

SUMI JO: THE WOMAN BEHIND THE VOICE FROM ABOVE

Sumi Jo in Manila
February 1, 2014
Samsung Hall, SM Aura Premier
Taguig City

Having performed in all the major houses to much acclaim, Sumi Jo is probably the only Asian to conquer the European operatic scene. Her debut role was Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto* in a production staged at the Teatro Comunale Giuseppe Verdi in Trieste. It was followed by more performances—from La Scala to Covent Garden to the Met. It is no wonder that Maestro Herbert von Karajan called her “a voice from above.”

She walks to the Cravings Restaurant, on the fifth floor of the Shangri-La Tower, the venue of the press conference on January 30, 2014, two days before her concert at the Samsung Hall of SM Aura, Taguig City. Journalists have been waiting for this moment. When she sits down, people start taking pictures. There is a quiet sophistication about her. She is confident but has none of the prima donna air. Given her stature and demeanor now, it is difficult to imagine the nineteen-year-old Sumi arriving in Rome Airport at three in the morning, not knowing a single word of Italian, and asking the driver to take her to the Piazza di Spagna, which she had seen in the film *Roman Holiday*. This Korean Anya Smith, young and carefree then, explored the streets of Rome at five in the morning. She still has that charming naiveté inside her.

After graduating from the prestigious Academia de Musica de Sta. Cecilia, where she studied with Carlo Bergonzi and Giannella Borelli, she took further lessons with the wonderful singer, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. Since then, she has played various roles all over Europe and the United States. It is a life that makes it difficult for her to stay in Rome, which she has considered her home for the last thirty years. In one interview, she said that she only gets to sleep twenty-eight days a year in her own bed.

That regimen has probably made her much more appreciative of life's small pleasures. Asked about how she relaxes, she says, “I don't really relax, but I love being at home. I play with my dogs. I love my gardening and I love going to the supermarket. I love cooking. You know, all these ordinary things.” Then she quips, “If born again as a human being, I don't want to be a singer. I want to do something

else because it's very hard." One wonders whether she is really taking this Anya Smith business seriously—how tiring “duty first before anything else” can be.

One thing's for sure, though. She has dedicated her life to art, and more. Her generosity as an artist extends to a number of personal advocacies—from women's rights to animal protection. That shift comes naturally to her, and admirably so: one moment she is talking about how it is important for her to communicate with the audience through music, and in the next she is saying how her concert in Manila is dedicated to the victims and survivors of typhoon Yolanda. She is donating her fee to UNICEF Philippines. (There will be a short handing over ceremony after her concert.)

Sumi Jo's lyric coloratura is still one of the purest you will ever hear in the concert world. The flexibility and sheer musicality of her lines elicit gasps from audiences around the globe. There is sincerity in her artistry, which even the stingiest critic will find tough to resist.

She did her first *La Traviata* (as Violetta) with the Toulon Opera in 2007. I ask her point blank why it took her that long to do it. Violetta requires a dramatic coloratura range, color, and weight. I am interested in how she planned and prepared for the role, given that it is one that would have forced her out of her comfort zone—Gilda, Olympia, and the other lyric coloratura roles. Sumi Jo says that she wants to always challenge herself.

“I wanted to try it not in a big opera house but a small one, where if I made some disaster people can really forget about it,” she says. At that the people laugh. According to her, she enjoyed doing it, but she thinks that it was good for neither her voice nor her presence. “I think I should have more experience in life to be able to understand the real world of Violetta. I'm humbled to say that but I try to be honest with myself. In the third act, I suffered a lot.”

Those words can come only from an artist who is not only practical, clever, and disciplined but also, more importantly, earnest. In 2006, just before her Paris concert, her father died. When she learned about it, she wanted to cancel the recital, but her mother reminded her of her duty to the audience. It must have been excruciating for her to keep a straight face, but her performance in that concert was, according to reports, numinous. One of the songs she sang that fateful night was Schubert's “Ave Maria.” She will sing that again as an encore in her concert here in Manila, dedicating it to those affected by the typhoon. She will make it difficult for one not to listen, not to press these ears against the wall.

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