

# Opera



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**Béatrice Uria-Monzon: life after Carmen**

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## BÉATRICE URIA-MONZON

JON TOLANSKY

Uria-Monzon sings *Gioconda* in  
Toulouse this month



‘I told them, “If you are wanting me to perform *Carmen*, I am sorry I just cannot do it”—I could only see superficiality in her.’

It was the Opéra de Paris that initially received that refusal after they had invited Béatrice Uria-Monzon, a fast-rising young star, to audition for the role that the conductor Myung-Whun Chung and the stage director José Luis Gomez wanted her to take on for their upcoming new production at the Bastille in June and July 1993. She did of course ultimately decide otherwise, and her challengingly unusual portrayal would bring her worldwide acclaim and become something of a signature role, one that she went on to sing in more than 20 productions, including Calixto Bieito’s in Barcelona, which was filmed for DVD. This deeply intelligent artist is a top choice for a wide array of differing stage directors and conductors, her subtlety and versatility as a vivid actress as striking as the dramatic brilliance and diversity of her vocal mastery: *Hérodiade*, *Didon*, *Marguerite*, *Mignon*, *Dalila*, *Juliette*, *Charlotte*, *Dulcinée* and *Mère Marie* are some of her most highly praised French roles, while in the Italian repertoire she has shone as *Adalgisa*, *Fenena*, *Eboli* (also in the French version), *Amneris*, *Santuzza*, *Tosca* and *Gioconda*. So, a mezzo-soprano in spinto and dramatic parts and also more recently a dramatic soprano. Additionally she has sung *Venus* in *Tannhäuser*, *Judith* and several premiere roles including, this year, *Eurydice* in *Hémon* by Zad Moultaka at Strasbourg.

Neither dramatic singing nor for that matter opera singing of any description were on Uria-Monzon’s agenda in the formative days of her youth. As the daughter of the distinguished Spanish painter Antonio Uria Monzón, artistic expression was very much part of her awareness, but, as she remembers: ‘The musical ambience at home was Spanish first and foremost but not exclusively—my father loved flamenco, while my French mother adored jazz, and these were the sounds and styles of music I grew up with. I would say that I was bathed in this mix of music as a child, as it was always sounding through our home on recordings and the radio. There was a lot of music at home, but no opera and nothing classical, even though in fact my Spanish grandfather, who I never knew, had been an orchestral musician. No surprise then that when I



became a teenager, I began to sing bossa nova, and my first appearance as a singer was when I was at school with a group of my friends and we performed this music in a restaurant in Agen, my home town. I did learn to play the classical guitar, but opera, or art song, or anything else classical—no, that wasn't part of my early life at all.'

So Uria-Monzon's studies at school were not in music. Instead, she graduated with the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, but then as she was undecided about her future her philosophy tutor offered her the highly unusual opportunity of doing an extra year with him in the school, even with her diploma under her belt. She accepted—and unexpectedly discovered opera, over a period of time.

'That was entirely thanks to my philosophy teacher, Pierre Gardeil. He was passionate about opera, and he had also started a choir in the school—pupils and teachers sang in it. I gradually began to explore a new world of singing and opera, and the following year I was able to enrol at the Bordeaux Conservatoire to study Music and the History of Art. There I had my first singing professor—Monique de Pondeau. She was very well established as a light lyrical soprano, especially in French operetta. Even so, I was still restless, and so I enrolled at the Centre National d'Artistes Lyriques in Marseille, but as a chorus singer. So you see, I was not taking any kind of conventional route to the opera stage—there were still many unexpected developments before that finally was to happen, beginning after two years when the director of the Centre suggested I change to be a solo singer. But, although the teacher was a very distinguished artist, Rita Streich, I knew that I would not benefit from her because she specialized in teaching people in her own lyric coloratura repertoire, and I already knew that my voice was very different in timbre and character and was unsuited for that. So you could say I was always searching.'

Her search led her to the École d'Art Lyrique, the opera studio school at the Opéra de Paris, where she embarked on yet more searching: 'The École helped me with opportunities to sing some small parts at the Opéra de Paris in 1988 [Feklusha in *Katya Kabanová* and Fyodor in *Boris Godunov*], but in respect of the overall situation I felt uncomfortable with many of the roles they were preparing me for. They particularly saw me as a Mozart singer—and I found it very hard singing a lot of Mozart, because I knew I did not have the necessary agility and lightness for the particular kind of Mozart roles they were giving me. Instead, in my studies I was feeling more comfortable in dramatic parts that needed a larger voice. Fortunately I was able to discuss this with the great tenor Michel Sénéchal when he became the director of the Studio—he had been teaching there already—and he recommended I try learning Charlotte in *Werther*, and especially the dramatic third act. This was the moment when at last I felt I was on the correct route for my voice. M. Sénéchal then arranged an audition for me to sing this music for Jacques Bourgeois, who produced the weekly radio programme *Jeunes Chanteurs de Demain* ('Young Singers of Tomorrow') on France Musique. That was a success, and after the programme I was offered the role of Charlotte by the Rouen Opera for 1990.

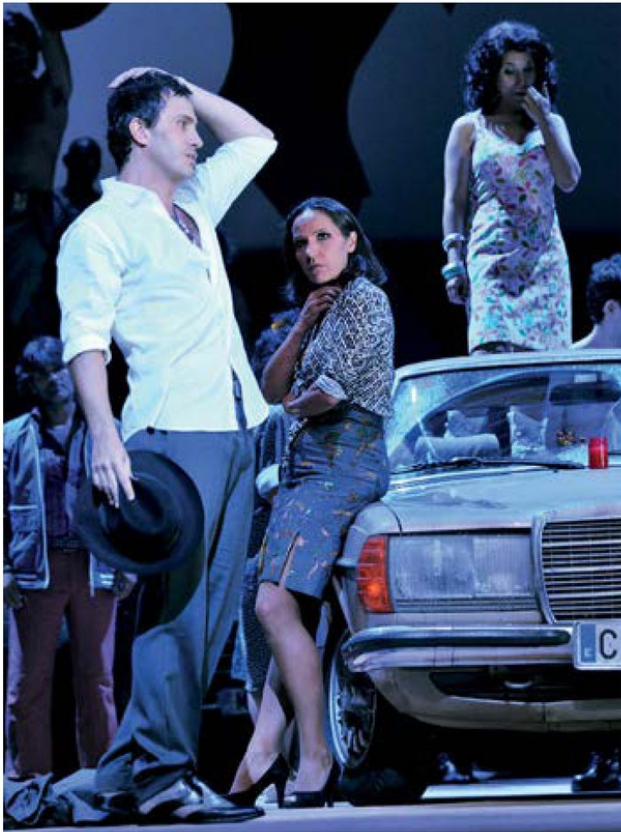
Ironically though, she had made her major stage debut singing Mozart the previous year: she was Cherubino in Opéra de Nancy's production of *Le nozze di Figaro*. It was almost the only time she sang Mozart on the stage—two years later, in Avignon, she was

Uria-Monzon as Didon in 'Les Troyens' at the Deutsche Oper Berlin in 2010









*A different view of Carmen: Uria-Monzon in Calixto Bieito's production in Barcelona in 2010, with (l.) Erwin Schrott as Escamillo and (r.) Roberto Alagna as Don José*

Cherubino again, and that was her Mozart farewell. ‘Truly it was harder for me to sing Cherubino than Charlotte. It was not that I did not like Mozart, not at all—I just felt much more comfortable and more natural in Massenet’s opera, and I felt that I had now discovered my voice’s home. But also, the complex character of this role appealed greatly to me.’

Complexity was not a characteristic that Uria-Monzon had associated with Carmen when she was approached by the Opéra de Paris to audition for the role in José-Luis Gomez’s new production coming up in 1993. But that was about to change. As she explained, ‘I knew I had the voice to sing Carmen, but what I had seen of the role I had always disliked. I had always seen Carmen played as a vulgar woman, and I could only see superficiality in her. I said to them, “I am not saying necessarily that I am right, but that is how I see her, and she is not for me.” Well, my manager Thérèse Cédelle—she still looks after me today after 32 years—she told me that the theatre was really very keen indeed for me to do the audition, and if they were to engage me it would be a major opportunity. So, I thought very carefully again about the opera and started to think, “Well, possibly, maybe”. Finally, I took the decision and said, “All right, I will do this—but I will have to sing it my way”. So I auditioned, standing there without physical movement and singing the role as I imagined I would if I were on stage—and that meant portraying Carmen gracefully in the phrasing, and giving her sensuality a deep darkness in the voice, because Carmen seduces through her voice every bit as much as with her body. I felt she was subtle, profound in fact, and another complex character—Bizet’s music told me this.’

It came as a surprise to Uria-Monzon, though not to her manager, when soon afterwards the Opéra de Paris called to say they wanted her as their new Carmen. ‘In



fact I was worried because I knew my Carmen would not be what was usually expected. Of course she is a powerful young woman who needs and knows how to inspire love, but there is depth and darkness in her, an awareness of the darkness that is within love. She is a gypsy, and her people live by the importance of their tradition—their cards, their jinxes, their death. They face up to these fatalisms, they live with them. And I, coming from the family that I do, also have the feeling to face and live with darkness. My father experienced the Spanish Civil War, and I see him facing it in his paintings. With this heaviness in our family history, I felt naturally able to identify with this deeper side of Carmen, and also with my Spanish blood I felt close to the Andalusia of the story.’

The production of *Carmen* at the Bastille in 1993 was the first foray into opera for the stage director José Luis Gomez. In an interview in *El País* on June 15 that year, he said he wanted ‘to clean it of the adhesions of hundreds of previous assemblies, to present it as cleanly as possible’. It was certainly a confrontationally controversial staging in the explicitness it gave to Don José, making him closer to Merimée’s novella than the opera character in a number of ways. It also demanded intense eroticism from Carmen, maybe not surprisingly—except that with Uria-Monzon that was a deep, elusive issue, as can so strikingly be seen in the DVD of her much later performance in Barcelona in 2010.

She has analysed the role in detail: ‘From her first entrance she is complex and serious. The Habanera is not the sexy showpiece it so often is thought to be. It is as though Carmen is asking everyone: “What is love for you?”—talking woman to man about a serious issue. Which is why when the men in the chorus shallowly ask, “Carmen, quand tu nous aimeras?” (Carmen, when will you love us?), her answer is “I don’t

Uria-Monzon in Massenet: (l.) as Charlotte in ‘Werther’ in Strasbourg in 2009; (r.) as Chimène with Roberto Alagna as Rodrigue in ‘Le Cid’ in Marseille in 2011





know”—because love is mysterious. Love is always where we are not waiting for it. We can’t decide to love or to be loved. I never understood women being very sexy in this *Habanera*—that is not the subject here. If we really understand this text and also Bizet’s subtle music—not vulgar but almost haunting—then it is impossible to make Carmen an “easy girl”, chasing after any man. This is why she is attracted to Don José in the first act—it is precisely because he does not show the kind of interest in her body that all the other men do. Then after that of course the tragedy plays out because she is so many-sided, and he is incapable of taking that on. So to me, Carmen definitely is not a *femme fatale*—the opera is meaningless if that is how she is portrayed, either vocally or physically. She has everything that makes her so richly feminine—she wants to play, she can be funny, she can be very sensual, and yes also very sexual sometimes, she can be loving, and she can be dramatic. She has an immense emotional range—and, do not forget, she is a gypsy, and she is deeply serious about her destiny.’

How did Uria-Monzon reconcile her view of Carmen with Calixto Bieito’s production? The staging relocates the action to 1970s Ceuta, and has a very violent and explicit physicality. ‘I loved singing in his production! He showed Carmen living in a very, very bad and hard environment, but her uncompromising behaviour in such a place made sense. He was saying, “This is the reality of life and it is disturbing”. He took away the beauty, but he placed you straight in the drama. I had one argument though, and I won it. In the *Habanera*, he wanted the men to fondle me and I said, “No, this is not the character of Carmen, she never lets a stranger touch her like this”. I told him, “Carmen decides who touches her and she is saying, ‘You don’t understand what love is—I will explain to you what it is’.” There were a few other inconsistencies for me, such as Zuniga’s whip when she dances in Act 2. But I accepted Bieito’s outlook on the

*As Elisabeth in Robert Carsen’s production of ‘Tannhäuser’ in Paris in 2008, with Stephen Gould in the title role*







(l.) as Eboli in 'Don Carlos' at the Vienna Staatsoper in 2012, with Kwangchul Youn as Philip; (r.) one of Uria-Monzon's earlier *Carmens*, at Verona in 1996

whole, even though there were vulgarities. I agreed to do much of what he wanted—even at times when I didn't really agree!—and he agreed with most of what I wanted to do. He accepted in me that I try to find a personal resonance with the character from the words and the music, that is to say how I would react in a particular situation given the words and music that I am singing. For instance, although Carmen knows and accepts that she is going to die at Don José's hand, still in the final duet she instinctively tries to escape—she still has a life energy, without which Bizet could not have written that last duet to last so long. That is why she tries to reason with him at first and it's why early in this duet I sing and act as a Carmen who is trying to tell him the truth nicely—even though I know he will not listen and will kill me.'

Another thought-provoking portrayal for Uria-Monzon became part of her repertoire in Avignon in 2012. That was when she sang her first Tosca, later performing it in different productions at the Opéra de Paris, La Scala and the Berlin Staatsoper. Hers is a Tosca of intimacy and elegance when she is with Cavaradossi—fiery with Scarpia yes, dramatic in general yes, but in her first scene nothing like as touchily reactive as is sometimes shown. 'When she comes in for the first time she is nervous and anxious, as any woman would be in this situation—she heard a noise, she heard her lover talking, what was happening? She does not appear there hysterically, but delicately. Yes she is a little possessive, but she is young—the music here in this scene is so light and fresh, and she sings so subtly. If she were really seriously jealous, Puccini would have written a dramatic duet and then there would be apologies, but we have a very delicate duet of love here. To me the magic of this scene is that we see such a gentle almost pretence of jealousy as a sign of her great love for Cavaradossi. Of course she has doubts and fears—which person in love doesn't?—but they are expressed by Puccini in a fragile





*As Verdi's Lady Macbeth at La Monnaie in 2016, with Scott Hendricks as Macbeth*

way, not aggressively. Later on she does become jealous because of Scarpia's malicious insinuations—but in this first scene we must see her delicacy, her refinement. It is crucial so that we can understand how sensitive, how romantic and how young she is. That is how the audience comes to love her—and of course it is how Scarpia can so easily manipulate her.'

And how was it, I asked, to take on this dramatic soprano role after being known as a mezzo-soprano? 'Well,' she answers, 'it was actually a kind of full circle. When I first began my serious vocal studies, I had an easy facility in high notes, and actually not long after singing *Carmen* for the first time I toyed with the idea of taking on soprano roles. While I was experimenting with this I felt I was losing my characteristic vocal colour, and so I decided to remain a mezzo-soprano—but then very gradually certain directors began to propose that I take on parts that you could say have elements of both ranges. When I was singing *Santuzza* at Orange in 2009, a radio journalist asked me in an interview, "Have you not thought of singing *Tosca*?" I was very careful in my answer: "Possibly, maybe, I might, I don't know, etc." In reality I was very wary of such an idea. The next day the director of the Chorégies d'Orange, Raymond Duffaut, said to me, "I heard the interview you gave yesterday—and I would like to recommend that you sing *Tosca* at Avignon." He was very influential as a consultant there. I agreed on one condition only—that I sing the role to him privately to see if I could do it well enough—for him and me! Even though we both felt that I could do it, my manager was sceptical—but after the first night, she immediately proposed me for soprano roles in many theatres. *Lady Macbeth* and *Adriana Lecouvreur* were the first two, and *Gioconda* followed later, among others. So you see, just like it had particularly been early on in my life and then again when I first sang *Carmen*, I have always had to think very carefully about what I feel I may or may not be able to do, and then destiny decides.'



