



Opera librarian Michael Bragg and
Czech language coach Radoslava Biancalana

MATTHEW WASHBURN

CZECH, *please!*

AN INTERVIEW WITH
RADOSLAVA BIANCALANA

BY MARINA ROMANI

In Prague today, one may stumble upon streets so quiet that you can hear your own voice at a whisper.

Despite the tourist traps, there are countless places where the city retains its intimate atmosphere. Locals are constantly on the move, and yet they make time to sit in cafés and hang out for hours. Romanesque monuments stand aside Art Nouveau buildings, such as the Municipal House, and Cubist icons such as Café Orient. Music is imprinted on the face of the city thanks to its no fewer than three opera houses, along with the many theaters and music halls, all of which attest to the city's lively soundscape.

I've never been to Prague, but San Francisco Opera Czech language coach Radoslava Biancalana painted the above picture for me while sitting and conversing for hours—many miles from a Prague café, but instead at the War Memorial Opera House on a sunny, windy afternoon.

For many of us living far away from our country of origin, remaining connected to our native culture can be a daunting task. How does she keep memories of her favorite places fresh? She has found one practical and joyful way to keep her culture alive at the San Francisco Opera: "I love language coaching because I think I can really be of use to a lot of singers, introducing them to the beauty of Czech and its rhythm, and simplify it dramatically."

Many speakers of English believe that singing in Czech will be difficult. Why? "For several reasons. The first one is because there are few operatic references in terms of sounds, especially considering that until the 1950s, the majority of Czech operas in the U.S. were performed in English." I wonder if the tense political climate during the Cold War played a role and made Western countries more hesitant to perform operas in Czech. Biancalana main-

tains that the issue was rather about a lack of resources: "Czech speakers are few in comparison to speakers of other major operatic languages; and, among those, even fewer are able to coach singers."

But there was a crucial factor that eventually made operas in Czech more popular—the advent of supertitles: "The moment supertitles became available [mid-1980s], they represented a revolution because the need to perform these operas in an English translation vanished. As a result, the nuances and complexities of the entire work were lifted off the page. I think that Czech operas suffered in translation because they didn't have the same dramatic vigor and rhythm." Once opera houses and audiences started to embrace operas in Czech, Biancalana explains, there was no going back: "Singers and audiences became comfortable with the language, and opera houses wanted to produce these operas in their original versions to achieve a high-quality product."

Biancalana points at yet another reason behind the myth of Czech as an extremely difficult language in opera: "It does have some peculiar sounds such as *Ď* and *Ř*, but many tend to group Czech together with other Slavic languages without acknowledging crucial differences." For example, Biancalana notes, while in Russian sounds are darker and sit at the back of the throat, in Czech they sit forward in the mask—the front of our face where the voice resonates the most. For this reason, vowels are up front and open.

"Let's go over to the blackboard and try to sing," she suggests. With her guidance, I could quickly pick up the correct pronunciation and sing the words she chose. To my surprise, it seemed like many sounds—vowels in particular—were similar to my native language, Italian. "Yes!" she exclaims,

“Czech sits in the same place as Italian does, so Italian speakers have an even easier time than other Romance language speakers. And singers are used to producing sounds in Italian, so they know what to do with their palate and tongue.”

I’m curious to know what her pedagogic strategy is when working with a singer who has never performed in Czech. “We start with some basic pronunciation rules—the usual suspects! The young artists from the Opera Center’s Adler Fellows get a crash course that has been designed to teach them to read any text that’s put in front of them. Czech is easy to pronounce so long as the air supply is constantly in motion because it’s a percussive language. I’ve heard many singers telling me that once they start singing, it’s like being on a treadmill.”

During our conversation, Biancalana shows me her handwritten materials and electronic copies of her coaching notes, allowing me to follow the linguistic journey a singer might take. I am in awe at the level of detail: “I collect each singer’s linguistic patterns during the first read-through music rehearsal. Once we have time for one-on-one coaching, we first work on just *speaking* the role. Only after that, we work with an accompanist and practice *singing* the role so that we can establish the architecture as to where the singer is going with each particular phrase.”

When staging rehearsals for *Rusalka* begin, she relies on written notes only. Each singer will get them electronically, following each rehearsal: “By having all the notes organized by rehearsals,” she explains, “they have a history of their own learning process and are able to study on their own. This is a very careful process, and some artists are not accustomed to working with a language coach up to opening night. But that’s the level of detail we’re looking for.”

Biancalana’s profound expertise on how to produce specific sounds in her native language comes from her background as a musician. She came to the U.S. from the Czech Republic to pursue her flute studies at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, California, and found herself

Rusalka piano/vocal score opened to "Song to the Moon"

more and more involved in the musical life of the Bay Area: “When I started coaching the Adler Fellows, it helped tremendously to be a singer and a flutist because I was already familiar with the importance of all the elements—such as the tongue, the mask, how the sound moves through your vocal cords.”

Music has been an integral part of Biancalana’s life since her early days: “I was born in Hodonín, near the Austrian border, where the play of *Jenůfa* was written.” At 14, she moved to Prague—a city whose history intrigues her: “One of the first universities in Europe was founded in Prague. And the city became a very popular cultural center at the time of Mozart, when a lot of theaters were already public so they were not under the patronage of specific families that would dictate what they wanted to have composed.”

It is this intellectual depth and fascination that drives Biancalana’s singing and language coaching. And she loves her work. “Yes, I do love it. Not only because I get immersed in my own culture, but because I can support the *Rusalka* artists identifying with it and using this cultural knowledge to catapult their roles and truly inhabit them.” With this type of language training, she hopes these singers, when asked in the future if they want to perform works by Dvořák, Smetana or Janáček, they will say, yes, *Czech, please!* 🌸

Rusalka’s celebrated soprano aria is referred to as “Song to the Moon,” but in Czech, the title is “Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém” [Moon up in the deep sky (or heavens): nebe=sky, or the heavens, hlubokém=deep].

Phrases that may come in handy on your next trip to Prague:

- Check, please. *Zaplatím, prosím.*
- Which way to the National Theatre? *Kudy k Národnímu Divadlu?*
- I’ll have a coffee, please. *Dám si kávu, prosím.*
- Where is the bar? *Kde je bar?*

For further assistance with Czech pronunciation and phrases visit, <http://www.locallingo.com/czech/phrases/meeting.html>

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