

Vocal coach Oresta Cybriwsky shares her expertise around the globe

by Adrian Bryttan

MUNICH, Germany – “Just how am I supposed to find that note?” Brett, a highly decorated 27-year-old lieutenant commander returning from his second tour of duty in Iraq, was lying on his back in Chicago, learning to relax and breathe deeply. After humming a simple exercise, he finally found one pitch he could hold onto... and then another. “I’m trained to aim at tanks, not to look inside and hunt for notes,” he dead-panned to his teacher.

It is in such re-alignment workshops with non-singers that internationally known pianist and vocal coach Oresta Cybriwsky demonstrates her conviction that every human being is innately musical. A natural voice-body connection exists from birth, but issues can block this natural process and the body will reveal the story. Vocal technique can thus be seen as learning how to eliminate what is getting in the way.

Ms. Cybriwsky believes a greater part of singing is re-learning to breathe properly and naturally. Breathing for life: inspiration...respiration...spirit (spirare, to breathe; Latin). She discussed this with the head of an organization that rehabilitates American troops traumatized by service in Iraq: “95 percent of our therapy is breath work. These young soldiers have great difficulty verbalizing their experiences, but by learning to connect with their breath, with their bodies, they can better access any locked-up trauma.”

“Connections” are the themes of Ms. Cybriwsky’s life, linked by the golden thread of music. Growing up in New Haven, Conn., she discovered her deep bond to nature during many summers at Plast camps: the shadowy woods and starry nights, the smells of dry wood crackling

in bonfires, colorful Ukrainian myths of the “lisovi mavky” (forest nymphs) and age-old goddess traditions of weaving wildflower-wreaths. Later, while studying 19th century Romantic repertoire, she experienced on many levels how nature deeply inspired Franz Schubert and other composers. Awakening this awareness in younger generations is central to her work.

Back in Munich, Germany, in addition to her regular position as vocal coach at the University for Music and Performing Arts, Oresta assumes a more traditional role of vocal coach/pianist for master classes with some of this era’s greatest singers. Always musically inspiring, these intense collaborations also reveal the “human-ness” of the vocal gods and goddesses.

After a particularly difficult session correcting the pronunciation of that feared German suffix called the “schwa,” legendary soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf just smiled and sighed, “You know, in our day we couldn’t really do it any better, either.”

During a cigarette break, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, probably the most recorded vocalist in history, once joked with a bare-footed Ms. Cybriwsky about whether she was planning to wear shoes for the concert.

Divas Christa Ludwig and Brigitte Fassbaender insist on the presence of Meggy, Ms. Cybriwsky’s tri-colored Jack Russell terrier, whenever they teach in Italy and Austria. Meggy has developed into somewhat of a celebrity in music circles, quietly sleeping or nestling under the piano. She has been filmed on Italian and Austrian TV, and newspapers have called her “The accompanist’s very own accompanist”: “The little dog, usually found next to the right pedal, shows her appreciation upon hearing a beautiful voice, but immediately drops her floppy right ear when she dislikes any sound...”

In 2004 Meggy stayed home with her dog-sitter when Ms. Cybriwsky made the first of several trips to China to perform and teach master classes in opera, Lied, vocal technique and accompanying. Her uniquely passionate and refreshing approach to music is so new to the Chinese that they record and videotape whenever her hands touch the keyboard.

One voice professor recently exclaimed after hearing her performance of Rachmaninoff songs, “I didn’t know whether to listen to the singer or to the pianist. Exquisite!”

Serving as interpreter, Chinese superstar Lang Lang’s first piano teacher, feisty little Yafen Zhu added: “Of course she’s brilliant! Every note is vibrant and alive in her playing.”

In Shanghai, various questions were posted regarding Ms. Cybriwsky’s most important advice for accompanists. The Chinese translation for “Get a life!” drew peals of laughter from the audience. An accompanist, especially for singers, must draw upon many and varied experiences to be extraordinary, and for the Chinese it was an extraordinarily new concept to have a collaborative pianist as cultural envoy of European and American music.

Ms. Cybriwsky has two handsome sons and has never believed in giving something up in life for the sake of a so-called career. It is the additional rewards of being a mother that make her life special and down-to-earth.

She found Asians a joy to work with because their innate language ability is rooted in pictures and imagination. Chinese is a symbolic language where each word reveals its meaning through its representational calligraphy. Ms. Cybriwsky compares the words of Western poetry to many waterlilies on a lake’s surface: by themselves they make pretty poetic sentences but if one searches underneath, the roots of the water-lilies (words) are very long and deep, intertwined, many-shaded and textured by light or darkness.

For instance, in the written Chinese word for flower (“hua”), one can actually “see” the stem, neck and petals. Or consider the descriptive vowel “o” in the word for “rose” in most languages... The deep experiencing of words in any language – word energy – results in convincing, authentic expression, and not merely an intellectual exercise.

After more than three decades working in Europe, Ms. Cybriwsky delights in coaching German students on American musicals and checks on current idioms by phoning her sister Nina in New Haven.

At one of her last master classes, how-



Oresta Cybriwsky with her Jack Russell mix Meggy, who accompanies her almost everywhere.

ever, Ms. Schwarzkopf warned that the Chinese are overtaking today’s musical scene. Ms. Cybriwsky is indeed most impressed by their hunger for knowledge and total dedication to learning Western music.

For the special holiday “Moon Festival” she was invited to the Beijing home of Lin Shi, a gifted, then 17-year-old mezzo-soprano who “devoured” music for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Lin wore the standard dark-blue, white-striped jogging pants and white polo shirt of the young students. But all the etiquette in the world could not help Ms. Cybriwsky know how to react when she realized the whole family literally lived in the garage of a high-rise. Lin’s own room was the size of a tiny bathroom crammed with thousands of CDs of Western classical music. A plastic soda bottle cut in half served as a vase for the lilies Ms. Cybriwsky had brought.

During their feast of various dumplings, lovingly prepared by Lin’s mother in their cramped quarters, Ms. Cybriwsky explained Ukrainian Christmas foods and customs. Gratitude for food on the table mingled with personal stories of the Cultural Revolution, when the Chinese people were reduced to eating tree bark and making soup from leaves. Having always been deeply disturbed by the never-ending hunger rampant in this world, Ms. Cybriwsky drew parallels to the tragic enormity of the Holodomor.

She and Lin gave an impromptu concert for the family and curious neighbors. Currently the young Beijing singer is ful-

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filling her dream as a scholarship student at Munich’s University of Music and Performing Arts.

Of course there were opportunities to visit the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, temples... and time to marvel at trendy mimicry now polluting this ancient culture: Jetsons-style fast-food joints and Chinese bellhop-girls grinning like Siamese cats, with their constant sing-song: “Welcome to Mr. Pizza.”

The current melting pot of old and new also creates dilemmas in music. How does one communicate “passion” in Tchaikovsky to young people who traditionally are very reserved about their privacy? Or evoke the emotion of love in songs from students who say “it is not allowed to have a girlfriend when we are

so young?”

Coaching Liszt’s “Hungarian Rhapsody” in Beijing, any attempt to describe European gypsies was fruitless. When Ms. Cybriwsky asked the assembled pianists if anyone had seen the film “Crouching Tiger,” only five hands went up! She then vividly described the hero who rode bareback, stole his lover’s hair combs and passionately whisked her away, defying all rules of propriety. Now the young Chinese pianist finally began to tell a story, rather than merely trying to dazzle with technique. Ms. Cybriwsky periodically receives his grateful e-mails: whenever Yinghe plays the “Hungarian Rhapsody,” he now taps into the Gypsy spirit by thinking of the Ang Lee movie that he has finally seen.

So many wonderful impressions... always something new to see, something new to think about. According to her mother Natalia, Ms. Cybriwsky loved to

sing along with birds at the age of 4 months, and talked before she could walk. She was an inquisitive, brave little spirit with eyes and ears receptive to everything around her and to her inner world. But she also needed the right soil to flower.

Ms. Cybriwsky’s father, Prof. Yuri Cybriwsky, who passed away in 1997, was a third-generation pianist from Ivano-Frankivsk who later studied in Vienna. A gifted teacher, he started daily piano lessons with Ms. Cybriwsky when she was 5. She gratefully attributes her solid pianistic foundation to her father’s attentive and loving guidance. (Later, with life coming full circle, she would dedicate her solo piano CD “prelude” to her father, who was the musical supervisor of the recording.)

Young Ms. Cybriwsky accompanied the Ukrainian Chorus in New Haven, Conn., school choirs and glee clubs, and played in the Youth Orchestra. Opportunities to perform with her cellist brother Nestor followed. Natural curiosity led her to additionally explore chamber and symphonic music and opera – far beyond the piano solo literature. She also began tying in art and literature, noticing how structure, style, textures and colors cross boundaries and unify all art forms.

When she was a 21-year-old piano major at Peabody Conservatory, Ms. Cybriwsky was suddenly given 10 minutes to make a decision that would affect the rest of her life. Gregg Smith invited her to be the pianist for the Gregg Smith Singers, the renowned vocal ensemble that had worked with Igor Stravinsky and toured throughout the world, recording over 100 albums and winning three Grammy Awards. Accepting Smith’s offer opened up new worlds of contemporary music, concert tours and recordings. She worked with composers like Ned Rorem and Lukas Foss, and learned very quickly

what it means to be a professional, to perform under the worst conditions or when you aren’t feeling well.

With a two-year Fulbright grant to the Stuttgart University of Music and Performing Arts, in Stuttgart, Germany, the dream of studying in Europe became reality. Completing her studies, she was appointed to the faculty and, on a fluke, visited Gärtnerplatz State Theater in Munich, a city she fell in love with in 1970 during a Plast tour of Europe. Without hesitating, Ms. Cybriwsky dialed the chief conductor from a phone booth in front of the famed Hofbräuhaus and arranged an impromptu audition, during which she was hired on the spot.

Inquiring into her background, General Manager Kurt Pscherer recalled Ukraine from his days as a young soldier. He praised “...the wonderful Ukrainian people with great hearts.” She immediately got a raise, and hadn’t even started working yet!

Thirty years later, after five decades’ experience on five continents as solo pianist, vocal coach, accompanist and teacher, Ms. Cybriwsky is now planning to establish her own Cybriwsky International Center for Music and Transformation. In her high school yearbook, her entry for “My favorite quote” cited Herman Hesse’s “Narziss und Goldmund”: “There are many paths to knowledge but the path of the mind is not the only one.”

“Know thyself.” Ms. Cybriwsky believes a spiritual connection must exist in every true artist: “Why do angels love human music so much? Because that’s how they can even begin to understand what the drama of being human is all about.” How extraordinarily fortunate and privileged musicians are to have this gift in their lives!

“Whoever plays like she does... is most certainly connected to a higher source,” are the most moving words of recognition she has ever received. They were spoken by her father.



Oresta Cybriwsky (second from left) during a master class in Shanghai, with Yafen Zhu (left) as interpreter, working with pianist and singer together.