



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 1: Slavic Sensibilities

Broadcast Intermission Interview

Jenůfa, 1980

Featuring Elisabeth Söderström (role: Jenůfa) and Sena Jurinac (role: Kostelnicka); Marilyn Mercur (interviewer/producer), Scott Beach (intermission host)

(transcript read time ~ 18 minutes; audio run time ~ 24 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

NARRATOR: Welcome to San Francisco Opera's centennial celebration.

SCOTT BEACH [SB]: Elisabeth Söderström and Sena Jurinac, the artists you're hearing as Jenůfa and Kostelnicka, are recognized throughout the world as two of the finest singing actresses in opera today. When Ms. Jurinac last performed the role of the Marschallin in San Francisco, one critic wrote, "A Marschallin must have and convey warmth, sensitivity, authority, honesty, wisdom, and pathos. Jurinac is supreme mistress of all these qualities." In a London Times review of Elisabeth Söderström's 1977 portrayal of Katya Kabanova here, a critic said, "British opera goers know what Elisabeth Söderström can do with dramatic potential of great operatic roles. She played and sang this profoundly frustrated woman as if born to the role, maturely, beautiful, wise, exact, and full of voice." These two women have more than superlative reviews in common, as producer Marilyn Mercur discovered when she interviewed them for this broadcast. She began by asking Ms. Söderström when she made her professional debut in opera.

ELISABETH SÖDERSTRÖM [ES]: That was in the prehistoric times, (laughs) the roaring '40s.

MARILYN MERCUR [MM]: The '40s?

ES: Yes. I made my debut in 1947, the same year I was accepted as a pupil in the opera school. I made my operatic debut as Bastienne out at the Court Theatre of Drottningholm, outside Stockholm, before I started learning anything about opera.

MM: Ms. Jurinac, when did you?

SENA JURINAC [SJ]: I can do better. I started in '42. (laughter)

MM: However, you are only two years apart in age. Is that right?

SJ: Let's talk about something else, please. (laughter) We said enough when we did our debut, okay? But my debut was '42 in May, and it was *Boheme*. I was already in school three years. It was '42, '44 I was already in Vienna, so I was a war product.

ES: I was 20 when I made my debut, if you'd like to start count. (laughter)

MM: I'm not that quick. However, you did both make your American debuts in 1959. Yours was at the Met, Ms. Söderström, and you were here in San Francisco. Different roles, however. What did you first sing at the Met, Ms. Söderström?

ES: I sang Susanna, Susanna and Marguerite in *Faust* and Sophie in *Rosenkavalier*, but the same year I had sung already the Marschallin in Stockholm and Octavian in Glynborne so that tells everything about my strange kind of voice.

MM: That's another one of the parallels because you both have done one or two and sometimes three roles in the same opera. Did you ever do Sophie?

SJ: No.

MM: But you did the Octavian and Marschallin.

SJ: Octavian and Marschallin, and I realize we did [inaudible] together, not in the same performance, of course.

MM: But also in *Marriage of Figaro*, you have both done The Countess, and Cherubino?

SJ: Have you done Cherubino?

ES: Only in singing the arias, but never the whole part.

SJ: On the stage, I have been Cherubino and Countess, and she was Susanna and Countess, it seems to me, if I'm right.

ES: Yes.

MM: You've both done Fiordiligi?

SJ: Yes.

MM: How about Dorabella?

SJ: I did Dorabella.

MM: And Ms. Söderström did not.

ES: But when it comes to *Magic Flute*, I sang first, second, and third boy, first, second, and third lady, Papagena and Pamina. Can you beat that? (laughs)

SJ: No. I can offer just one boy, first and second lady, and Pamina. Papagena is missing.

MM: You are both equally recognized as great artists. You have titles, which have been bestowed upon you by the opera companies which you consider your home companies, the Vienna Opera, Ms. Jurinac, gave you to the Kammersängerin Award.

SJ: With the years, you get always more and more honors and rings and crosses. (laughs)

MM: The Stockholm Opera has now named you the Court Singer.

ES: Well, that's the King.

MM: And you have the *Fidelio* Award, the Mozart Medal.

ES: Oh yes. I have a Janáček Medal.

SJ: So do I. (crosstalk)

MM: Yes, and I was going to say both of you have done the role of Jenůfa. Did you know one another earlier in your careers?

SJ: We met the first time here.

MM: Really?

ES: Yes, but I've always admired Sena Jurinac's voice.

SJ: And I heard always about Elisabeth's.

ES: But I remember when you sang the aria from *Idomeneo*, (sings) that was, to me, the height of beauty, and it's a sound which I've carried with me through the years. I would never have dreamed that we would be on the same stage because I thought we had the same kind of parts. I was so excited.

MM: Well, I think the audience here is so fortunate to be able to see both of you together, under these circumstances, too. Ms. Söderström, when you began Jenůfa, when was the first time you sang the role?

ES: I think it was 1972 probably. I'm very bad when it comes to years.

MM: But you've been doing it for a while.

ES: We did a production in Stockholm. I've only sung it in one production, and it was staged by (inaudible), so it was very thoroughly prepared. I think we had about eight weeks of rehearsals. He also had the advantage of having artists who had never sung their parts. Both Sena and I, now here of course, arrived with very clear picture of what we wanted to do on stage, and what Sena does is fantastic. I couldn't have asked for a better -- (laughter). But I think it's more interesting to hear Sena's view when she has come from Jenůfa to Kostelnicka.

MM: When you did the role, Ms. Jurinac, was it different?

SJ: First of all, I must say in Vienna we are not really far from Moravia, I think you say it in English, maybe 100 kilometers away from there. My first Jenůfa was done with [Schenck?] in Vienna, and this was my only production really, though I did now as a guest in (inaudible) another one. We did it maybe not very sophisticated, and Jenůfa is a poor girl which is in love, and it happens often that the girl is pregnant, you see, but I don't think also, as Elisabeth, she doesn't do it as a very weak personality because she goes into the steps of her stepmother. She knows to read. She teaches the little boy to read, and she becomes also a personality.

But for the Kostelnicka, later on, it is a great problem because she's the person of respect in the village. She is next to the priest. She is teaching people. She is more or less the doctor of the village, and she, of course, has to look after a great morality in the village, and she has to live this morality herself. But we opened here a cut in this opera, in San Francisco, and I wonder why nobody really realized, even tried to talk about that, because it shows really the whole problem of this personality. Why, they say, she's not doing it as strong, as bad woman? I don't like this behaving for Kostelnicka because she's really a very, very, very poor woman. She was in love with a man who didn't love her, and he was a drinker. He beat her. She had to sleep in the fields, and she sees exactly the same coming to her stepdaughter. When she was a widow, she looked after Jenůfa, and all her love she gave to Jenůfa, and now she sees that the girl is going to do the same thing with this boy.

MM: With Števa.

SJ: With Števa, and of course she is so much against that. Of course, she didn't realize that it is already too late, and she's expecting a baby. So for her, it is terrible to understand that she got the baby. What do I do now? She says, "Okay, I take everything, as long as the boy comes now, marries her, and takes the child." He comes. He doesn't want to marry her. He's afraid of her, as he's afraid of Kostelnicka. Besides that, he's engaged with another girl.

MM: Why was he afraid of Kostelnicka?

SJ: Because Kostelnicka is a very strong personality, one of these women which passed a lot in life.

MM: Dominant?

SJ: Dominant, and he is weak. Laca is not afraid of Kostelnicka. Laca feels that she is really a lonely person. He kisses her hand, and she's a bit rough to him because she's afraid of kindness or too much kindness. As I said always, respect is not so far from fear. It's not always love you feel against the person which you respect. When she realizes that the boy is not going to marry her, what is she going to do? Then comes Laca. She explains. He said, "Now give her to me. I love her. I will never leave her." So she says okay, and she has at last somebody who will love her. Then she says frankly to him, "Now, listen, she got a baby eight days ago, and it is Števa's child." Now, of course, Laca is so shocked by this news. This moment is really the moment I feel it comes through her lips. Even if before she prayed a lot, please take this child, let it die, let it die, this child wouldn't, so she says, "But the child is dead." Then he goes. She realizes what she said, and at the end, she gets so mad about this situation and desperation that she does it.

- MM: You talked, in another interview, that when you do a role, that you feel you must identify with that role. Otherwise you can't sing it. Now, in that scene, what do you draw on?
- SJ: (laughter) This is question. You mustn't do everything in life to be able to identify yourself. We are artists to be able to feel the way the other person could feel or feels. We are able to feel this. You know, I understand every murder. I mustn't do the same thing.
- MM: In your book, you said something to the effect that sometimes it's easy to hide behind a role in your own private life, to hide your real feelings.
- ES: Well, that's the problem I have in my life, that I have so much lived myself into different parts that when I come into a difficult situation in the real life, then I sometimes use one of the scenes I've been playing.
(laughs)
- MM: That must be very interesting.
- ES: It happens to most actors and artists.
- MM: Do you agree, Ms. Jurinac?
- SJ: I don't feel the same way, I must say, Elisabeth. The stage is something else to me, and if I'm not able to feel a part, then I prefer not to do it. But I think the solution on the stage for life, it's very, very difficult. It's so different to what real life is.
- ES: But also on the other hand, Sena, there's one thing I have always felt, and that is that we are privileged in a way that we may live out aggressions and problems on the stage because there's very many people in real life suffer from depressions, and they feel like committing suicide or something, and when we feel like that, there's always some occasion for us to explode.
- MM: A certain amount of technique has to play a part in your characterization on stage, and you talk in your book, Ms. Söderström, about the grand opera style of acting, and then you talk about body language. Where did you develop your own technique?
- ES: I went through a marvelous school in Stockholm where we first learned the big gestures, and then we were allowed to leave them. We had two years of ballet training, and we were taught the classical style in the 18th century, where every gesture meant something. There are positive gestures with open hands and negative gestures where you close your hands or a fist, what you call a clenched fist, is always a threat or desperation, and I nearly died when I saw another younger artist act for the love of a person with a clenched fist. You're crazy. These are the basic facts of body language, which I think every young singer ought to have a chance to learn.
- SJ: Our job -- or our profession, I wouldn't like to say job -- is connected also with how do you say it in English? [Handwerk?]
- ES: Handicraft?

SJ: As Elisabeth said, you have to know how to walk. You have to know that if you go to the right side, you mustn't start with the left foot, so you make a cross.

ES: (laughs) I still do.

MM: You said once that you found it difficult to combine the singing and the acting.

SJ: Yes. For me it was always very difficult, but maybe now it's much easier to me because I had to find out myself so many things. But when I learned a part, I knew it musically. I sang it. I think everything was okay. Then I came to the first stage rehearsal, and then feel and do and move, and the voice was gone. I didn't think about singing. I just thought about acting and doing and feeling and things like that. But we feel very often on stage, in my view, we felt a lot, but the public didn't feel that.

MM: And now the public feels it.

SJ: This is the main thing, to be able to feel, to feel controlled, and be able to project it.

ES: That's where the whole secret lies.

SJ: Then we had a lot of problems, I think, because it's a difference if you have to project in a big theater but not with big, old-fashioned movements. This I don't mean, but the same sort of acting to project in a big house, consciously, and not making the big gestures.

ES: But when it comes to big gestures on stage, we are on a large stage, but we have light. But in the old days, you know the theaters were not very well-lit, and that is why you could never use your facial expressions as you can today. That is why opera in the old style, if you tried to act opera in the way they did in the 18th or 19th century, people laugh at you. I mean, now even in this big house, we can use our facial express, as Sena said, wide open eye or if you have intense feelings behind that look project even in a large opera house.

MM: I think the simplicity of both of you, as actresses, the economy of your movement is so extraordinary, and the resolution in that very final scene, when you were singing with Laca, have you ever found that you have become so emotional that your voice is affected?

ES: Well, very often. That happens to me all the time. It's something I have had to fight through my whole life, that I am a very emotional person, and painfully enough, if you feel too much, nothing comes across the footlights.

SJ: But this is what I mean with voice together with acting. To mix that, for me it was always very difficult, always very difficult.

MM: You cannot be too sensitive.

ES: No, you're not allowed to. You must always be controlled. Otherwise the audience cannot enjoy it.

MM: Did you find that singing it in Czech made other problems for you?

- SJ: Oh, for me, I am speaking Yugoslav, as you know, probably, so I have an idea about the Slavic language. It's of course different to the Yugoslav, but there are a few words which I am understanding what I sing.
- ES: So do I because I have Russian as a base.
- SJ: So we both have some feeling to this language.
- MM: Have you had members of the audience who speak Czech speak to you afterwards?
- ES: Trying to express what they feel in Czech, yes, and expecting you to answer in the same language, thank you very much. (laughter)
- SJ: But you know, to me, a revelation that I had yesterday a big discussion about why in Czech, why not in English, and I have not this feeling that really the people miss the English.
- ES: I came here the first time doing *Kát'a Kabanová* in English, and I was very happy about that. Therefore I was worried when we approached this in Czech because the other production had worked so well, and people said that they liked it because they could understand. But the same people have told me now, this time, that they didn't mind the Czech language because they thought that they did understand. Perhaps it's because this music is so characterized. Every phrase, I mean, the music tells in every line what the words say.
- MM: In 1971, a critic in London wrote that *The Makropulos Case* was not able to sell the house, but then neither did *Elektra* 12 years before that. Then he made the comment that the education of the public taste is a slow process.
- SJ: Well, I can tell you one thing. In 1977, *The Makropulos Case* sold every possible house we could give it in England, and we gave *Makropulos Case* in London in December last year, and people queued for return tickets. So the process has been going on.
- MM: It's going on. Yes.
- SJ: (laughs)
- ES: We now have the problem that we have too many people who want to go to the opera. There aren't enough seats. What's happening in our country is that they start small companies, not only in other cities but also in Stockholm itself, so that we have -- how should I say -- freelance opera companies popping up here and there. The interest for opera has grown tremendously, which I think is marvelous because when I came to the opera school in 1947, they said, "Opera is dead, but we have to try it anyhow." (laughs)
- MM: I think San Francisco is also in that fortunate position because they had to start a season which will be done for the first time in 1981, a new festival season. It was for the purpose of being able to have an audience who couldn't buy tickets for the full season.

SJ: And the boom opera has on television in your country is rather fantastic.

MM: It's an interesting thing, what television and what the media has done for opera and also for really establishing a kind of superstar elite in opera. I think that, were you to be more in this country singing, that your names would also be household words. (laughs) You've got had at least 30 years of experience. Does the career get easier?

ES: Was it easy when it started? (laughs)

SJ: I think it gets tougher and tougher.

ES: The difficulties vary, I would say. I remember I was scared to death, very often, when I was young, and I was scared by the fact that I didn't know how to behave and how to do this and that. Now I feel there are very many things which come much more easy. We have experience. We have routine. We know that conductors or producers scream at us, but we don't go and weep, as at least I did when I was young. They could scare me to death. They can't scare me any longer because I know why they scream.

SJ: They scare me still. (laughter)

MM: Ms. Jurinac, who scares you?

SJ: Producers can scare me still. (laughter)

MM: How?

ES: Darling, you can scare producers, too.

SJ: I can, too, probably. Probably I can, I'm sure.

ES: Actually that is one of the disadvantages of having been so long on stage because when they suggest something to you, you know immediately that this is going to work or it won't work.

SJ: First of all, she has a lot of patience. I have not. She is much more diplomatic than I am. But also, I mean, when the producer says, for instance, "Now show me what you think. Yes, very good, but I think we could do it another way, too." I said, "Of course. There are 100 ways to do, but my way would be that one."

ES: My way would be the best one. (laughter) You got your way in the end.

MM: On those words, we'll have to end this talk. Thank you, Elisabeth Söderström and Sena Jurinac.

SJ: Thank you.

SB: That was Marilyn Mercur in a conversation with Elisabeth Söderström and Sena Jurinac, the Jenůfa and Kostelnicka of this performance.

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