

Preview

Akron Symphony: a conversation with Rossini *Stabat Mater* mezzo-soprano Elizabeth DeShong

By Mike Telin



On Saturday, April 12 the Akron Symphony, under the direction of Christopher Wilkins, will present its final Classic Series Concert of the season with performances of *Walton's Crown Imperial March* and Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*. The concert, which begins at 8:00 in E.J. Thomas Hall also features The Akron Symphony Chorus, Maria Sensi Sellner, chorus director, in Rossini's *Stabat Mater*.

"I've worked with Christopher Wilkins and the Akron Symphony in the past," mezzo-soprano and opera sensation Elizabeth DeShong told us during a recent conversation from New York where she was performing the role of Hermina in The Metropolitan Opera's pastiche, *The Enchanted Island*. "And knowing that I am occasionally in Akron, since my base is there, they asked if I would come back for the *Stabat Mater* and I was really happy to do so. I have sung many Rossini opera roles but this will be my first experience of singing *Stabat Mater*. It's a piece that I've been wanting to sing and it's wonderful to be able to do it in Akron."

The music of Rossini is something of a specialty of DeShong's. In the summer of 2012, she sang the title role in *La Cenerentola* at the Glyndebourne Festival about which *The Guardian* wrote, "...this is, quite simply, one of the great operatic performances. It is dominated by DeShong, whose voice combines a contralto opulence with blazing top notes and some of the most staggering coloratura you will ever hear..."

Although Elizabeth DeShong is based in Akron, she said she doesn't get to spend nearly enough time in the city, "My base is there, but I don't see it as frequently as I would like sometimes, but it is good to be busy." And busy she is indeed. This season for The Metropolitan Opera she sings two Hermias, one in Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and another in *The Enchanted Island*, as well as Suzuki in *Madama Butterfly*, a role she will also sing at the San Francisco Opera. In addition to the *Stabat Mater*, her concert performances include Handel's *Messiah* with the National Symphony Orchestra, and Mahler's *Symphony No. 2* with the Webern Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Franz Welser-Möst at the Musikverein in Vienna. She returns to northeast Ohio in May for performances of Mozart's *Requiem* with the Cleveland Orchestra conducted by David Robertson.

Born and raised in north central Pennsylvania, Elizabeth DeShong did her undergraduate studies at the Oberlin Conservatory before attending the Curtis Institute for her graduate work. She points out that the path from undergraduate school to that of a professional is a long process. “It begins at conservatory and then into grad school and most of the time the next step is moving into a young artist program. I was fortunate to be able to move into the Young Artist training program at the Ryan Opera Center at Lyric Opera of Chicago. I spent three years working alongside wonderful artists and learning the trade while being in it in a very practical, real world way.”

Young Artist Programs also give young singers the opportunity to develop the business side of their careers. “That’s when you begin looking and auditioning for managers who will act as your connect between the opera houses and the orchestras — as well as managing your booking engagements and helping you to plan your future. Planning what is right for you and keeping your schedule manageable so that you’re not doing too much. A good manager, which I am fortunate to have, really looks after you in that way. They make sure you stay healthy.”

What are her secrets to good health? “I’m not terribly paranoid about it and I’m lucky that I have been blessed genetically with good health. I don’t suffer from allergies, so that helps me. I eat very cleanly and try to stay active. And I try to take care of myself personally. I have a wonderful and supportive husband and a wonderful family.” She also places equal importance on the professional and personal sides of her life. “Keeping that balance keeps me healthy inside and out.”

That balance comes across during our conversation: you do get the sense that Elizabeth DeShong is a well-grounded and well-rounded person as is evident in her stunningly beautiful photo blog, [A Singer’s Suitcase](#). “It’s fun for me and I won’t say that it’s therapy, but it’s something that I take time to do every day that takes me out of any pressures or stress. It’s just a moment to appreciate what this lifestyle provides. So it’s a wonderful record of what I do. And I think people are curious about what the day-to-day lifestyle of a singer can be. I just want to get across that it is so much more than being on a stage in costume.”

I confess to her that when I was first told about the blog, I was a bit skeptical. Thanks goodness she laughed rather than taking offense. But Elizabeth DeShong is a very good photographer. “I don’t consider myself a photographer but I’m learning. I so appreciate the art form and I hope to keep learning.”

Unlike many social media sites where everything is 100% about “me doing this and that”, DeShong only appears in very few of her photos. “That was a choice because I didn’t want it to be like that. It wasn’t a public relations move to do *A Singer’s Suitcase*. It really is an interest of mine and a way to share, but I didn’t want it to be specifically about me. I just wanted it to be about experience and taking time to notice all the little things that make [life] special.”

Was Elizabeth DeShong always a Mezzo? “Yes, absolutely. I was fortunate to not go through any crisis of identity vocally. [Laughing] Many singers have those and it’s a hard thing to get through. It’s a very competitive business and anything can put you just those few steps behind in your progress and that can be a very difficult thing to navigate.”

Returning to her point that the path from undergraduate school to a professional career is a long process, DeShong compares it to preparing to be a doctor or physician. “Like studying medicine, it takes training to be a well-rounded and prepared musician so that you can head out to your jobs at your best,” she said, adding that she remembers her early training at Oberlin with fondness. “I studied with Daune Mahy and I still go back to see her from time to time. She is an amazing lady and I consider myself so fortunate to have studied with her. Very few people make themselves available the way that she did. She is so dedicated to her students and has more energy than any human being I have ever come across. She is a real cheerleader and her enthusiasm really helped and it still does. Studying with her was the best decision I ever made.”

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