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# Opera

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## DELICACY AND STRENGTH

GREAT SINGERS IN GREAT ROLES:  
RAINA KABAIVANSKA TALKS TO ROGER PINES  
ABOUT ADRIANA LECOUVREUR

**T**he Bulgarian soprano Raina Kabaivanska was already internationally renowned as an interpreter of Verdi and Puccini roles when she first took up the challenge of Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur*, a role with which she became inextricably identified. Over a span of more than two decades, she sang *Adriana* frequently in Rome, also bringing the portrayal to other Italian cities (Modena, Bologna, Parma, Reggio Emilia, Florence, Venice, Verona, Naples, Trieste, Messina), as well as to Munich, Monte-Carlo and Marseille. On YouTube one can see and hear multiple excerpts of her *Adriana*, as well as a full-length video of the Messina production, with Sergey Larin as Maurizio and Nicola Rescigno conducting.

**RP:** When you were initially offered the role, was this an opera that you knew well?

**RK:** When *Adriana Lecouvreur* was proposed to me, I had never heard it before. When I sang it for the first time, it was for a series of theatres in the big cities of Emilia-Romagna, with an enthusiastic public. That was with an important director, Mauro Bolognini. I sang it for him all over Italy. It was a beautiful staging, remounting a production that had originally been done with Magda Olivero. Mauro helped me with the gorgeous costumes, he did my make-up—he really took care of me. I had the good fortune to make my debut in the role with Giuseppe Patanè, and later I did it so many times with Daniel Oren conducting. I sang it, too, with [Gianandrea] Gavazzeni—I have beautiful memories of him—and with [Zubin] Mehta and [Gianfranco] Masini.

**RP:** What attracted you to the opera initially?

**RK:** I am someone who first considers the *personaggio*—I need to think about what the character is about, above all. But also, of course, *Adriana* is the peak of

Raina Kabaivanska





Kabaivanska's role debut as *Adriana Lecouvreur* in Modena in January 1968

prima-donna *singing!* She *is* a prima donna—she behaves like a prima donna, and she *acts*. It's certainly required of her in Act 3, with all the declamation.

**RP:** But what about the music?

**RK:** Certainly Cilea's music fascinated me, because it's a mirror for the beginning of the [20th] century. But it's not *verista* at all—absolutely not! It has an infinite delicacy, which doesn't belong to the *verista* school. I always detested verismo opera—Nedda is the only verismo role I've ever done in my life. After I'd sung *Adriana Lecouvreur* they offered *Fedora* many, many times. I always said 'No, no, no, I don't like the music!'. Whereas I was attracted to the music of Cilea—but not so much by the libretto of this opera, which is a little absurd and exaggerated.

**RP:** Which leads me to note that critics have always tended to look down on *Adriana Lecouvreur*. In listening to it again, however, I find so much glorious music in it. How do you refute the criticism that has been inflicted on it so frequently?

**RK:** Well, Cilea is not Richard Strauss! But he also wasn't really part of the

*giovane scuola* [the group that included Puccini, Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Giordano et al]. He used more classical methods. The critics who wanted a Strauss, a Berg, a more contemporary style, didn't like him. Cilea didn't make contemporary music in the sense that it was intended then.

**RP:** You were able to develop such a remarkable association with the role of Adriana.

**RK:** As the years went by, I became the only Adriana Lecouvreur in Italy. Although I did also sing the role in Munich, Monte-Carlo and Marseille, it generally wasn't that popular outside Italy, where it was adored. In Italy hardly anyone is doing it now!

**RP:** On stage in this opera, you were playing a woman who actually lived. Did you undertake any research regarding the real Adrienne Lecouvreur?

**RK:** Yes, of course! She was both a great prima donna and a very intelligent woman—she even had a correspondence with Voltaire. And I want to add that my great friend Umberto Tirelli [the costume designer] found her original costumes. Really! But they were so very small. When the historical Adrienne Lecouvreur was alive, women were



sick all the time. The women were so skinny then, they didn't eat well, they were malnourished. They also often suffered from tuberculosis. Adrienne Lecouvreur died at the age of only 37. She didn't die poisoned [as in the opera]—I imagine she died of TB [scholars have never confirmed what caused the actress's death]. They don't know where her body is buried.

**RP:** Can you describe the impact that she made on French theatre? She was something of an innovator in her style—is that correct?

**RK:** Yes! She was an innovator because she acted in a realistic style, which was quite a change. She didn't act with the pompous artificiality that was prevalent in the theatre at the time.

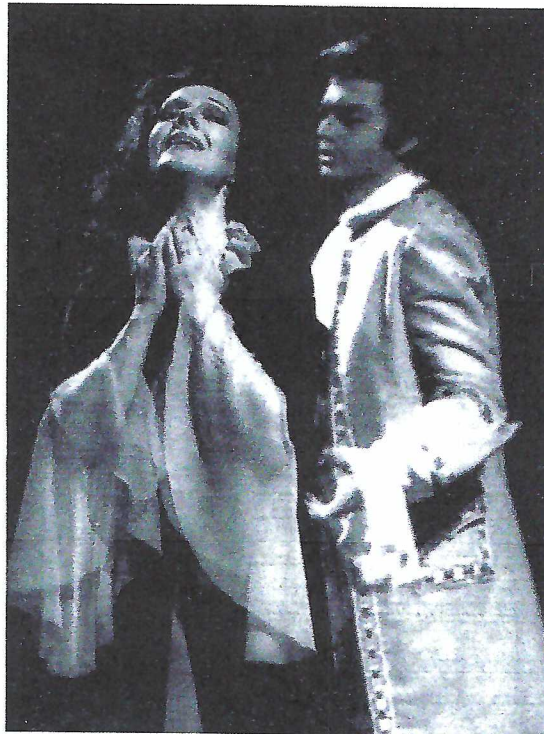
**RP:** Adriana is a character who can make a substantial impact only when performed by someone with the vocal and theatrical command that comes from considerable stage experience in starring roles. What other operatic heroines led you to her?

**RK:** During that period [pre-Adriana], I was doing a lot of Verdi. I came to Covent Garden for Desdemona, and then I was in San Francisco for that role, which I sang everywhere, including the Metropolitan Opera. And I did *Don Carlo* at La Scala with [Antonino] Votto, at the Metropolitan with [Fausto] Cleva and the *bellissimo* maestro who died so young, Thomas Schippers. My very first Desdemona, at Covent Garden, was with Mario Del Monaco, Tito Gobbi and [Georg] Solti—can you believe it? All of this prepared me vocally for Adriana Lecouvreur, because the role doesn't need to be sung in a *verista* manner. It needs legato, *pianissimi*, different colours, dynamic variety.

**RP:** Cilea gives you a marvellous entrance, declaiming lines spoken by the character of Roxane in Racine's *Bajazet*. Did you relish having your first lines as Adriana be spoken, or would you rather have begun the role by actually singing?

**RK:** I actually always sang those lines, right on the notes. But in Act 3, for the *Phèdre* monologue, I did declaim with the voice of a dramatic actress.

Act 4: Kabaivanska as Adriana Lecouvreur in Trieste in 1977, with Franco Tagliavini as Maurizio



For me, this created a complete and full realization of what this character was—to sing *and* to speak.

**RP:** The thrill of this opera's dramatic content has really been underestimated.

**RK:** I think of the last act, which, for me, was truly magic. It starts with the orchestra playing the theme of [Adriana's aria] 'Poveri fiori'. I was always there listening, and it gave me the illusion of the legitimate theatre. *Real* theatre. Remember, Adriana is first and foremost an actress. She's *always* acting! In her final moments, she sings 'Ecco la luce che mi seduce'—she's still acting, even when facing death.

**RP:** You have the most famous music in the role at the start—that is, 'Io son l'umile ancella'. What is its greatest challenge?

**RK:** That aria doesn't present any purely vocal challenges. But there are the nuances of dynamics—the *sfumature* [shadings]—of *decrescendo*, *piano*, *pianissimo*, *crescendo*, *forte*, *fortissimo*. This was perhaps my strength in this music, since I was able to offer that kind of nuance, including, in the aria's finale, sustaining the *pianissimo* into a big *crescendo*.

**RP:** In your performance, from the very start of the role you communicate a total connection to the text. You're not a native Italian, but no one would guess it for one second in this portrayal. Did you achieve such command of text simply because you have a wonderful ear for languages? Or was there a coach or conductor in your formative years as a singer who helped you to achieve such extraordinary textual authenticity?

**RK:** My teacher, Signora Fumagalli [the soprano Zita Fumagalli Riva] helped me a lot. She was a singer who'd done a lot of verismo roles, and was the diva of Mascagni and Leoncavallo. She taught me the wedding of music and words, and gave me a personal instinct for text. I also sang with Herbert von Karajan, who had this instinct. When he offered me *Elektra*, I said, 'No, I can't do it, because I don't speak German!'. For me, language comes before the music, in a sense, and I absolutely cannot sing a role by rote like a parrot, without having the real meaning of the words. So I told him no, and he said to me, 'You're the first woman who's said no to Karajan!'.  
Because I like Richard Strauss's music so much, I sang *Capriccio* in Italian—I don't remember the year [it was 1991, in Bologna]—with the young [Christian] Thielemann, and with *regia* by Luca Ronconi. I did it because I absolutely wanted to sing an opera of Richard Strauss, but I couldn't have done it in German.

**RP:** The next episode is one of the most charming in the opera—the conversation between you and Michonnet, the devoted stage manager. Can you describe the type of relationship that exists between them? He's been in love with her for a long time, but how does she feel about *him*?

**RK:** He's a real confidant, a true friend—an intimate friend.

**RP:** A crucial element of that wonderful scene is that it's pure conversation. Does the style of Cilea's conversational writing differ much from that of Puccini? If so, how? And what, in your view, is the key to mastering this style?





Kabaivanska in one of her many appearances as Adriana Lecouvreur in Rome: Act 3 with Ivo Vinco as Bouillon and Sesto Bruscantini as Michonnet, 1989

**RK:** It's very different. Puccini is melodic, even in the recitatives. Puccini *sings* in the recitatives, while Cilea doesn't sing—he *talks*. One has to have great vocal technique in Cilea, because it's not easy to do this *parlato*, without the necessary breath control. *Parlato*, in the end, can ruin voices, if it's not supported by technique.

**RP:** You then have the great pleasure of having one of the most beautiful love songs in Italian opera sung to you, Maurizio's 'La dolcissima effigie'. Can you cite one or two tenors with whom you sang this opera whose vocal qualities were particularly persuasive in the aria and created just the right atmosphere?

**RK:** Let me think [laughs]! You know who was divine? Franco Corelli—and he actually was singing *piano* for nearly the entire aria.

**RP:** In Act 2, we see quite a different side of Adriana—the woman who will fight for her man. How does she express this, in the confrontation with the Principessa di Bouillon?

**RK:** It's a very feminine moment—woman against woman, in a classic confrontation. And it's cruel, because women can really be cruel with other women!

**RP:** In Act 3, Adriana has a ballet to sit through—and I always watch *her*, not the dancers. What is going through her mind as she sits there?

**RK:** I was always thinking of the dancers. Cilea created a *divertissement*—he wanted to do the ‘grand opera thing’, which, of course, would have included dance. This ballet, I must say, is very beautiful, melodically speaking. And I always liked to watch the *good* dancers. Ballet is a very cruel art. I’ve seen so many dancers smiling on the stage, and when they go behind the stage, they collapse in pain. It’s just too cruel.

Once I was doing this opera in Monte-Carlo and the mezzo-soprano was sitting in front of me during the ballet. She had shoes that hurt her so under the chair, she took her shoes off, which she had time to do because the ballet is very long. When it was over she had to get up, but she started to look under her skirt because she couldn’t find her shoes. The princess without shoes!

Speaking of the princess: I sang *Adriana Lecouvreur* in Marseille with [Fiorenza] Cossotto. Her character doesn’t sing in the last act, but she remained in her costume because she wanted to take the applause at the end!

**RP:** It’s suggested by the princess that Adriana recite the monologue of the abandoned Ariadne, but Adriana does the scene from *Phèdre* instead. What prompts that decision?

**RK:** *Phèdre* is a great dramatic character, and the monologue finishes with a great insult for women without honour.

**RP:** I’ve heard the monologue done very different ways, from almost whispered in much of it to heavy, loud declamation all the way through. How did you approach what is, in fact, a huge challenge to the singer?

**RK:** I always declaimed it loudly and strongly—I didn’t whisper! That’s what I was talking about before—you have to have technique to do it the way I did.

**RP:** In that episode, the singer portraying Adriana must project her *speaking* voice over the orchestra—and, of course, without a microphone. If I’m not mistaken, with the exception of Violetta’s reading of Germont’s letter, this is the only role in your repertoire that required you to speak.

**RK:** I also did *La vedova allegra* [*The Merry Widow*], in so many performances of Mauro Bolognini’s production. So of course, I had to learn how to speak like an actor, on the breath. I taught myself to do it.

**RP:** Like Violetta, in the last act you’re on stage from start to finish.

**RK:** Violetta is a *scherzo* by comparison! Yes, the first act of *La traviata* is hard, but the third act is actually no problem.

**RP:** How did you sustain your energy through Adriana’s entire last act?

**RK:** You know, I always died in all the operas I sang! So I simply became accustomed to sustaining the role right up to the death of the character.

**RP:** The death scene is really a tour de force for a singing actress.

**RK:** It’s one of the most beautiful deaths I ever had during my career on stage, because she is like a white vision—a white dove, flying to the heavens.

*Special thanks to Marina Vecchi, who served as interpreter for this interview.*