NADJA MICHAEL REVEALED

The German soprano is one of today's most alluring singing actresses

In 2009, Michael made her American debut with San Francisco Opera as Salome.

CORY WEAVER

Sitting next to soprano Nadja Michael, you can actually *feel* the electricity emanating from her. It's an apt sensation from an artist renowned for her searing performances as Lady Macbeth, Kundry, Judith in *Bluebeard's Castle*, and Salome—the latter of which she performed in San Francisco in 2009 to ecstatic praise. In conversation, you discover that Michael's life story is as gripping as her dramatic portrayals on stage.

Born and raised in former East Germany, she was smuggled to the West in the trunk of a car during the final months of the Iron Curtain. Trained afterward in Stuttgart and at Indiana University, she began her career as a contralto before discovering that her voice and dramatic sense were better suited for some of the biggest and most challenging roles in the operatic repertoire.

Emilia Marty in Janáček's *The Makropulos Case* is one such role. Michael finds the tortured, perennially youthful heroine not only intellectually stimulating but also extraordinarily moving.

As the youngest of five children, you grew up in a village ten miles outside of Leipzig. Can you describe what your childhood was like, living during the time of a very repressive regime?

It's true, it was repressive. But when you are little, it's your parents who suffer from that. We as children lived out our lives and would take our bikes and spend time in the woods. We had to work every weekend in the fields with our parents, but it was also fun. Beautiful, really. My parents though had a really tough time as my father was not a conformist.

After the Second World War, my grandmother was put in prison, not because she was a criminal, but because she was denounced for being associated with some wealthy people—which wasn't even true. So she was in prison and then she came out. Near that same time, my father was already married to my mother, my brother was born, and they put my father in prison for two years. As a result, neither my father, nor my siblings or I could get permission to study at a university.

Since I was three years old, my dream was singing. It was not because of education, not because of strong cultural surroundings. I come from a very simple background, but I inherited the love of music from my mother. My mother loved popular music, and sang in an amateur chorus. We also had—not a classical chorus but a chorus. We had also LPs of choral music and Bach. We hadn't been educated in this but we were listening to it; it was beautiful, those pure voices. And we had an accordion and piano.

I used to do a lot of sports until I was 14, including competitive swimming. And then my parents took me out of this sports school. My parents saw what it would turn into. They saw the Olympic swimmers; they saw them looking and talking like men. My parents didn't want that. I was actually very sad, because I didn't understand. But later I saw that it wasn't my way. I took that as an opportunity to apply for a school which taught music education to children. And there I began voice training.

At what point in your teens did you decide to defect?

I'm a free spirit by nature. And when you get older, you want to be creative, experiment, be different. You start to question things and the world all of a sudden becomes very small. The directive under communism was to never stick out—just be gray. In sports you can stick out, but nothing else, including art, philosophy, and science. For me it was clear at a rather early age that I needed to get perspective.

At 16 I went to Budapest with a friend of mine, and there I got to know a woman from Frankfurt am Main. Her husband, Tony, was Hungarian but grew up in England. He was interested in us girls from East Germany and how life is there. He and his wife really opened my mind. "We will help you... you can come to West Germany if you like," they said. I went back to Budapest a half year later, but this time, with my boyfriend for the final departure from Budapest to Vienna. The both of us were smuggled in the trunk of a Wartburg [an East German manufactured car], driven by a Hungarian whose father was a diplomat. In those days, no one really had cars.

You eventually settled in Stuttgart where you continued to study voice and received positive notices from scholarship committees and voice coaches. What were those early years of finding your voice like?

I would say it was a natural progression. My voice had always been a big voice. It was never fulfilling to be in the lyric repertoire. I always had a huge vocal range—very low, very high, but I just could not yet use the top in the manner of a dramatic soprano; I was too young. You have to have the endurance and the conditioning. At the time, people were saying, "Finally you will be Elektra, but now, you better sing this, this, and this." During those earlier years, I did all the mezzo repertoire you can imagine, including a lot of Dalilas and Ebolis.

When you listen to many of the high dramatic sopranos of the past such as Gwyneth Jones and Eva Marton, they have this similar range: the very low voice based in the middle and then a dramatic top. It's really not my choice of repertoire; the repertoire has chosen me because of certain needs of the voice.

After Stuttgart you came to this country to study at Indiana University. Can you describe that time of transition?

At first, I didn't sleep for a couple of months. I became very thin because I was so excited to be there in Bloomington. In this country, I love that people want to make life easy for you in a good way; they are polite and make compliments. People are so aware that we are all here together and everybody has their burdens, so why not be as nice to each other as possible. There is a lot of generosity in the U.S., and you love big voices. And that was for me, amazing. Because in Germany, it was, "Okay, so she has a big voice." In Bloomington, it was, "WOW! She has a big voice!"

A big voice and a very wide repertoire that currently encompasses Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, Cassandre and Didon

Acclaimed for her vivid, fearless stage portrayals, the Associated Press has observed that "Nadja Michael commands the stage in a manner few sopranos do." Born and raised in a small town outside of Leipzig, Germany, the dramatic soprano now resides in Berlin with her family.

in *Les Troyens*, and Tosca. What new roles are you learning? Is there a Brünnhilde in your future?
I'm leading to that! I just debuted as Ortrud [in *Lohengrin*] with Anna Netrebko and conductor Valery Gergiev. Now I will do Isolde and Elektra with Gergiev. And after Isolde comes Brünnhilde.

Let's turn our attention to Emilia Marty in *The Makropulos Case*. What does this particular role mean to you?
First of all, for me, Janáček's music is just out of heaven. What makes *Makropulos Case* so exceptional, is of course that it has no real arias. It's a conversation piece—even more so than in other Janáček operas. Until the very last scene, there's a lot of *parlando* or speaking style of singing with some segments of phrases. But when the final scene comes, it really hits. There are long phrases, very dramatic and subtle at the same time. And very deep.

Second, the opera's topic is extremely modern, because it is not only the question about eternity and its costs. I see even more the debate about the position of a woman in society. Director Olivier Tambosi and I have had a long discussion about how to play a 300-year-old woman who has acquired so much wisdom and experience but has also had to detach herself from many aspects of what makes us human. From the very first moment Emilia Marty enters the stage, all the men are hitting on her. And why? Because she is strong. They feel that there is an extra skill somehow, there is something, and that mirrors society in a spooky way to me.

Janáček was a feminist. He loved the heroines in his operas and experiencing their difficulties in a male-dominated society. How do women survive? What difficulties and transitions do they have to face? What does age mean? What does giving birth mean? Here in *Makropulos Case*, Emilia becomes a vehicle for higher truth. In the end she becomes a higher human being, because she has suffered all wounds imaginable and, at the same time, that makes her so sympathetic. I love her, because she has lived everything. Nothing can surprise her.

And she has had 300 years to perfect her vocal technique—every singer's dream! What are the vocal demands for this role? Is stamina its biggest requirement, saving just enough energy for the final scene, Emilia's apotheosis?
Actually, I think it is the language. The Czech language requires a lot of concentration, and Janáček's music isn't Mozart; it requires a lot of concentration to be in sync with the conductor. I have to concentrate so much on the words and meaning and music, I have to count at a certain point.

Maybe that's why I don't think of preserving energy, because it just happens naturally. I go into the part, and then the part just takes over.