

ARTIST OF THE MONTH

TAMARA GURA

A natural communicator: Tamara Gura

Within a few moments of hearing her sing, it's obvious that that Tamara Gura was born to have a stellar career in opera. The young mezzo soprano has an absolutely natural ability to communicate through her voice, thrilling audiences with its velvety warmth, its expressive range of colours and its effortless coloratura. Born in the USA into a family of Polish-Italian descent, Gura took piano, dance and drama lessons as a child. Aged 13, she had a revelation: 'My voice teacher gave me Italian art songs to learn along with arias from *Carmen*: I was hooked!'

Gura began training seriously as a singer, and having gained a degree, she won a Metropolitan Opera National Council Award. Then came an important career plunge: she moved to Europe, first to Switzerland to become a member of the Zurich Opera Studio, and then to Hamburg as part of their young artist ensemble. 'I sang more than 150 performances in two and a half years,' she recalls, 'performing roles such as Zaida in *Il turco in Italia* with the amazing Christof Loy as director and Gymnasiast in *Lulu* with Peter Konwitschny. I also sang Pauline in *The Queen of Spades* and Sesto in *Giulio Cesare*, working with leading conductors such as Simone Young and Ingo Metzmacher. I learned an enormous amount in that short period of time and amassed tons of stage experience – invaluable for my development as a singer.'


Following Hamburg, Gura spent four years as a company principal with the Badisches Staatstheater in Karlsruhe in southwest Germany: 'That's where I debuted a large number of my core roles, in an incredibly supportive environment, especially Mozart and Rossini parts that I have gone on to sing in major houses like Hamburg and Dresden.' Another particular benefit from being in Karlsruhe was the city's Handel Festival, where she was able to develop roles such as Sesto (*Giulio Cesare*) and Radamisto. It's obvious that she adores Handel: 'He's a master teacher for singing because his writing is truly bel canto. He asks everything of his singers – long spun legato lines with the full deep sound of the mezzo voice, a round full middle register, easy access and flexibility to spring instantly into the high and low registers, as well as virtuosic and lightning-fast coloratura. It is a roller-coaster of feelings – emotional depth, fireworks, sensuality, grief, fury...'

Though she is passionate about Handel, the 34-year-old versatile mezzo resists being pigeonholed. Her Polish-Italian ancestry has given her a breadth of cultural references that stand in her in good stead as an opera singer. Still based in Germany, she is adept at languages, speaking Italian, German and French fluently. She explains: 'I'm like a sponge with languages and also with learning in general. I feed off the energy and people around me and from what I can learn from each new situation. It stimulates me to develop constantly as an artist and as a communicator.'

The need to communicate is an important driving force in Gura's life, and she cites quite different types of singers as her

influences. At one end of the spectrum is Nina Simone: 'She connected so deeply when she sang and invited you to listen from a quiet and powerful place. I often listen to her during my warm-up for inspiration.' Then there's Pavarotti: 'He dared to open himself up so much when he sang. The sound is so free, organic and unique.' She also relished working with Brigitte Fassbaender on *La Cenerentola* at the Cuvilliés Theater in Munich last year, precisely because she found the great mezzo-turned-director 'a wonderful communicator'.

Having been entranced by *Carmen* when she was first introduced to opera as a teenager, Gura has just sung the role for the first time, in Darmstadt, where rave reviews highlighted her vocal maturity, dark timbre and beautiful tone. They also honed in on her dramatic flair and immense physicality. She keeps fit as part of the job, having always danced (including tap dancing at a competitive level), and practices yoga regularly as well as working on posture as in the course of her everyday life. 'As performers, we must have complete awareness of our bodies,' she says. 'A free voice that sings on the breath and not on the muscle is a powerful, beautiful and authentic vehicle for expression.'

Gura's dedication to her singing career is paying off. This summer she makes her role debut as Olga in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* with Dorset Opera. Then comes *Carmen* again, plus more Handel, a composer she'd like to keep returning to throughout her career. Coloratura roles are a particular favourite for the 'flexibility and joy' they bring; hence *L'italiana in Algeri* in Weimar next season, Adalgisa in *Norma* the following. She would love to sing Bellini's Romeo as well as Strauss's Octavian and Composer. 'Opera reaches deep into my emotional capacities,' she says. 'I love the challenge – it's constantly full of new discoveries. You have to follow the footprints that the composer and librettist left with an open and creative spirit. The exciting part is that you never know where it will lead you. It is like a great treasure hunt!' 

Francis Muzzu

www.tamaragura.com

Dorset Opera's new production of *Eugene Onegin* runs from 26 to 30 July.
www.dorsetopera.com