

CARMEN

AN INTERVIEW WITH DANA BETH MILLER, CARMEN IN BLO'S *CARMEN*

Ms. Miller holds a bachelor's degree in Vocal Performance from the University of North Texas College of Music. She did her Master of Music studies at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and her post-graduate work at the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia. She has been engaged by the leading opera houses in the United States including the Metropolitan Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, San Francisco Opera, New York City Opera, Seattle Opera, Dallas Opera, Portland Opera, and Cincinnati Opera, among many others.

BLO: How does it feel to be playing your first *Carmen* at Boston Lyric Opera?

DBM: I am thrilled to have the chance to sing this iconic role with such a prestigious company! It is incredibly exciting for anyone when you do your first *Carmen* - an experience that I will never forget throughout my entire career.

BLO: What do you enjoy most about this role?

DBM: There are so many facets to the character and so many ways to approach her - every line can be done so many different ways. It is really a gift to be able to breathe life into such a complex woman and have the chance, as an actress, to make dramatic choices that could possibly tell her story in a new way. Also, the role is so much fun to sing! Her arias have an earthy, sexy, and often gritty quality about them coupled with a sense of French elegance - it is a wonderful dichotomy. The music is a beautiful balance of strength and femininity, much like Carmen herself.

BLO: What do you feel is most challenging about this role?

DBM: Everything that makes Carmen one of the most exciting roles to sing also makes it the most difficult. It is the most famous opera in the repertoire today, and that popularity comes along with an abundance of pre-conceived notions. Everyone has an idea of Carmen in their head - what she is supposed to look like, how she should act, what she represents, even what she should wear! If someone knows nothing about opera, you can probably assume they will have heard the *Habanera* and can hum it, or at least tell you that Carmen sings it! The challenge is making the role your own and putting your own personal stamp on the piece, while still fulfilling the expectations of the most famous character in opera!

BLO: Luminaries over the years have taken on Carmen. Who is your operatic inspiration for this role?

DBM: In recent years, I would have to say that Denyce Graves made the biggest impression on me. I was singing in the Dallas Opera chorus to help pay my way through college, and she sang Carmen with the company. I remember watching her every night from the wings and being completely taken by her fearlessness and raw, visceral sexuality. She wasn't afraid to take risks - and didn't resort to any fake "Carmenisms". Her performances really came from deep within her and they were mesmerizing. She paired all of that with a gorgeous, smoky mezzo timbre and a great chest voice!

Reaching a little further back, I love Tatiana Troyanos, Regina Resnik, and Grace Bumbry. You can learn so much by listening to these women sing this role - each one brings something different and has their own approach to the vocal challenges of the piece. It is also fascinating to hear someone else's interpretation of dialogue - how they inflect certain words, the rhythm and speed they choose for the phrases, and the emotional subtext behind what they are saying. I love to listen to the choices these great singers made - it can only serve to deepen my own interpretation.

BLO: How do you intend to put your personal stamp on such a well-known character?

DBM: As I said earlier, this is the trickiest part of singing the role. I may have never lived among gypsies, or attacked another woman with a knife, or smuggled contraband through the mountains, but as an interpreter of Carmen I have to find the commonalities between the two of us. I have to look at the basic, human emotions that we both share, despite our

different backgrounds and lives. At the same time, I have to keep the two of us separate and delineate our personalities. I have to keep a true sense of myself while playing this woman. If there is no sense of me, it will come across incredibly fake and transparent to the audience. I have to draw on my own emotions and experiences - it has to be deeply personal or it will be completely generic. I am the only person who can sing Carmen as Dana Beth Miller - if I don't bring myself to the role, it won't be authentic or believable. I have to funnel my own strength and weaknesses, my own loves and sorrows, my personal sense of sensuality, my fears and doubts, my sense of defiance and vulnerabilities, and my own deep passion into the character - not the other way around.

BLO: How will portraying Carmen be different than playing your past mainstage roles?

DBM: As a former soprano, I spent a lot of time in my career playing "victim" roles on the stage. I was always dying of some consumptive illness or chasing a womanizing bastard all over Spain, only to realize I was just one of over 3,000 conquests! It is very freeing to play a woman who exudes strength and sexuality and who is seemingly in control of her own destiny and the men she encounters. It is very empowering and a refreshing change of pace!

BLO: What do you enjoy most about being a mezzo-soprano?

DBM: I feel like I am finally home!!! I began my career as a soprano and moved down to the mezzo-soprano fach just last season. But to be honest, I think that I was always a mezzo!!! As a soprano, I always had a rich middle voice and a huge chest register - I could usually sing lower than all my mezzo friends. I never felt like I fit into the soprano world - it always felt wrong. I feel like the mezzo repertoire plays to my own personal strengths as a singer and an actress. It seems as if I have found my true calling in the opera world! The roles are so much fun to sing and act - a whole bevy of "bitches, witches, and britches!"

BLO: You travel extensively across the country for different opera engagements. What are the most challenging and rewarding aspects of your travels?

DBM: The most challenging aspect is leaving my husband and two adorable dachshunds - I am usually gone for months at a time, and I worry that they will all forget what I look like! I am blessed to have such a supportive and understanding man by my side...most marriages could not survive the time apart. We try to not go more than three weeks without seeing each other, but sometimes our schedules get in the way.

The most rewarding aspects would have to be getting the chance to do what I love and am most passionate about in this world - for that, I would travel any distance. Also, it is a wonderful opportunity to spend extended periods of time in great cities. Most opera engagements are between five and seven weeks long, so you really get to know a city. I have a catalog in my head of the great places to eat or to get coffee, or cool things to do on free days, or scenic walking paths for so many fabulous cities in this country. It makes it a lot of fun to go back and sing with those companies again! Another perk of the opera business is that you keep running into the same people again and again - it really is a family. It is always so much fun when you first see the cast list for a show and see all the great people you get to work with again!

BLO: Are there any activities or sites you are planning to enjoy during your stay in Boston?

DBM: I am planning on walking the Freedom Trail, visiting the Old North Church, eating a lot of delicious seafood, and seeing the glass flower exhibit at the Harvard Museum of Natural History. Unfortunately, rehearsals begin after the regular MLB season, so I won't be able to see the Red Sox play at Fenway Park. Being a Texas girl, I would LOVE to watch the Dallas Cowboys beat the Patriots at home, but they don't have the chance to play each other in the regular season! So, I will just have to wait for the Super Bowl...

BLO: Do you have any pre-performance rituals?

DBM: A lot of sleep! And a big Diet Coke before the show and an apple at intermission.

BLO: When did you first fall in love with opera?

DBM: In fifth grade, our entire class took a field trip to see the student performances of *La Traviata* at the Dallas Opera. I was completely taken by it - the music, the sets, the costumes, the story - I was in tears at the end and the only one who wasn't asleep in my row! I knew then that I felt and understood opera on a deeper level than most...

BLO: If you weren't an opera singer, what do you imagine you'd be doing instead?

DBM: I would probably be a professional organizer, interior designer, or an opera director...all three sound fascinating!