is your future.' "

Marton fully understands the significance of that night as a rite of passage for an opera singer. A triumph at the Met means a little more than a triumph elsewhere. "Not a little more . . . *much* more," she states seriously. "Before that evening, I sang very well. But I had the feeling that nothing was happening. I was facing. . . like a wall. I thought I couldn't break through, it was beyond me to do it. That evening, I broke through the wall. My dates were always full before then, but only at the *Metropolitan* do you become a star. You know, I had a wonderful success as Elsa in Buenos Aires in 1979. But who outside Buenos Aires knew about it? I don't believe you can become a star in opera overnight. You have to work four or six years. But you can lose your patience after six or seven years. Many singers give up."

Would Marton have given up if she had not had a sensation that night? "Oh, no. I am the the type that does not give up easily. Stubborn. . . is that that word? I would have waited for my chance. It would have come. But you must have the right role."

Here, Marton explains how to become a diva. "It is difficult to be a sensation as Tosca after Callas. You can't do it as Gioconda or Chrysothemis. You can do it with Salome, Elektra, Brünnhilde, Tatyana in *Onegin*. I once sang very well as Elisabetta in *Don Carlo*, but that is not the way to make a big impression. Elsa is a wonderful role, but the most exciting part in *Lohengrin* is Ortrud."

Marton promises that she will sing the Empress in America again at the Met in 1989. But only for four performances.

Born Eva Heinrich in Budapest, Marton has sung ever since she can remember, but her voice "disappeared" when she was 14 and did not return again until she was 18. She toyed with becoming an archaeologist and she played championship volleyball as her body matured. "I like to be alone and work problems out for myself, so archaeology was a good second subject



James Heffernan



Opposite:
As Ortrud in *Lohengrin* at the Met.

This page:
The final scene of *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* at the Met, with Marton as the Empress, Gerd Brenneis as the Emperor, Birgit Nilsson as The Dyer's Wife, and Franz Ferdinand Nentwig as Barak.



Opposite:
Marton's Tosca.

This page:
As Turandot at San Francsico Opera, 1985.

Nilsson, 1981: "I think you will be the next Turandot." To date, Marton has sung the part over 70 times.

for me. I gave it up soon for music. I couldn't stop my singing, so I sang folk songs, songs by Bartók and Kodály. I had a wonderful teacher, Katalin Biro, who told me I would get the voice back. She said, 'You will have a new voice. Just take it easy.' She helped me build the voice again one scale at a time. Now, she was not really a voice teacher, but a piano teacher—one of Bartók's last students. She never had any children, and she treated me like her daughter.

"My real voice teacher was a very famous Hungarian tenor named Andre Roszler. He taught me style and interpretation, but he died after I was with him only one-and-a-half years. Nobody at the high school I attended wanted me. Now, it is very important for students not to have too many teachers, and I knew that then. I finally found Professor Sipos at the Liszt Academy. He taught me singing technique.

"When I left Hungary in 1972, I was with only my husband, and I thought, how can I live without my teacher? But my husband, just said, 'Trust yourself and you will have everything.' That is exactly what I did. Years later, when I went back to Budapest, Sipos asked me to come and do some exercises with him. After five or ten minutes, he said, 'Your voice is so well in place. I can say nothing. You have outgrown me. Just keep healthy.' That was the biggest compliment of my life."

Marton's appearances in *Frau* at the Met with Nilsson were also pivotal for her career in another way. "When she [Nilsson] and I were rehearsing *Frau* together, she said 'I think you will be the next Turandot.' Not you will *sing* but you will *be* the next Turandot. I looked up and I said, 'You really mean that?' I couldn't believe what she was telling me. The same day I called up my husband in Europe and I told him, 'Can you imagine, Birgit told me Turandot will be my best part.' And my husband said, 'I just had a call from the Vienna Staatsoper, and they have a new production of *Turandot* they are offering you with Harold Prince directing and Lorin Maazel conducting.' "

To date, she has sung the part more than 70 times all over the world.

Between engagements, Marton spends as much time with her family as her perambulatory schedule allows. She has a son Zoltan (21) and daughter Diana (14) by her husband Zoltan Marton, a surgeon who specializes in peritoneal disorders. Marton is quick to appreciate her contentment with this side of her life. "I think it is very important for women to have children. We become more mature by having them, both in our bodies as well as spiritually. Simply having the child is not enough. It is helping the child grow and find happiness. That is what makes the woman grow. Look at women who do not have children. So many of them become more distant and hard. So many of my colleagues who do not have children say first to me not 'How lovely your voice is,' but 'How lucky you are to have such a wonderful family.'

"Three years ago, when I finished Brünnhilde in San Francisco, I thought I am ready to die, I am so happy. Now, I say how terrible if I would die before seeing my children grow up and be successful. I thought only of myself then. Now I am changing that. I want to share my happiness. The quality of the voice did



Marty Sohl

change. I have more expressiveness, more feeling in the voice now."

While Marton's career has progressed smoothly in its ascending curve since 1981, she concedes to some downs as well as ups in her meteoric flight. "You know, my mother always said, 'If you have a problem, close the door and solve it. Never let it out.' I think that is true for me. If I found something was so wrong for me or that I didn't think I could give my best, I cancelled. But I can think of one time. . . . It was the first time I sang Tatyana in *Onegin* in Vienna, and the critics wrote horrible things about me. Five years later, they wrote how good I was. The second time was at Salzburg in 1982. We Hungarians sometimes have heavy accents in other languages, but I sing with no Hungarian accent. But I was doing Fidelio, which has much spoken dialogue. The critics talked about my accent. So a good friend knew Maximillian Schell, the great German actor. She said I should work with him. I was very upset when I went to visit him. He listened to my speeches from the opera, and after 20 minutes, he stopped me and said exactly what all my teachers and my husband always said: 'You have to believe in yourself. You are Fidelio. You have to accept the critics. They will always criticize you. You have to go your own way and not be influenced by them.' Here was a stranger, an outsider to me, saying exactly what those closest to me had been telling me. That made me strong and secure. A third time, I was to sing a Richard Tucker benefit, and I thought my voice gave out the day before. Well, Richard Tucker's son, Barry, brought me some chicken soup—'*Jewish* chicken soup,' he told me—and I swear to you, I was all right for the concert."

Last season, Marton encountered sneers from disappointed operagoers at the Met who said they had inside information that Marton cancelled what was to be her first Lady Macbeth anywhere because of the weak dollar. "The dollar value had nothing to do with it," she says firmly, eyes blazing. "It was a matter of quality. It was to be my first Lady Macbeth. Sinopoli and Bruson both cancelled. I never had sung with the replacements. What could I do? I was alarmed. The way the schedule was arranged, I would do eleven performances with four different Macbeths and a conductor new to me. Between performances, I would have to rehearse with the next Macbeth. Physically and psychologically, I couldn't do it. This was not cowardice. I knew where the limits were. This was beyond those limits. This is not a prostitute profession. Just to do this or that and make the money would not be right. During the time I was supposed to be here, I wasn't singing somewhere else. I was at home learning new parts."

For all the heavier German parts she is currently performing, Marton feels the nature of her vocal powers are Mediterranean. "I still would say I am an Italianate soprano, because 80 percent of my performances today are in Italian. I always go back to Verdi even now that I am doing Brünnhilde and other German roles. In 1990, I will sing the whole *Ring* at the Met. But I will also have a new production of *Forza*. Next year I will sing Elektra in Vienna under Abbado with Harry Kupfer producing. It will be interesting—an Italian conductor, a German producer, and a Hungarian soprano," she laughs.

While top-drawer opera these days tends to be international in scope, Marton's vocal production, technique, and coloring have been described as *Slavic*. "Just a minute," says Marton, bristling. "I am not Slavic. I am Hungarian. We are not Slavs, and my technique is Hungarian. This is a joke, of course," she says smiling, "but I am very proud of being Hungarian, and we are not Slavs.

"You must sing in the morning," she continues, after a pause. "I used to go to my lesson at 8.30 in the morning, and I would tell my teacher that I could not sing. He said, 'The birds can sing in the morning, and so can you. You must believe this, or you will never sing.' My teacher made drawings like an anatomist showing which muscles make the air pass through the windpipe and through the throat."

Joke or no joke, the quality of Marton's voice and singing style extends the Hungarian singing tradition stretching back to the Esterhazys of the late eighteenth century. While the lyric tradition in Hungary underwent many disastrous periods when the State Opera almost went out of business, the Hungarian manner of vocal production, with its emphasis on a hefty, clear sound, with less vibrato than other middle-European styles of singing, emerged into full flower at the end of the 19th century. However, it was foreigners who were responsible for it. Gustav Mahler, Artur Nikisch, and later Egisto Tango developed and fortified a national style of opera singing and interpretation, and Brahms once said, "If you really want to hear a fine performance of *Giovanni*, go to Pest." The fruits of the discipline instilled by Mahler, Nikisch, and Tango ultimately produced a line of world class singers right up the beginning of World War II. Among sopranos, Anna Medek, Elza Szamosi, Olga Haselbeck, and Terez Krammer became the first legends of the Budapest Opera. Later, Maria Nemeth, Luisa Szabo, Rosetta Anday, and Maria Basilides took this style of singing to other European opera houses and to America. Of these singers, Marton perhaps most resembles Nemeth in warmth of tone, flexibility, and lyrical inflection, although Marton's voice is much larger.

While she claims not to listen very much to her contemporaries, she readily admits to studying Nilsson's portrayals of Turandot on tapes from various periods of her long career and acknowledges Nilsson as her mentor. She also respects Rysanek. "I heard her late in her career, and when I sang my Elsa to her Ortrud, I found her very professional, and she always sings from the heart. Everything she does is absolutely convincing. I know the stories that she had many downs and ups, but who doesn't? But I think she lasts so long as she has because she does everything heartfully and good. When we spoke together during rehearsals, she was very sympathetic. She is in equal parts a great star and human being."

Now in full stride at mid-career, Eva Marton is also working hard at being both. □