

Julia Varady, “Song of passion”

Julia Varady is a mystery. In a sense, she embodies in one person the unlikely fusion of the art of the two most famous prima donnas of the second half of the twentieth century, Maria Callas and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. She has Callas' emotional commitment, overwhelming dramatic presence and tragedian's art; and Schwarzkopf's perfect vocal technique, charm of voice and extreme refinement of expression. Furthermore, her repertoire spans and extends beyond the seemingly incompatible repertoires of these two great models. Of all the divas who have been singing in recent years, she is the one on whom music professionals – conductors, opera directors and fellow-singers – have bestowed the most flattering reputation, though it can hardly be said that she has achieved truly popular fame: she has not had the American canonisation, has not indulged in the whims or affected mannerisms of the star, and has never provoked the media scandals from which, one way or another, myths are fashioned.

And yet, with her sumptuous voice, her spellbinding stage presence, her burningly intense physical and emotional absorption in the music she is singing, her purely musical gifts, her characteristic exquisite spontaneity, she should have been idolised by a far wider public than the relatively limited opera audience.

She was born of Hungarian stock at the start of the Second World War, in Romania, where she studied and collected her first local accolades. When she managed to flee her native country right at the end of the 1960s, she was virtually unknown in the West, without

connections, equipped only with a splendid tragedian's voice – an instrument she would have to hone to become one of the very finest lyric sopranos of our time.

She was to settle in Germany, and this naturally dictated the main orientations of her career. She was trained in the Italian school of singing, but speaks remarkably good French, German and Russian, as well as Romanian and Hungarian. Her encounter with Germany (incidentally, she was to marry Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, the vocal prodigy of the century) opened up the great Germanic repertoire of opera, Lied and oratorio for her – hence this unique example of a great prima donna who is equally at ease in Mozart's light soprano roles, Verdi and Puccini's dramatic characters, Johann Strauss' comic Viennese parts, Wagner's lyric roles and personifies the heroines of Richard Strauss, Bartók and French opera as successfully as those of Tchaikovsky's brooding theatre.

For her, each role is a challenge to be taken up by identifying utterly with each character. Not content to express vulnerability and distress, she experiences them from within: "There I am, my heart laid bare. The despair of my heroines is my despair. Becoming the character you play on stage is always tantamount to being reborn". Coming from Julia Varady, these are not empty words: she is expressing perfectly something she has experienced and her ability to immerse herself emotionally in her roles, to the point where one forgets the accomplished technique and vocal prowess implied by her combination of vibrant feeling and total assurance.

Having always refused to give endless concerts abroad, although not strictly speaking attached to a company, Varady only appears on stage at the opera houses of Berlin, Munich and Vienna, with summer excursions to

Bayreuth and Salzburg. She can occasionally be heard on stage at the Paris Opera (in September 1995, in a memorable performance of Verdi's *Nabucco*), Covent Garden, La Scala, or the New York Metropolitan Opera, but the rest of the world has to content itself with fêting her at orchestral concerts or recitals. It could be said that her astounding career defies the usual laws of supply and demand. This probably explains the aforementioned apparent contradiction.

In 1998, Varady stopped performing in operas and decided, for motives that were both personal and artistic, that henceforward she would perform only in concert or for only too rare recordings. Then, in 2002, when she had never been singing better, she gave up appearing in front of audiences altogether.

This film was shot over a period of two years: it set out to retrace the most important stages of the great singer's career and show the range of her musical activities. In addition to new footage, it makes use of a wealth of archive material from different periods.

Apart from the purely musical sequences, most of which were shot in Berlin, we filmed Varady in the magical setting of a village in Portugal. It seemed to me to be the ideal place. Away from her Berlin and Munich homes, she would be freed of professional preoccupations and would more readily relate episodes from her vocal apprenticeship and the fantastical circumstances of her flight from Romania reminiscent of Rudolf Nureyev's liberating *entrechat* at Le Bourget airport – where restrictions of all kinds cramped her talent; to tell us what her early career in the West was really like (unlike Nureyev, she was a total unknown); to talk to us about her voice and her aspirations; and to

confide her doubts and convictions as an artist and a woman at the peak of her fame.

As I was completing the editing of this film, I had the thought that whilst of course it would allow the viewer to enter Varady's intense world, for those who never had the chance to hear or see her, it might perhaps also provide a sort of belated revelation of one of the most fascinating vocal and musical personalities of our time.

Note on the Wagner Recital with Viktoria Postnikova

At first glance, the idea of asking a fiery-tempered soloist to accompany a Lieder recital might seem bizarre. Of course, it was primarily because she is an immensely talented performer, like Varady still inexplicably underrated by the public at large, that I contacted the great pianist Viktoria Postnikova. But it was also because Julia Varady and Viktoria Postnikova did not know each other. I was sure that the first encounter between these two great artists, both personalities of white-hot intensity, but contrasting and complementary, would kindle a spark of unexpected complicity and a fresh approach and interaction, from which all feeling of routine would almost automatically be eliminated. That is precisely what happened, first in rehearsals and subsequently in the private concert (heard by a privileged invited audience) organised in Paris for the purpose of this film.

Note on the “bonus”

As I was writing a screenplay for the film about Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* with the Alban Berg Quartet, I had the idea of writing into it the song of the same title, which I would ask Julia Varady to sing, accompanied on the piano by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. I had been fortunate enough to work with him for many years, and he unhesitatingly agreed to take part in this somewhat unusual sequence. And it was in the intimate setting of their home in Berlin that we were able to film

them rehearsing in detail Schubert's famous song. The resulting film is presented here in its entirety for the first time.

Of course, it was not her marriage to Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau that made her career. It would have been dazzling anyhow. Yet sharing her life for over twenty years with the "master of masters" must surely have lent still greater depth to her art.

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Translation: Victoria Selwyn

Julia Varady

Biographical notes

Julia Varady was born into the Hungarian minority in Romanian Transylvania. She started learning to play the violin at the age of six and received her initial musical training at the Cluj-Klausenburg Conservatory.

Her voice was discovered when she was only fourteen. As a very young girl, she was singing an extract from Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* in a competition when she was moved to tears. Her voice became choked and she had trouble continuing. At her teacher's insistence, she went on singing, patiently learning what the art of singing requires in terms of control of the emotions. As a student, she interpreted Glück's *Orfeo* at the Klausenburg Opera: so began her career as an alto. Shortly afterwards, she was to incarnate Fiordiligi, a soprano role, and began to give successful concerts, meanwhile studying at the Bucharest Conservatory.

In the early 1970s, she decided to follow her voice and flee the stifling atmosphere of Ceaucescu's Romania. She won a singing competition in Italy and was engaged to sing Violetta in *La Traviata*. Then the great conductor Christoph von Dohnanyi heard her in Beethoven's concert aria "Ah, perfido" and invited her to the Frankfurt Opera. It was the Munich and Berlin opera houses which were subsequently to hold onto her and become her standbys, with excursions to Hamburg, Vienna, Cologne, Covent Garden in London, the New York Metropolitan Opera, La Scala in Milan and the Paris Opera.

Her vast repertoire encompasses all the roles in Mozart's major operas: Fiordiligi, Elvira, Donna Anna, Vitellia, Elektra, Cherubino, the Countess, Susanna and Pamina.

She has also embodied Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, Liù in *Turandot*, Richard Strauss' *Arabella* and *Ariadne*, Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin* and Lisa in Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*, not forgetting the principal female roles in Verdi's great operas: *Il Trovatore*, *La forza del destino*, *Don Carlos*, Lady Macbeth and *Otello*, on which she worked with Carlos Kleiber, *Aida* and *La Traviata*. In 1975 came Rosalinde in Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus*, also conducted by Carlos Kleiber, and in 1976, in Edinburgh, she sang Elisetta in *Cimarosa's Secret Marriage*, conducted by Barenboim, Elettra in *Idomeneo*, conducted by Karl Böhm, Cordelia in Alibert Reimann's *Lear* and Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* with her husband Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, both conducted by their friend Wolfgang Sawallisch. She has also sung Wagner: Sieglinde (*The Valkyrie*), Senta (*The Flying Dutchman*) and Elisabeth (*Tannhäuser*), and many other roles by composers such as Spontini, Offenbach, Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Spohr, Mascagni and Glück, to say nothing of a quantity of Lieder and arias by Beethoven, Strauss, Handel, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Schubert, Schumann and Bach.

After a career lasting over thirty years, Julia Varady bade farewell to the operatic stage in 1998.