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CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE: Paul Thomason on Bidú Sayão

Bidú Sayão's Second Home, San Francisco Opera

BY PAUL THOMASON
(read time ~ 5 minutes)

Bidú Sayão was one of the most charming sopranos to ever grace an opera house. Hers was not the fake, transactional emotion that so often passes for charm today, but the real deal, “to affect by or as if by magic” as *Webster’s* puts it. When she sang it was indeed magical. Her perfectly produced, crystalline yet warm voice entranced you into caring about the character she was playing. When Sayão portrayed the so-called “-ina” roles—like Norina (*Don Pasquale*), Adina (*L’Elisir d’Amore*), Rosina (*Barber of Seville*), Zerlina (*Don Giovanni*)—they were neither the saccharine, sticky-sweet ninnies, nor waspish shrews. Instead they became delightful three-dimensional characters.

She also seemed to find an inner strength in her roles that gave them a surprising depth. For instance in Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette*—an opera she sang in three different seasons in San Francisco—she could tear the heart out of listeners by her reaction to learning the young man with whom she had been flirting is Romeo, a hated Montague. In her 1947 broadcast of the opera from the Metropolitan Opera (with Jussi Björling as her Roméo) Sayão leaves absolutely no doubt that Juliette knows her life is over if she surrenders to him. The horror and despair she conveys in those few measures—while still singing beautifully—creates a seldom-realized dimension to Juliette.

Sayão was one of the last pupils of the legendary tenor Jean De Reszke with whom she studied for two years. She told author Lanfranco Rasponi, “De Reszke had an extraordinary ability to evaluate the text, integrating it to the music until they became one. The struggle was to make it all sound spontaneous while actually it was the fruit of much work.” She explained to Voytek Matushevski, “Everything had to be beautiful—the sound and the words. [De Reszke] would tell me: ‘A word is a companion to the sound and only both together make what is called—*interpretation!*’”

Originally Sayão wanted to be an actress but that was utterly impossible for a respectable girl from Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the 20th Century. Her family reluctantly allowed her to study voice, though the idea of going on stage was still forbidden. After repeatedly being turned down, Sayão finally persuaded the famous soprano Elena Teodorini to accept her as a pupil, though at the time her voice was tiny. When Teodorini returned to her native Romania she took Sayão with her, and had her sing for the music-loving Queen Marie who was impressed and suggested Sayão work with De Reszke.

“It is ironical that I always loathed the repertoire my instrument was suited for, as my instinct drove me to crave dramatic and pathetic parts,” she told Rasponi. “It is very much like the painter gifted at executing miniatures whose ambition is to do huge frescoes. So I was always in a state of frustration. I would have given happily ten years of my life to be able to appear as Butterfly.”

In Europe she sang the major coloratura roles, but when she came to America the Met had Lily Pons for that repertoire, and Sayão’s second husband, Italian baritone Giuseppe Danise, was helping her transition to lyric roles. With the retirement of beloved soprano Lucrezia Bori, the Met needed a lyric soprano to sing her repertoire. Sayão’s Met debut was as Manon—a role she sometimes described as her favorite—on February 13, 1937. The Des Grieux was supposed to be Richard Crooks but at noon he informed the management that he was ill. To avoid possibly upsetting Sayão no one bothered to tell her. “Onstage I waited at the inn for Des Grieux, and imagine my surprise when it turned out to be a man [Sydney Raynor] I had never seen before.” The next day Olin Downs’ review in the *New York Times* was a review that might have been written at any time during her 20-year career in the US. “[Sayão] looked the character and interpreted the music with warm sentiment, grace, and style. The tone was lovely and fresh, and the artist has genuine sensibility. Miss Sayão triumphed as a Manon should, by manner, youth, and charm, and secondly by the way in which the voice became the vehicle for dramatic expression.”

Her debut in New York was a radio broadcast, as was her San Francisco Opera debut two year later, in the same role. But Gaetano Merola cast Tito Schipa as her Des Grieux. “Of all the tenors I sang with, I liked him the best. It was a joy to sing with him—such style, such diction. He was my ideal and favorite partner,” she told Matushevski. She elaborated a bit more with Rasponi: “I appeared with all the leading tenors, Gigli and Pertile included, but the one from whom I learned the most was Schipa, for he chiseled notes like a goldsmith. He lowered many of his roles one tone, but no one noticed it, so consummate was his art.”

She considered San Francisco her second home, and it was here that she finally ventured into more dramatic repertoire at the end of her career, singing Nedda in *Pagliacci* and Margherita in *Mefistofele* in 1952. “Perhaps God did not give me a great voice, but some talent for interpretation,” was her overly modest assessment of her artistry. I once told her that every time I heard her sing, her voice was so warm and inviting that I wanted to give her a big hug. “How do you do that?” I asked. She gave a delightful giggle and said, “I don’t know, I don’t know. I just sing and people liked it.”

Paul Thomason has combined a lifelong passion for music, his decades of experience in publishing, and his delight in storytelling to create a unique voice in writing and lecturing about opera. In addition to writing regularly for the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, Aspen Music Festival and other companies in the US and Europe, he is also a regular guest on the award-winning podcast *Aria Code* and the London Wagner Society’s Zoom series.