

Preview: Cleveland Orchestra's Mozart *Requiem* — a conversation with mezzo-soprano Elizabeth DeShong

by Mike Telin



Composed in Vienna in 1791, Mozart's *Requiem Mass in D minor*, K. 626 was left unfinished by the composer at the time of his death. Although mystery surrounds the work (who was the mysterious messenger who ordered Mozart to compose a requiem?), the Mass has become one of Mozart's most beloved works.

This week at Severance Hall, guest conductor David Robertson will lead The Cleveland Orchestra and Cleveland Orchestra Chorus in four performances of Mozart's *Requiem* with guest soloists Jessica Rivera, soprano, Elizabeth DeShong, mezzo-soprano, Garrett Sorenson, tenor and John

Relyea, bass-baritone.

"Mozart's *Requiem* is fantastic," 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*. "The best part of it for me is the feeling of unity. It's not so much of an expression of soloists. You really sing so much as a quartet that you go through the piece with the sense of working toward a very common goal. I think sections like the "Recordare" that is sung by the solo quartet are some of the most magical moments in the piece."

DeShong, who last season sang Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* and Peters Lieberson's *Neruda Songs* with the Orchestra as part of their Miami residencies, says she looks forward to returning to the Severance Hall stage this week, a place that played an important role for her early in her career.

"I was very fortunate that when I was a student at Oberlin back in 2004, I had the opportunity to sing with The Cleveland Orchestra in a performance of Debussy's *La Damoiselle Elue* with Dame Felicity Lott. I was a very young singer so in a way I feel that I have come full circle in returning to them now that I am in my professional life."

Speaking with Elizabeth DeShong is a pleasure. She is very warm and quite funny. And one could say that she is a local. “My base is in Akron. 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 *Requiem*, 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.

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 connection 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. Thank 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.”

While I had her on the phone I asked Elizabeth DeShong to talk about her opera career.

Mike Telin: You’ve performed the role of Suzuki on a number of occasions and will continue to do so this season: How do you keep it fresh?

Elizabeth DeShong: It’s just keeping in your mind that you need to listen as if it’s the first time every time. It’s giving yourself that reminder, before every rehearsal, before every performance. Constantly reminding yourself to hear it in that moment.

I think this is especially key for a character like Suzuki. In the first act she is primarily an observer, but an observer in the sense that she is seeing the very same things that the audience is observing. In a way she is a mirror to their experience. So I feel that that makes her a loud voice even without saying a lot at the beginning. And I think that's how the audience is drawn into her.

MT: How do opera singers decide how to portray their characters?

EDS: During the first few rehearsals you're discussing the direction of the characters and the director gives you his or her idea of who the character is and how you relate to the other characters. You get everybody's back story, you put them together and see where you are and how you relate to everyone.

MT: Who is Suzuki? I understand you were recently asked to portray her a being a little younger than in the past?

EDS: I think of her as maybe being the child left behind. Maybe she had a similar experience. Maybe, [like Butterfly], she was left. Or maybe she had been training as a geisha. She has lived and seen so many people she has cared about who have loved and lost. She has seen that and carries that into her relationship with Butterfly. She is protective of her.

I like to think of her that way when she's older, but it was an interesting challenge to play her younger because that gave me the chance to really hear everything fresh and from a different perspective. It's nice to have that variation.

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