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# OPERA NEWS

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## High and Deep

JESSICA DUCHEN talks to the dynamic American soprano Laura Aikin, who affirms her versatility — and her artistic courage — this summer with high-profile assignments at the Holland Festival and the Salzburg Festival.



Photographed by Alain Kaiser at the Opéra National du Rhin, Strasbourg  
Makeup and hair: Fabienne Jost-Walter / Jacket: Crea; trousers: Giorgio Armani /  
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When Laura Aikin, raised in Buffalo, New York, first boarded a plane to cross the Atlantic, heading for studies in Germany, she little dreamed that she was saying farewell for good to making a home in the U.S. She has been based primarily in Europe ever since; she married an Italian lawyer, and they now live with their family in the countryside near Milan. These days, when she does visit the U.S., she returns as one of America's most extraordinary vocal artists, with a global reputation that is rising at a rate of knots.

Aikin's dazzling voice, a blazing scimitar of a coloratura soprano with a three-octave range, is complemented by her powers as an exceptionally charismatic and convincing actress. This combination has allowed her to excel in a wide variety of music, from Handel's *Cleopatra* to Berg's *Lulu*, from Zerbinetta in Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* to Konstanze in Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, and in repertoire at the cutting edge of twentieth- and twenty-first-century opera. Aikin can be heard on a number of recordings, in repertoire ranging from Schoenberg's *Die Jakobsleiter* and Henze's *Boulevard Solitude* to Richard Strauss lieder to *Wuthering Heights*, an opera by Bernard Herrmann (of Hitchcock movie fame).

This year Aikin, forty-six, is enjoying a veritable carnival of new challenges, including the world premiere, at Netherlands Opera, Amsterdam, of Robin de Raaff's *Waiting for Miss Monroe*, in which she plays the eponymous heroine, Marilyn herself.



As Richard Strauss's *Aithra* at Deutsche Oper Berlin, 2009  
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As Handel's *Cleopatra* in Dresden, 2009  
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And in August she is at the Salzburg Festival to tackle one of the most daunting roles she has yet faced — Marie in Bernd Alois Zimmermann's gritty and devastating opera *Die Soldaten*.

This 1965 work is by a German composer who had been through extreme horrors in World War II and later committed suicide. It concerns a young woman suffering in a vortex of disappointment, degradation and destruction at the hands of a succession of soldiers. Operatic characters scarcely come any darker or more complex than this.

"Marie's been dragged into this muck," says Aikin, "yet at the same time she's diving into it head first, hoping to make the best out of it, mingling constant disillusionment with hope and the realization that this isn't right. She is an allegory of collateral damage on the part of the military. I've always wanted to do this role — and it's a thrill to be returning to Salzburg. I'm very grateful to Alexander Pereira [Salzburg's intendant, profiled on p. 26] for the opportunity. I went there to sing Lulu a few years ago — that was a big success for them, and I think he's appreciated that." The staging is a coproduction with La Scala, Milan; the director is Alvis Hermanis, and Aikin is excited to be working with him. "It's a very complicated piece, and he seems to specialize in large productions involving multimedia. I think that's what this is meant to be all about."



As Lulu at the Paris Opera in 2011, with Franz Grundheber (Schigolch)  
© Opéra National de Paris/Ian Patrick 2012

Vocally, *Die Soldaten* makes extraordinary demands on its performers. As conductor Ingo Metzmacher and dramaturge Götz Leineweber comment in an essay for the festival, "The human voice is taken to its extremes, the vocal lines are full of leaps and change between speaking and singing voice seamlessly.... Hidden aggression is shown quite openly, and human suffering attains a new dimension: the pain distorting the singers' voices across several octaves is almost physically palpable."

The hard work involved in its preparation, though, is part of the excitement for Aikin. "I'm a fast learner — I can learn a Strauss opera in a couple of weeks, no problem. But this level of complication is another matter. *Die Soldaten* is so rhythmically complex that when voices come together it's extremely challenging. Right now I'm doing three huge roles in a row, so my brain is a bit of a logjam!"

Still, she adds, "I like to work hard, and I really like a complex character. And if a character is not necessarily complex, then I like to make her more so. My Konstanze is a little crazy. I like to find the dark side of my characters. I think it's so important for us, as actresses, to let out this dark energy within us." There could well be something cathartic about this: "When I play Lulu, I'm wholly involved in it, but backstage I have so much fun laughing," Aikin affirms. "At the end I feel like I've been in one of those oxygen bars! It tanks me more than it costs me in terms of energy."

The "huge role" immediately preceding *Die Soldaten* is next month's world premiere of *Waiting for Miss Monroe*, which forms part of the 2012 Holland Festival. When I interviewed Aikin, she was gearing up for it: she had just received another four pages of the score, which de Raaff was sending through bit by bit as he completed it.

"We've been in close contact, and I've been supporting him with my excitement — I think that gives him energy," she says. "It's a wonderful team, along with the librettist and the director. I've never felt so much a part of the creative process before. It's amazing!" The opera's style, she says, is "very modern, very chromatic. It's not entirely atonal, but it's a serious composition with a huge score. Sometimes modern compositions can be quite syllabic, but Robin is making sure that there are some beautiful sung lines and coloratura phrases."

Portraying such an iconic figure is no small task. "I am not 'becoming' Marilyn," Aikin insists. "I am not even going to attempt that. Besides, there are very few moments in the opera where she 'puts on the character' — it's very much about the private woman behind the scenes that people don't know, so it is much more open for creative interpretation. I'm playing someone whom I believe I can portray very well — a performer, an actress, facing the challenges of her life, many of which I can identify with."

Act I explores the filming of Monroe's last movie; Act II is about her alleged affair with John F. Kennedy, complete with "Happy Birthday, Mister President." "I've been quite obsessed about having to wear that dress," Aikin admits. Act III concerns the protagonist's death, including a dream sequence in which Monroe has a dialogue with her younger self. The one concession Aikin is making to "becoming" Monroe is to bleach her hair: "There will be three different hairstyles. The last is her own hair,

straight out of the shower, and I want it to be my own. It makes me feel closer to the character not to wear a wig."

Aikin is convinced that *Waiting for Miss Monroe* should travel after its initial hearings. As she declares: "I hope Marilyn has legs!"



As Semiramide in Naples, 2011  
© Luciano Romano/Teatro di San Carlo 2012

**W**hen Aikin first left Buffalo, the idea of starring in a brand new opera about Marilyn Monroe must have been very far from her mind. She describes herself as a country girl from a large family; she was the first of her sisters to go to college. Her interest in music began with instrumental lessons (piano, trumpet, baritone horn) and a passion for theater. "At first I got involved in musicals because I wanted to act. The voice was discovered when I was fifteen, and everything just came together." But musicals had one drawback: Aikin longed for something more challenging to sing. "I really *loved* complicated music."

Sure enough, that has been her focus ever since. She studied at Indiana University with Margaret Harshaw and later, after winning a two-year grant from the German Academic Exchange Service, headed for Munich. The two towns were thousands of

miles apart in approach, never mind distance. "What I liked about Indiana was the incredible discipline that was demanded of us," she says. "Every morning at 8 A.M. we had class. You could not be late — they locked the door. And the competition was incredible. You had an opportunity, and you took it or you lost it. I blossomed within that structure — I needed the framework.

"Munich was the exact opposite. If you wanted to learn something, you learned it. That had its positive side, too. I think the opera school there was much more relaxed, because there was much more work around. In the States, if you want a job as a singer, there are fewer opera companies, and the competition is fierce. In Europe there's much more of it, on many different levels."

Aikin's big breakthrough came when she auditioned for Daniel Barenboim at the Berlin Staatsoper. "When he became music director there [in 1992], at the first big audition that they held, around forty singers were there, including me. I'll never forget that audition. It was crazy. He wasn't so interested in my coloratura singing — he's more involved with heavier repertoire. I had brought six arias, and he didn't want to hear them, so I was pulling things out of thin air — Pamina, for instance — and he kept asking me to do another one and another one. Eventually they called me back out, and he said, 'Okay, they say you're a coloratura, I think you're a lyric.' I'm sitting there, trembling, and he says, 'Sing something coloratura — but I don't want to hear an aria.' So I sang just a cadenza from an Ophelia aria [from Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet*]. I think I added a bit to it, then came down, stopped and said, 'Is that enough?'" It was. When she walked offstage, she relates, the casting director came up to her and offered her a four-year contract. "So that's where it all started, and it was a beautiful beginning."

One perennial challenge that Aikin faces is combining her career with her dedication to her family. She is a mother of two — Marcello, fourteen, and Virginia, seven. "Virginia loves to travel with me — she likes nothing better than walking through the halls of a theater holding my hand, or being backstage with me," she says, "but now that she is seven, we can't take her out of school so much, and that's hard." Aikin's website includes her moving account of life as an opera-singer mom, entitled *A Mother's Song*, which dates from Marcello's early childhood.

When she was pregnant with Marcello, Aikin took time off from singing. "But I decided with Virginia to do an experiment, and I sang through the whole pregnancy. Even when I knew I'd started going into labor, I went and sang through the whole of *Das Paradies und die Peri* [the Schumann cantata] with Ingo Metzmacher. After she was born, I didn't sing for twelve days. Then I went straight back. I had her specifically in Berlin so that I could immediately work with my voice teacher, Brigitte Eisenfeld, afterwards. By the time she was four weeks old, I felt really in control of my voice. And by the time she was four months old I was singing Sophie in *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Met."

Having children has a profound effect on any woman's body, and many singers find that their voices undergo important changes as a result. Aikin says she is more than content with her own ongoing development. "In the last few years my voice has really started to settle," she says. "Also, having done so many Konstanzen and a few years ago my first Donna Anna — those roles eventually broaden out the voice. For the

most part the top is all there. It's different [in timbre] now, but I have what I need. In the last year I've found a very interesting space, with a warmth to the sounds that I can really hold on to and use to project. I think this is a normal progression, if one's willing to do the work — and I've always loved to work on the technical side of my voice."

Staying fit and healthy, physically as well as vocally, is crucial to Aikin: "We singers need to think of ourselves as athletes — for the kind of *Regietheater* we're supposed to do these days, singing in every possible position, we have to be fit. I've taken up running, and I'm hoping to do a half marathon before *Waiting for Miss Monroe*."

She is not short of dreams for the future. "My 'diva dream' is *La Traviata*," she laughs, "though it will probably never happen. I would like to move on to more 'bad girl' roles, like Marie in *Wozzeck*, and I would like to find a situation where I could do a Salome. I'm sorry I've never had a chance to do Fiordiligi in *Così Fan Tutte*, and if that came along I'd take it, but I'm looking forward to singing some other Mozart roles. And any time I get my hands on a Handel role I'm happy. They're so beautiful — whenever I start learning one I just cry. I remember singing Cleopatra in Dresden, and I cried and cried!

"There's an incredible creative freedom in singing Handel. I love the possibility of creativity in opera. I detest the idea that you are expected to do something in a certain way through tradition. Maybe that's another reason I'm attracted to contemporary music, because there are not so many footprints all over it. I remember studying in university some of the standard arias and being told, 'Now, the glissando has to be exactly like this, and the breath has to be here....' Even then, I was thinking, 'This isn't right — I'm a different voice, I'm a different person.' What I love about Handel is there's this wonderful moment when you make it your own."

Meanwhile, Aikin has her eye, long-term, on the director's chair. "If I had a dream, it would be to start directing. A long time ago, I was involved in directing a production of *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Virginia was only seven months old, though, and to start something new at that time didn't feel right. But I haven't given up the idea. I work really well with my colleagues — we always get along, and I like the creative process of working together, exploring the characters, the situations, and how the stage works. It's fascinating." □

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