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Opera



Remembering Jessye Norman
Barbara Hannigan — game-changing artist
A history of 'Halka': Moniuszko at 200
Mahler's troublesome tenor

SHE STIRRED THE SOUL

Roger Pines celebrates the life and career of Jessye Norman, with contributions from the soprano Harolyn Blackwell, the tenor Lawrence Brownlee and the composer Bruce Saylor

Jessye Norman was born in Augusta, Georgia, on 15 September 1945. She died in New York, aged 74, on 30 September 2019, of septic shock and multiple organ failure, the result of complications from a spinal-cord injury suffered in 2015.

Jessye Norman's vocalism could blaze with intensity as Stravinsky's Jocasta, sail forth with unique breadth and radiance as Wagner's Elisabeth, and caress with heartstopping tenderness in the 'Adieu' of Berlioz's *Didon*.

One could recognize Norman's voice even in a single note, thanks to an essential opulence that produced instant sensuous pleasure in a listener. Deployed with exceptional colouristic variety, the sound in itself would have ensured memorability, but there was more to Norman's performances than just the voice. She was a born communicator, imbuing every moment on stage with extraordinary vividness of personality. Whether performing Purcell or Poulenc, her entire being simply lived the music.

A singer who declared unequivocally that 'pigeonholes are for pigeons', Norman ignored the *Fach* system. Although officially a soprano, she possessed a luxuriant lower-middle range making possible numerous roles poised between soprano and mezzo. Her non-operatic work stretched the boundaries even further: how remarkable, for example, that Norman, for whom Strauss's *Vier letzte Lieder* was a musical signature, also commanded the contralto depths of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*.

Her upbringing—centred on school, church and her close-knit family—instilled a positivity and unshakeable self-confidence that were integral to Norman's persona. Her parents strengthened her faith continually, her well-being, and (as she wrote in her memoir, *Stand Up Straight and Sing!*) a desire 'to live a purposeful life with distinction'.

Having never previously had a serious voice lesson, Norman found a crucial mentor in Professor Carolyn V. Grant, her teacher during four formative years at Howard University in Washington, DC. After completing her training at the Peabody Conservatory and the University of Michigan, she won the Bavarian Radio International Music Competition in 1968. Egon Seefehlner, then the intendant of the Deutsche Oper Berlin, immediately proposed Wagner's Elisabeth as her operatic debut. On the night, she handled that formidable role so successfully that during the interval Seefehlner offered a three-year contract. Norman accumulated significant stage repertoire during her Berlin years, while also undertaking important engagements in Italy: *Aida* at La Scala, *Idamante* (was there ever a more sumptuous-voiced artist in that role?) with RAI under Colin Davis in Rome, and Meyerbeer's *Séliká* (in Italian translation, alas, but ravishingly sung) with Muti in Florence.

In 1975 Norman bade opera a temporary farewell, fearing that vocal burnout could result from the heavy repertoire everyone seemed to expect of her. She based herself for several years in London, while focusing on recitals and concerts

internationally. The most eminent and exacting conductors adored her, thanks to her superb musical preparation, textual authenticity and stylistic acumen.

Norman's opera career resumed in the early 1980s, first with *Ariadne auf Naxos* in Hamburg and subsequently *Dido and Aeneas* and *Oedipus Rex* for her US stage debut in Philadelphia. Having first stepped onto the Metropolitan Opera stage at the age of 23 in the



■ Jessye Norman

company's National Council Auditions, she returned as a star in 1983, singing *Cassandra*, switching to *Didon* for other performances and taking on both roles for that season's *Troyens* broadcast. Norman's Met repertoire eventually encompassed *Jocasta*, *Ariadne*, *Madame Lidoine*, *Judith*, the *Woman (Erwartung)* and *Kundry*. She also surprised many with a triumph as the Met's first *Emilia Marty*. Most indelible of all was *Sieglinde*, a character Norman embodied with total commitment and sang magnificently, concluding with an 'O hehrstes Wunder!' that stirred the soul.

In addition to an early-career *Aida* at the Hollywood Bowl and a 1990 *Alceste* at Lyric Opera of Chicago, Norman's operatic activity also included London, where as a young singer she had another important mentor in Colin Davis. After conducting the *Rome Idomeneo* and Norman's first studio recording (*Figaro's Countess*) in 1971, the following year Davis conducted for her ROH debut as *Cassandra*. She returned as *Elisabeth* in 1973 (also with Davis on the podium) and again, after a 13-year absence, as *Ariadne*.

It was France, above all, that venerated Norman, with the singer attaining the stature of a national heroine. Among her major achievements there were an incandescent portrayal of Rameau's *Phèdre* at the Aix-en-Provence Festival, Purcell's *Dido* at the Opéra-Comique and, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, a Spiritual-based work created by Robert Wilson, *Great Day in the Morning*. In 1989 Norman received the Légion d'Honneur and sang the *Marseillaise* in the 200th-anniversary Bastille Day celebration at the Place de la Concorde. Her friend and colleague, the composer Bruce Saylor, recalls that 'Jessye was asked in an interview, "Miss Norman, did you have to work especially hard learning all the verses of the *Marseillaise*?" She looked at this guy and said, "I have known all the verses of the *Marseillaise* since I was a middle-school child in Augusta, Georgia!"'

Norman appeared with virtually every distinguished orchestra worldwide, and her recitals sustained rewarding relationships with the *crème de la crème* of collaborative pianists. Winner of the Gramophone Award and five Grammy Awards (including one for lifetime achievement), Norman recorded prodigiously. Certain standard-repertoire roles (*Leonore*, *Carmen*, *Santuzza*, *Salome*) weren't quite the right fit. Rather, it was in singing



■ Norman as Phèdre in 'Hippolyte et Aricie' at Aix in 1983

more rarely encountered heroines that she especially shone on disc, as in a dazzling portrayal of Haydn's Armida, a tonally and interpretatively glowing Euryanthe, and a delectably alluring Helen of Troy (Offenbach's, that is—would that Norman's marvellous sense of humour had been given more opportunities onstage). While her astoundingly varied discography of orchestral and song literature isn't OPERA's province, mention should be made of the sublime *Vier letzte Lieder* under Masur and Berg's concert aria 'Der Wein' under Boulez.

Norman's parents raised her to give back to her community. This she did constantly, creating the Jessye Norman School of the Arts in Augusta, appearing in concerts benefiting causes she passionately believed in, and serving on boards of such organizations as Dance

Theatre of Harlem, the New York Public Library and the Elton John AIDS Foundation, among others. In 2009 she curated 'Honor!', a three-week, 52-event festival celebrating the African American cultural legacy, presented under the auspices of Carnegie Hall.

One of Norman's last major projects was serving as artistic director of 'Sissieretta Jones: Call Her By Her Name!', created to raise awareness of the first widely celebrated African American diva. Jones toured worldwide with her own company of prominent African American artists in the decades following Reconstruction. The project was launched with a multimedia concert last December at Brooklyn's innovative music venue National Sawdust, honouring both Jones and Norman herself. The soprano Harolyn Blackwell, now spearheading the project with the arts administrator Adina Williams, notes that 'Jessye had wanted to do this for years. She was amazed by the career of Sissieretta Jones. We all felt her story was so important that we had to let the world know who she was and what she accomplished.'

Interviews with Norman revealed her boundless intelligence, wit and charm. Always a law unto herself, she was undeniably also viewed by many as something of a *monstre sacré* and prone to a certain over-the-top grandiosity of manner. Such things pale into insignificance when considering the totality of this unique career. Jessye Norman was a

giver, and the generosity with which she offered audiences her voice, artistry and spirit will remain in the memory always.

Harolyn Blackwell

It was Jessye Norman who made me decide to pursue a career as an opera singer. When I was 18, in Mexico City, I was walking past the concert hall and saw the pictures of her. I didn't know who she was and was on the fence at the time: I had a music scholarship to the Catholic University of America, but I didn't know if this was for me. I heard her that night and thought, 'This is what I want to do.'

What I always admired about Jessye was her integrity. I knew that about her instinctively, from just meeting her, but having worked with her, that's really what her legacy is to me, as an artist and as a person. She never wavered from that. She sang the repertoire *she* wanted to sing, she respected the job she had to do, and she was always herself.

When I received the news that Jessye had passed away, it was as if someone had punched me in the gut. I thought, 'We've lost our angel, our guiding force. She's gone, but look what she's given us.'

Lawrence Brownlee

I had the great privilege of knowing Miss Norman. She was always very supportive of my career. I was honoured that she invited me to her performing arts high school in Augusta, Georgia, where I gave a recital and a masterclass. She will be remembered for her tremendous artistry, magnetism, mastery of languages—so many things. An iconic figure, an iconic artist, someone who will be sorely missed. One of the last of the true, great divas!

■ Norman at the Met: (l.) as Emilia Marty, 1996; (r.) as Ariadne, 1993





■ *Jessye Norman's first OPERA cover—as Ariadne at Covent Garden in 1985*

Bruce Saylor

Jessye was a real nitpicker when it came to preparation and rehearsal periods being sufficient for the repertoire. She was very respectful towards art, believing that great art had to be performed not just with precision but with intention and care and love.

In Jessye I saw an extreme honouring of what a composer does. She learnt Schoenberg's *Erwartung*—one of the most fabulously difficult pieces to learn—so she could perform it a dozen times at the Met. She studied like crazy and was able to sing it as if it was Mozart. In the 1990s Boulez asked her to perform and record *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. She'd performed it in English a lot, but she decided that, like Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, she would never sing in a language she didn't know. She took a summer out to study Hungarian so she could sing it in the original language!

I provided the music for her medley of American hymns that she sang just before President Clinton took the oath of office at his second inauguration in 1996. She relayed to me the project: 'I have exactly five minutes to say something to America and to the world.' She constructed a progression of tunes and texts that delivered the message of freedom and redemption.

She was a creative genius herself, even as she revered the creativity of others. She constantly gave speeches about the profound importance of the arts in education, and the necessity for all of us of art and poetry, for the benefit of humanity.

Readers' letters

Brazilian bullfight

I was interested to see that Welsh National Opera's new production of *Carmen* is set in Brazil. Transferring locations of opera is nothing new, but I wonder if there was a crisis of geography involved here. I am not sure how the Portuguese would feel about the attribution of something (although written by a Frenchman) so

quintessentially Spanish. There is also a minor problem with the fact that the opera climaxes outside a bullring. Bullfighting has never been as much a part of life as it has in Spain, and is, in fact, illegal. A toreador in Brazil would be considered a decided oddity rather than an icon.

Michael Rolfe
Via email