



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 1: Slavic Sensibilities

Broadcast Intermission Interview

Pikovaya Dama, 1975

Featuring: Regina Resnik (role: The Countess); Scott Beach (interviewer/host)

(transcript read time ~ 15 minutes; audio run time ~ 16 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

NARRATOR [N]: Welcome to San Francisco Opera's Centennial celebration.

SCOTT BEACH [SB]: I think to call Regina Resnik a fine singing actress is a masterpiece of understatement. We've seen her in San Francisco in a variety of situations, and what a pleasure to welcome her back as The Countess in our production of *Pique Dame*, which we're hearing this evening. Well, I suppose it's as obvious a question as any, Ms. Resnik, but this such a fascinating character, The Countess, and I'd like to ask how you have approached her. You're so well-known for The Countess.

REGINA RESNIK [RR]: Well, first I want to thank you for your lovely welcome, and second, I think the approach to The Countess has been done with such genius by Tchaikovsky that it really is not terribly difficult to analyze the part. I think the difficulty in The Countess is that she really has about 10 minutes to make her mark, and there's no return. There's only one scene. If you don't do that scene well, there's no recompense. You haven't got the next act in which to come back and sing better or act better. That, I will say, will be the challenge of The Countess because it's so short and so compact.

But it is one of the few parts ever written, I think, in opera, actually she is the title role, and though she appears through everything, she sings very little and says very little. That Tchaikovsky had the genius to include the song, the great song, that she sings of another composer, or another era, and not presume to write one himself is, I think, the crowning touch of glory in this part, and that is that little reggia aria which is chosen to represent another time and another place. He didn't presume to write a piece.

It's interesting because in the pastoral, which we're hearing in this uncut version, all of which we hear, his obvious love for *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute* comes through, of course, because he's copied the tunes, and you hear Papagena, and you hear part of Zerlina in that little duet in the pastoral. There he didn't mind mimicking and having charming Mozart in influence in the pastoral. But when it was serious and it had to do with the story of the gambler and the story of the death of The Countess, inadvertently by Gherman, he didn't choose to write Tchaikovsky.

That really is part of the clue to the character and to building the character. I'll tell you why. It's because everything about her has to do with the fact that she feels she's displaced in time, in a way that

she's almost lived too long, and she doesn't belong to the era in which she's now performing. That clue, of not being part of that production or looking like those people or not living that kind of social life and being far above it and living still in her memories in another era and being bitter about the time she's in, is an enormous clue to her stoicism, in addition to the legend, which says that the third man that will come into her life will cause her death if the secret is given away.

Now, there are two ways to play *The Countess*. I formulated this countess actually here in San Francisco, in the 1963 production. At that time, it was a cut version, and the Pushkin scenes were very close together. There was no pastoral and there were no children. It was very lugubrious in atmosphere, and I had the opportunity the other night to talk to Maestro Rostropovich, who says that he feels a lugubrious production of *Pique Dame* gives away the opera. He thinks that Tchaikovsky wrote the music of the pastoral, the children and everything, because he meant it to be a romantic piece and that the impact of what I call the Hitchcock part of the story, which is Pushkin, which is the Old Lady and Gherman, comes as a shock, has to come as a shocker to people.

Now, we threw that around for a while. It was probably one of the most artistic and interesting discussions I've ever had with another musician and a great musician. We didn't come to any conclusions. We just discussed it a great deal. He feels that it's just a way of life, and then suddenly the shock of the drama comes. I didn't quite go along with all that opinion because I think the mood of Gherman and *The Countess* is set from the beginning. Every encounter that they have in every scene leads to the death of *The Countess*. It is pointed out by Tchaikovsky in the music, and if it's not pointed out in scenery, it has somehow to be pointed out by the (inaudible) and each time they meet, there has to be some bolt of lightning because essentially those are the two central figures in this opera.

Liza, who is the longest part to sing and the most difficult part to sing, is really incidental between the two as a character. I don't think I can think of any other drama which was famous, then written for the stage, which has the same kind of fragmentary things for the leading people.

SB: You know so much more about Russian opera than the average person. Is this a typical Russian opera, in your opinion?

RR: No. It's not a typical Russian opera at all because 99 percent of the Russian opera that we know is folkloric and Russian in character, and there's not necessarily, with the exception of, I think, *Boris Godunov* and maybe *Khovanshchina* are the historical pieces, or they're pieces like *Ruslan and Lyudmila* and *The Snow Maiden* and fairytales of (inaudible) Rimsky-Korsakov and *Sadko* and things which are fairytales and have Russian flavor as folklore in the background.

This is a piece that was also written by Dostoevsky, *The Gambler*. It's an eternal story, a great story. It's a story of a compulsive, obsessed man who's a neurotic, a schizophrenic. The big problem with this opera, as opposed to others which are more simple in character, one sees them more as Russian, this is Russian because it's Tchaikovsky and Pushkin, not because it's so folkloric, you see. This story, in my opinion this is the greatest of Tchaikovsky's works. It's the most compact, and in my opinion, with certain prudent cuts, despite all the trueness we are now having in this production, with certain prudent cuts, almost a perfect opera. In other words, it has that measure of perfection in the story line, like *Tosca*, which can make it compact.

SB: You, along with your husband, Mr. Arbit Blatas, are planning a production which you will direct. How will it differ, if it differs importantly?

RR: Well, as you mentioned, my husband, Mr. Blatas, who's a painter and sculptor, strangely enough and Rostropovich, the other evening, saw eye to eye. My husband also sees *Pique Dame* not as a complete giveaway. In other words, the first scene is gay in the park. He also sees the masked ball not being purposely, if I can use the slang expression, a setup for the drama. On the other hand, The Countess' room has its own atmosphere, and Liza's room is not a lugubrious setting because Gherman is not expected. Really my husband and Rostropovich see eye to eye. He as a painter and Rostropovich as a conductor and musician see that very well.

When I said prudent cuts, I meant that we are going to do the pastoral as a divertimento. Of course, we're going to do it in English in Vancouver. We do not have a Russian cast, and the Russian cast is really justified only with the Russian artists and people who sing Russian very well and know the style. We are going to do it in English, and we are having, of course, many American and Canadian artists. When I say prudent cuts, I will make the prudent cuts not for the sake of economy, but I will make the prudent cuts as a director. I really feel that the opera is very, very long and that if you do not have a perfect ensemble in which you can really tie together a great deal of rehearsal time, which I think is terribly important, when you have children in the ball and the ballet, you must have an enormous amount of time to prepare very well the things which I find extraneous to the story, as part of the entertainment.

SB: Here you are, now working as a singing artist and an actress in this production, and yet of course your director's hat must be laying around close by somewhere. You're working under a director, and soon you will be directing your own production. Do you get fidgety in these circumstances at all?

RR: Yes, I get fidgety. I get nervous, and I'm highly controlled. I made myself a cardinal principle rule, and that was that when I sing a part, if it affects me and my scene directly, there's no reason I cannot speak openly with the stage director, and if that stage director is flexible, as I am when I am with other artists who have their own ideas, we can come to many, many good conclusions because I believe we're eternal students. We never can learn too much. Very often we learn what not to do, and that's also learning.

We have a very good understanding about my scene. For example, Mr. Hadjimishev and I did not misunderstand each other for one moment because the formation of what my Countess was took place in San Francisco 12 years ago, and I really have not changed it very much ever since because I did an enormous amount of work to try to find, in my own mind, at that time, not only with Paul Hagar by myself, how the shock should come about, and my undressing in full view of the audience so that that transformation takes place is something that I had to work out over a long period of time, and Mr. Hadjimishev respected that.

I also think it merited respected because there is something in it that is frightening for the audience and wonderful for me in that scene. If we ever found a better solution, I would be the first one to try it. I do, when things in our scene lack tightness or tension, I asked for it and we worked out different ways of getting it. I don't meddle in other people's scenes, in other people's affairs. I control myself and sit by and watch what I would do in the same circumstances. It's a great lesson.

SB: I can just imagine.

RR: I had an experience in Warsaw, you see. We had -- you know of course -- a very famous and great and dear colleague of mine, Garon Devons, my husband designed and I directed the first performance ever, the Verdi premier, of *Falstaff* in Warsaw.

SB: The first time it had ever been done?

RR: The first time it had ever been done, 82 years after it was written, and it was the world premier for them, kind of thing, and first time in Italian, and I directed an all-Polish cast in the Italian language, and Garon came to sing the title role. Now, I sang my first quickly with Garon Devons as Falstaff. Now he's directing, and I'm directing, and I was directing Garon. You see, everything's possible if great artists get together. I want to say that this particular meeting on the *Queen of Spades*, in this production, in this atmosphere, has been, I think, one of the most rewarding artistic experiences of my life.

SB: I should imagine, just at the very least, with Rostropovich making his American opera conducting debut and with his obvious enthusiasm and interest in musicianship, and the other artists that you're working with and the chance, as you've put it, to return to this characterization and develop it some more --

RR: I must tell you why I did develop it more. I really owe the development of that character to Rostropovich more in this scene.

SB: In what way?

RR: I will tell you in what way. He is one of the most elastic, warm human beings that I have ever met in my life. When Rostropovich receives just one inch from you, he'll give you six. We've taken a lot of freedom in my scene, but that freedom has made it heart-pounding, even for me. Even I am affected on stage, and I know that he is. Our work together, which were the, let's say, 12 days we were together, working constantly on another stage in the Orpheum Theater, from the first day that we met, Rostropovich, Vishnevskaya, Gougaloff, and the team, all of us, I don't know if it's good or bad, but we became like a great homey Russian family.

It's true. The atmosphere was not only friendly, so warm, and it's this humanity of the way we worked on stage that came out of Rostropovich in the pit, not only for the whole opera, but I speak now for myself. For my scene, he said to me after the performance, he said, because he's so adorable with his English, he says, "Like tissue paper," he said. He put his two hands together, and he said we were so together like tissue paper. And he said, "And you know, you don't look it at me." I said, "I don't have to look at you." We did. We feel each other so, and this warmth and this enormous enthusiasm for his feeling for this piece, which he obviously adores, and the orchestra has adored him, and they play for him like gods. Together with his wife, with Galina, who's been utterly charming.

You see, I always contend that one of the great tragedies of artistic life, there's a great word in America, you say political bedfellows, and I always say operatic bedfellows. People you sing with, sometimes you make love to on the stage. They are people you very rarely want to ever see again in your life, and you are forced to spend probably the majority of your working life with the people you don't really love. It's

a very unusual thing to become attached to and combined with a group whom you really love. You don't mind seeing them after the performance. If you don't see them, you miss them.

What is incredible, of course, is that when you meet a personality as great as Rostropovich, I've done a lot in my life and I've met a great many people, but I myself, the very first day, was very, very excited for Rostropovich. Of course, it only proved that the greater the human being, the simpler it is to get along and the warmer the personality.

SB: In the last couple of minutes that we have here in this intermission, I wanted to get on a slightly different subject. You mentioned producing an opera, a *Falstaff* premier, if you will, for the first time in an Eastern European setting. Can you make comparisons? Are you able to make a comparison between the culture and the life of opera, say, here and in Europe and in Eastern Europe?

RR: Oh yes. There's a great comparison, of course. Setting aside, for a moment, completely the question of political freedom, which we will set aside, if we talk only to the artistic point, you see, the Eastern countries have been not only clever, but they have made culture and music and art part and parcel of the education of the people, if you like. Propaganda, education, whatever you say, that is part and parcel of what people must have. You walk the streets of Moscow, and you are not really aware that such a thing exists as sex shops, porno, beach clubs, nightlife. What is their nightlife is cultural. What is there to do is theater.

They have a flourishing theater, as in all Eastern countries, flourishing music. We will not discuss what the artists are paid or how they're paid or how free they are to sing or where to go, but we, as guests, as Western guests, came to the East with an enormous welcome, an enormous enthusiasm. For them, like it is for when the Eastern artists come to us, who have something to offer us, it was like some kind of new breath of air, different kind of atmosphere. You cross every frontier, and you cross every political, every language barrier, every artistic barrier when you make great theater and great music.

SB: Regina Resnik, it has been a multiple pleasure, and thank you so much not only for just now but for everything you've given us in San Francisco.

RR: Thank you very much.

N: You've been listening to *Streaming the First Century*, San Francisco Opera's centennial celebration told through historic recordings. This recording is a copyrighted production of San Francisco Opera, all rights reserved.

[END AUDIO]