

Anna Prohaska: a soprano on the warpath



Holger Hage/DG

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You can understand why it would be awkward. On the one hand you only have eyes for the man with the baton, in this case Simon Rattle, as he conducts your performance as Sophie in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. On the other hand, you are also snogging Rattle's wife, mezzo-soprano Magdalena Kozená, since she is singing the male part of Octavian and you are meant to be infatuated with him.

"And we didn't hold back or anything," Anna Prohaska recalls. "Magdalena and I really wanted to go for it in the love scenes. We really *kissed* each other." After the performance, all three of them, Rattle, Kozená and Prohaska, got in a lift together. "And Simon said, 'Oh, should I be getting jealous now . . . ?'"

This classical menage à trois was supposed to be having a reunion in London right now, as Kozená was originally announced to sing Blanche in Poulenc's drama about an order of nuns during the French Revolution, *Dialogues des Carmélites*, which Rattle is conducting at the Royal Opera House and in which Prohaska sings the novice sister Constance. As it is, Kozená withdrew at an early stage and Prohaska has enjoyed a notable house debut as chirpy Constance, who even goes to her fate on the scaffold with bright-eyed optimism. "It was a true story," Prohaska says. "They really did die with

smiles on their faces, and that's a really perverse thing to imagine." Eschatology and martyrdom isn't the usual area of study for opera singers during rehearsals. "But we've had these philosophical-religious talks, and it's been quite fascinating."

Constance, like Sophie, is classic "soubrette" fare for a young, light-voiced soprano. Prohaska's latest project, *Behind the Lines*, is emphatically not. A new album and the springboard for her recital tour (coming to the Wigmore Hall later this month), it is a musical journey across the battlefield. Prompted by the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, it is also a chance for the 30-year-old soprano to explore the complexities of her own upbringing. In Germany, she's considered German. "But I would describe myself as European. My mum's from Manchester, her family's from Ireland, my dad's from Austria, his family's originally Czech. I was born in Germany, then moved to Vienna, then back to Berlin." Prohaska, now a company singer at Berlin State Opera, has lived in the German capital since she was a teenager.

While both her parents are musical — they met in music college in Vienna — the Prohaska family was accustomed to dinner-time conversation that went beyond Mozart and Mahler and into history and politics. "We had a lot of discussions where my parents didn't take the obvious stance. Sometimes my mum would defend the Germans under Nazi rule, arguing that they were victims of a dictatorship. And my father, being more left-wing, would say no, they were like sheep, and they should have voted against Hitler." Prohaska grew up reading a huge range of literature and history on the world wars, in both English and German. *Behind the Lines* grew out of her scholarly enthusiasm. "It's the loss of innocence after 1914," she says. "People were forced to take their blindfolds off, and that's where the 20th century started."

In the end, Prohaska's plans to focus only on the First World War hit a snag: while there's plenty of war poetry, there isn't that much music setting it, especially not for solo soprano. The album therefore marches all the way from traditional German and English ballads inspired by the Thirty Years War (1618-48) through to 19th-century lieder on military themes and then to both world wars, encompassing a vast range of both mood and music (in English, German, French and Russian), most of which Prohaska captures with disarming directness and complete dramatic absorption. "I wanted to touch on various aspects of war — the male perspective, the female, the perpetrator, the victim, the horror, the escapism." Stretching the theme just a little, Prohaska has also added a tour-de-force by Liszt, the dramatic scene *Joan of Arc at the stake*. "I wanted a female soldier in there as well, and I wanted someone who sacrificed her life for her country, because most of the repertoire is critical of war. It's either sarcastic or sad." It was for similar reasons that Prohaska didn't want an album cover "with a woman standing against the window, waiting for my soldier to come home. I thought 'Yeah, I want a uniform!'"

Is Germany commemorating the First World War in the same way that England is, with a mixture of pride and soul-searching? "No. Everybody sees it as a premonition of the Second World War, the expression of German or Austro-German imperialism. There's none of this nostalgia." So what does she think the German and Austrian response will be to an album whose cover star is wearing an imperial army greatcoat? "I do expect a bit of criticism— that I'm toying with 'militarism' or have this fantasy of being a soldier. But it's just an album. You can't educate people about war and history

through it. It's an emotional landscape I want to draw."

While it was Rattle at the Berlin Philharmonic who gave Prohaska an early big break at the Salzburg Easter Festival and has championed her career since, she also keeps on the right side of the city's other big musical beast, Daniel Barenboim. "He's probably one of my greatest encouragers. He was the pianist at my first recital in Berlin." With those powerful supporters, and a salary and all the benefits that a permanent job at the State Opera brings, Prohaska says she intends to stay a Berliner, even though staying in London for *Carmélites* has given her a tempting chance to reconnect with her English side. She is moving house, though, from safely gentrified Prenzlauer Berg, in the former East, to trendier, rejuvenated Kreuzberg, in the West. "Prenzlauer Berg has become so fuddy duddy, full of what we call 'Öko-kampfmütter' — 'organic fight mothers' — because they push their way through with their prams." Even if you're bilingual, sometimes that German compound noun just says it better.

Behind the Lines is out now on DG. Anna Prohaska performs at the Wigmore Hall, London W1, on June 14. *Dialogues des Carmélites* continues to June 11 at the Royal Opera House, London WC2

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