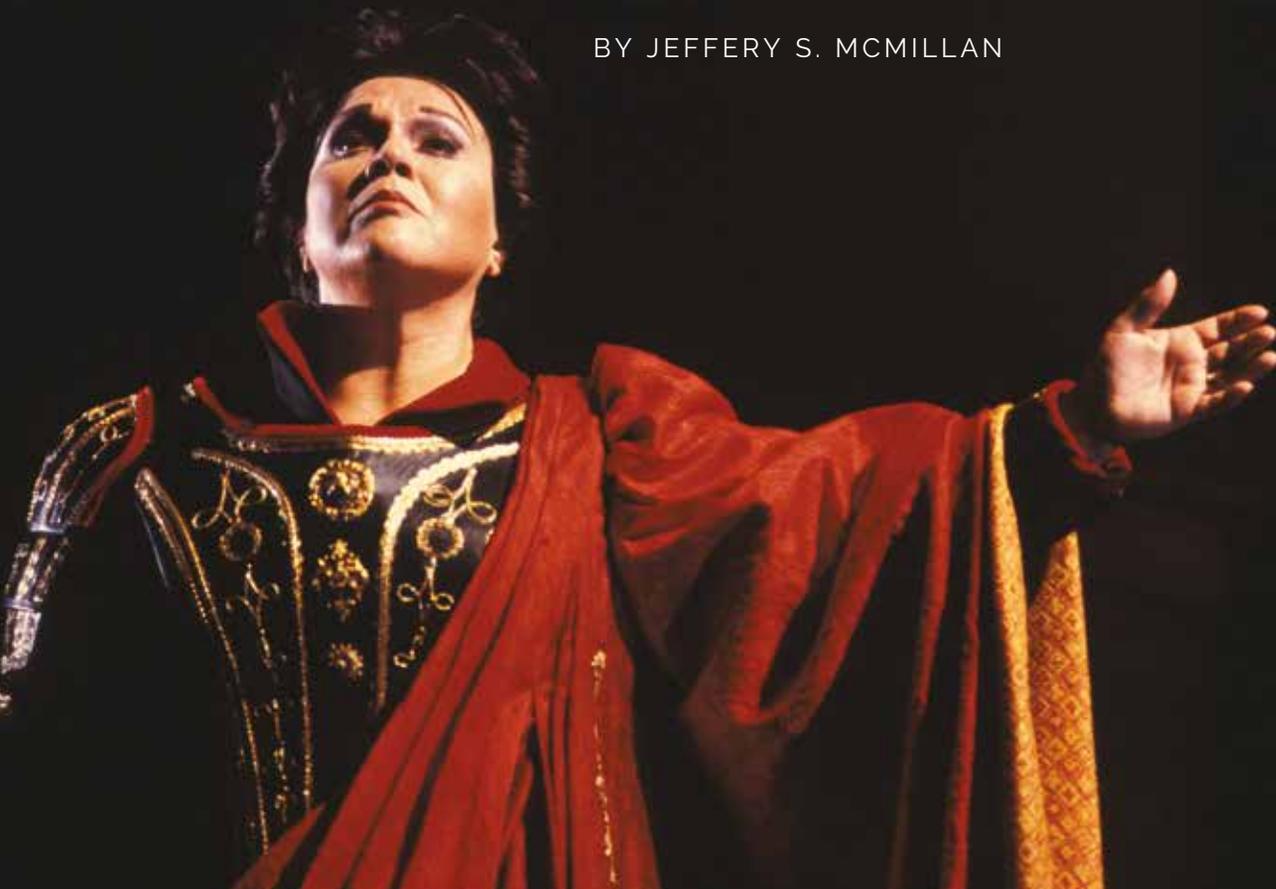


MARILYN HORNE

ORLANDO'S CHAMPION

BY JEFFERY S. MCMILLAN



Marilyn Horne as Handel's Orlando (1985).

ROBERT CAHEN

In San Francisco Opera's near-100 years of presenting opera on the grandest scale, there are a few elite artists who stand apart from the Company's esteemed and lengthy roster of greats—the cream of the cream of the crop. Near the top of that short list with the likes of Muzio, Pinza, Kirsten, Price, and Domingo is undoubtedly Marilyn Horne, or “Jackie” as she is known to intimates. Hailed by *Opera News* in 1981 as “probably the greatest singer in the world,” Horne’s legacy is one of global proportions, but Bay Area music lovers enjoy a close connection to the artist as if Jackie were one of our own. Over a span of almost forty years, San Francisco Opera audiences saw and heard the legendary American mezzo-soprano on many occasions, 111 to be exact. Locals have witnessed her evolution from

precocious young talent to ambassador for the art form, all the while following her into novel artistic terrain and savoring each encounter with her artistry.

Disciplined, thoughtful, and unafraid to take risks, Horne was a disruptor of the status quo in opera and, more broadly, society at large. Her marriage to African-American conductor Henry Lewis from 1960 to 1979 challenged antiquated views on interracial relationships. For singers, Horne raised the bar of vocal excellence to astronomical heights and helped expand the repertory by popularizing many worthy operas that had fallen from favor for want of artists who could sing them. What Maria Callas had done in the 1950s for the bel canto operas of Bellini and Donizetti, Marilyn Horne did for Rossini’s dramatic works like *Tancredi* and *Semiramide* in the 1970s and 1980s.



Marilyn Horne and company in Handel's *Orlando* (1985).

ROBERT CAHEN



Marilyn Horne and Montserrat Caballé in Rossini's *Semiramide* (1981).

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With the rising tide of vocally demanding works came a resurgence of interest in Baroque opera and Horne was predictably on the front lines. Portraying the male heroes in works by George Frideric Handel and Antonio Vivaldi, her efforts in the Baroque revival spurred interest in eighteenth-century masterpieces like *Rinaldo*, *Orlando*, and *Orlando Furioso*. Arrayed in armor and plumed helmet, “General Horne” introduced generations of opera fans to some of the most thrilling vocal music ever composed.

The personable and quick to laugh diva spoke with us about introducing San Francisco Opera audiences to Handel’s *Orlando* in 1985 and her many fond memories of performing with the Company. She began with a clarification: “Actually, I did Vivaldi’s *Orlando Furioso* before I did Handel’s *Orlando*. My first inkling of an opera called *Orlando Furioso* was when [Italian early music conductor] Claudio Scimone came to me [in 1976] with the score under his arm to see if I would record it with him.”

“It was not obvious from the score that it was so good,” she said. “My accompanist Marty Katz and I looked through it and we both decided that it was worth doing for the sole purpose of one aria: ‘Nel profondo cieco mondo.’ The recitatives were *very* involved and at that time I was just beginning to really speak Italian, so there were a lot of words I did not recognize. It was a hard job, but as I got into it I realized that the recitatives are incredible!”

“This is going to sound blasphemous, but I preferred doing *Orlando Furioso* to *Orlando*. Even though it was quite successful, I was never quite happy with *Orlando* because it is a little low, even for me. If I were doing it today, I might move it up a tone.”

Comparing the two works—separated by six years and disparate performance traditions of early eighteenth-century

Venice and London—inspired further reflection. “I loved doing *Orlando*. Maybe I’m hard on myself that I felt it was a struggle. But, you know, sometimes when you struggle, you’re good. I’ve had many instances, especially when I was married to Henry Lewis, when I would be struggling up there on stage, dying! Then he would come back to my dressing room afterwards and say ‘you were sensational tonight.’ Other times, when I felt I was just sailing and it was fantastic, he would come back and say, ‘having a little trouble tonight?’ It is different on the audience side, you know. We can’t always hear ourselves up there.”

Back to *Orlando*, she said, “The story is so great because you know he goes temporarily insane and surrogate madness is wonderful. It’s like surrogate death—a death scene. Nothing is better than that!”

Even with delicious dramatic possibilities, Horne emphasized that Handel’s intricate musical lines are often so demanding that performers, no matter how well prepared, must concentrate solely on execution. “Singers have it rough. We have to deal with the extremities of voice, which then has to be employed into what you’re doing on stage. Sometimes you have to just stand still and sing in order to get it the way you want it.”

“If you want to do the role total justice, it’s really hard to put it together. First of all, to learn it technically is very difficult. But then it is about observing what Orlando is doing and taking it on as if it was you in these situations. You have to imagine that. The help is, of course, everything that you’ve read or seen, including movies. I think we absorb all of that and it goes into the big tape recorder in our brain. This is probably what causes individual performances with the same words and same music.”

When discussing challenging music, another composer,

Gioachino Rossini, also naturally comes up in the conversation. Horne flourished in the composer's comedic roles like Rosina in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and Isabella in *L'Italiana in Algeri*, but it was in his dramatic works where she revealed the appeal of little-known operas that offer a combination of high-flying vocal exhibitions and stage pageantry.

"When I was asked to sing *Semiramide* for the first time, I didn't know anything except the overture and I sort of knew the aria for Semiramide, 'Bel raggio lusinghier.' We had to go to the Los Angeles Public Library and steal the score. It was so old and the pages were crumbling; nobody had used it in a long time. I decided that I was going to do more with that old score than anyone else had ever done. The role of Arsace was very difficult to decide to do, again, because it was so low. But my voice was starting to develop down there and mature. It became one of my signature parts." Note: Horne eventually replaced the Library's old *Semiramide* score with a new one.

After performing the opera on many occasions with frequent stage partner and close friend, soprano Joan Sutherland, Horne and Montserrat Caballé opened San Francisco Opera's 1981 Season in the work. For sheer virtuosity and spectacular, joyful music making, the *Semiramide* performances are among the Company's milestone achievements (the opera was broadcast and preserved). When asked about this historic occasion, Horne first remembered the fun she had onstage with her Spanish co-star, who passed in October 2018. "Montserrat would get lazy sometimes and, being Spanish, her Vs came out Bs. She had a line coming up where she addresses the masses, 'I vostri voti omai' and she didn't remember it. She knew that I knew the opera really well and while we were receiving the applause, she said, 'What are my next words?' I said, 'I bostri boti omai.' We both had a good laugh and kept on singing."

Orlando, Tancredi, Arsace ... what was her most challenging role? "The hardest part I ever did was Fidès in *Le Prophète*. Meyerbeer puts *everything* in there. He wrote it for the great Pauline Viardot." A self-professed history buff, Horne relishes the opportunity to discuss the legendary artist. "If you know other roles of Viardot's, which I do, you can tell that she was sitting right beside Meyerbeer when he wrote it. She was a great musician and tremendous pianist who toured with Liszt when she was ten years old. I did a show in San Francisco at Herbst Theatre based on her life where I was the narrator."

Horne underscores the fact that blazing a trail in new-old repertory during the 1970s and 1980s was never easy. The music was already challenging on its own, but she and her colleagues often delved into these works without the



In her dressing room in 1966, Marilyn Horne, dressed as Eboli in Verdi's Don Carlo, having a laugh with husband/conductor Henry Lewis and Hollywood buddies, Rock Hudson and Jim Nabors.

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benefit of recordings or clear, legible printed materials. "I got *Orlando Furioso* in manuscript. And *Rinaldo* I had in unreadable xeroxes. It was difficult for all of us, like trying to decipher chicken scratches. People have so much more available to them now. It has to be easier for them."

At 85 Horne continues to influence the world of opera as a mentor to young singers through her long affiliation with the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara and by encouraging patronage as Honorary Chairwoman of San Francisco Opera's Bel Canto Society. "We have to keep classical music alive," she declares. Handelian opera is an area, Horne feels, with great potential for the future as long as performers are permitted certain freedoms. "I think we need to add that certain something that will move an audience. Maybe a high note here or there. This is exciting stuff. It's show-off music."

I asked if she had any advice for the artists taking on *Orlando* this season for San Francisco Opera, especially Sasha Cooke, one of Horne's former students who is assuming the opera's title role for the first time. "She knows what she needs to do. She will have her own take on *Orlando* and bring that to all of the rehearsals and performances. For the cast, I would just say stay healthy and be prepared." How about advice for the *Orlando* audience? "Open your ears. The roles in *Orlando* are so beautifully written and the recitatives are quite incredible. The prayer when Orlando goes to sleep, now that is quite something. That's a very beautiful aria. Handel was always good about that." 🌸

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