

Q & A: Elena Mosuc On Her First 'Lakmé' & The Challenges Of French Grand Opera

By Francisco Salazar

Elena Mosuc is one of the leading sopranos of her generation and one of the reigning Bel Canto singers of today. A native of Romania, she has been awarded multiple prizes for her musicianship and has been closely connected with the Zürich Opera House throughout her storied career.

Among the operas that she has dominated over the years are "Lucrezia Borgia," "Anna Bolena," "Maria Stuarda," "Norma," and "Lucia Di Lammermoor." She has also sung numerous Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, and French operas to great success throughout the world.



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This month Mosuc gears up for one of her biggest challenges in Delibes' "Lakmé," an opera rarely performed and one that she is encountering for the first time.

Elena Mosuc spoke with OperaWire about the new role and the challenges of performing a work that is rarely heard in the standard repertory.

OperaWire: "Lakmé" is a rarely performed work. How did you decide to finally sing the role?

Elena Mosuc: First of all, I believe that this role came 20 years late. I should have already sung it because I recorded the Bell Song on my very first solo CD. I had to think about whether or not I did the role before I accepted. But it's never too late and I love challenges, because they allow me to show all my experience, vocal technique, and breath support that I have learned throughout the years. Throughout the past few years, I have moved from coloratura roles to more dramatic coloratura like "Norma," "Anna Bolena" and "Maria Stuarda." When it was proposed I thought about the "Bell Song," which I had already sung for the recording, but never in concerts. And I thought this could be a challenge and I said, "I'll do it." First of all the music is very beautiful and I want to prove to myself that after 29 years of singing, I can sing this really difficult role.

OW: Because the work is rarely heard, a lot of the opera is very unknown except for the "Bell Song" and the "Flower Duet." Can you tell me about the music and what kinds of things you have discovered?

EM: When I first heard the opera, I don't know why, but I thought it was a bit boring. But after starting to study it, I realized there is nothing boring about it.

All this time that I have studied it, I have discovered so many incredible moments. I think it has a lot of musical similarities to "Roméo et Juliette," "Carmen," and "La Bohème." I think there is also a lot of similarities to "Madama Butterfly" thematically. And you realize that it is a really complex role and the music is not really a coloratura role, like I originally thought. It's quite a lyric role except for the "Bell Song," which is a very different world. That aria is a coloratura work and you need a singer who knows how to handle everything and must have a very solid technique.

I also discovered, in this exotic music with strong oriental influence, a lot of impressionistic music and a very interesting harmonic language. The orchestra is very dense and rich and you need a voice that can go over that orchestra, which at times is very heavy.

The phrasing in this opera, as in all French operas, needs an extreme legato. You have to play a lot with the dynamics too, as in Bel Canto. This music is like a stream with a precise direction, but often full of surprises. The libretto is really poetic and I was very impressed by the beauty of the words.

I hope that with this new production, which is a co-production around the world, we'll see this opera pop up more often.

OW: What the biggest challenges of performing that aria?

EM: The aria starts with beautiful, melancholic and magical phrases and then all the staccato, which is the most famous part of the aria. This repeats itself and at the end, you have two pages of staccato ending in an E natural. There is also a cadenza, which is short but difficult. In the middle of the aria there is also a cadenza of pure virtuosity, but it's not problematic.

You have to be very attuned to the orchestra and the vocalise is not easy, especially because it is written a capella.

OW: Outside the aria, what are some of the greatest challenges of the entire role?

EM: You have to make sure that technically your voice is positioned to sing in the higher tessitura. It's the same as if you were to sing Wagner or Italian opera. It's a different style but you have to pay attention to where your voice is placed. If you position it high and with correct breath support you will be able to sing the high notes and the voice will be like a bell. If you feel that it comes out naturally, you're in the right place. Another thing is that you have to know how to handle the lyrical sections with the coloratura and also pace yourself because it is a really long role. You have to know how to use your energy. The opera starts with Lakmé and ends with Lakmé. It's grand opera in the vein of Meyerbeer and Massenet.

The duet with Malika is a delicate one because the soprano and mezzo-soprano have to be in harmony and they have to have similar colors. The intervals are also very small in many moments and that is very difficult to do. The intervals are sometimes delicate and we have to pay more attention.

But ultimately it's a role that allows you to show a variety of colors as well as your technical prowess and your lyrical expressiveness.

OW: What is the difference between singing French music and Bel Canto?

EM: The technique is the same but the style is very different. To sing French you have to have very good pronunciation and it is difficult to do so. This is why it's indicated to work with a French coach like we are doing in Muscat. I have sung a lot of French roles over the years like Michaëla in "Carmen," Marguerite in "Faust," and the four roles in "Les Contes d'Hoffmann." As for Bel Canto roles, they are difficult especially Verdi because there is rapid coloratura which ranges two octaves and it is constant. That is not in French music and I think that it is harder to sing Italian opera than French music. There is also a lot of virtuosity which is not in French music.

Another interesting thing is that in Bel Canto you can insert high notes and cadenzas and show your virtuoso prowess, whereas in French music that is not always the case. And if you do insert something it is very rare and it is just a high note.

OW: You have sung at the Royal Opera House Muscat before. Tell me about your experience in the theater?

EM: I sang there in "The Abduction of the Seraglio," "Lucia di Lammermoor," and "Norma. It's a huge theater with great acoustics and those who work in the theater are very professional. There is no stress and I love to work in that environment.

The only thing I don't care for is the air conditioning. There is a lot of air conditioning and it's because the weather in Oman is very hot. It's not very good for a singer and I am very sensitive to it. I have to be extra careful so I don't get sick.

I have to thank the management of the Royal Opera House Muscat, Mr. Umberto Fanni and Maestro Jordi Bernàcer who invited me with open arms to make this debut here.

OW: What is the audience like in Oman?

EM: They are so warm and they love music. It's an audience made up of Omani, but also a lot of Europeans and I see that there are a lot more productions happening every year.

I think that's important and there is a taste for opera and a lot of concerts. They also have a concert hall, which I hope to perform in one day.

OW: Tell me a little about the production you will be premiering here?

EM: We'll write the history in Muscat with this opera because it will be the first production completely born here. All the other productions that have arrived in Muscat were made by other opera houses before.

This "Lakmé" will be premiered here and it will then go around the world to Los Angeles, San Francisco, Tokyo, Sydney, Verona, Firenze, Genova, Cairo, Astana, Beijing, and Shanghai.

I want to remember that all of Genova's Carlo Felice staff is here: choir, orchestra, technicians, dressmakers, which I know very well. It's also my first collaboration with stage director Davide Livermore who has a very clear idea of the production. We are working very intensely and what we are doing is very fair and justified.

We have a beautiful set design with large LED screens that will make giant projections of flowers. There will be very symbolic imagery, linked with water that will be on stage and which represents the love between Lakmé and Gerald, for example. The "Bell Song" will showcase fantastic dancers (from Opera Australia) with Indian influences.

I am always happy to work with artists who love music and are faithful to what the composer wants.

Livermore is also a singer, so for him, it is very important to present the music first of all. We work in a very

nice atmosphere and I'm happy with this collaboration. This "Lakmé" will be very beautiful, special, with many effects thanks to modern technology and dreamlike costumes.

OW: After "Lakmé," what are you looking forward to?

EM: I love to always explore new things because it keeps things interesting and fresh. I will be doing "La Rondine" again. I did it once in concert and I will sing it again in concert, but this time I will do it by memory. I will also do Gilda in "Rigoletto" and my role debut as Giselda in "I Lombardi alla prima crociata" in Romania. It's a role that is generally done by dramatic sopranos, but singers like Mariella Devia, Luciana Serra, and Renata Scotto also performed and did it with their voices. I will do it with my voice, which has also been able to do "Norma."