

Étoile

Being a French singer of French repertoire is a huge responsibility, but right now Sophie Koch is doing it to great acclaim. This month, she makes her Met debut as Charlotte in *Werther*. Jessica Duchen travels to Paris to meet the mezzo.



Photographed by Vincent Pontet at Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris
Ensemble by Tricot Chic / Jewelry designed by Sophie Koch / Makeup by Sylvie Vanhelle / Hair by David Carvalho Nunes
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It is the morning after Sophie Koch's last performance in a run of Gluck's *Alceste*, and the backstage corridors of Paris's Opéra Bastille are all but deserted. "It's nice to be back here," Koch remarks, while we settle into an empty dressing room to talk. The French mezzo-soprano of the moment, though, is never away from a theater for long.

Her schedule for the year ahead is intense: she is racing between Paris, New York, Vienna, London, Munich and Salzburg, tackling a range of works from Poulenc to Wagner, any of which would be a tall order at the best of times. "Sometimes it's maybe too much,"

she admits, "but, as my ex-agent used to say, you're in or you're out — there is no middle way. I'm over forty now — I can say that, I have no problem with it — and it's the time to sing. These are my good years, and if I turned things down, I would regret it."

Koch in person seems supremely controlled, soft-spoken and serious. Straightforward and up-front, the forty-four-year-old mezzo manages to be charismatic without being flamboyant, and to carry off the image of a star without playing the diva. Tall, elegant and blessed with exceptional versatility both vocally and as an operatic actress, she can turn her skills to an extraordinary range of repertoire. Koch's voice has a special openness of tone, with a natural radiance that shimmers through generous but not excessive vibrato. Her feel for the combination of long line and detail of diction is a powerful addition to her distinctive timbres across the registers, and her willingness to involve all of herself in the music and drama enables her to project emotion with no holds barred.

The purity and focus of her technique, as well as the glowing molten-copper tone of her voice, has suited her supremely well to the music of Richard Strauss, the 150th anniversary of whose birth will be in the spotlight throughout 2014 — an occasion that will see Koch performing the Composer in *Ariadne auf Naxos* in Vienna and Munich, as well as one of her signature roles, Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier* in Dresden and Salzburg.

First, though, she is experiencing a major career landmark — her debut at the Met, singing Charlotte in Massenet's *Werther*, with Jonas Kaufmann in the title role. She was announced earlier this year as a late-in-the-game substitute for Elina Garanča, who had to withdraw because of pregnancy. Since Koch is in such demand, it is surprising that she has not yet set foot on New York's top stage. It has not been for want of trying. She was contracted there in 2008 to sing Nicklausse in Offenbach's *Contes d'Hoffmann*, but the opera was then replaced with *Carmen*. "After that they offered me *Barbiere* and *Ariadne*, and I was not free," she explains, "and *Faust* I turned down because it came too late for me. So this is a wonderful opportunity."

Koch has been singing Charlotte for some nine years; her notable appearances in the role include the Paris Opera, with Kaufmann, and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, where she partnered Rolando Villazón in his post-surgery London comeback. Both houses stage the production by Benoît Jacquot, with the Paris version fortunately preserved on DVD. Koch feels it is the perfect role for her first Met appearance: "I'm excited to do it in New York, because it's a very good type of excitement. I'm not scared," she says. "I know the role, I know my partner, and I can enjoy being there and singing it again."

Charlotte, Koch suggests, is a young woman in a state of emotional flux partly conditioned by the society in which she lives. "I think she doesn't know herself very well," she says. "She is discovering herself, discovering her feelings, discovering what passion can be. That's all about knowing oneself better. To me, she's a very romantic character, very delicate and passionate, but also she has a sense of duty. It's also a question of context. The meaning of duty in our times might be a little different, but in those days it was extremely important."

Massenet's music for *Werther* has a bittersweet quality that can be heartrending when performed well. But too often performers, regarding this late-Romantic French composer as sugary, try to make him sound sweeter still; the result can be a self-fulfilling prophecy of

sentimentality. This, Koch feels, is completely the wrong approach; and something similar is true of the opera's eponymous hero.

"He is romantic enough as he is," says Koch. "If you have this touch of sentimentalism, it becomes a kind of soup. But if you keep a certain type of noblesse in his behavior, then it becomes very intense. It's exactly the same with the music. It's not sugary — that is a misunderstanding. I think that it needs to keep its structure, without adding extraneous nuances or rallentandos — it makes a much stronger impression that way. I think it's typically a piece where less is more."

That approach was certainly true, she felt, of Kaufmann's interpretation of the title role in Paris in 2010. "He was quite inward. He wasn't projecting this emotional character everywhere. I was the emotional one! I can't think of another tenor right now who sings Werther like he does — and I think that there was something special between us onstage in this opera. I think it will be very exciting again in New York, even in another concept of production." She has tackled eight or nine different stagings of the piece, but she retains special affection for Jacquot's: "It was the purest, the simplest, the most efficient, and the most faithful to the spirit of the piece."

Among colleagues with whom Koch has enjoyed working on *Werther* is Michel Plasson, who conducted the opera in Paris: "I respect him a lot. His interpretations are, of course, very personal and original. He used slow *tempi*, and it was hard to sing — very German, in a way. But I like this depth of emotion. I found it very interesting." As for recordings, she singles out Tatiana Troyanos's Charlotte (conducted by Plasson) as a special favorite. "I have always appreciated the voice of Tatiana Troyanos in many roles. For Charlotte, she has the right clear color for the beginning of the piece, becoming darker through the opera and sensual enough in the loving scenes."

The process of absorbing such a role, she adds, is a little like taming an animal (in French, "apprivoiser"). "Of course when you do a new role, you don't even know yourself your reactions, your potential or how it will develop. It's a kind of a journey from the first show to the last. Even if you've worked hard in preparation, you don't really know it until you have performed it — it is totally different being onstage. When I sing a role for the first time, I'm very emotional, maybe too much so to control my singing as I would like to. With time, I can have a little distance — which I have now with Charlotte and other parts — that allows me to be a bit more controlled."

That is one of any performer's eternal questions — how much to detach oneself from the emotions in order to express them. "Charlotte was one of the first really important roles I sang," Koch muses, "and it was perhaps the first step to another universe, one that inspires me and that also matches my personality and my type of voice. I don't think I act a role — I live it. That's why sometimes I'm out of control. But I like to lose control! It brings something which is not so standardized. It costs a lot of energy, and it can be exhausting, but I think the audience enjoys it. People know when someone's giving everything and loses a bit of herself in the character." Admirers of Koch's Charlotte should hurry to catch her this time; she says that she may soon stop singing it altogether.

Koch lives with her husband and eight-year-old daughter a little way out of the French capital, having grown up outside Paris, in the town of Versailles near Louis XIV's famous palace. As a child, she studied piano for fifteen years and was an enthusiastic member of

her school choir. At the age of thirteen, Koch attended an international music summer school in Monmouth (a picturesque spot in the Welsh countryside, on the border with England), where she took part in an opera for the first time, a piece by composer Mervyn Birch based on *Alice in Wonderland*. "It was a wonderful experience, and I loved it," she says. "Then I was interested in everything I studied — philosophy, literature, history — and I had no idea what I wanted to do."

The turning point came when she failed an audition for the university choir at the Sorbonne. She decided she would try again the following year and, to that end, she would take some singing lessons. New pathways soon made themselves evident. After vital encouragement from the great mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig, she auditioned for the Paris Conservatoire. "I spent four years studying with Jane Berbié, who is still my mentor and friend even now." In 1994, Koch won first prize in the Bois-le-Duc vocal competition.

Her performing career began to develop slowly in France — too slowly for her taste. "After a year and a half, I wanted to do bigger auditions. My first audition for the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, was in 1996, and I will celebrate a fifteen-year collaboration with them this year. It's a very special place for me, because Peter Katona, the casting director, was the first person to trust me. I auditioned with *La Cenerentola*, and he engaged me for three operas." She made her debut there as Rosina in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* in 1998 and soon afterward sang Dorabella in *Così Fan Tutte* and Angelina in *La Cenerentola*. The Vienna State Opera was eager to give her a contract. "Paris came later," she adds cryptically. "'Nul n'est prophète en son pays,' as we say." But that also has its advantages: "We are singers of the world!"

Nevertheless, being a French singer in French repertoire in France qualifies as a big deal. To judge from Koch's reaction to the subject, this is possibly the understatement of the year. "Oh, my God," she laughs. "You come to Paris, and you can't imagine the expectations of the audience." Singing Gluck's *Alceste*, she had had a taste of this in the weeks preceding our meeting. "I don't know what people expect — perhaps the revival of Régine Crespin? It's crazy!" she says. "At the premiere, when I sang 'Divinités du Styx,' I didn't want to use my chest voice to sing [the phrase] 'ministres de la mort.' The critics went crazy, saying that I had no low register." In a subsequent performance, she decided to use the chest voice "to please the people" — and duly received an ovation. "It was an artistic choice, but you are trapped if you don't match the expectation set up by a particular recording. Isn't it strange?"

The ultimate French mezzo role is *Carmen*, which Koch has yet to tackle. "As a French singer, singing in French and singing *Carmen*, you always think you will disappoint people," she admits. "People expect something special from you, and that is a bit scary. If someone comes to me — a conductor I know and trust and a stage director I know and trust — then I would do it. But not just any production — I'd have to know exactly where, how, with whom. It's not a decision I can take easily." The role has been suggested to her twice, she says: she was not free to take on the new production in Paris in 2012, and the other — the Orange Festival in 2008, with a TV broadcast — she decided to turn down. "It was too much pressure for me, singing the role in France for the first time. Maybe it would be easier in another context."

Many of her fans overseas are surprised to learn that Koch is French; they assume she is German, because her voice and temperament are ideal for Strauss. Octavian in *Der*

Rosenkavalier has been central to her repertoire for fourteen years, ever since she stepped in to perform it for the first time in Vienna on only three days' notice. More recently she has been making her mark in Wagner. She has already sung Fricka and Waltraute in the *Ring* cycle, as well as Brangäne in *Tristan und Isolde* — the latter notably in Christof Loy's production in London — and her Venus in *Tannhäuser*, at the Paris Opera in 2011, was lauded to the skies. She cites Kundry in *Parsifal* as a dream role.

Still, Koch is eager to maintain her remarkable versatility. "Wagner is very physical. You need to use your whole body like an instrument. Strauss is more lyrical, and you have to find the transparency in the sound. You have to work on your voice to find the flexibility, the sensuality that belongs to Strauss. Massenet is French, and as people know — or perhaps don't — it has to keep its transparency. This is a very special color. You have only one instrument, but every time you must try to find the right colors to sing each composer. I want to keep as long as possible the sensual capacity of my voice. I know myself — I'm not a dramatic voice. I'm a lyric voice that can do sometimes dramatic impressions. But I cannot change essentially what I am and what my voice wants to sing. I have to respect it."

She is godmother, meanwhile, to a foundation called ColineOpéra, offering fundraising performances to benefit the charity La Chaîne de l'Espoir (The Chain of Hope); it provides access to medical care and educational assistance for children in Cambodia, Afghanistan and a number of countries across Africa. "This is very important to me, because it is something concrete," she says. "It is not only a nice evening for the public but also a way of helping people in despair. It costs two Euros a day for a child to live, and it's vital in our world to have this sense of relativity. In our capitalist society generally, making money, money, money, it's important to estimate the power of that money, to know that there are people who have nothing, and to be able to do a tiny bit for them.

"I am very sensitive to music as something universal, something which is not only for an elite," she declares. "Of course we need this elite, which has the money and which supports us — it's fundamental. But also I'm deeply persuaded that music is for everybody and touches everybody. It is maybe not a rescue, but it is balsam for the soul. Everyone needs that. □

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