

Prima Donna Autentica

Anna Caterina Antonacci's powerful performances have made her one of opera's most admired sopranos, but the singular nature of her repertory makes her almost impossible to classify. JESSICA DUCHEN reports.



Portrait photographed by Pierre Mandereau
Makeup and hair by Cyril Desmon / clothes styling by Adjara / dress by Valeria Paris
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It's a cold, wet night in south London, and I am sitting in a pub with Anna Caterina Antonacci. Strange to interview one of today's greatest Italian singers surrounded by fruit machines, a darts board and some long-abandoned beer mugs, but Antonacci, though immensely charismatic onstage, seems somehow camouflaged. After an afternoon rehearsing with the London Philharmonic and Yannick Nézet-Séguin, she is relaxed, soft-spoken, easygoing. She casts an affectionate glance at the darts board. "My son is very into this game," she remarks.

Twenty-four hours later, the camouflage is off. At the Royal Festival Hall, Antonacci — a classic Italian beauty, with dark hair and eyes offset by pale skin — transforms herself into the eponymous heroine of Berlioz's *La Mort de Cléopâtre*. Statuesque in a glittering black gown, she is not merely magnetic;

she inhabits her character to an almost scary degree. Antonacci's voice is immensely flexible and possesses a range not only of pitch but of color too, always guided by her commitment to the text she is conveying. No repeated phrase comes out the same way twice, because her response to the nuance of words is completely alive. She can switch instantly from sweet to sardonic, likewise from full-bodied, vibrant soprano tone in her upper register to a powerful, focused delivery in which she seems to spit out the text in a wonderfully witchy mezzo range. Her *Cléopâtre* has a white-hot intensity conveyed by the unforgettable mix of that character-rich tone and imperious stage presence. The voice, though not enormous, provides her with a range of dynamics in which she can use sinewy legatos to magnetize her audience, drawing them in to her, rather than only projecting out to them.

Sometimes she can even inhabit multiple characters at once: she astonished listeners with her single-handed performance of Monteverdi's *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* at Wigmore Hall in 2009. *The Independent on Sunday* described her as "daring to the point of recklessness in her use of vocal colours." As for her *Carmen*, her unforgettable interpretation at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, with Jonas Kaufmann as Don José, has fortunately been preserved on film. It's no wonder, then, that Antonacci, at fifty, has won a veritable cult following.

Nevertheless, she can seem a mass of paradoxes. She fits no stereotype and no precise vocal Fach. She was an early starter yet a late developer; she made headlines in Handel and Rossini but still had the courage to reinvent herself entirely at the age of thirty-eight. Her voice defies classification, yet she can fit it to an eclectic range of music, from great mezzo roles such as *Carmen* to Monteverdi, Berlioz and Gluck, as well as the songs of Respighi, Chausson and Fauré, to name a few.

Remarkably, she has never sung at the Met. In the pub, Antonacci smiles and shrugs. "I regret a little that I never, never sang at the Met," she says, "but I think perhaps they choose more the recording stars. It's a world that is quite far from mine." Though she doesn't have a major label contract, she is well represented on opera DVDs — including, for instance, *Carmen* twice, *Ermione*, *Rodelinda*, *Les Troyens*, Cherubini's *Medea* and even Marschner's rarely heard *Hans Heiling* — and on CDs of *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, *La Mort de Cléopâtre* and *Così Fan Tutte*, among others. But she has made only one solo album to date — Italian Renaissance works, mainly her beloved Monteverdi, under the title *Era la Notte* (on the Astrée Naïve label). The disc is based on a music-theater project that she toured in Europe: it brought together some of the great "mad scenes" of early opera and culminated in *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*. OPERA NEWS's critic declared, "Antonacci mesmerizes the house for a full, uninterrupted hour, running the gamut of vocal expression."

In contrast to many other opera stars, Antonacci looks like a literary novelist in a flock of chick-lit writers. In terms of repertoire and vocal character, she is perhaps the closest thing we have to Pauline Viardot, the nineteenth-century diva who inspired the leading composers and writers of her day. Describing

Viardot's voice, poet Alfred de Musset compared her to her sister Maria Malibran: "It is the same timbre, clear, resonant, audacious ... at the same time so harsh and so sweet, which produces an impression similar to the taste of a wild fruit." This would not be inappropriate to Antonacci. And Viardot, like Antonacci, excelled in Gluck, Rossini and Berlioz; she, too, transfixed her audience with her ability to inhabit a character. It can be no coincidence that when Opera Rara and Prima Donna Productions assembled a project devoted to Viardot in 2006, Antonacci was one of its stars.

Even though she lives in Paris and French repertoire is vital to her, Antonacci has a special edge of authenticity in Italian roles; such understanding of nuance can probably only derive from speaking the language as a mother tongue. It seems given the significance of Italian repertory to surprising, though — that so few Italian female opera singers have similarly opera — magnetized a wide public in recent years. Perhaps the only comparable figure is Cecilia Bartoli, whose career has taken a very different direction from Antonacci's at almost every stage.

How would Antonacci account for the scarcity of Italian international stars? "I have been lucky," she says, "because I started to build my career outside Italy very early. I have always been very focused on the world beyond Italy. You cannot stay in Italy all your life and only have a career there, so I tried to internationalize my work." But not all young Italian singers have felt the same way: "Some don't like very much to go out of the country, because Italy was once the factory of opera." One wonders if some potentially fine singers have simply become marooned in the land of Verdi and Puccini.

Opera used to be central to cultural life in Italy and could be front-page news, raising passions almost unimaginable now. Antonacci recalls one of her first small solo roles, in *Rigoletto* at Florence's Teatro Comunale in 1984: "The director was a very controversial Russian, Lyubimov, and the audience waited outside to boo him!" (In a bizarre coincidence, I remember this too. I was in a hotel opposite the stage door, on holiday with my parents. The booing woke us, and we thought a riot was taking place, until we saw the morning headlines.)

Today Italy is littered with struggling or closing opera houses and high-profile strikes sparked by swingeing cutbacks to government funding. "The fall of the Roman Empire," Antonacci remarks, wryly. The country has suffered especially severely in the financial downturn, she suggests. "Throughout Europe there's a serious shortage of funds, so everything is reducing, but more so in Italy, because in the past they really wasted money. Culture is less and less cared for, and the theaters are often quite empty. There's not the same interest in the arts that you find in Paris, London or Germany, where people love to go out to an opera, concert or theater. And also, maybe we had too many opera houses, and it's just not possible to keep funding them all."

Italy in 2011, says Antonacci, is a very different place from the one she remembers from her childhood in Bologna. "In the 1960s, Bologna was a fantastic town, open and bright, with lots of cultural interest. It was very

tolerant and free — really a nice place to grow up. I started to go to the theater very soon, because my father was passionate about music and opera. We had lots of recordings at home, and I grew up listening almost exclusively to classical music — that was *my* music. The theater had a good program of concerts and operas. Mirella Freni often sang there. It was a privilege that we had such good singers to hear."

She started to sing as a small child. "I always loved singing, and I was in a children's chorus, very famous in Italy, the Piccolo Coro dell'Antoniano, which performed often on TV. We had real rehearsals when I was six or seven years old, so I had a little experience of performing. Maybe this stayed in my heart." In her teens, Antonacci decided to try to enter the chorus at the opera house, "so that I could work in the theater where I had been in the audience so many times and experience theater life from behind the scenes instead of in front."

Later, she found that progressing up from the chorus was less simple. "I wasn't a phenomenal voice," says Antonacci, "so I had to climb, step by step, to prepare my technique. I and for me it really was a problem think a problem for all singers — is to find out what your voice needs, what your repertoire can be, how — to be ready for a professional life. And I am still improving, so the preparation and the study never end. At the beginning you are nowhere. Even if you sing well you are nowhere, because it takes years and years, all your life, really to understand. When you understand, maybe it's too late!"

It was not too late for her when, at thirty-eight, despite being well recognized in Baroque repertoire and as an ideal interpreter of Rossini's operas for Isabella Colbran, she went to a new teacher, the late Alain Billard. "At last I met someone who finally was able to explain to me clearly and plainly what I have to do to sing. I kept performing, but always when I had time I went to see him, and we spent days and days working together. After that, everything changed, because I forgot the fear, the *angoisse*, that I had before. Every performance used to be a question mark. It could have been good or bad. Yes, I could sing, but always there was something I couldn't control. He really gave me control, and the pleasure of singing. Now when I sing, it's a pleasure for me. I will be always grateful to him, because it totally changed my life."

How has she come to terms, though, with an instrument that leads her in such unusual directions? "The voice always leads," Antonacci confirms. "Now I understand I was lucky not to have the right voice for the famous roles. This was a pain when I was younger, because I could not sing Lucia, Traviata, the big Verdi and Puccini operas, and I regretted this. But now I recognize that this has been the biggest luck of my career. I had the chance to find new repertoire that is so interesting and so deep, and that could represent *me*. I'm sure *La Traviata* could not say as much about me as Medea, Cassandre or Cléopâtre. Now I'm happy that I have an unusual voice."

Monteverdi remains a favorite. "Rossini I almost left behind," she says, "but Monteverdi stays with me throughout my career. In his music I always feel a tremendous modernity and a freedom of expression far beyond anything I

could find in Rossini, Donizetti or Bellini. His characters are so well imagined, so well created, and with truly sublime music."

And then there's Berlioz, whose music suits Antonacci perfectly. She will be Cassandre in *Les Troyens* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, next year — one of those powerful, visionary women as whom she excels. "I can't wait!" she says. "David McVicar, who I adore, is the director, and Tony Pappano is the conductor, so it will be a dream." Cassandre, she adds, is "one of the most fascinating characters I have ever done. She is so fragile and so strong at the same time. The capacity to see into the future is like an illness for her, but at the same time she's a brave and courageous heroine. It is a short role, but intense, like a *coup de foudre*."

"The history of Troy has haunted me all my life," she adds. "I studied it when I was a child, and to me it's one of the most fascinating histories of humanity. When I saw the film *Troy*, I cried! Cassandre is an example of real heroism, and of the good people who lose. Maybe it's fate. I cannot be so involved with Greek tragedy and not believe in fate." Those Greek tragedies are just part of Antonacci's passion for literature, which is also leading her along fascinating newer avenues. She is planning a recital project devoted to Italian songs by Respighi and Tosti on the poetry of Gabriele d'Annunzio, and she would like to sing more French *mélodies* by Fauré, Chausson and Ravel, composers who set some of the finest poetry of their time.

When she is not singing, she spends time in Paris with her ten-year-old son or retreats to the south of Italy, where she has a field of olive trees and presses oil. "That is my paradise, something I adore," she beams. France has recognized her with the prestigious Chevalier de l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur. Antonacci's professional life is unique, and she likes it that way. "I have had a fantastic career so far," she declares. "I have been able to do what I wanted to do. I have always been an outsider, and I think I will finish my career as an outsider — but I am proud of it." □

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