Donizetti in New York

INTERVIEW WITH EVE QUELER. Nicola Lischi Mungai

I met Eve Queler in her manager's office. Judging from her petite constitution and extremely affable and polite manners you wouldn't say she keeps on her shoulders one of the most prestigious musical institutions in America, the Opera Orchestra of New York. I approached her with a sense of reverential respect and gratitude, perfectly aware that very few people if any have done as much as she did to promote the cause of belcanto in America.

NLM: Let's begin with a question I am sure you must have been asked one thousand times: how did you decide to become a conductor?
EQ: I have been a musician since I was a child. I was studying piano since the age of five and I was playing before lessons by ear. This evolved very gradually. When I went to school I was playing the French horn. I was always in love with the orchestra. The orchestra was the biggest thing in my life. Every day we had a prova with the orchestra and we were playing Brahms, symphonies, etc... And that's how my love for this repertoire started, music that I couldn't play on the piano. When I finished high school I went to Conservatory. To earn my tuition I played the piano for voice lessons. And then I discovered how I felt about the voice and so the first thing I did when I finished school was to go down to the New York City Opera and ask for a job, and I started to play for rehearsals. I was so enchanted with the whole idea, and gradually, from being in the company as a pianist, although they never really advanced women to conduct - I mean, all the male pianists eventually were conducting, once in a while they were short of conductors and they asked me to conduct backstage or at rehearsals - I started to think that I should really address this situation. I studied only on my own, and from the time I started to study, you know when you know what your métier is, well conducting was my métier. I am a pretty good pianist, but I am a better conductor, definitely than a French horn player. On a piano you press the keys and the sound dies, here you press the keys and it lives. I am very interested in tone color, in string tone, I work a lot with my strings, on where they play, their position, how far up....this was only possible with an orchestra as a conductor. It enlarged my ear, my whole world of sound became vast...the possibilities are so vast, not just to choose the tempo and beat the time. This is rather pedantic...
NLM: Scholastic?
EQ: Yes, right, scholastic. Although now recently I have realized that the right tempo is more important than I used to think, especially the right tempo for the voices. The possibilities you can do with an orchestra are so extraordinary and I feel very comfortable as a conductor. I feel I can express myself and the orchestra can follow me. Most orchestras enjoy working with me. I just made my debut in Bonn with **Jenufa** and the reviews made many comments about the colors of the orchestra, about the strings. They noticed that somebody is interested in all this. My orchestra, the Opera Orchestra of New York, just loved playing **Hérodiade**. They got a little bored the previous seasons with all those belcanto operas, **Sonnambula**, **Favorita**, they think there is not much to play for them...
NLM: Yes, of course, the predominant element is the human voice...
EQ: The voice and clarinets and flutes, they have nice things to play. But the belcanto opera accompaniments must be so rehearsed. They look easy, but they are very exposed. **Hérodiade**, they loved it so much. **Jenufa** is really a verismo piece for the orchestra. I think my relationship with most orchestras is a good one. We never know it for sure -you know, they may hate us conductors - but you sense the way they response.
NLM: You were assistant conductor to Julius Rudel at the City Opera for five years at the beginning of your career. What did you learn from him?
EQ: Everything about an opera house, about working in an opera house, about the speed you have to prepare things and the little bit of time you have to actually work with the orchestra in the proper setting in the pit and with the stage. There is a lot to learn from observing a talented person.
NLM: What or who attracted your curiosity towards the belcanto repertoire. You have done so much for this repertoire. Very few other conductors have dedicated their efforts to the belcanto the way you have done.
EQ: I am involved with the OONY with doing operas in concert which are not currently being done by the other two companies, because it doesn't make any sense to repeat in concert what you see on stage. Where would you go if you want to find beautiful repertoire untouched?

Donizetti has 72 operas and when I first started, I knew about 6, **Lucia**, **Don Pasquale**, **Elisir**, **Fille**, **Favorita**....What did we know? So that's the first place I looked for the unknown. Bellini wrote only 12 operas. There is not as much to choose. I have done most of his operas, **La Straniera**, **Il Pirata**, **Beatrice di Tenda**, **I Capuleti** (twice), this season **I Puritani** and next season **Norma**. I also looked at Verdi, because out of his 24 operas we knew about ten. I still love the early Verdi, but I think I have done more Donizetti than any other composer. I like to do varieties. Belcanto is the best way to show the voice, the color and the beauty of the voice, the mezzavoce, the pianissimo, and I believe most singers will benefit from singing it. Very early on I started with Caballé, whose forte has always been belcanto, and since the Metropolitan Opera has usually not shown interest in belcanto, this gave me an open field. I found a lot of singers eager to try this repertoire.

NLM: *We will talk about singers later. What are the principles, the criteria, by which you decide to explore and eventually perform a score among these neglected operas and on the contrary you decide to put another one back on its dusty shelf?*

EQ: Since they require great singing I have to be sure that I can cast it. I have to study it a long time to see what kind of voice is the best one. Although, sometimes it's the singers themselves who ask. Caballé for example had ideas for **Parisina d'Este**, **Gemma di Vergy** and Mercadante's **Virginia**. Donizetti's **Adelia**, she wanted also. So, in that case it was easy. Other times, as I said, I have to really look whether I can cast or not an opera. We go through certain periods of singers where all of a sudden there aren't any, there are no belcanto tenors, or baritones, or primadonnas.

NLM: *However nowadays there is a remarkable number of singers specialized in belcanto..*

EQ: Oh, yes. If I wanted to do verismo I would be in serious trouble...But on the other side, you can't kill **Boheme**. Even if I didn't have the greatest singers, I could still make a beautiful evening of it, but I can't do anything with **La Sonnambula** if I don't have first-rate singers. So that's why the belcanto operas are very dependable on who's going to sing, and not on the orchestra. The best solution for me is to do belcanto operas with singers who have already performed them, although many people have learnt new roles for me, I mean, Aprile Millo has learnt 7 roles for me, Renée Fleming has learnt a number of roles for me, Montserrat learned **Parisina** for me, but it's always better if they have already performed it. So I look to see what's being done in Europe. I try to go to see if there's something close to my heart. Some of these operas have stories I can't really relate to.

NLM: *Have you heard **Ermione**?*

EQ: Yes

NLM: *I believe it is Rossini's masterpiece.*

EQ: It probably is. I like the Rossini's opere serie much better than his comedies, and next year I am going to do **Armida**. Back to Donizetti, I have been planning for years to do **Marin Faliero**, but it's been so hard to find the tenor. Rubini, what he could do, it's amazing...So I will probably do **Favorita** again.

NLM: *The French version?*

EQ: Nobody wants to sing it in French, I am sorry. I remember a long time ago I was talking to Nicolai Gedda when we were planning **Guglielmo Tell**. He sings so beautifully in French and we've done French operas together. He told me he could sing it in French if I wanted, but he definitely would rather sing it in Italian (Queler sings a phrase of Arnold's duet with Tell in both Italian and French to show Gedda's point: "Ah Matilde, io t'amo", with the high note on the vowel "A", as opposed to the French version where the high note falls on a more difficult and dangerous "U"). Gedda also said he would never do **La Favorita** in French, it's too heavy, there is something about the language that makes it heavy. And there's another thing I'd like to say as a conductor: if you change the language you change the flow and the tempo.

NLM: *You are going to celebrate your silver anniversary with OONY next year. Would you like to draw a sort of balance sheet, although not final of course, of your relationship with the early 19th century repertoire you have tackled so far?*

EQ: You mean if I've done all the things I wanted to do?

NLM: *Yes, and also if you feel you have expressed yourself enough in this repertoire, and your projects and aspirations in this sector.*

EQ: I want to keep variety. We've had some seasons that have been entirely belcanto, like last year with **Caterina Cornaro**, **I Capuleti** and **Linda di Chamounix**. I want to have more variety than that because that's more interesting for our subscribers. There are people who love belcanto and wish I would only do belcanto, and there are people who subscribe and want more Russian, or more German, or more French, or no French, so I try to think in this way: it's a season of 3 operas, I 'll do one for me, one for the singers and one for the audience. In my record there's been more belcanto than anything, but I am still exploring the Russian, and I need to explore much more Rossini than I have. I'd love to do **Elisabetta Regina d'Inghilterra** but I have to find the protagonists. I heard Anna Caterina Antonacci and I spoke to her, we" ll see. But I have to find a combination of people that I am sure will attract the American public. If

everybody's unknown here, people will be a little bit shy to go.

NLM: *What 's your relationship with the philological trend operating nowadays? I read an old interview regarding* ***Don Sebastián*** *where you said that preparing a critical edition is "really time consuming and tedious work". And also several times you have affirmed that you have no scruples in recurring to major cuts if necessary.*

(This is the only moment during the course of the interview when Queler's voice becomes firm, resolute, with a hint of polemic tones)

EQ: I think the composers themselves made changes and cuts. You have various versions the composers made and you must make some decisions about that. I think that those who take the position that the work is untouchable and must be done complete are not in the performing world, they are in the musicological world. I have to deal with money, and I have to know how much money I can spend. If you are writing a book , you have the luxury to say this or that opera shouldn't be changed. If I can avoid making cuts I won't do them. I didn't do any cuts in **The Tsar's Bride**, whereas in **Hérodiade** I made just one cut that was requested by the singers. I have to finish by 11 o'clock. Musicologists don't care. I have certain restrictions. I am not 100% free and cannot be disdainful of the people who support me and cannot be disdainful of the audience who have to leave and get up the next morning for work. I try to balance all this. Once I had a big fight with a critic regarding **Le Cid**, because I made ten minutes of cuts. It was a recording and I was told not to exceed 150 minutes for 3 records. I made the best job I could in eliminating those 10 minutes and I don't think the music I cut was so horrendous. Even about belcanto, I speak to a lot of singers and they say "Sure, the musicologists don't have to sing this. I cannot sing this cabaletta twice, there's no way I can do it". So what do you do? I serve the composer, that's my first responsibility, even before the audience and I have read a lot of letters of composers and the thing they are happiest about is when they were brought back for curtain calls. I make these works as successes. Some of them were failures when other people did them. Why were they successes with me? Because singers can sing them the way I conduct them and singers can sing them if I have to make the cuts for them. So are Massenet or Donizetti happier with me or are they happier with the conductor who is going to do every note and have singers who don't make the end? This is my decision, if they don't like it , fine, don't come to my concerts. There are conductors who have taken this position, they won't cut anything...

NLM: *In Italy we have one of them...*

EQ: Yes, you have one or two, we have one here...Again, these people can afford to be irresponsible because their organizations will survive. Mine is a "piccolo" (sic), tiny organization, we are not the Met, we are not La Scala, and when the National Endowment gives out money, they don't give *us* a half a million dollars, they may give $10.000 out of a budget of one million. My biggest problem will be if I am ever able to do **Les Huguenots**. I'd like to do it and I won't be able to do it uncut. We have explored this and the cost is two performances, twice of everything, twice in the orchestra, twice in the hall, with the box office from one!

NLM: *Who writes variations and embellishments in the belcanto operas you perform?*

EQ: I do many of them. But sometimes singers come and they have worked with Bonynge or someone else and they keep theirs, if they are in style.. However I've had singers who came with embellishments who were not in style and I couldn't change them, because they were very famous. I like to embellish. I coach singers myself. I always have two casts, sometimes three, and I coach the young singers for months, as I used to do with Renée Fleming when she was an understudy, but if Mariella Devia arrives one week before the performance, she has it worked out.. Caballé used to work hers out and I though she was very musical. Why impose something else? Singers ordinarily should be able to do that. Fleming can do that because she used to sing popular music and used to improvise, so we did some improvising in **La Dame Blanche**. I like to add high notes, because I think they are nice, if the singers have them. When we did **Benvenuto Cellini** it was Mariella Devia's debut in America. There is a very big imitative belcanto aria at the beginning of it, and I wanted her to end on a high D. I know this is out of style, but I thought that the aria was so spectacular...There is a big a cappella run that goes before it, and instead of starting on a low D, I told her to start a third higher and just keep doing it. She has just such beautiful high notes. She sang Jemmy's aria a couple of years ago in Pesaro. I found that aria myself. When I was preparing **Tell** over 20 years ago, I went to Paris and was looking in the Opéra Biblioteque and I took out everything in the parchment for **Tell** and I found this aria, that nobody had done before. I had it translated from French into Italian, I copied myself the orchestration.

NLM: *Talking about singers, how difficult is to choose them? Is it more difficult and challenging to work with established singers like Gedda, Devia or Caballé or to discover new talents the way you do, because as we have already mentioned you always double-cast?*

EQ: Artistically speaking you will be more satisfied from the experienced singers, but the young ones after a few years can learn this. Again, I bring up Fleming, the way she has grown from the very beginning. She did all the belcanto with me and she learned from the people she was

covering; she covered June Anderson, Millo and others. Now she is more satisfying than she was a number of years ago. So if you nurture, you will keep having new ones.

NLM: *How difficult is to convince a singer to study a role that he or she may never sing again?*

EQ: With some of them it's impossible. You can't interest them economically, in the time. But I have been fairly successful in luring big stars into unknown roles in all these years, I must say.

NLM: *How do you deal with cancellations?*

EQ: Badly (she laughs). I have had two this year, two major roles, and not only did I lose the person who was supposed to sing, but I lost the understudy also, and then I went to the second understudy.

NLM: *An old New York Times review criticized you for your willingness to alter some of the score balances so that the voices could be heard...*

EQ: I work very hard on balance. I did that three times, once in Strauss' **Guntram**, taking out a brass doubling if the voice had to force. Sometimes in Italian opera, even in belcanto. Even Bellini can be heavy, in the winds, and if it's a duet, I may say just a bassoon instead of two. Of course you can't take much out, because you destroy the color, but Bellini, although I love his orchestration, sometimes put all the woodwinds in doubling the voices in thirds and it can be very difficult for the voices.

NLM: *Your rarities have usually been more obscure works of major composers: have you contemplated performing scores of those dozens of so-called minor maestros of the Rossini-Bellini-Donizetti period, composers like Pacini, Coccia and many others?*

EQ: I haven't particularly thought about it. Again, the rarer the composer, the less hope of getting a great voice to sing it. I think my public here is very voice-oriented, very hungry for these voices of the size of Olga Borodina's (who performed in **The Bride of the Tsar** this season, NLM) and if you want to have Borodina, you have to do the operas that she knows. If you want Alfredo Kraus, one of the greatest belcanto tenors of our generation, you have to do one of the six or seven operas he performs. Gedda was willing to learn, but unfortunately he doesn't sing anymore. I am not here for self-destruction, just to challenge the whole world announcing I am going to do an unknown work of Pacini, not even **Saffo**. I can't serve everything. I only do 3 performances per year.

NLM: *Let's go back to Donizetti: what kind of peculiar performing problem does he present?*

EQ: Donizetti presents a vocal problem of weight of voice and endurance. I always go back to see who created the roles. He wrote ad hoc, like all the other composers of the time, revising, adding arias for every particular performer. Some of the Donizetti operas sit in the passaggio to such an extent that you have to make changes, lower them, bring them down. This is one of the challenges of Donizetti. I didn't have to do that for Rossini, because he really wrote wonderfully for the voice. So first I go and see who sang that particular role for the first time and try to compare what other roles that person sang.

NLM: *In 1997 there will be the bicentenary of Donizetti's birth and one hundred fifty years since his death..*

EQ: Then everybody will be doing a lot of Donizetti....

NLM: *Have you planned something special for the occasion?*

EQ: I have two projects, **Marin Faliero** and **Favorita**. In 1997 I am supposed to do Spontini's **Agnes von Hohenstaufen**, a very big opera.

NLM: *What is the collocation you attribute to Donizetti in the global development of the history of opera?*

EQ: He was pivotal, because he started the declaimed recitative, the expressive recitative. The declamato has to be emotionally declaimed and vocally colored. This was an invention of Donizetti. Some of his earlier works sound very Rossini, but also **Un Giorno di Regno** sounds very much like Rossini. Donizetti made a very strong development without which you couldn't have Verdi. What Verdi added is the rhythm in the cabaletta. Donizetti epitomized what the belcanto period was from which Verdi could then proceed. It's hard to imagine what Italian opera and not only would have been without Donizetti.

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