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Soprano Eva Marton

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Courtesy Philips Records

Frans Brüggen

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Ovation (ISSN 0196-433X) is published monthly by Classical Music Publications, Ltd. Subscription rate in the U.S. is: one year $21, two years $42; in all other countries, including Canada, add $7 per year. Foreign subscriptions payable only by bank draft drawn in U.S. dollars (no checks acceptable). Second class postage rates paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. For changes of address or subscription problems call 1-800-227-5782.

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Postmaster: Send address change to Ovation, P.O. Box 924, Farmingdale, NY 11737.



Strength—of voice, body and spirit—is the byword for this Hungarian-born soprano

© Jack Mitchell

Eva Marton

by Heidi Waleson

WHEN THE CURTAIN went up last fall on Act Two of Franco Zeffirelli's production of *Turandot* at the Metropolitan Opera, it was hard to imagine how any individual singer could survive its opulence. Zeffirelli had made the Emperor Altoum's court a vast panoply of columns, banners and bridges, populated by hundreds of servants and courtiers, all in full regalia. The Emperor on his high throne far in the rear was almost invisible.

Yet when Turandot entered, she held the stage. Made huge, as well, with sumptuous pearly and ice-blue robes, an immense headdress and what looked like six spikes protruding from her back, she stood her ground, hurling her riddles at an unrepentant Calaf. The columns and the extras faded into the background, and the drama came down to two people: the vengeful princess and the suitor who bests her.

The production's Turandot was Eva Marton, the Hungarian-born soprano who has been taking over the major dramatic roles—the Wagner, Puccini and Strauss heroines—at the Met and across the United States, as well as in the principal opera houses of Europe. Dramatic sopranos of her stature are in short supply, so when that big, gleaming, flexible voice—able to pour out beautiful sound over even the grandest of orchestras—came on the scene, the opera companies began lining up.

The Metropolitan was no exception. This year, Marton repeats last season's Tosca (10/16–11/14)—she has other Toscas at Covent Garden and in Stuttgart and Philadelphia—and then makes her debut as Lady Macbeth, with baritone Renato Bruson (1/7–2/15). Next season, she will be Leonora to Luciano Pavarotti's Manrico in the Met's opening-night *Il trovatore*. Other heavy-duty heroines are anticipated: Salome in a new production ("It's Zalome!" says the singer, emphasizing the Z; "I'm sorry, but that's the correct German"), to say nothing of Senta in *The Flying Dutchman* and all three Brünnhildes. Marton doesn't mess around.

Last spring, Marton was installed in a colleague's apartment in Manhattan for the run of *Turandot*. A big, strong-looking woman, with a mass of auburn hair and a sense of style, she radiated a quiet chic in her black-and-white silk blouse and slim black skirt. That evening, she was scheduled to attend a party for an important Met patron. This is not her favorite activity, but—she shrugged—"It's business," and she added, in an enthusiastic English that often that afternoon slid back into Hungarian or German: "For these social things, I need my husband with me."

Eva Heinrich was born and educated in Budapest, though she makes it plain that she has lived in Germany for fifteen years now and carries a German passport. She started music studies in the Kodály system in elementary school. "When you learn to read in school, you learn to read music too. I always sang. I think children are happiest when they sing.

"In my first year at school, I told my mother I would like to play the piano. It was after the war, and a very hard time for everybody. We didn't have anything—just to eat, and that was about all. But I told her, 'You don't need to pay, I will do very well.' She told me, 'Okay, but you have to keep that promise.' I started the first semester, and I paid ten *forints*—which was nothing, maybe thirty cents."

Eva was already performing in school when, at age fourteen, she ran into vocal problems. "My voice canceled," she explained. "It was changing—as it does at that age. With me, everything was late." The teenager was devastated. "I couldn't do anything. Just the piano. And that was not enough for me. I knew by that time that I could *not* be a concert pianist."

Luckily, sports revived Eva's flagging spirits, gave her a new challenge, a purpose. "I was very interested in sports," she continued, "and I found volleyball. It was an outlet, it was hope. For the first time, I worked in a team, I wasn't alone, but six girls—six women together. For six years, we were the best team in Hungary." For the first four of those, Marton concentrated her efforts on volleyball.

"I was still in school, but my teacher would say, 'You don't need to sing—just four songs. And never sing over one octave.' I was very discouraged. I couldn't sing more than eight notes. Before, you see, I had very high notes, and I had lost them. The only hope I had was the success in sport; that's what kept me alive for four years."

At eighteen, her voice started to come back, but she stayed with the team for two more years, until she was pregnant with her first child. "My husband was very jealous," she related. "I was pregnant, and yet wearing the little shorts—" She burst out laughing.

But volleyball was more than a stopgap for the singer-to-be. "I find out, now, how much that was truly the foundation of my entire life," she declared. "It's very important for young people to find out about their body and the development of it... how you can trust your body, what it can



Eva Marton's Turandot commanded the stage in the new Met production.

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Heidi Waleson writes about the arts for the New York Times *and a variety of publications.*

take. The best example was in *Turandot* this year, when I had three dresses on my body, the flags, the headdress, and 286 people around me. And it was so hot onstage! Sport gave me the discipline for that—as well as patience until the whole thing came together."

When her voice began to return, Marton entered the Franz Liszt Academy. (Had she not been accepted, she said, she might have studied to become an archaeologist instead of a singer.) From there she went to the Budapest Opera in 1968, where she made her debut as the Queen of Shemakha in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Le Coq d'or*. Christoph von Dohnányi heard her there as Freia in *Das Rheingold* and invited her to sing at the Frankfurt Opera. Offered a contract, Marton, with her husband and son, moved to West Germany in 1972.

In Frankfurt, Marton had the opportunity to learn many operas in their original languages. "In Budapest, I sang always Hungarian. It's so stupid! For Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin*, I've learned Russian, Hungarian and German. Somebody wanted me to do it in English, but I said, 'No more!'" She sang in other cities during her Frankfurt days—a new production of *Onegin* at the Vienna Staatsoper, for example. Then, after she had spent five years with the Frankfurt Opera, Dohnányi became Director of the Hamburg Opera, and invited her there on a contract that left her quite free for guest appearances elsewhere.

> "The big roles have come slowly. I never went after them. They came to me. Every time I was offered to sing them, I said no."

Soon the world's major theaters started to hear Marton: She sang both Venus and Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* in Bayreuth in 1977 and 1978—a feat that she will be repeating at the Houston Grand Opera next May—and also made her La Scala debut in *Il trovatore* with Zubin Mehta in 1978. Her Metropolitan Opera debut had already come, in 1976, as Eva in *Die Meistersinger*, and she returned in the 1978–79 season for Chrysothemis in *Elektra*. But it was her appearance as the Empress with Birgit Nilsson in *Die Frau ohne Schatten* that in October 1981 launched her as a Met star.

"At that time, five, six years ago, I was on top in Europe, but not in America," she reminisced. "I was nothing before, and after, I had everything. One night and a star is born. . . . It's interesting."

Marton returned to the Metropolitan for *La gioconda* the following season, for *Fidelio* in 1983–84 and for Ortrud in *Lohengrin* in 1984–85—the latter not usually her role, but Music Director James Levine wanted her, and in it she brought down the house. Then came Elsa in the same Wagner opera for the 1985–86 season. She also sang in the Met's gala centennial concert in 1983, "*In questa reggia*," and the choice of aria foreshadowed last season's triumph as Turandot. "In 1983 I sang my first Turandot in Vienna, and it was like a firecracker. For myself, too." She has recorded the opera with Katia Ricciarelli and José Carreras, Lorin Maazel conducting the Vienna Staatsoper (CBS Masterworks 39160), and, the soprano said proudly: "I have sung Turandot sixty-three times in the last three years."

The big roles, Marton remarked, have come slowly. "I never went after them. They came to me. Every time I was offered to sing them, I said no. When I finished university, the director of the opera



David Powers/Courtesy San Francisco Opera

house in Hungary, he wanted in the first year Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* and Elsa in *Lohengrin*. I said no. Later, I was in Germany, and they asked me to sing Arabella. I didn't speak German, it was too early, and I didn't want to take the risk."

Marton doesn't think of roles as being "heavy" or "light." "My whole concept of the body and the spirit is so prepared for a role that, for me, it is not heavy. When the time comes that I lose this cohesion of the body, then it will be heavy. When I sang the Empress in *Frau* for the first time, it was two months after my second child was born—a very difficult time for me. But, I thought, I can do it. And four years later comes another such part. I tried, and I succeeded. I could solve the problem.

"The technical problems were slowly disappearing. There were no edges; everything became smoother and smoother, and I felt the security. After my second child was born, I felt that my femininity was much more evident in the characters. As time goes on, every person undergoes changes into a better or a different or a more secure personality. For a singer, twenty years doesn't finish the completion of her psychological, physical and philosophical progress."

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Backstage at the Metropolitan Opera after Turandot, *Marton joins, from left, James Levine, Birgit Nilsson, Franco Zeffirelli, Elizabeth Taylor and Plácido Domingo.*

Marton credits some of her ability to keep going and developing to her husband Zoltán Marton, a surgeon. "We have not just a husband–wife relationship; we have a very close friendship too. He's always with me when I sing. He's a doctor, and he knows my body very well. He gives me criticism—sometimes very hard. But he tells the truth. It's very important to have somebody to depend on. I don't have girlfriends—I don't need that: I can't speak about dresses and fashion and makeup. It's boring."

Her husband made some important decisions for Marton early on. When they first arrived in Germany, she received invitations to sing at small provincial houses. Marton wanted to go. "I didn't have money, and I wanted to go to these small cities for maybe two hundred dollars, just to eat! But my husband told them no, I was busy. I asked him, 'How can you say I am busy? I don't have anything! We came to Frankfurt with just fifty German marks. We don't eat, we don't have money.' He said, 'Don't worry about it. To sing in such small houses—there is no time to learn anything there.' And besides, he said, I wasn't going to be paid right for it. He was afraid that I would get lost in these regional theaters, as many people do. You cannot exchange your talent for small change."



Marton as two of the strong-willed heroines that have become her hallmark: Brünnhilde in the San Francisco Opera's Siegfried *(left) and Floria Tosca in the Met's* Tosca *(right).*

James Heffernan/Courtesy Metropolitan Opera

Today Marton's life revolves around both her singing and her family: son Zoltán, twenty-one, and daughter Diana, thirteen. They live in a Hamburg suburb. "We live very simply. I'm not a party girl," the soprano made plain. "I never go out after a performance. If I do, it's something very special—maybe a first night. Also, I don't drink, I don't smoke."

These days, she explained, she is singing about fifty-two opera performances a year (and there are also concerts and recording sessions). "I think that is a very healthy number. I can't push myself. If I'm tired and I sing, then the next time I'm ill. Years ago, I had to fight with conductors because, from the very beginning, they wanted me to sing full voice. Now I don't have to do that anymore. I've learned how, by using little voice, sometimes little emotion, not to spend myself on rehearsal.

"Sometimes I am ten or twelve hours in the theater. When I sang Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung* in San Francisco three years ago, I would start at nine in the morning and go to ten-thirty at night, with just a little lunch, and thirty minutes' pause between two orchestra rehearsals. I would shut myself in my dressing room, use a short time to get a big rest. A singer is comparable only to a professional sports person. You have to be in shape."

Staying in shape means getting plenty of exercise—a holdover from her volleyball days. At home in West Germany, it's "swimming, bicycling. . . everything." On the road, tennis whenever possible. "I'd like to have a competition with the tenors, sometime," Marton affirmed. "Domingo and Pavarotti both play tennis!"

Marton picks her roles and her theaters based on the colleagues she will have and on what roles will come before and after. "I don't like to be in an opera where everything is centered around me, where the other colleagues are not a match. I hate that. I feel like, in such conditions, you have a yoke on, and you have to pull everything—it's all depending on *you*. I believe opera is teamwork, and in teamwork everybody is equal."

There are a few favorite conductors: James Levine, Lorin Maazel, Andrew Davis, Erich Leinsdorf. In a stage director she likes those who offer "a new concept." She speaks enthusiastically of Hal Prince, who directed her first Turandot in early 1983 in Vienna, and of Jonathan Miller,

(Continued on page 22)

who insisted on a freeze-frame effect for her leap at the end of a Florence *Tosca* in 1986. "I don't like the same old thing. I like to work with the director and try many things during rehearsals—I'm not a doll who wants to stand in one place. In fact, I like rehearsal time best: It is creative." Marton resents colleagues' jetting in late for rehearsals, which makes performances difficult. "I like improvisation," she acknowledged, "but not all evening."

Zeffirelli's big productions at the Met have been enjoyable experiences for Marton. The huge *Turandot*—which will be telecast on PBS' "Live from the Met" in early 1988—didn't faze her. "Don't forget, *Turandot* is a fairy tale. I think the Metropolitan is the only place in the world where you can put such old-fashioned magic onstage—we don't have the money to do so big a production in Europe," she maintained. "But even though everything is big in the Met production, and all those people are there, they don't slow you down as obstacles. If something is used correctly, it's not gigantic anymore. How many people were around me—two hundred or two thousand? It's all the same. It was as if I had many friends onstage. And then, Peking had several million people—and this was just a little drop of it!"

But not every theater uses gigantism well. Marton recalled a *Fidelio* in Salzburg: "We had an enormous and very deep stage. For the whole night, I never went into the sides of the stage." The production had a hazard, too, one that could have proved tragic. "There was a huge wooden thing, like a bathtub, with water dripping into it. I was afraid every night that I would fall into it, and one night I did.

"The tub was constantly moving, and I told the stage director to please nail it down. So, during the second act, in the jail in the famous duet with Florestan, I took one step to the back, and the next moment I had fallen in! James King, the Florestan, was laughing, but Lorin Maazel kept going and I did too. After the duet, King came and said, 'Eva, you were great! We didn't lose the rhythm.'" She laughed. "*Boom*! You can hear it on the broadcast."

Metropolitan Opera–goers may remember a similar incident in the Zeffirelli *Tosca* on October 20, 1986, when Marton—fighting off the advances of the lecherous Scarpia—got an elbow in the face from baritone Juan Pons just before her aria "*Vissi d'arte*." The soprano's jaw dislocated, but she made it through the aria, the end of the act and, against her husband's advice, through Act Three as well. "I couldn't open or close my mouth," she told the *New York Times*. "I had to suddenly invent a whole new way of singing." But she had been determined to finish the performance. "I waited two years for this, to sing Tosca at the Metropolitan." Marton appeared to suffer no lasting damage; the dislocation resolved itself.

> "I don't like to be in an opera where everything is centered around me. I believe opera is teamwork, and in teamwork everybody is equal."



In the future, the soprano is planning to limit her opera engagements to a few theaters; the Metropolitan and the Vienna Staatsoper are becoming her home bases. In addition to the anticipated Met roles already mentioned, she has her first Elektra coming up in Vienna in 1989 with Claudio Abbado, and she is hoping to do her first Isolde one day. "At the Met, we spoke about it. I have a good feeling." She would also like to do Norma—"Lilli Lehmann is the only singer who did both Norma and Isolde"—and plenty of Strauss, Wagner and Puccini. "And later, when I'm older, Jenûfa."

For CBS Masterworks, Marton has made a wide range of recordings, including both German and Italian repertoire: Mahler's Symphony No. 2, with Jessye Norman, Lorin Maazel conducting the Vienna Staatsoper Orchestra (38667); highlights from Strauss' *Salome*, together with his *Four Last Songs* and the recently discovered "*Malven*" (42019); and, released late last year, Puccini arias, Giuseppe Patanè leading the Munich Radio Orchestra (42167), and Giordano's *Fedora*, with José Carreras, Patanè conducting the Hungarian Radio and TV Opera Orchestra (42181; see Record Review).

Early-autumn Marton releases scheduled by CBS are Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*, with Carreras and Giorgio Zancanaro, Patanè at the helm of the Hungarian State Orchestra (42369), and highlights from her CBS *Turandot* (42168). Recorded this year and scheduled, respectively, for spring and fall 1988 release are: Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, in Hungarian, co-starring Samuel Ramey, with Adam Fischer conducting the Hungarian State Orchestra; and Ponchielli's *La gioconda* with Plácido Domingo and Ramey, Patanè leading the Hungarian Radio and TV Opera Orchestra.

Needless to say, Eva Marton's Hungarian roots are still strong, and she wants to sing more Hungarian music. In 1978, she sang the first *Bluebeard's Castle* in Hungarian at La Scala. Next year, she'll be doing concerts and a recording of Bartók songs with Hungarian pianist Zoltán Kocsis. She joked about her Hungarian accent: "They wanted me to do *Fledermaus* at the Met. My accent is so funny when I speak English or German, and if I'm angry, the one-liners and the double entendres come out even better!"

On a table near the soprano lay a magazine describing Hungary in the 1960s. "I know the people. It is history now," she said. "I studied everything in school—political science included. So I saw Marxism. Now I like to see capitalism. I think people born in the West don't have the same outlook as we. They haven't seen how an ideology can slip down to a low level and become impractical, how a good idea can be murdered by mediocre people. I saw that, and now I see the other side."

Marton's children have had an easier life so far: Zoltán will enter a university; Diana loves horses and designing things. She also plays piano—"a little Mozart, just for happiness"—and tells people, to her mother's chagrin, that she can't be a singer because she doesn't have enough legato. According to Marton: "Diana has everything at home, and that's not good. If you have something you're yearning after, you go and get it. If you have everything, you don't. That's why the present generation has problems—because they don't know what they want. Our generation was different. That's why it is strong."

Marton's own strength, of both body and will, has not failed her yet. □