



## INTERVIEW TO MARINA REBEKA

by Santiago Rodrigo Hilara

Excellent Latvian soprano Marina Rebeka is making her debut in Madrid, revisiting the role of Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust*, in what is hopefully one of many more opportunities to listen to her live in Spain [she had only sung in Spain once, portraying Violetta at the Palau de les Arts in Valencia, with Plácido Domingo as her Germont].

Born in Riga, Rebeka began her musical studies in Latvia, and continued in Italy, where she graduated at the Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia in Rome in 2007. She also attended the International summer academy in Salzburg and Rossini Academy in Pesaro. And she had already earned several distinctions in vocal competitions worldwide [most importantly, the Bertelsmann Stiftung "Neue Stimmen" Competition in Gütersloh, Germany] before her breakthrough in Salzburg in 2009 under the baton of Riccardo Muti. The opera was *Moïse et Pharaon*, and Rebeka's portrayal of Anaï prompted a critic to call her 'the glory of the evening', an epithet she has kept throughout all these years whether playing *La Traviata*, the Mozart and Rossini roles she has become closely associated with, new Verdi roles (Amelia Grimaldi, Luisa Miller and Giovanna d'Arco), or the Italian Bel Canto and romantic French roles steadily broadening the scope of her repertoire.

This year has seen the release of two complete opera recordings with Rebeka; a live recording of *Luisa Miller* with the Münchner Rundfunkorchester, as well as *La Clemenza di Tito*, as part of the yearly Mozart opera series launched by DG, performed at Baden-Baden and under the baton of Yannick Nézet-Séguin. Rebeka's lush, beautiful soprano, her technical accuracy and the sheer vocal power are standouts in both recordings, with growing verve in Luisa as the character's ordeal starts off, as well as with an infinite variety of colours to portray Vittelia's wiles, allure and opposing feelings.

As we start our conversation on her various recordings, Rebeka confesses to have found the relationship between singers and recording companies to be somewhat difficult at times, which led to an unexpected turn in her career, as she now, together with her husband, a sound engineer, has created their very own label.

M.R. - It was not planned. I had a project to record dramatic belcanto scenes. I had a conductor, I was searching for an orchestra, which I finally found... I was doing everything by myself... So I thought... can we try to create a new label? It's not about publicity - I want to put a good product out there. And at first I was like 'No, it's too much work, you don't know where to start, you don't know how this all works'. But soon I said 'Ok, let's try', so as I was dealing with the artistic part of it, my husband was dealing with all the contracts, distributors... it was a crazy half year - you can't imagine how much work we have done, but in the end we are now distributed worldwide and we are on Amazon, Spotify, iTunes. It's called Prima Classic, and the album is gonna be called *Spirito*. We recorded it in Palermo in July this year.



### **-Why Spirito?**

- The idea of *Spirito* is because all these queens and very strong personalities, priestesses in some cases, were very spiritual people - some of them believed in God - the priestesses I was mentioning are *La Vestale*, by Spontini, and *la Norma* - on the one hand, and then most of them are people whose lives are known even in our times, whose spirit is still present among us. Mary Stuart and Anne Boleyn, for instance. *La Vestale* was an extremely famous opera in the times of Spontini - I mean, Meyerbeer admired him and many other composers, and it tells the story of Vestale, whose temple is still in Rome. Now, Vestale, this century has been sung in Italian, mostly. My album will feature the music in French, similar to what I did with Rossini... I did a special, critical edition with Rossini, as I went to Archivio Musicale Rossini in Pesaro, and I took the manuscripts and did the edition we used for the CD, not based on critical editions, which might sometimes change things. The same thing I did now with this project, so... *Norma* is from a manuscript from Santa Cecilia in Rome, I found Spontini's *La Vestale* in Bibliothèque National Française, then also *Anna Bolena* in Biblioteca Braidense in Milan, *Maria Stuarda* was sent to me from Stockholm, and I had this facsimile of *Il Pirata*. There are some differences in the texts sometimes... small, but still. It was amazing for me - when you look at the handwriting of the person, you get this strong connection with the person. Then I had to create the variations, based on the style, of course, but based on how I feel it and what is good for my voice. Someone in the library of the Latvian National Opera made everything into pdfs then, so we could send them to Palermo.

Quickly after our meeting, on that day, she was to resume working on *Anna Bolena*, her next commitment at the Opéra National de Bordeaux after *Faust* at the Teatro Real. "Donizetti saw her as this very romantic personality, he very much romanticized her... She was a very powerful woman who wanted to stay in power, not a victim, but at the end of the opera she is kind of a victim, so people in the hall would suffer for her, with her!" Unlike Donizetti's queen, Marguerite cuts a much more humble figure, both in Goethe's text, as well as in Jules Barbier et Michel Carré's version for the opera, some of her first words towards Faust in the opera being '*Je ne suis demoiselle / ni belle, / Et je n'ai pas besoin / Que l'on donne la main!*' [*I am neither a lady, / Nor beautiful, / And I don't need / For anyone to give me his hand!*]. Marguerite is a role she premiered at the Latvian National Opera in Riga, then reprised in Montecarlo. "The role for me is one of those amazing roles... singing-wise, it's great, it's very central, only the end is high. The colour should be full and dark, but for me... the best and the most difficult part of playing her is that it is, emotionally, very draining. It's an incredible passage from being a girl to being a woman, a mother, to committing a crime, and losing her head completely before dying... huuuuge arch. She feels extreme loneliness, because she is rejected by everybody. In *Faust*, we can see that the devil is actually inside of human beings, because, instead of society accepting her and helping her, it rejected and damned her, '*sia maledetta*' [*she says menacingly in crisp Italian*]... even her brother... love turned into something different in her case. And funny enough, and this I find to be very modern of Gounod, when she goes to the church, we hear this organ, considered to be a diabolic instrument. The fact that as she's praying, it's the devil that is inside the church, is a very modern concept in my opinion. I mean, we have this news about children being abused by people in the church, which goes on to show that the devil is actually in the heads of these priests... And she represents this pure soul, pure personality, and then we see how she is treated by different people (her family, church, society in general...). The



only way out for her would be dying, but she wouldn't commit suicide, because it is something against the Church, so she loses her mind, and kills the baby... she is pushed to it. She isn't selfish, she doesn't go with Faust."

Rebeka truly believes the production directed by La Fura dels Baus' Àlex Ollé will be of great interest to everyone. The casts put together by the Teatro Real are truly outstanding, with Piotr Beczala, Luca Pisaroni, Stéphane Degout and Serena Malfi among others, to join Rebeka, while another cast will feature Ismael Jordi, Irina Lungu and Erwin Schrott in the leading roles of Faust, Marguerite and Méphistophèles, respectively. "There are quite a few things I love in this production... the concept is extremely modern, and Marguerite is one Faust's very young assistants in the lab, and is totally in love with him - he doesn't see her, you know?"

Even with as strong a cast, it is unlikely Marguerite will go unnoticed this time.