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## Coming in from the Cold

Soprano Lise Lindstrom talks to SCOTT BARNES about her sometimes bumpy journey to becoming the opera world's leading Turandot.



Lindstrom as Turandot at the Met, 2009, with Charles Anthony (Emperor Altoum)

When Lise Lindstrom made her Met debut as Turandot, I was sitting fourth row center. She was the first Ice Princess I could actually sense melting, vocally and physically; it was as if the color worked its way from her fingertips to her cheeks until she appeared to be consumed by fever. Turandot is Nilsson, unfortunately, as Mama Rose is to Merman: almost every critique includes how the current singer compares to the iconic one. What is compelling about Lindstrom's approach to the Puccini role — she's performed it with twelve different companies, including Deutsche Oper Berlin, Florida Grand Opera and the Savonlinna Opera Festival — is that she sings with her own slender, feminine voice, which has loads of "cut" without being harsh or ugly. The voice is very sensual and attractive, but with plenty of *slancio*.

I spoke with Lindstrom during an atypical month off, necessitated by the death of her mother, Lindi Lindstrom. The respite coincided with a rare upper-respiratory infection, which the deeply spiritual soprano viewed as her body finally saying, "You're not going to slow down? Fine. Then we'll take it out of your hands for a while."

**OPERA NEWS:** So, you're at home right now?

**LISE LINDSTROM:** Wherever the husband [David Krueger] would be is home. So for now,

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it's Bloomington, Indiana. He was hired by I.U. in the theater department in 2002, just after we were married. People think I'm crazy for not

loving it here, but I just don't. I come home, see friends if I have time, and just enjoy being in the house.

**ON:** Where are you from originally?

**LL:** I was born in the Bay Area, and I grew up in a small town in California gold country called Sonora.

**ON:** Oh, Girl of the Golden West!

**LL:** Exactly. And both of my great grandmothers are named Minnie! And I ride a horse!

**ON:** Contract, anyone? Did your training start at home?

**LL:** The plan was for me to be a musical-theater kid. My mom would do four or five musicals a year in a town of 3,400! People just adored her. We were just two peas in a pod. It was a love affair. I have her to thank for everything. She was the best coach and director I ever had! My first "real" voice teacher was Blanche Thebom. I went in to an audition for *Merry Wives of Windsor* that she was directing, and Blanche asked if I had ever had a voice lesson. I said not really, and she offered to teach me if I was interested. I got home and, in a fairly offhand way, told my mom about the offer. Well, she just about lost it! She got on the other extension and made me call Blanche back and say yes! I stayed with her for about six years, but it was really over my head — way beyond my comprehension. Somewhere down the road, the "hard drive" started feeding it back, and *now* I get it.

**ON:** Some years went by, and you were in the San Francisco Opera chorus and singing here and there, but you didn't have an idea yet what the voice was about. And no one was really guiding you.

**LL:** I did an audition workshop years ago in New York and offered an aria from *Ballo* and "Dich, teure Halle." One of the adjudicators asked my age and then said, "Oh, such a shame." This is in front of all my colleagues and the other adjudicators! "Because you sound like Dawn Upshaw, but you're singing all the wrong rep, and now you're too old." [She's] still in the business, and still being paid for bad advice! That was one of those moments I forgot to put my force-field shield up. Without naming names, there were a lot of people charging me a lot of money without one idea about how this thing works!

In '99, I had gone to an audition for Mobile Opera for Jerome Shannon [then general director]. I sang *Fiordiligi* and "Es gibt ein Reich," from *Ariadne*, another aria [voice teacher] Kathy Cathcart had given me. He said that he was casting a future *Turandot*, and would I be interested? I assumed he meant Liù, and he said, no, the title role. I laughed and said, "Uh-huh. I can't sing that! That's hilarious. And you also want me for *Salome*, right?" I told him to keep me in mind. That was in 1999. Then I got married, in 2002, and left New York when my husband got his job offer. So there I am, living in Indiana, not singing, and planning to study social work. It's 2003, February....

**ON:** You were the poster child for operatic depression.

**LL:** Exactly. I get this e-mail with an offer from Jerry Shannon for *Turandot*!! I called him to make sure he really remembered what I sounded like, and put my depression on hold. I had nothing to lose. He mailed me the contract, and I signed it. While my husband was at work, I would start each day determined to figure out the role by myself, since no one yet had been able to help me put all the

pieces together. I'm a smart girl. I'd start the morning full of belief that I could do it, and by the time he got home from work, I'd be in tears. After about two weeks of this torture, my husband suggested I go to New York for a couple of weeks, see friends and take the role to someone I really trust. At least I would be out of Indiana for a couple of weeks. I had a coaching with Scott Rednour, a dear friend from Manhattan School. I told him I sucked at it, so to go easy on me. I sang a little bit, and he said, "There's this really great teacher...", and I said, "Scott, please. Not another messiah at \$200 an hour. They either mess with your head and your voice or just your head ... but no." Well, Scott made the call anyway, the teacher had a cancellation, and I went the next day. His name was Fred Carama.

Within ten minutes, he had tapped into my real voice and the real me, and I knew that I was actually singing *my* way. It was *his* information, but it was organic. I made a hell of a lot of sound, *and* it was so fun! I started crying. I was just overwhelmed with the concept that I was not completely out of my mind for having pursued this thing for way too long without any sign of success, and second of all that I could actually *sing*! And it was so much easier!

**ON:** Everyone says that, when they finally figure it out — that it's so much easier than they'd ever imagined, because when you do it right for *you*, you are no longer fighting your body.

**LL:** Thank you. It makes me feel so good to hear you say it that way. All I keep finding to say to younger singers is, "Jeez, stop working so hard! You're gonna kill yourself if you keep doing that! That sounds like it doesn't feel good!" It should be joyful, expressive — your soul singing!

**ON:** Right now, even though you sing several other roles, you are sort of "that Turandot girl." What are some of the role's pitfalls?

**LL:** First of all, it's one of those parts that if it's not easy for you to sing, why in the world attempt it? It's terribly exposed, very high, and you are always compared to a huge declamatory voice. And you have to be able to get through those twenty-some minutes of singing in many different "life circumstances." I just sang a final dress to a packed house in Amsterdam the day my mother died. And I sang the snot out of it! It wasn't until the maestro came onstage for the curtain call with tears in his eyes that I lost it.... Before "Straniero, ascolta," I had to turn away, and I said to myself, "Get your shit together, girl, this is not a soap opera."

**ON:** So, as a reigning Ice Princess, can you go through the checklist of how you protect yourself when you come into a production that's new to you?

**LL:** Where's the emperor? Where are the stairs, and how many are there? How long is the cape or caftan? Does it have a train, and will I have handmaidens to help me maneuver it? How heavy is the headdress? Where is the prince? And which ending are we doing?

**ON:** What is it about the Puccini girls that tugs at you so much?

**LL:** There is something so inherently passionate and alive in the writing, which encourages me to find the living, beating heart of the character. Not everybody *feels* Puccini. One must surrender oneself to Puccini in order to feel it. If you're not willing to do that, it can be a tough walk. Strauss is not written that way. The fulfillment level is huge, but not the same.

**ON:** More cerebral, right?

**LL:** Exactly. Strauss phrases aren't organic — they don't just come out of your guts. Puccini does, as long as you can be available to that area of your singing. I would really, really love to sing *Fanciulla*.

I've got to get some more Verdi in my life, whether that means more *Ballo* or taking on *Aida*.

I have to be very clear with my management about what we need to say yes to. *Tosca*, *Ballo*, *Fanciulla*, *Macbeth* — definitely. I'd be very interested in doing *Andrea Chénier*. And I'd love to do *Butterfly* and *Aida*, although I don't know that I'd want to see me in them.

**ON:** It seems to me that if the roles have a real "tug" for you, and you can sing all the notes without freaking out, and some management is willing to put a signature on the dotted line, why do their work for them? The last time I looked at a singer's contract, it was to sing, not to cast or direct.

**LL:** I know. For heaven's sake, I'm a six-foot-tall soprano of German and Nordic heritage who plays a Chinese princess all over the world. Shut up and sing!

**ON:** So as you embark on yet another trip to old Peking, how do you keep Turandot fresh?

**LL:** Liù is my catalyst. She's the reason I can see Calàf for who he is. It's all about listening. That's why this role that I do over and over again never gets tiring for me.

**ON:** What do you do with colleagues who aren't really present?

**LL:** Well, I had a Calàf who walked offstage for a drink of water and just made it back in time to answer the riddle. But I've learned to listen maybe not to that particular person but to the ideal one that Puccini has provided. Who hasn't had her life altered by a kiss? It changes my life every performance. □

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