

Martina - Straight Up With a Twist

Is there life after Verdi? In her newest role as director of the "Prelude to Performance" workshop, Martina Arroyo answers with a resounding "Si." SCOTT BARNES report



The first thing that strikes you about Martina Arroyo is how beautifully she is put together - perfect coiffure, tasteful makeup, elegantly tailored clothes, just the right jewelry. It comes as a bit of a surprise if you're familiar with her self-

deprecating presence during more than twenty appearances on *The Tonight Show* in the Carson years. "Oh, no one remembers me!" (said without false modesty or fishing for reassurance, despite her twenty seasons at the Met). Not a vanity-sized designer "zero," Arroyo is smart, funny, charming, flirtatious, with a seriousness of purpose and a devotion to young singers that underpins all the wise-cracking. Never content to rest on her laurels as a world-class soprano, she has a new "baby" - a role-preparation workshop of approximately thirty singers called "Prelude to Performance," a destination for young professionals who seek guidance in more than just singing technique. In the program's 2006 season, five weeks of classes and rehearsals in June and July culminated in fully-staged performances of *Don Giovanni* and selected acts from *Don Pasquale*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Falstaff* at Manhattan's El Teatro Heckscher.

ON: What level of singer is "Prelude" attracting?

MA: Most of them have performed at universities or other programs; usually they have done only scene work, or learned a role quickly. The emphasis in this program is to study the entire role, the background of the character, character development - all the things you don't usually have the time to do if you're just learning the aria or the major duets.

ON: Was this a result of your experience teaching at Indiana University?

MA: Partially, even though IU has a wonderful opera program - one of the best in the world. Also, when young people came to study privately, they didn't really know what the words meant. I was lucky, because I went to the Hunter College Opera Workshop in the '50s. Then workshops sort of stopped in many colleges. In my day, the singers were professionals who were studying roles. I was at Hunter College High School, and a few friends and myself were outside the auditorium imitating the opera singers, and I got caught. Professor Turnau made me sing as a punishment. He said, "You can sing," and allowed me to take the workshop. but became so involved that I ended up going to Hunter with a so-called scholarship from George Schuster, who was the president. He sent me to study with Mrs. [Marenka] Gurewicz, and that's all I wanted to do. Music took over my life entirely.



Charles Caine suits up
Dino Wu as Malatesta



Falstaff in performance
with Jay Gould (Falstaff)
and Stephanie McGuire
(Mistress Quickly)

ON: And it all started from your fooling around with your buddies to make each other laugh! Do you remember what you sang?

MA: I sang the jewel song from *Faust* - and at the end, he asked, "What language was that in?" And do you know, to this day, my French stinks?!

ON: So you must have been the baby in the workshop.

MA: Yes. Pretty much. Mrs. Gurewich didn't permit me to sing opera. She felt that at fourteen and a half, I should sing "An die Musik" and old Italian songs. Behind her back, I was learning *Butterfly*.

ON: Of course you were.

MA: Now I get kids at IU who come in with "Vissi d'arte," and I say, "How about 'Tu lo sai' [a staple of beginning singers from the classic collection *Twenty-four Italian Songs and Arias of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*]?" Mrs. Gurewich would take an entire lesson to work on the first line of "Vergin, tutto amor." She would drill and drill, working on legato.

ON: You got to her via Josef Turnau. Did she have other students your age?

MA: [Looking horrified] Oh no - she didn't even want *me*! She said no at first, but she took me because I had a "kernel," like Grace Bumbry. Some very young singers do. I've met many older singers without. No core to the voice. Forty-five minutes a week, and any extra time she had. I think I was paying something like five dollars a lesson. My teacher made sure that I knew the word-by-word translation of the song or aria - we did that together in my lessons. Nowadays, when I hear that teachers are charging \$250 an hour, and you can pay by credit card! How many people do you know that can take more than one lesson a month? What kind of training are they getting? In that hour, there's certainly no time to talk about character development, or to stress the language. *That's* why we're doing this program. Sometimes these wonderfully talented young singers have great instincts but can't really tell you what they're singing about. So there's a whole mess of work that can be done with talented people that has nothing to do with vocal technique. We don't touch the technique.



Butterfly at the Heckscher with Tracy Marie Koch (Cio-Cio-San), Victoria Manning (Dolor), Allison Robertson (Suzuki) and Kenneth Overton (Sharpless)
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ON: Is that problematic for you?

MA: Sometimes. We try only to accept singers who can be adjusted by the mention of a vowel sound or something similar. Our motto is "Take that to your teacher!" If we want a singer to crescendo, and they don't know how to, we're not gonna *teach* them how to. Many of them don't know how to mark [to rehearse at half-volume, or "duck" high notes by singing them down the octave] - *especially the tenors!* I was a Romance Languages major and taught Italian. It was my life - and easy. But it's not easy for every singer. We take that into consideration and give them the time to work at it. They have grammar in addition to diction. [Italian language instructor] Sergio Stefani is absolutely wonderful. He loves being around the music. The kids are always around him asking questions, and they know that he doesn't mind. Our feeling was that at least if they get a chance to fully study *one* role, they have the idea of how to approach

every role - a guideline. I teach the role course, but the program is not about me. We have coaching, special recitative classes, stage combat, makeup, libretto study. That last is particularly important. They actually have to *speak* their parts, as well as know a word-by-word translation. This year we're doing two performances of *Don Giovanni* in costume and with orchestra; one act each of *Don Pasquale*, *Falstaff*, and two acts of *Butterfly*, also in costume and with orchestra; and piano concert versions of the last

three complete operas. And they're not doing it with books - they're fully memorized and moving.

ON: How much time do you spend on body work? My experience has been that classical singers have a hard time getting away from the piano.

MA: In the staging sessions, Laura Alley and Ellen Rievman [a member of the Met's corps de ballet for twenty years] always deal with the whole body. Mrs. Gurewicz always told me to use my whole body when I sang. I also studied dancing thirteen years, until I realized that I was the biggest and tallest one in the class - bigger than all the boys, too! Our conductors, Willie Anthony Waters and Steven Crawford, are also the kind of *maes- tri* who are not interested in just pretty sound. The way they conduct, a singer can't help but get fully involved!



Falstaff run-through with conductor Willie Anthony Waters

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ON: It's so interesting to me that you have elected to keep technique out of the purview of the "Prelude to Performance."

MA: We ask the teachers to come! I speak with them on the phone, they come to performances, and we have a little dialogue. We will also inform singers when they need some technical guidance. We urge the singers to make time during the six weeks for their lessons, if the teacher is in town.

ON: If a singer asks you -

MA: I hesitate to. A new teacher could really confuse a young singer. If someone is not in the course, I will recommend a teacher. I feel I really have to stick to the principles that we've established - which is why we just had to let a singer go who didn't have the role memorized. Their agreement is that they will come to the "Prelude" with the part fully memorized - we understand a lapse here or there - but he clearly didn't have it down and was not going to in the time allotted.

ON: Is the workshop about preparing opera stars, or opera singers?

MA: Not everybody is gonna be Radamès. You can't do *Aida* without the Messenger! That's why we bring in master teachers like [basso] Paul Plishka, who is known for his characterizations. In order to be free enough to be that kind of colleague - that also has to do with really knowing your stuff.



Steven Horak makes up Allison Robertson as Suzuki
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ON: Do you deal with issues such as appearance in the workshop?

MA: We have to. Also grooming. It's a part of your professional business. Not all of us can afford Georgette Klinger, but clean hair, fresh makeup, shiny shoes. The argument is what's in style versus what's in style for an opera singer. Wear spandex on your bike, but have a pair of dress pants in your backpack. And I don't really want to see a girl's bare tummy sticking out when she's breathing. Even if you've got the body for it, it's distracting. Find someone with an "eye" who will tell you the truth. I've had to tell young men to wear a touch of makeup if they look washed out at an audition. You *must* see the eyes under those harsh lights. You've got to take your students to a hall both to hear and to see them. Mrs. Gurewich always did. I want to stress that this program is not just what's important to me - we've got sixteen professionals who meet four times before sessions begin, and throughout the workshop, determining what's important.

ON: Do the kids get a recommended reading list?

MA: Sometimes, but they get a lot from the internet. In *Don Giovanni*, some will bring in Kierkegaard, with a little Molière thrown in, and get into *wonderful* arguments! I learn all the time - easily twice as much as they learn from me.

ON: Once you do the "homework" - i.e., provide back story, historical and geographical specifics, know the word by word meaning of the text, "straitjacket" the music - will that work serve you throughout your performing life with that operatic role?

MA: Absolutely. With each new production, you learn something different, you make adjustments. One of our most important abilities is to adapt. I don't think you change the meaning of the word or what you think about it. You move earlier or later, go left or right, but there are always surprises. In *Ballo*, when the veil comes off and Renato finds out it's Amelia, usually he pushes her away angrily. Sherrill Milnes hugged me first, and *then* pushed me away, his face black with anger. His instinct was to protect his wife first.

ON: Your excellent stage director Ellen Rievman talks a lot about the *permission* to create, take chances, adjust to the other characters onstage. It seems to me that once your singers have done the homework - and found out what that homework is - they are empowered to find immense freedom within the limitations of a role. Once you're freed up with the music and language so that it's second nature to you, then you're really free to create and interpret.

MA: [giggling] You may quote me.

SCOTT BARNES *teaches a crossover class for opera singers and directs cabaret in New York City.*