

# Heading to Violetta

– the living path of an opera singer  
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## **“Heading to Violetta – the living path of an opera singer”**

Develop a character, delve into the skin, into the psyche, what the character looks like, how they speak, how they react, what their worries and fears are, what their joys, their goals and their greatest desires are; is not easy. It takes time to think, to observe, to read, to search, to wait. For a singer the search is twofold. We must look for the dramatic but also musical character, as expressed in music in style and vocal technique.

In our professional life, time passes in different ways, preparation times are often very short, not to mention substitutions, where many times you have to jump into a production that is already in progress, without time to think, just to do. . It was a desire I had for a long time to rediscover my own process, to dedicate time to scrutinize details where I had not been able to before. To observe my path as a student again and have the time to savor learning new things.

Violetta seemed like the biggest challenge of my career and I definitely wanted to go to another level. Violetta, a door, a key to develop my strengths as an art and stage professional. The most difficult thing I could find, the strongest challenge that a soprano can face... I put it at the centre of my time and my research.

The career and life of a singer is subject to a never-ending process of changes and developments. It is a profession that is always looking for new ways, new methods of learning. Nothing is predetermined, it is never the end of the road but the beginning of a new challenge. All the knowledge acquired throughout our careers is subject to constant change, to doubts and to a to-ing and fro-ing that, despite ourselves, will never end.

Therein lies the beautiful, the natural, the living. We are human and we are artists, we walk the path of life and we learn from it. We question it or we accept it and we move on. The certainty that we are doing the right thing in the right place is never exact. It is an intuition, a feeling, an experience that we file in our memory in the hope of repeating it.

The path of a singer goes with the path of life, which is not always straight, which is not always bright and which has lots of frustrations and joys. That make that unique moment

wonderful where all the planets come together, where all the suffering and work has paid off and "The Magic" appears.

We must understand that each person is a Universe before judging the processes of an artist of our profession. We do not all arrive at the same point, nor in the same way. For some it may take five minutes and for others it may take years. So I must confess that my process of searching and learning has been a long one, and I don't consider it to be over yet.

However, we cannot walk this path, only accompanied by intuition and magical moments. We need strong tools based on experience and constant searching that help us to create a certain artistic level that we can offer to the public, no matter how good or bad we feel in our daily life, if the sun is shining outside or if there is a pain that torments us.

## **The challenge to develop as an opera singer**

Since I was a little girl I knew that singing was my destiny. A singing teacher I had, used to say: "choose to be a singer if you know in your heart that you have no other choice, because this is something uncertain that will never end..." but as I said, I had no choice, my old soul knew it before me.

I started taking singing lessons at the age of 19, and not because I wanted to be an opera singer, which, I must confess, I knew nothing about; but because I wanted to be a vocalist in a rock and roll project. In the second class my teacher, who was a wise man, told me: "forget that madness, you are going to be an opera singer..." and that's when it all began... I'm not going to describe all the torments that this choice cost me until I finished university in Cuba, because then I would have enough arguments to make a biography. It is enough for me to tell you that it was not straight. Even so, it was beautiful enough to keep me faithful to my dream.

After finishing university, I had the opportunity to be chosen to play Juliet in Gounod's "Romeo and Juliet". I didn't feel at all prepared to face such a challenge, but I accepted without hesitation. Without knowing it, I started my first artistic research. I started by learning the music and watching different versions on video, choosing the ones I liked the most and my favourite singers, rereading the original play. As I was not sure of my

technique I sometimes studied by listening to different singers and singing over them. I enjoyed immensely the moment of the stage work and with my fellow actors, but when we arrived at the theatre... orchestra, audience, stage... the strongest and most important discovery of my life, that inner certainty that... "I was born for this, I feel at home". All the joys and sorrows made sense.

Other opportunities came my way and I continued to play roles such as Vitellia, Donna Anna, María. I found that my strengths as a singer improved with each character I learned and with the methods I created for myself to learn them depending on the musical styles and the complexity of the characters. But there was always a certain amount of uncertainty in terms of vocal technique that I had to constantly rediscover. For me, sometimes it worked and other times it didn't, some days I could sing like an angel and with great ease but other days it cost me a lot of work and effort, especially the coloratura passages and the high notes.

That's when I considered the possibility of seeking help outside the borders of my country; a Master's degree, I thought, and I said to myself, somewhere in old Europe, where it all began. A place that could open the doors to my knowledge and my career. Many friends I have in the Opera world recommended me "Sweden" and so, I was lucky enough to get here.

## **The project**

I was always scared to approach this character of Violetta in La Traviata alone, and that is why I found the perfect opportunity to put it at the center of my research in my project and discover the process and the methods that I can develop to raise my knowledge by learning a character of this caliber.

In the search to achieve that goal, several questions appeared and of all of them, I chose two that seemed to me to be the most important to answer.

The first question is: how can I develop my vocal technique through working with a character? How could I use a roll like Violetta to develop my singing skills? What I

proposed and thought from the beginning was to use the most complex musical moments and turn them into everyday vocal exercises, that is, to use the coloratura passages of the first aria, for example, to vocalize before starting a class or at least once a day and developing endurance means singing the arias and ensembles many times a week to create a habit that turns the difficult into easy.

The second question is: Is it possible for me to achieve absolute freedom on stage to the point of forgetting how difficult a character is vocally, by concentrating more on the representation of the character on stage? My plan was to prepare the dramatic character along with the musical, study it as if it were an actress in dramatic theatre and unite both paths that often go somewhat separate in operatic performances. Give meaning and truth to the music I sing as much as possible. Create a balance in both worlds that would allow me to have a certain freedom on stage and not be aware all the time of "how I sing" but also of "who I am on stage" and "what I say."

Ever since I was at university, I had been curious about this character and realised that only great singers could approach it successfully. It seemed more than a challenge to me, but I couldn't bring myself to tackle it alone. When I started my professional life, I tried several times to start studying the character, but something always stopped me. Time, technical doubts... inside me I knew I needed a push and a chance.

Violetta is a seductive character in many ways as a singer and also as an actress. She is not your average damsel in distress or innocent young woman to be saved. She is a strong character, who has dark conflicts but who is also a noble human being capable of sacrificing her fortune and destiny for something that makes sense to her. A brave woman above all else and courageous enough to walk her own path. Willing to do what is necessary to do in many cases in order to survive.

Technically she gives us all the challenges a soprano can dream of, from complicated passaggio of coloratura to beautifully defined singing lines. Lyric, coloratura or dramatic soprano? There is no specific voice type for that, you have to be all in one.

## **The process to study the role**

I began the process, happy to have the time to dedicate to learning a character so important to me. Singing lessons, followed by acting lessons, musical work and a lot of time studying on my own trying to find my way.

I started by reading the original novel by Alexandre Dumas, *The Lady of the Camellias*<sup>1</sup> which I was even able to read in Spanish thanks to the kindness of our librarian at SKH Opera (Lena Nettelblatt) for that I dedicated my long train journeys between Gävle and Stockholm and filled those dead hours with the inspiration of a beautiful book that captivated me from the very first moment.

My perception of the main character i.e. "Violetta or Magarite Gautier" changed as I got deeper into the novel. Innumerable feelings came to me constantly, passion, sorrow, pride, pity, desire... and I discovered that this woman recreated by Dumas and based somewhat on a true story of a romance that the writer had; was much more than I imagined.

Marguerite is the woman of the moment in Paris in 1840, she prostitutes herself with the richest men in order to survive and oppose the fate of having been born vulgar and poor. At first she may appear to our eyes superfluous and vain, but later, as the plot unfolds, you discover the human being behind the curtain of jewels and costumes and meaningless laughter. You discover the human being capable of sacrificing the only real happiness she has ever had in her life in order to provide a possible future for someone else.

## **Working with the character on stage**

With this background I entered the classes with Mira Bartov, an excellent and inspiring acting teacher. She is one of those teachers who likes to search in the individual soul of each person looking for the original and the unique.

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<sup>1</sup> Dumas, Alexandre, *La Dama de las Camelias*, Editorial Alma, Clásicos Ilustrados.

We didn't establish an exact order to work with the arias because it was my first time learning the character musically and it all depended on my individual study learning the music. After some work with archetypes and trying out different emotions for the same purpose we started a hard work with the last aria Addio del Passato, and as I was so interested in searching for the truth that would relate me to the character, we dedicated a whole class just to work with the reading of the letter that precedes it. I remember that I didn't want to repeat canons and we began to experiment with different intentions and styles of voices according to the moment Violetta was going through, close to death, ill, alone and with no illusions of seeing the love of her life again.

In the end of Dumas' novel, Violetta writes a series of letters every day to her beloved, where it is more and more noticeable how the energy and the light is leaving her dying body. There are some small differences between the novel and the opera, but I wanted to convey this feeling through the reading of the letter.

The method concentrated on searching from the monotony of a being who believes herself lost and dead, to find nuances in the emotions. And from there we went to the sung part trying to go against what is expected not always going with sadness or joy but looking for what always appears in the middle of these things and that we always overlook. Where I place my attention, where I find the resistance, what the character has to fight or let it go...

Reading the letter was a crucial work for understanding the character and for being able to understand the state of pain and hopelessness in which Violetta found herself at that moment. When we started the class work, I was worried that my voice would not be heard well on stage, I had to read the letter with a deep, inner voice, seeking to find the exact state that reflected a dying person. But with repetition, these exercises became more adapted to the text, to give importance to some words, to look for physical sensations such as imagining that you swallow glass, looking for the critical state of the consumption patient in bed. Avoiding as much as possible the canons already preformed for this scene. But I was determined to try and be open even if it meant compromising the accuracy of the music somewhat at that point in the process. I was confident that this job would develop my skills and confidence in the scene, and it certainly did. The reading of the letter became a preamble that connected in every sense the beginning of the aria later, without there being a perceptible division between singing and speaking.

## **Working with the character through the music**

Lessons with "Jaroslaw Kaliski"...what a Maestro, colleague and friend! It is so nice to discover a soul who knows how to connect through music and "Jarek" as we cordially call him; he is definitely one of them. We started working on the main arias E' strano...Sempre libera and Addio del passato, searching within the musical style what could identify me; my own way of singing Violetta, respecting the style but looking for what I could contribute as an artist to the musical interpretation. That is why we go to the theatre so many times to see the same plays with different performers, each one makes the character new, unique and special. At the beginning I got quite tired in rehearsals, and I remember that Jarek told me one day; one of your challenges is to gain the stamina to sing the whole opera. But with a few rehearsals the arias stopped being a challenge and then I just started to enjoy the art of singing such beautiful music, because if Verdi knew anything it was writing for opera singers and for the record, that's a redundancy! We took the strategy of recording some rehearsals and from rehearsals we moved on to higher quality recordings so that I could see how my vocal technique was also progressing in the more difficult passages. That was one of the main obstacles in our rehearsals, especially the fast coloratura passages and the high notes that are not lacking in Traviata, especially in the first aria. The musical learning process was going well but in order to sing freely and reach a level where you can create and enjoy your performance, it is essential to be able to trust your vocal abilities. Jarek began teaching me some vocal exercises that included holding my throat and nose open at the same time. One day he told me: "Think about singing freely while maintaining the nasal and vocal opening" and like magic the round free sound that I had been looking for, began to appear and everything seemed easy to do, I had no limits in my singing, no ceiling in my voice. We rehearsed Sempre libera and Jarek began to cry with emotion, I made a simple recording of the rehearsal and when I listened to it at home I was surprised with the result, that was the sound that I was looking for, that was the soprano I wanted to be. After that the stamina it was not a problem anymore.

In the first lesson when I sang the recitative Fredrik Zetterström our talent singing teacher told me: "your voice is perfect for this character, you have chosen well". He helped me a lot with the styles and his experience with this work. With him the work



was mainly based on musical styles because he firmly thought that technically I was ready. He has had a huge career in and outside of Sweden and of course has sung many Traviatas. We started working with the arias and he really helped me a lot to colour the dynamics of my phrases. Where to sing forte or piano, how to rely on the phrasing and dynamics of the music to make the performance more interesting. We cannot always sing each line with the same force and intensity, we run the risk of our interpretation becoming very boring for the listener. Other advice was based on the technique for attacking the notes in the coloraturas and the held notes, that is, maintaining relaxation and attacking each beginning of the coloraturas with the same vocal opening.

After the arias, the work concentrated on the ensembles, the duets with the tenor and of course the great duet with the baritone, which is without a doubt my favourite, in the second act. He helped me find all the musical nuances that Violetta has in this part of the opera, we can say that the main conflict of the character and the opera is centred in this duo. Violetta decides to sacrifice the love of her life to do good and ensure the future of Alfredo's sister, but the feelings that precede this decision are the most interesting to me in the entire opera. Anger, despair, understanding and resignation. The duo worked together many times until I asked him to record it because it seemed crucial to my presentation of the project. The pleasure of sharing music is immense, it's not the same feeling when you sing alone as when you sing in ensembles; you feed off each other. You share and compete amicably in music and it's something I've loved ever since I had the joy of singing in a choir for the first time.

I had a lot of time to work alone, to experiment, to find myself within the singer and the singer within Violetta. I didn't feel comfortable or happy with the coloraturas and the result I was getting, and I started to turn the coloraturas of the first aria into vocal exercises in different tessituras, I took the coloratura passages from *Semper libera* and turned them into vocalizations to warm up the vocal cords before starting to sing the arias or before singing class. I repeated them with different high and low pitches to achieve flexibility in the sound. In this way, when I had to sing the complete aria, they no longer seemed difficult to me because I had made them part of my vocal warm-up routine. I lost a little bit my fear of the high notes and I felt stronger when singing the whole aria. I recorded my rehearsals and my vocalisations and watched them carefully

afterwards, looking for a sound that suited me for the character. I went to YouTube in search of my favourite sopranos and came across Sierra Nadine<sup>2</sup> and Lisette Oropesa<sup>3</sup>. Both of them, great modern Traviatas in my opinion, with markedly different styles and things in common at the same time. I observed how they approached the coloratura and the more lyrical moments and how they performed with the ensembles.

Fredrik recommended me so much to listen to Renata Tebaldi, one of his favourites, and I adored it<sup>4</sup>. The cleanness of the style, the clarity and strength reminded me that we should always look back and go back to see what others have done and be inspired. Sometimes I sang with them trying to discover the tricks of the technique...but I still felt that I was missing something else. Some problems with the technique did not allow me to deal freely with the character... I still had difficulty reaching the highest notes safely and sometimes I could find freedom in the coloraturas but other times I couldn't. And so it was that by one of those coincidences of life I met Robert Hyman, another singing Maestro who had been a teacher here at SKH opera, for a long time. I asked him for advice and he invited me to his house to revise a few arias. It was only three lessons that will last me for the rest of my life. He gave me clear technical advice on what to fix and I quickly saw different results. I recorded the lessons and then studied on my own. It was a dramatic difference in sound for me that allowed me the freedom I had long been looking for. Basically, better control of the support and keeping the nostrils and throat open at the same time. So as not to create barriers to the sound. The sound of my voice and the Violetta I wanted to be quickly came to me, overnight. Sometimes it's so simple that it's hard to imagine it, and because we can't imagine it, we can't do it. So, many thanks to "Rob".

We had many meetings with Wilhelm Carlsson, trying to clarify a viable way forward for our research. It was really helpful to know that what we have always done, i.e. our

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<sup>2</sup> Sierra, Nadine, E' strano-sempre libera, La Traviata, Metropolitan Opera House, 2022.

<https://youtu.be/tuR-UpXiqbw?si=3IwGHOYI8ErCnDht>

<sup>3</sup> Oropesa, Lisette, Addio del passato, Teatro Real de Madrid, 2020.

<https://youtu.be/2ldOBson0vw?si=r4gxx9SpM6vXfA2N>

<sup>4</sup> Tebaldi, Renata and Tagliabue, Carlos, duetto, La Traviata, Serafin, 1954.

[https://youtu.be/dpaMArxxGGY?si=rFk\\_A8nHa3ySXUjV](https://youtu.be/dpaMArxxGGY?si=rFk_A8nHa3ySXUjV)

learning process of a play or a character is our starting point for the research of our Art. From these meetings came the idea of looking for sources of inspiration in the search for our methods and as I was so interested in the truth of the character on stage, I remembered that for a while I was really a fan of Konstantin Stanislavski, I had read some of his books and one in particular came to mind and that is "My life in Art"<sup>5</sup>. It is somehow connected with my search now and I spent some time re-reading trying to connect that thread with my project. "My life in Art" is nothing more than the biography of a man who dedicated his life to the search for truth on stage and who incidentally spent a good part of his studies studying the technique of voice and diction and how to connect with the actions and the body on stage. That basically answered one of my research questions about whether it is possible to achieve total freedom on stage to the point of forgetting the difficult vocal parts that a singer has to perform.

As I had found a digital version of the book in Spanish, I reread some chapters, but one in particular caught my attention; "The Bolshoi Theatre Opera Studio". It was incredible how many similarities appeared in this chapter with what I had been thinking about for my project and for me it resided in the importance of all the arts at the same time, how to put the actress and the singer on stage at the same time.

*- "An opera singer has to deal with not one, but three arts at the same time, that is, the voice, the music and the scene. In this lies, on the one hand, the difficulty and on the other the supremacy of his creative work. The difficulty It lies in the same process of simultaneous learning of the three arts; but, once mastered, the singer has much more possibilities large and varied to influence the viewer, than the ones we have us, the dramatic actors. These three arts, which the opera singer, must be fused and oriented towards the same aim. If one of them acts on the spectator while the others hinder his work, the result will be very unfavorable. A branch of the arts will destroy what has been created by another."*

*"...we got the interpreter of the role of Tatiana spent the entire scene in the letter in bed, and thus we prevented it from becoming walked around the stage making operatic gestures, as was customary. This immobilization, which required a great effort of restraint from the actress, moved the viewer's focus from the external activity to the internal motifs of the scene, replacing the rough movements of the arms, legs and the entire body through a rhythmic game of mimicry and small gestures..."*

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<sup>5</sup> Stanislavski, Konstantín, *Mi vida en el Arte*, ALBA editorial, translation and notes Jorge Saura and Bibicharifa Jakimziánova.

All of this connected perfectly with my beliefs about what an opera singer should be and what I wanted to achieve. Bringing truth and music at the same time, singing and acting united in a single art.

When we started working with Wilhelm Carlsson on the scenes for the performance, I really tried hard to forget the singer who has to think of the complicated passages but to be honest most of the time it was quite impossible. A good part of your brain is dedicated to the control of the sounds and the delight or fear that this provokes...but without a doubt when I improved my vocal technique and felt more secure and confident I could dedicate myself with more freedom to recreate the theatrical character, to tell a story with my music and not only to sing difficult parts.

### **The presentation of the project**

The presentation helped a lot to concretize our thoughts and our experiences. I chose to present the parts of the opera that seemed to me to be at the heart of the work in terms of plot, scenic and vocal difficulty. The first aria “Sempre libera” which offers you all the vocal difficulties that a soprano can desire, the duet of the second act with Giorgio Germont. It’s the scene that summarizes the conflict of the whole Opera and where we discover Violetta no longer as the kept woman that all the men of Paris desire. She is revealed as the human being who loves with the immense nobility of sacrificing her happiness for the happiness and the future of someone else. That scene always comes to my mind not in the form of a martyr but in the form of an indispensable human being in these days we live in. The music of the duet are beautiful pages that fit deeply with the plot. And to end the performance “Addio del Passato”, a beautifully lyrical aria with an unjust denouement, but a denouement in the end.

I had the joy of recording the duet with Fredrik Zetterström who kindly agreed to sing it with me <sup>6</sup>. The idea for the recording came because Fredrik would be away on business

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<sup>6</sup> Duetto Violetta –Germont, La Traviata, Verdi. Anyelín Díaz, Fredrik Zetterström, Jaroslaw Kaliski. SKH Opera Theatre, 2024. <https://youtu.be/iT8vrvb4Jts?si=EMPBxSCJm-7jymbo>

and I didn't want to miss the opportunity to sing it with him. From the rehearsal to the recording the magic was made, it was perfect. All the emotions were there, the musical phrases in accordance with the dramaturgy of the scene, perfectly drawn singing lines. At several points during the recording I actually forgot that there was a possibility of failure, I was experiencing the scene as if I were at the Met. I remember we rehearsed one day, sang the duet once up and down and that was it. Next adventure was the recording. For me it was like being the protagonist of a movie, what a joy to sing with an excellent singer and partner, what a joy the communication that was established between Jaroslav, Frederik and me... it was there that for the first time I realised that it is possible to forget that you sing, I just lived and that moment. When three energy centres meet and exchange and converse, the magic appears.... there is no method there, just synergy, life . I loved the recording we made, I listened to it many times and could not believe it was me singing....

When the long awaited day of the performance arrived I wasn't feeling well at all, I had been sick with a cold for a few days and had a certain vocal insecurity. In the rehearsal for the performance I just sang in a half-voice, trying not to strain myself too much and concentrating only on experiencing the character. My colleagues who were watching the rehearsal came up to me and said: "Anyelín I love it when you mark..." I tried to keep that same vocal feeling when the time came... and the truth is that pushing vocally doesn't help, it's better to let go and experience that feeling of lightness that allows us to be flexible both in the music and on stage. That left a strong experience with me and that is that it is not necessary to overexert myself to sing, it is necessary to maintain vocal relaxation even when dramatic moments require expressing despair and agony. That relaxation allowed me to sing the most difficult arias I have ever sung in my life even with a cold. And the best thing is that it didn't stop me from living my character. My friends showered me with praise that night. I was on cloud nine anyway, I hope it wasn't just because they love me too much.

## Conclusions

I have to say that this project has been more than beneficial for me. Having the time and the necessary conditions to dialogue and discuss with myself and the character, look for solutions, look into the black holes that I didn't have time to dedicate myself to when you are working all the time in your professional life.

Violetta must be an example for the characters to come, because now it is not just about this one; it's about the routine and methods that I can use in my future professional life in the Theatre and as a Teacher. The conscious look at those problems that I previously solved with intuition; and that I can now approach with a method of conscious study that perhaps I had already resolved before in some way, but that now appears clearly before my eyes.

Having the time to talk with my vocal technique, to reinvent myself, to relearn old things and to be curious and open to new advice, because if there is one thing we know, it is that you are never completely sure and confident in this profession. You must work hard on yourself and come back; seek advice, and help; Go back in time and pay attention to what's next. We are athletes, artists, singers, bohemians, researchers and dreamers, all at the same time in a training that never ends. Because our art is not written on hard stone. What is a strength today may be a weakness tomorrow.

Having the opportunity to pay attention to myself, to my ways of creating and doing, having the opportunity to question myself, to review myself, to record myself, to listen to myself, and to face all this later to the evaluation of my classmates and my teachers was a luxury for me. SKH is a team of creation and research of Art where the doors and conditions are open to those who know how to see them and take advantage of them.

Where everything seemed dark and impossible, Sweden opened a door for me. Thank you for allowing me to dream, thank you for everything.

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