



Features

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## Turning Point

**Deborah Voigt didn't like the way she looked or felt, and she took a radical step to change the situation. BARRY SINGER talks to the soprano about how her decision has affected her career, her vocal health and her outlook on life.**



Photographed in New York, June 2006, by James Salzano



**The diva with her dog,  
Steinway**

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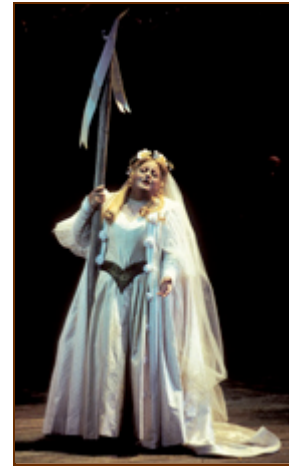
It is just about impossible to talk with Deborah Voigt today about opera *only*. There are opera stories, and then there are stories that only an opera can do justice to. Deborah Voigt's multi-act story has become an opera tale for our time, with resonances well beyond the proscenium and a finale that has yet to be written.

For all of her professional singing life, Voigt was a very large woman with a very large voice. Her following among lovers of large women with large voices - that is to say, opera-lovers - was devout. Yet beyond this narrow slice of the world-at-large, she was all but unknown.

Today, Voigt is a surgically more svelte woman with a voice that is - depending upon whom you ask - as large as ever, or not. Her following among opera-lovers remains devout, if increasingly quixotic. Beyond this niche, however, the world-at-large has finally come to know her name - though not necessarily the sound of her voice.

On a rare rest day following a run of *Tosca* performances at the Met, Voigt graciously puts off a voice lesson to meet (at her request) for lunch - apparently unconcerned that what she orders and eats for lunch these days might have an impact on any article written about her (though not this one). She arrives looking serene and, yes, trim.

"It's sure been a story that people can relate to," she readily acknowledges, understating the Oprah-esque appeal of her situation. Yes, she is one of contemporary opera's grandest divas, the leading dramatic soprano of recent years, who has triumphed in the demanding works of Richard Strauss (*Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Elektra*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, *Die Ägyptische Helena*, *Der Rosenkavalier*) while successfully tackling enough of Wagner's major heroines (thus far, onstage, Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, Elsa in *Lohengrin*, Senta in *Der Fliegende Holländer*, Sieglinde and Isolde) to become an odds-on choice for preeminence as a Wagner soprano for years to come. She has also been, in fairly rapid succession, a victim, a fat victim, a publicly humiliated fat victim and finally a triumphantly slenderized victim-no-more. If the former Deborah Voigt was an object



**Der Freischütz at Seattle  
Opera, 1994**

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Der Freischütz at Seattle  
Opera, 1994



**Vanquishing James  
Morris's Scarpia in the  
Met's Tosca, 2006**

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Vanquishing James  
Morris's Scarpia in the  
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lesson in the meticulous constructing of an opera career, the latter is a figure cut for mass-media celebrity. Her ordeal is now so well known it has practically joined the lexicon of iconic opera shorthand. There is "*The Ring*," there is "The Met," there are "The Three Tenors," there is "The Dress."

"I was engaged to sing *Ariadne* at Covent Garden in 2004," begins Voigt, as if retelling a much-told fairy tale. "I'd already sung there twice before, so they knew what they were getting. It wasn't a secret, my size. They knew who Deborah Voigt was *and* what she looked like.

"'There's a problem with the dress.' I remember getting the phone call from my manager.

"'What do you mean there's a problem with the dress?'"

"He explained that this updated *Ariadne* production of Covent Garden's would center around a little black cocktail dress that my character was supposed to wear and - well, how could I fit into it?"

"You know, I wasn't that upset initially. I mean, I didn't want to look stupid either. What did very soon upset me was that Covent Garden didn't offer me another opera. If they had said, 'We're so sorry, we're very embarrassed, we want to apologize - would you please sing *Ballo*?' I would have looked at it as an isolated problem with an isolated production, and that would have been that. It's not like it was the first time I'd heard 'You're too big for this.' But Covent Garden essentially said, 'We don't have *anything* for you.' And that sent a big message.



As Isolde in Günter Krämer's Wiener Staatsoper production, 2003  
© Wiener Staatsoper GmbH/Axel Zeininger  
2006

"Months later," continued Voigt, "I was back in London for a recital when a journalist asked me, 'Why are you not singing at Covent Garden?' And I thought, what do I say? 'Because they haven't asked me?' That's not true. 'Because I don't want to sing there?' Also not true. So, I said, 'Well, I was *supposed* to sing there. I had a contract for *Ariadne*. And I was removed because I couldn't fit into the costume.' And as this was coming out of my mouth, I thought, what the hell are you doing?"

"I was concerned enough that I called my publicist and my manager and told them what I'd said. We figured there'd be some local fallout in the London papers. I then went on with my performing. Next stop, Geneva - where the phone rang. And it was my publicist, Albert [Imperato, of the Manhattan firm 21C Media]. 'We've got a little something going on that you need to be aware of,' he said. 'Your

comments about Covent Garden have been picked up by virtually every newspaper in the world.' I said, 'Define *every* newspaper.' And Albert laughed. I hung up the phone, and almost immediately

it rang again. This time it was *People* magazine."

In 1996, when Deborah Voigt was still a comer in the opera world, and *People* magazine had yet to notice, another mainstream media mainstay, *USA Today*, did deign to inform its readers about her with a brief, appreciative article that managed to stick largely to Voigt's musical merits while also breezily dropping a semi-ironic aside that seems, in retrospect, brutally prophetic. "Probably the one thing she needs to propel her into superstardom," *USA Today* opined blithely, "is a good scandal."

In fact, Voigt has since had two: "The Dress" and "The Surgery" - the radical gastric bypass surgery she ultimately chose to undergo in June 2004 that returned her to the pages of *People* and periodicals around the globe. Voigt insists that the two "scandals" were unrelated. "My decision to have surgery was made well before "The Dress,"" she says, "unbelievable as that may seem. Gastric bypass surgery really is a last resort. It's very drastic and very dramatic and very dangerous. It is not something you do because you want to look better or because somebody fired you for being fat. Why did *I* do it? Because I was unhappy and had been for some time. In fact, I was depressed. I was never a large girl who thought it was O.K. to be large because I was an opera singer. I also was in pain - my knees were hurting me. I was frustrated - I was buried in 135 pounds of extra fat that I thought kept audiences from really seeing me onstage. Did I go through periods when I thought this shouldn't matter? Absolutely. Do I still feel that way? Yes. I find it offensive that someone might think that the soprano is too fat for anyone to love her."

While the emotions underlying Voigt's choice were her own, her decision also clearly was driven by opera's eternal conundrum: is an opera singer's first priority to produce the most perfect sounds or to achieve some sort of dramatic verisimilitude?

"We should have the best voices working, irrespective of looks," Voigt reiterates. "Still, I know I was much more believable onstage as Isolde, or any other heavy character. In the back of my mind, though, I also knew there was a great Tosca in me, a great Salome. But this is a business, and I've always known that too. It's all about who is the most marketable."

So, was there a business component - a marketing consideration, to her surgery?

Voigt sighs. "It's hard to separate these things out. It really was a physical/medical decision. But yes, I knew if I could take 100 pounds off, there would be other possibilities for me. I knew that."

What escalates Deborah Voigt's story from mere weight-loss saga toward something more Faustian is the still-undetermined effect of her surgery on her singing, generally acknowledged pre-surgery to be just about the finest, technically and tonally, in opera. Her Faustian bargain is multi-fold, the potential ironies poignant. Whether by choice or happenstance, "The Dress" and "The Surgery" have effectively positioned Voigt as a potential crossover artist, with a significant pop-cultural profile as well as a more saleable silhouette. The William Morris agency recently signed her up for special projects and non-operatic engagements. (CAMI still represents her for opera, concerts and recitals.) Movies and television really do beckon.



Backstage at Lyric Opera of Chicago's Fiftieth-anniversary Gala, October 2004, with Elizabeth Futral and Andrea Gruber  
Peter Thompson for Lyric Opera of Chicago

Voigt, moreover, actually has a feel for the fodder of opera crossover - the American popular standards and Broadway show tunes she grew up avidly singing as a Midwestern high-school student. Her recent cabaret debut at Lincoln Center's American Songbook series ably demonstrated this.

"Did I like it?" asks Voigt, about the experience. "Only in retrospect. But it got me noticed by William Morris. Do I want to do Broadway? Not really. I don't know how they do the same thing over and over eight times a week. I'd lose my mind. I wouldn't mind giving a concert, though, for one night in some Broadway house. Or going into the Carlyle."

The irony is that Voigt's wide-open pop future may now come with diminished vocal powers. Voigt herself acknowledges the possibility, before batting it aside. "Much of what I did with my weight was very natural, vocally. Now I've got a different body - there's not as much of me around. My diaphragm function, the way my throat feels, is not compromised in any way. But I do have to think about it more now. I have to remind myself to keep my ribs open. I have to remind myself, if my breath starts to stack. When I took a breath before, the weight would kick in and give it that extra *Whoomf!* Now it doesn't do that. If I don't remember to get rid of the old air and re-engage the muscles, the breath starts stacking, and that's when you can't get your phrase, you crack high notes."

Voigt pauses. "It can make me angry. It can piss me off to hear a sound I don't like.



"Still," she quickly continues, "I feel this is very much a transitional phase I'm going through - though I confess I really thought the transitional aspect would be over by now. I'm a little frustrated about that. I sometimes don't feel as grounded in my body. It's not familiar to me. I haven't lived in this shape very long. I'm still shocked when I go to sit in a chair and don't have a problem crossing my legs. Walking down the street and seeing my shadow, I'm still dealing with that kind of stuff - Oh, my God, my shadow's smaller. People come up to me and say, 'You look so great, so small,' and I don't know who they're talking to. I don't even know how to take it in."

It is this internal shakiness, this dislocation, more than any glaring vocal defects, that audiences have perhaps sensed watching and listening to Voigt lately. Her Tosca at the Met often seemed indecisive - tentative when the action demanded absolute certainty, vocally effortful when Puccini's lithe musical lines cried out for flexibility. Voigt does not dispute this possibility either. "Tosca's a role I still want to explore. There are just too many references to her amazing beauty for me to feel instantly at home in that part. I mean, I've always thought I was a pretty girl, but..." Her voice trails away. "My Leonora recently in *La Forza* also was probably not what it should have been, partly because Leonora is such a one-dimensional character - she has no arc. And I'm at a point in my life where I need something to ignite me vocally. I've been doing this a long time. And Leonora just doesn't do it for me."



*Salome* in concert at Tanglewood, 2001

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I didn't know at all. Never in my wildest imagination did I think I would come close to looking like that. And many of my opera friends are just shocked. They think of me as this good old girl who they really know, not the erotic Debbie that was always in there and is now out. During the shoot I was extremely self-conscious. And I thought, boy, Voigt if you're this uncomfortable being shot in a body suit, what's going to happen when you have to *be* this character onstage?"

Voigt's future now holds the promise of more stimulating characters - more Toscas, another chance to play Helena next March in a new Metropolitan Opera production of Strauss's *Die Ägyptische Helena* and, this month at Lyric Opera of Chicago, her first staged *Salome*, a kind of holy grail for Voigt. "Or holy veil," she laughs. "I used to think, Well, why can't *Salome* strip Herod instead of stripping herself? Now I don't have to."

Voigt readily admits that the high-profile *Tosca* bookings would probably never have come without the surgery, and that her present *Salome* contract in Chicago originally was for *Ariadne*. Nevertheless, for a diva once photographed by *New Yorker* magazine posed in her *Aida* costume on the back of a flatbed truck, her current *Salome* publicity shot is an ex-fat-lady's photo fantasy.

Throughout her carefully nurtured pre-surgical career, the one character Voigt painstakingly labored toward, her acknowledged vocal beacon, was Brünnhilde. Is Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* still the ultimate destination for her voice?

"Yes," insists Voigt. "But I'm putting it off. I was supposed to sing Brünnhilde in two years in Vienna, in a new production - I had the contract and everything. I had a contract to sing her at the Met as well, with a penciled-in date in San Francisco, too. And I've canceled them all. I just think that my options are different now. I want to do more roles I wouldn't have been considered for. My voice's color has changed a little bit. Why not explore what that change allows me?"

The question seems coy but inevitable: Which character that she has played would have chosen gastric bypass surgery, and which would not?

Voigt laughs. "Tosca would have done it. She's a woman who knows what she has to do and does it. Which one would never have done it?" Voigt thinks hard and long. "Lady Macbeth. Because I think she knows that she doesn't have the power. She's the impetus to power, but she herself has no power. Now, had Macbeth been a fatty and Lady Macbeth thought *that* was keeping him from the crown, she would have cut his stomach out herself. But doing this sort of surgery is just for *you* and no one else.

"I like to think it was an act of security on my part," she adds, "rather than insecurity. Maybe it goes back to faith or spirituality. I am not religiously observant. I was raised with religion just crammed down my throat. But I am spiritually observant. I'm at a stage in my life where I'm redefining what my relationship is to God. There's Tosca - her blind faith. I don't really get that. I envy it. My mom had it. I just knew that this gift that has been given to me was not going to be lost on an operating table." □

BARRY SINGER's *new book*, *Alive at the Village Vanguard*, *will be published next month by Hal Leonard Books.*

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