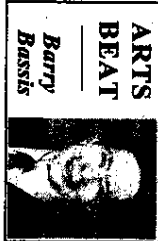


MUSIC

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Remembering the artistry of Shirley Verrett



ARTS BEAT
BARRY BASSIS

Last month, Decca released a DVD of a performance of "Tosca" recorded at the Metropolitan Opera on Dec. 19, 1978 and originally telecast.

The reason for the release was no doubt the Cavatossi, Luciano Pavarotti in his prime in one of his signature roles. The title role was played by Shirley Verrett, who died on Nov. 5 and she is certainly a singer to be remembered.

She had some spectacular successes in her career, including Carmen and Norma (in which she sang the title role and the part of Adalgisa a few months apart). In 1973, she sang both Dido and Casandra in the Met premiere of Berlioz's "Les Troyens," replacing an indisposed Christa Ludwig in the latter part.

The "Tosca" is a superlative performance with Pavarotti in top form, delivering a rhapsodic "recondita armonia" and a plaintive "e lucevan le stelle." He looks better in closeup, where his girth is not so evident. Verrett acts and sings sensitively. Her "Vissi d'arte" earns one of the biggest ovations of the evening. Cornell MacNeil was not a great actor but had one of the deluxe baritone voices of his time. Fernando Corena recorded the role of the Sacristan with Bjorling about 20 years earlier and he sounds about the same here.

The performance is vibrantly conducted by James Conlon. The extras are entertaining: a rehearsal with Pavarotti and Verrett, a conversation about the opera by the youthful conductors

James Levine and Conlon and finally a discussion about the role of Scarpia by MacNeil and the director of the production, Tito Gobbi, who was the most acclaimed Scarpia of the post-war era.

Singer-guitarist Joan (pronounced Juan) Soriano is called the "Duke of Bachata," which is the title of the new set, which includes a CD of Soriano's new album, a DVD of a documentary film about him and a 16-page booklet. Bachata is a rural form of music from the Dominican Republic that began in the 1960s.

The documentary shows the 36-year old Soriano in the village Villa Mella where he lives in humble conditions with his wife and young son. He is close to his extended family; one of 15 children, he constructed his first guitar out of a can and some strings. Soriano couldn't afford music lessons and never learned to read music, though he writes songs and plays in backup groups to earn money.

He is filmed on a tour of the United States with other bachata masters and they are also impressive. One can see evidence of the musical genes in his family; his father sings and dances and his younger sister wants to become a vocalist. Soriano is popular locally but it is unclear whether his roots music, which is mostly acoustic, will catch on with urban audiences in the Dominican Republic who listen to slicker and less emotional music.

Several years ago, I had tickets to see the leading couple in opera, Angela Gheorghiu and Roberto Alagna in "La Rondine." She canceled the performance, allegedly because she was indisposed. It turned out that she was sick of her husband. Fortunately, one of their performances at the Metropolitan Opera was filmed and is now released on a DVD by EMI Classics.

The opera, written by Puccini in 1917, is one of his least performed, perhaps because it lacks the drama and tragic ending of his most popular works. Magda (a kept woman) leaves her old sugar daddy (Ramaldo) for a young student named Ruggero. They run off together but when he wants to marry her and bring her home to his mother, she goes back to her former way of life.

Director Nicholas Joel moved the action to the Roaring 1920s, which had a positive result on Ezio Frigerio's art-nouveau sets that elicited applause and Franca Squarciapino's fashionable costumes. Gheorghiu has the requisite glamour and is one of the world's leading Puccini sopranos; she acted credibly and produced a gorgeous rendition of the famous aria, "Chi il bel sogno di Doretta."

Alagna looks youthful and sings with a rich tone and commitment to the text.



SHIRLEY VERRETT

Most of the humor is supplied by a tart-tongued poet named Prunier (tenor Marinus Brecht), who is carrying on an affair with Magda's maid Lisette (Lisette Oropesa; that's not a typo. The singer and character have the same first name.) Marco Armiliato led a sensitive performance.

The most virtuosic of the new holiday releases in tenor Juan Diego Florez's "Santato." Actually, this is really a classical album with a few Christmas numbers: "Adesde Fideles" and "O Holy Night," sung in French and then in English. Most of the CD is bel canto (Bellini, Rossini and Handel), at which Florez is the world's leading tenor exponent. "Alleluia" from Fux's "Plaudite, sonantibus" is a spectacular showpiece.

As one who has seen him knock off the high C's in "Daughter of the Regiment" with unerring accuracy during the last two seasons, it is clear that the singer (now in his 30s) is in top form. He avoids the trap of so many tenors who rush into heavier roles than is good for their voices. One pleasant surprise of the album is that he wrote the title track, a South American favored tenor extravaganza with orchestra and chorus. Even the Grinch would enjoy this CD.

Florez will appear at the Metropolitan Opera in a new production of Rossini's "Le Comte Ory" on March 24, 29, April 2, 5, 9, 14, 18, and 21.

The heroine is Portia (supremely played by Lily Rabe). The play meanders into romantic comedy in the scenes between Portia and her suitors, who have to play a guessing game, conveniently won by the object of her affections, Bassanio (David Harbort).

While Shakespeare unfortunately succumbed to the anti-Semitic stereotype that was common on stage at the time, and long after for that matter — it is unknown if he actually met any Jews; they had been banished from England from 1290 until 1655, Shakespeare died in 1616 — you have to give him credit for predicting the rise of female lawyers (even if Portia had to cross-dress to perform as such).

"Merchant" elicited audible groans at certain points due to the suffering inflicted on Shylock, whom Shakespeare undoubtedly intended as the villain of the piece. Nevertheless, it is Pacino's performance that will linger in the memories of those who see this revival.

Highly touted violinist Rachel Barton Pine will present a unique unaccompanied program ranging from new classical works inspired by heavy metal to Bach and Spanish virtuosos pieces on Thursday, Dec. 2 at 8 p.m. at Bargemusic (Fulton Ferry Landing in Brooklyn, 718-624-2083).

She often performs with symphony orchestras as well as her "doom metal group" Earthen Grave, which should offer a change of pace from the holiday music filling the airwaves.