

BY MARINA ROMANI

Passion and Glamour

The star of *Tosca*
is ready for her
San Francisco
Opera close-up

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Thunder roars in the summer sky, while waves ripple over the Gulf of Naples. The scene unfolds before an open window, looking onto the Castel dell'Ovo—the fortress that has served over the centuries as a convent, prison, and royal residence. To the east, the blue silhouette of Mount Vesuvius rises against the clouds, through the driving rain.

The setting is worthy of an opera, and so an apt location in which I should meet Italian soprano Carmen Giannattasio. And no less appropriate that, with the appearance of the prima donna, as we sit down for a *caffè* in the sumptuous hall of the hotel, the backdrop slowly shifts: the early evening air becomes warm and crisp, the sky is becalmed.

We meet in early August, when Carmen is taking a brief pause before her San Francisco Opera debut in a major new role, *Tosca*. She is no stranger to high-profile engagements: at 24, she debuted at La Scala. After winning First and Audience Prizes at Plácido Domingo's Operalia, The World Opera Competition in 2002, she has been dazzling audiences with a repertoire ranging from rarely seen 18th-century operas to masterpieces by Verdi and Puccini. She was the first Italian soprano in more than 20 years to take on the role of Violetta at the Metropolitan Opera, and she is beloved at the Royal Opera House in London, especially after stepping in last minute in *La Bohème* in 2012 with a mesmerizing portrayal of Mimì. Acclaimed for her rich timbre, expressiveness, and charisma, Carmen's warm temperament and glamour have led her to become a special representative for the high-end fashion designer Antonio Riva, Bulgari jewelry, and perfume brand Carthusia.

"You know, we are sitting just a few steps from where Enrico Caruso passed," the soprano reminds me, hinting at the Hotel Vesuvio next door, where the legendary tenor spent his final hours in 1921. In her frequent travels around the world, Naples holds a special place: "*Io sono di casa qui*—it feels like home. It's not my city, but I was born just about an hour away in Avellino. Naples is where I grew up as an artist."

Her journey began not far from where we are sitting: in Solofra, her father's village, and Avellino, her mother's hometown. "I went to school in Solofra, and then to the Cimarosa Conservatory in Avellino, which is a forward-thinking place." It was her piano teacher who first recognized her vocal talents. This came as a surprise for the young musician: "At that time, I was playing Bach, Satie... opera was so far away from my sensibility! It took me about three years to really get into opera—and then I fell in love!"

Opposite: Carmen Giannattasio in a gown by designer Antonio Riva.

Above: The Italian soprano on location at Rome's Castel Sant'Angelo.

We speak in Italian, with occasional forays into our own respective dialects—hers Neapolitan, mine Abruzzese—whose common linguistic lineage speaks to the history of a fragmented nation. Both of our regions belonged to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies until the unification of Italy in 1861 and, as Carmen remarks, "it's been maybe 60 years that we all speak the same language. That's thanks mainly to the advent of television at home in the 1950s. Here in Campania, dialects—and especially Neapolitan—are deeply rooted." Carmen is knowledgeable and passionate about local histories—their linguistic peculiarities, neighborhood theaters, little-known places to find the best Neapolitan food. Her inquisitiveness has guided her in her career, both on and off the stage. In fact, together with her studies at the Conservatory, Carmen pursued a degree in English and Russian at the University of Salerno. "I wanted to be a journalist," she explains, "and the critical eye that you need in that profession has stayed with me."

It is with this same keen perspective that she is approaching her latest role. I am curious why she chose *Tosca* at this point in her career. "You know, I was asked to sing *Tosca* when I was 27, after I won Operalia in Paris," she says. "Obviously, receiving such an offer when you are a young artist is incredibly flattering. You feel perhaps not that you have made it, but that you are ready. You think to yourself: 'They want me, so I can do it.' But I've always been realistic about my career and always considered where I was on my path as a singer, both taking on new roles and understanding when to let some of them go. When I was asked to sing *Tosca* at such a young age, I realized that, before getting to Puccini, there was a lot of music I needed and wanted to sing: Cimarosa, Monteverdi, Mozart... a lot of bel canto. Right now, my voice has a thickness, color, and maturity to tackle a prima donna role like *Tosca*, to whom I feel very close."

A smile from Carmen hints at another affinity with *Tosca*. "Yes, I have to confess that her passionate artistic soul is very close to mine," she confesses. "Some singers are vocalists. Other are *interpreti*, or performers. I feel like a singer-performer. One can be the best technical singer in the world, but, without conveying any feelings, those vocal fireworks become merely an end in themselves. I get more pleasure out of a sound that may not be perfect but, in that moment, in a specific scene, has its own perfection."

Combined with her instinctive relationship to a character, Carmen's critical edge informs the way she crafts her operatic roles. She has always been meticulous about researching the literary sources of the operas she interprets, and she tells me she has just finished studying the source play, Sardou's *La Tosca*. In addition, after our conversation, she is planning to meet with her friend, conductor Gianluca Marciànò, to spend a few days in a full immersion

with *Tosca*'s orchestral score.

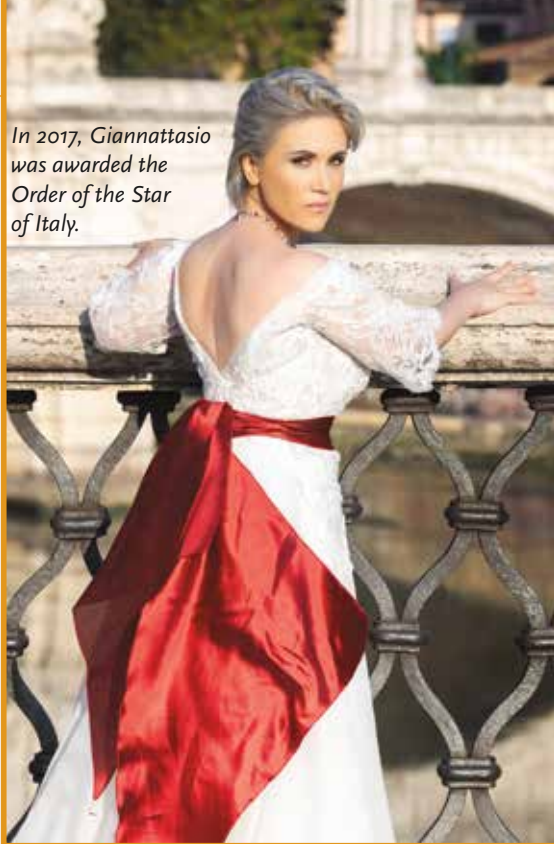
Her familiarity with the original text influences her interpretation of the character. "Reading Sardou's play, you find out that Tosca was an orphan from Verona and lived as a sheepherder," she says. "The Benedictine monks took her with them and gave her an education. She grew up in a monastery! This is the reason for the profound religiosity that we witness in the the opera. In fact, she was meant to become a nun. It was the Pope himself that, in hearing her voice, was so touched that a tear fell from his eye. That's when he told her that she couldn't stay in a monastery: she had to bring beauty to the world and share with everybody the same emotions that her voice provoked in him.

"In the process of building a dramatically solid character, it's crucial for me to know all of this. Learning more about her education and values, you understand how truly, deeply horrified she is by Scarpia's proposal. Mario's life is too important for her, so she accepts his depraved deal. And yet, she can't tolerate the mental torture to which Scarpia is subjecting her... and that leads her to the extreme act of murder."

Her desire to go for psychological depth makes Carmen a passionate interpreter, while her academic background in literature and languages allows her to feel comfortable in many artistic disciplines. This attention to cultural politics extends to her engagements with the fashion industry. "I feel very flattered that many prestigious brands have invested in me, especially because I didn't train to become a model and I don't have the body of a traditional model," she says. "I believe that these brands trust me because they know, and I know too, that women need images in which they can see themselves."

The first in her family to pursue a career as an artist, Carmen considers herself a self-made woman, and she believes that this aspect is something important to see reflected in haute couture. "I chose a path that's rewarding but also tough and full of sacrifices, and I paid my dues for many years," she states. "Many women work hard for years and finally they can afford certain items—purses, dresses, jewelry—that they couldn't have afforded when they were younger. Some brands prefer selecting an ambassador that embodies precisely these qualities: a woman that has worked hard to succeed, regardless of age, size, and appearances. Through my work with haute couture, my message to all women is that if you have skills and are willing to work, you can reach unlimited goals, even if you don't see someone like you represented yet. External beauty is ephemeral—but your personality, charisma, the fruits of your work, those last much longer. You have to educate your mind, your soul, otherwise you won't have anything to offer when external beauty fades."

In 2017, Giannattasio was awarded the Order of the Star of Italy.



Along the way, Carmen has found solidarity not only with her Italian compatriots but supportive professionals and institutions abroad: "I often say I am a 'British product.' They took me when I was diamond in the rough. I owe so much to the U.K. and what I love the most about the British is their foresight. They recognize your talent—and then they also tell you that there's more work to do, more practice needed."

Her American experience has been equally positive. "In some places, performers are like toreadors in the arena: until the end, you don't know what the reaction will be," she explains. "That's also part of the game, you have to be able to accept all kinds of feedback. But in my performances in the U.S., it's almost like being on a team, you and the audience together—and that's an

incredibly warm feeling. Also, I am touched by the support of the Italian and Italian-American communities. I remember one episode from my debut at the Met in *Il Trovatore* when, for the very first performance, no member of my family, friends, or even my agent could make it. And yet, at the end of my aria in Act I, I heard somebody screaming: 'Forza Carmen!' This gave me the energy to go on for the rest of the opera!"

Carmen's role as a cultural ambassador has also been recognized on an institutional level. In 2017, she was granted knighthood—the Order of the Star of Italy—a distinction honoring those who have promoted cultural excellence in the world. "That was a huge source of pride," she explains, "and I almost couldn't believe it."

The hours go by, and it's almost time for us to move upstairs to the terrazza for dinner. Her friend Gianluca Marcianò and his wife, violinist Tatevik Shahinyan, have just arrived at the hotel. He jokes about Carmen's attention to detail and her work ethic: "She's the only singer I know who can rehearse in full voice for seven, eight hours in a day!" They reminisce about previous times they have performed together, and on the particular teamwork required to bring opera to life. "Music is synonymous with *condivisione*, sharing," Carmen exclaims enthusiastically. "You do it together—with your colleagues and with your public. Singers cannot go on stage without all the professionals involved in a production—prop masters, electricians, hairstylists. I want everybody to be the best they can, and that pushes me to be the best—which doesn't mean better than others. That has never been my goal.

"I only want to be better than Carmen from last time. Better than myself every time I go on stage." 🌻

Marina Romani is a music and film researcher and performer, trained in Western classical voice and Afro-Caribbean music. She holds a doctoral degree from UC Berkeley.