

Angela Gheorghiu: 'Difficult? No, I seek perfection'

Melba, Callas, Norman – Angela Gheorghiu, the operatic soprano of the age, can out-diva them all. But behind the no-shows and spats is a singer passionate about her art, discovers Jessica Duchon

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If you listen to Angela Gheorghiu on a CD, you don't have to worry that she won't show up. Fans grabbing the first copies of her new recording of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* are spared the uncertainty that plagues her live audiences. For today's top diva – indeed, some say the last of the great divas – has become almost as famous for her non-appearances as for her performances.

When she's there, she is there in force. Her presence is tangible in the reception room of the Mandarin Oriental in London even before she arrives: there's a stillness just waiting to be broken, a sense of expectation like the atmosphere that composers love to build into their operas before the soprano's grand entrance. And the whirlwind in the doorway is unmistakable: the flashing dark eyes, the skin-tight jeans, a leopard-print cap and a voice almost as expressive when speaking as when singing.

In person, Gheorghiu, 43, is open, warm and welcoming and isn't above praising my purple jersey for being "à la mode", though she then declares that she doesn't care about fashion; she loves shopping and seeking out unusual clothes for a personal style that can be hers alone. A cat-like luxuriance hovers about her, and occasionally there's the glint of a concealed claw. She's the proud possessor of a sensual hourglass figure that she loves to show off – and she seems to delight in her perfect looks to the point where she's rumoured to have demanded a full hair and make-up treatment before a radio interview.

But she's nothing if not consistent; she of the leopard-print cap doesn't change her spots according to whether the voice recorder is on or off. With her, what you see is what you get. Here is one amazing woman who likes to tell it like she thinks it is and doesn't care if she gets into trouble for it.

And get into trouble she does. She's never out of the operatic gossip-columns, each "Angela story" fruitier than the last. The blogger *Opera Chic* recently alleged that the Romanian star "hasn't fulfilled in ages a complete run of an opera she was under contract to appear in". In Britain, immense fuss ensued a couple of years back when she pulled out of a new Covent Garden production of Verdi's *Don Carlo*. Her equally starry husband, the tenor Roberto Alagna, is as notorious for apparent fits of artistic temperament; he stormed off stage during *Aida* at La Scala, Milan, after apparently being booed.

No wonder that opera's chief celebrity couple has been plastered with nicknames – "Bonnie and Clyde", "the Ceausescus" and, for Gheorghiu, "Draculette". "Just because I am Romanian and here nobody knows anything about Romania except Dracula," Gheorghiu half-jokes. "Besides, Dracula is English!" (Actually, Bram Stoker was Irish and when he wrote the novel *Transylvania* was part of Hungary, but never mind.)

Gheorghiu nevertheless has bucketloads of charm, wistfully declaring: "I miss London! I adore this city and Covent Garden, I love the atmosphere in this opera house." So what went wrong with Don Carlo? The opera exists in two versions, and Gheorghiu says she backed out early in the planning when conductor Antonio Pappano decided to present the longer, five-act edition. "I just cannot sing so much and so hard," she shrugs. "It was a much simpler explanation than people said. I think they didn't want to know the truth."

Still, she defends her cancellations. "OK, what do you prefer?" she challenges. "If I am not good, it's bad for me and it's bad for the public. So, to go on stage and not be good? Or to cancel? From these two, I have to be clever enough to choose the least worst. Everybody, not only myself, wants perfection. But we are not perfect! If I cancel it's because I'm not good enough to show myself in front of you. I go on stage to make people feel good, not to make them suffer with me. I like to be admired. I want to have success, I like to be beautiful, I want to sing well. I'm not a masochist who will go there to be booed or shouted at."

She'll be back at Covent Garden next season, she insists – after all, Don Carlo was one of the simpler sagas. Last season, she was fired from *La Bohème* at the Lyric Opera of Chicago for skipping town in the middle of rehearsals, popping off to New York to see her husband sing at the Met. She told *Opera News* she had asked for the time off in advance, but also mentioned that she didn't like the production (by Franco Zeffirelli) in any case and had wanted to pull out of it earlier. The LOC's general director, William Mason, responded with a different account: "Ms Gheorghiu never asked Lyric management for a release. She missed more than half of her scheduled rehearsals and did not attend the costume fittings for the new costumes she requested. On the day of the stage/orchestra rehearsal, we were informed by her assistant that she was en route to New York..."

It's less than two years ago that she walked out of *La Traviata* in Rome after the first night, claiming illness; others muttered that she'd taken it amiss when her co-star Renato Bruson sang an unplanned encore. In 2003, she abandoned another *La Traviata*, in Madrid, allegedly because she found the production "vulgar". This year, she's already cancelled a recital in Barcelona and she and Alagna recently exited in a double flurry from a forthcoming broadcast in Vienna, having apparently discovered that their interview slot was later than expected.

Growing up in Ceausescu's Romania, Gheorghiu was steeped in an atmosphere of repression and fear, in which people dared not speak their views openly. It seems she's been making up for lost time ever since. But she remains passionate about her native country and its culture; she is planning to record a CD of traditional Romanian songs arranged especially for her; and she still has a home in Bucharest, one of three: "Bucharest is me, Paris is Roberto and Switzerland is in the middle, the place where I go every time I need to learn or prepare something.

"It's very important for me to be relating my happiness with my career," she adds. "I cannot cut myself in two; I am not a singer and then a person, I am an entire one!" So life and art can't be separated? "I think never, for me. Because I was always different: I was the artist. When I was little, I was always worrying about how you could be judged by your qualities for yourself, not just because you're different."

Born in the small town of Adjud, Angela and Elena Burlacu were the two extraordinarily gifted daughters of a train driver and a dress-maker. Gheorghiu (whose professional surname is that of her first husband, an engineer) says she followed her "destiny" on to the stage. "I never thought for one second of my life to do something else. I started singing when I was six, then I went to boarding school in Bucharest, then the Academy of Music; during all of these studies I was almost leading a double life to become an opera singer. When I was 17, I sang with orchestra for the first time, 'Solveig's Song' by Grieg, and since then I never stopped."

She was determined to have her first audition at Covent Garden: "I didn't want to hear about other theatres." Arriving in London, she didn't know the way to the opera house. "My English was not good – I had to learn all the V C languages, because to me all languages were foreign – and I had a little piece of paper with the words, 'Where is the stage door of the Royal Opera House?' The third person I asked was a very good-looking man on Floral Street; he said, 'Over there, five metres,' and I went in. And when the casting director, Peter Katona, arrived, he was my friend from Floral Street! My audition was perfect.

"Peter was the person at Covent Garden who trusted me very much and wanted to give me important things right away. In fact, he wanted to give me *La Bohème*, and I asked if he could please give me a smaller role first so that I could feel the atmosphere."

She stormed the place with *La Bohème* in 1992. Sir Georg Solti snapped her up for *La Traviata* two years later and took the extraordinary step of persuading BBC2 to broadcast her performance live. "I was in tears," the great conductor declared at the time. "I had to go out. The girl is wonderful. She can do everything." The next day, the whole of the opera-conscious world knew that a star was born.

When Gheorghiu met Alagna, sparks flew at once; the pair were married in New York, by Mayor Rudy Giuliani, in 1996, two years after Alagna's first wife died of cancer and following Gheorghiu's divorce. At once they were the Posh and Becks of their art, the golden couple who barnstormed the public's imagination as opera's greatest sensation since the Three Tenors. But further tragedy was to strike: later the same year, Gheorghiu's sister Elena Dan, also a successful singer, died in a car crash. Elena's husband, a surgeon, died in another road accident four years later when he suffered a heart attack at the wheel. Gheorghiu has now formally adopted their daughter, Uana, whom she and Alagna have raised alongside Alagna's daughter Ornella from his first marriage. Her sister, Gheorghiu says, was "like another part of myself. And when she was pregnant, we used to say, 'We have a child!'"

There's more. "I think I never told this before outside my country," Gheorghiu says suddenly, "but when my sister died, there was a rift in the family, my parents separated and my father became a monk. Now he lives in the mountains in Greece, in a monastery where women are forbidden to go. He said that he would pray for us."

Gheorghiu might not seem an obvious candidate to be the innocent heroine of Puccini's ever-popular tear-jerker *Madama Butterfly*. But her voice type has never been quite as overtly dramatic as her personality; she shot to fame singing comparable roles, such as Mimi in *La Bohème* and Violetta in *La Traviata*; and in her new recording of *Butterfly* she captures the turmoil of the heroine's journey from passionate girl to betrayed woman.

How did she tackle the challenge? The key, she says, is love. "Imagine: I am singing Italian music, being a Latin singer from Romania, in the character of a Japanese girl of more than 100 years ago, being a geisha – I am not sure if she is a geisha with sexual experience or not; wanting to be married in a second to someone she has never met before; being really in love. This man is a sailor, and we know that a sailor can have a lot of girls everywhere; but something magic happens. She believes. Because when you are in love you believe everything. And this love duet is one of the most beautiful in all opera."

The discs, on EMI, bring Gheorghiu together with a very special new recording partner: the German tenor Jonas Kaufmann, one of opera's most exciting emerging stars. She proudly claims the credit for "discovering" him. "We were planning this recording around four years ago and we thought we would have Roberto [Alagna], but then he left EMI," she explains. "And in the same period, I needed a tenor for *La Traviata* at the Met. My manager gave me a tape of Cecilia Bartoli singing with Jonas and said, 'He is singing in Zurich, but nobody knows him – just listen and trust your instinct.' I listened, and I said, 'OK, he is my Alfredo.' Afterwards I suggested to EMI we

should have Jonas for Butterfly. It's like Roberto, and Tony Pappano: when somebody has an unusual talent I never make a mistake. I have a gift for discovering, and I was right!"

She hasn't yet the "courage" to sing Butterfly on stage, she remarks. "In an opera that is so dramatic and tragic, things can happen to you if you are very emotional. One month ago, imagine me singing La Bohème. I have sung it hundreds of times; I was singing in San Francisco; and in the last act I could not sing because I was crying all the time, crying. You know why? Because of Puccini! And even if some critics judge him in all the negative ways possible, they are very wrong: he wrote music for the people, and he wanted you, and himself, to cry. If you are crying, he is a winner. We are all winners."

And we are – not just because of Puccini, but also because the more outrageously diva-like her behaviour, the more Gheorghiu's public laps up the stories, the passion, the scandal. We may be outraged at paying through the nose for tickets only to find that she's absent with a severe infection of the upper respiratory tract, or whatever; but we can't help ourselves – we're wired to love divas for their very divadom. Nobody ever became the world's greatest soprano by making life easy for other people.

And ultimately, it isn't even about the singing: we flock to the diva whose charisma burns the brightest, and that couldn't be anyone but Angela Gheorghiu. It just couldn't.

'Madama Butterfly' is out now on EMI

Jessye Norman (born 1945)

Norman's personality is as vast as her voice, which has been called "as near perfection as one could hope for". She excels in everything from Purcell to Wagner. In the 1990s, she sued the now-defunct 'Classic CD' magazine for libel when it reported she had become trapped in a swing door and, when advised to go sideways, had replied: "Honey, I ain't got no sideways." She denied making the remark.

Adelina Patti (1843-1919)

Verdi called her the greatest vocalist he'd heard – but when she sang Rossini an aria from his own *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, adding embellishments, the composer said: "That was wonderful – who wrote it?" Patti commanded \$5,000 a night, paid in gold. Her contracts stated that she was "free to attend all rehearsals, [but] not obligated to attend any". She's said to have trained her parrot to shout "Cash! Cash!" whenever it saw her manager.

Maria Callas (1923-1977)

The great Callas's private life was every bit as dramatic as her stage roles. Her reputation for being "difficult" reached a peak when she dropped out of a Rome Opera performance of 'Norma' in 1958 after one act, when the president of Italy was in the audience. Furore ensued, and a newsreel declared: "If you want to hear Callas, don't get all dressed up. Just go to a rehearsal; she usually stays to the end of those."

Dame Nellie Melba (1861-1931)

"I am Melba": with these words, the great Australian explained her every quirk. Famous for upstaging other singers, she once refused to let the tenor John McCormack, making his London debut, take a bow with her. A younger soprano, Emma Eames, told how Melba constantly blocked her progress, and said of Melba's performance of the "Jewel Song" from Gounod's 'Faust': "She would have hung the jewels off her nose if she could."

Francesca Cuzzoni (1696-1778)

Handel's celebrated leading lady for Rodelinda and Giulio Cesare, Cuzzoni was known also for her vituperative rivalry with Faustina Bordoni. Once, she refused to sing an aria due to its simplicity. Handel said: "Madame, you are a devil, but I will make you know that I am Beelzebub, King of the Devils," and threatened to throw her out of a window. She ended her days working in a button factory in Bologna.

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