

*“You have to give talented young people
a chance to prove themselves”*

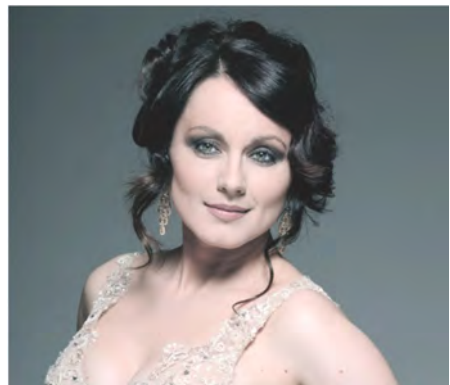
Interview with the soprano Anita Hartig

MIHAIELA ILEA¹

Abstract: The interview with Anita Hartig aims to reveal the personality of the lyrical artist through a form of sharing the sensible, through the simple benchmarks of the world, art and life and the manner in which they are capitalized on the stage. Remembering the years growing up in Bistrita, the years spent as a student in Cluj and the leap to the big world of international lyrical stage has not changed her perception of her own personal values, but rather they build her character and lead to her artistic self. The meeting with Anita Hartig was occasioned by the premiere of Puccini’s *La Bohème* in Cluj, where the soprano played Mimi. The fragmented dialogue took place in unconventional places and situations (at the airport, in the car on the way to the hotel, in the backstage before the general rehearsal). The material formed the basis of a portrait documentary about Anita, broadcast by TVR.

Keywords: Anita Hartig, Opera, Cluj, Viena, Mimi, *La Bohème*, Zeffireli

The soprano **Anita Hartig** graduated from Gheorghe Dima Music Academy in Cluj-Napoca in 2006. She had a spectacular ascension, evolving alongside the international elite of lyrical artists. The role of Mimi in Puccini’s *La Bohème* earned her professional recognition, playing it in 2006 in Cluj-Napoca, in 2009 in Oradea, and then in 2012 at the Welsh National Opera, The Royal Opera in



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London, Metropolitan Theatre New York and Vienna State Opera. With the same role, she appears in shows in Paris and Munich. In 2014, she debuts as Micaela in Bizet's Carmen at the Metropolitan, and in 2015 – as Violetta in Verdi's Traviata at Barcelona.

Mihaiela Ilea: *You just returned from Vienna for a new show, La Bohème, by Puccini. How do you think Mimi, the role you are going to play for the Romanian National Opera in Cluj, is going to be?*

Anita Hartig: Mimi has gone through some experiences, she has grown up, learned new things, developed. I am curious to see how I am going to conduct myself. I am quite a spontaneous person and I easily react to my surroundings and to the energy around me, that of my colleagues "and friends". I am eager to see how Mimi is.

M.I.: *Mimi was also your debut role in 2006 in Cluj-Napoca, and since then you continued playing her in Romania and abroad. Now, at the Romanian Opera in Cluj, you work alongside old friends in a show with a similar cast as the one you were involved in at Oradea in 2009, when you were a young hope of the lyrical scene. The show is directed by Ina Hudea, as in the case of the 2009 show, Rudolfo was played by Hector Lopez, now by the tenor Teodor Ilincăi. There will also appear other important voices, Adrian Sâmpetrea as Colline, and Florin Estefan as Marcello. What do you think about this professional reunion?*

A.H.: I wanted to return to Cluj, if it meant singing with friends and colleagues with whom I grew up professionally. It is difficult at this moment to choose your stage partners, especially at home, where you hear "X or Y are coming... Z as well... you were all available at the same time." It is a professional reunion, of course, but especially a human one.

M.I.: *Thank you for allowing us to continue this fragmented interview and to accompany you from the hotel to the airport. The Vienna State Opera is your HOME but still it is a "maddeningly beautiful autumn in Cluj," the place where you spent your university years at the Gheorghe Dima Music Academy...*

A.H.: What I can easily remember now, years after having left Cluj... the image of a train comes to my mind. I was commuting by train, every weekend I was going back home to Bistrita to see my parents, my grandparents, and

riding the train was an adventure on its own. Being students, we had no money so we used to travel with what seemed like empty backpacks, although heavy, and we used to walk to the rail station, and the train left late in the night and it was moving so slowly, it took so long for it to reach Bistrita... Nonetheless, we always had a great time on the train... This is what popped into my mind as I was thinking about those times. Of course, all the university experiences, all the friends I made back then and I am still close to, although we do not talk that often. Whenever we see each other, it is like we never parted, and it is interesting to see how each of us, despite growing up a little, remained a kid. We learned something, we lived a little bit and got to see the world. And it is wonderful to see what became of us and how we got here.

M.I.: *You are headlining lyrical projects in Vienna, New York, London, Paris, Barcelona, Cardiff, Beirut, etc. Is it possible that the great stage of the world made you feel like Transylvania is far away?*

A.H.: Oh, no... I have kept Cluj and Bistrita inside me, but especially my love for nature. I adore animals and to go around the town without even knowing the streets, just wandering by myself. I was brought up in a simple environment and this formed me and stuck with me. Of course I have learned a lot of things, I see some things differently now, but this has nothing to do with what my parents offered me back home.

M.I.: *Was there someone in your family that sang? Did you inherit the voice?*

A.H.: I was mostly inspired by my mother, because she was a singer and she wanted to have a music career, but not Classic music, rather Romanian Folkloric music. She did not have the possibilities or she was not supported enough by her family, not in the way she supported me. Instead, when I said "Mom, this is what I want to do, with all my heart," she was always there for me. My father, afterwards, seeing that this was not a teenager joke, even if he could not always support me financially, was there for me.

M.I.: *Because we are already talking about your birthplace, I suggest to not drive away for a moment, even in our own minds, although the traffic will not provide the perfect environment, and do an exercise of imagination. Please close your eyes for a few seconds and tell us what images you see.*

A.H.: Hills, forests, a bridge... it is the bridge in Bistrita I used to cross to go to my grandparents' house... I am becoming sentimental. No. It is the Evangelical Church tower in Bistrita. These are the images.

M.I.: *Thank you for the imaginary journey... The encounter with opera, what was the key moment for this decision?*

A.H.: My friend and colleague, Roxana Costeanu... When I was about 17, I was studying at the High School of Music (in Bistrita) and I was listening to Romanian Pop music, Mihaela Runceanu. I did not know exactly what I wanted to do with my life, but I knew I wanted to sing. Hearing me sing, Roxana, maybe wiser than me, told me "You have to sing opera!"

I was a bit shocked. What was she saying, had she not seen those full bodied women yelling there, one more than the other? It did not seem to me like this was an art I could do in the future. But she told me "Here, listen to these CDs!" There were arias of various operas with Maria Callas. And I kept listening to them and for some reason I was interested in it, and I wanted to rehearse them, to listen to them again and I remember that I was helping my Mother around the house, she was cooking, I was dusting, and I still listened to those CDs and I don't know why but it overwhelmed me. I was touched by the energy and the emotion of her voice, its power and tumult. I don't know, everything that happened in music overwhelmed me and I said to myself that this is what I would like to do. And since then this is what I am trying to do. I can still remember the first show I had seen at the National Opera in Cluj, I was 17 or 18. I was so impressed by it, by its colors, its music... It was The Barber of Seville.

The following day. Before the general rehearsal for La Bohème, by Puccini.

M.I.: *At the press conference, someone said that talent is international, it has nothing to do with where you come from, and you did not completely agree with the statement. Also, reminding you that you stressed at the beginning the need for an institutional connection between Gheorghe Dima Music Academy and the Romanian Opera here in Cluj. What were you referring to?*

A.H.: You have to give talented young people a chance to prove themselves. And without a payment, we would have come (to the Opera) motivated only by our passion and our desire to improve ourselves, at least for a month. I would have been around all the sopranos, we were so hungry for a bit of knowledge or information. I had been given this chance abroad, we were all lucky enough to make a name for ourselves and obviously it is wonderful when your value is acknowledged, despite not having the same results back at home. But then you return to Romania and you are being told you are great and you are "one of us." Yes, but when I was here, I was not paid attention to and it is sometimes painful... I am not going to sing at home because back when I wanted to do so no one paid attention to me. Now that I have reached a certain level... Yes, it is frustrating, but you return because you want to show them that one can dream and continue down this road with all the pain it brings, and one can get somewhere.

M.I.: *You often played Mimi, in Romania or abroad, but also Micaela (Carmen) or Violetta (Traviata). Opera is a syncretic art and thus it requires profound perspectives, time to research and different approaches for each role. How do you get close to each character?*

A.H.: Everything is written there, in the music, and I am able to express love from my own experience, being aware or knowing what kind of character that is, because I am not playing a queen in the way I play Mimi, through the outfit, the articulation of the voice, maybe through colors, I do not know.

M.I.: *You finished your academic musical studies in 2006 and you relatively quickly had a spectacular ascension, the first important step being your departure to Austria, receiving the appreciations of Mr. Ioan Holender, back then the director of the Vienna State Opera. Who are the people that influenced you? How was this professional journey?*

A.H.: I had the fortune to meet people that supported me, that saw a potential and a talent in me, people who challenged it, who wanted to see what was going to happen to me further down the line, sure, by throwing me into cold water. Moving from Cluj directly to the Vienna Opera, where there are important artists performing, was overwhelming. Sure, for me it

was a rather quick journey, one with too many information all of the sudden, but this being my current situation I tried to do my best to be as disciplined as possible, although I am not the most disciplined person. But of course there needs to be discipline. You need to pay attention to what you are eating, you must rest properly, you have to learn your repertoire, to study on a daily basis, but I did not want it to become an obsession, because then it could not have been something natural, something spontaneous. I am still learning and I want to adjust myself to each situation that may arise, to each new role I get, with the voice I have at the moment, because it is such a sensitive instrument and any emotion from within or around you impacts the voice. Automatically, you need to work with what you have. If you happen to have a show in a certain day, then you are under extreme pressure, you fight or you work with your fears, your dreams, with you, in the end. Among the important people in my life was Ioan Holender, who took me to Vienna, he heard me singing and said "Let's see how you are going to do if we put you on such an important stage."

Well, I did what I could, it seems I did not do something wrong. Afterwards, I met Ileana Cotrubaş, who guided me, protected me and supported me for a while. That was for as long as she had the strength to do so or if I was in Vienna and we had the same schedule. She guided me, I learned as much as I could from here, but certainly I will never say that this quest ends with one maestro. You develop, you change, you learn, you become more confident maybe, as time passes by, and you start to make decisions on your own. This does not make it wrong or right, you just want to see how it is like to be on your own. Even if your decisions are not the best, it can sometimes happen that you have a good instinct.

M.I.: *It seems you were predestined to perform this role, Mimi from Puccini's La Bohème, you played it several times, even under well-known directors, such as Zeffirelli. Who else did you work with?*

A.H.: I worked with amazing people, I even had the chance to meet Franco Zeffirelli at La Scala in Minalo, we all know what wonderful shows he directed all over the world, and I also worked on La Bohème with him, what a coincidence, I am being chased by this title... And, sure, he did not have energy of his younger years, he does have a considerable age, but for me it involved an enormous emotion to shake hands with him, taking into account just how many great artists shook his hand. I felt some sort of

energy exchange and I was overjoyed, I waited for this moment like a child. Among the personalities whom I met with, and whom I was used to look at, for years now, only on television or on the Internet, but then I had the chance to sing alongside with, is Piotr Beczala. I admire him profoundly, he is an incredible colleague, positive, mature, reliable, trustworthy and balanced. Anna Netrebko has a very exuberant and extroverted personality. Krassimira Stoyanova – I have not sang with her on the stage, but I had the pleasure of meeting her. Another soprano whom I have great respect for is Anja Harteros. Sonya Yoncheva, as well – whom I sang with *La Bohème*, along with Teodor Ilincăi, at Covent Garden, where she was Mussetta, and who now has a very important career. Of course these are a lot of wonderful names, you learn from them. I only hope I can find my own place alongside these artists.

M.I.: *You already are among the great names of worldwide lyrical artists. Just like a professional athlete, you trained rigorously to become an opera singer. It is a discipline, a certain vocal technique. What is the daily routine in such a profession?*

A.H.: It is not like you can get by with only your daily energy, it requires more, an enormous surplus to work your voice, a certain amount of your voice, capable to travel and to pass over the orchestra of 80 to 100 people, to make it reach even the last row, but also to convey an emotion, and I have no idea where this energy comes from. When I happen to be feeling very energetic, I feel like everything is aligned in one direction. I have slept well, I have eaten well. These are essential and simple things in life that make me feel good. The relationship I am in, of course, offers me a lot of support. What makes me happy in this relationship is that I am not loved because I am a singer, but for who I really am. I am not only a singer, and I refuse to be only this, I want to be a normal woman, to go shopping, to walk with him hand in hand in the park, to go to a movie, these simple things that I take great pleasure from. It is my duty to further challenge my talent, as much as I can, and I hope to have strong nerves to keep doing this, to cope with all the demands. Everybody expects so much from you, and they do not think that you are only a young individual that, besides being an artist, is a human being with everything this entails. For as long as I am going to have the energy, I am going to try to refill my powers from the Universe – to meditate, to pray or to think that there is something bigger than me. I am thinking “Fill me with your energy and your love, so I can pass them on.” Sometimes it works, sometimes I succeed.

M.I.: *Beyond the roles you play, beyond the stage, what is hiding behind the mask in your everyday life?*

A.H.: I have many discussions and fights with myself, with all that I am, and maybe I am preoccupied, and this can sometimes be seen from the outside, that I am concerned with myself, but I do not consider myself a proud or self-centered person. I do not like to consider myself as being important, and I do not try to pass as such, because I know that this is not my merit, and I do not know for how long I can keep doing this, at least in the way the Universe intended it for me. So, yes, there are a lot of things I am not sure I should share or if there is any point in sharing them, things that have to do with who I am and my own thought process, my life, and the maturity I want to have one day. I am a very sensible person, and if I have to sing, I must sing, I am not allowed to cry, and even after such a long time, if I play someone that dies at the end, I immediately think about my dead grandparent and it is difficult to keep my emotions under control, but I know that their energy surrounds me and lives on through me and this is an important consolation. It is pretty sad, because in such moments I realize that I would not have had any chance to get out of that small town (Bistrita). However wonderful it might be, it is a small Saxon town, you can almost walk from one end to the other in half an hour, still you have a wall in front of you, and for art and your dreams there are not many opportunities. Frankly, it is shocking that somewhere a force from the Universe surrounded me and gave me the power, the enthusiasm, the faith or the hope that I can do what I wanted to do or what I was meant to do. It is sad that many talented kids or young people are limited by their environment and do not have the chance to develop their talents. Sure, the teachers are real heroes, because they do everything in their powers to teach or to give hope to children.

M.I.: *Talent, sensibility, discipline, emotion, strength. If I were to continue this personal list of benchmarks for such a profession, where would you place wisdom?*

A.H.: I think it is very difficult for a singer to understand that he or she cannot stay on the stage till the end, especially for us, women, because of your fragile physicality. It is hard to realize that you can no longer work at what was once your full potential, to understand that you have to give up

and to make room for someone else. I believe this is an extremely difficult moment, but also one of great maturity and wisdom. It has to occur at the right moment, when you have not fallen in disgrace and people do not want to hear about you anymore or to see you on the stage. It is weird. I have not yet thought about this moment that much, but I have thought that I would like to pass along the knowledges I acquired and I will continue to acquire, to a young person, a soprano maybe, it is easier to work with someone with the same type of voice as you. Of course I would like to give back to other people, I think that is the whole point.

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