

Appearing nightly

by [DeCaffarelli](#) | 1:32 pm | Nov 15, 2013



I suspect most New York City opera-lovers had long since given up hope that the fascinating soprano **Anna Caterina Antonacci** would ever return to their city. But in the spring of 2102 after an absence of over 13 years, she presented a rapturously received recital of Italian songs at Alice Tully Hall. Wasting no time, Lincoln Center invited her to bring her one-woman [performance piece](#) *Era la notte* to this year's White Light Festival which presented the US premiere Wednesday evening at the Rose Theater. Conceived and directed by **Juliette Deschamps**, it featured Antonacci performing four challenging monologues by early-to-mid-17th century Italian composers accompanied by seven members of the French period orchestra Les Siècles.

Long a favorite of mine, Antonacci, still glamorous in her early 50s, remains one of the more compelling, yet controversial singers on the international opera scene. In the early 90s, she specialized in Rossini, singing many of the roles written for Isabella Colbran: Semiramide, Ermione, Elisabetta, Desdemona in *Otello*, Elcia in *Mosè in Egitto* and Elena in *La Donna del Lago*. Her earliest US stage appearance was as Ninetta in a Philadelphia *La Gazza Ladra* in 1990.

As the 21st century dawned, she turned more to French opera, perhaps spawned by her [triumph](#) as Cassandre in Berlioz's *Les Troyens* at the Châtelet in Paris in 2003.

I was lucky enough to attend that superb *Troyens*: one of my favorite operas indelibly performed. Antonacci's haunted prophetess dominated, her dark, doomed soprano gripping in its tortured intensity. Cassandre has since become a signature role, repeated in Geneva, Tanglewood, and Covent Garden; La Scala is due to see it in April 2014, and it's rumored for her return to San Francisco where she long ago sang Adalgisa to Carol Vaness' Norma. Rachel in *La Juive*, Marguerite in *La Damnation de Faust*, Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine*, the title role of Fauré's *Pénélope*, Charlotte in *Werther*, Brunehilde in Magnard's *Sigurd* and, of course, Carmen have followed, with Chimène in Massenet's *Le Cid* opposite Roberto Alagna whispered for the future at the Bastille.

Yet throughout her career Antonacci has also consistently shone in baroque and classical music. Memorably opening the 1996 La Scala season in Pier Luigi Pizzi's legendary production of Gluck's *Armide* conducted by Riccardo Muti,

...she has also performed that composer's *Alceste* in both French and Italian: it's unfortunate that she has recently withdrawn from the new Krzysztof Warlikowski *Alceste* scheduled for February at Madrid's Teatro Real.

Mozart's [Donna Elvira](#) and [Fiordiligi](#), as well as Paisiello's Nina

...have been important roles, as have her two great Handel heroines: an unconventional [Rodelinda](#) at Glyndebourne, and a dazzling Machiavellian empress in David McVicar's production of *Agrippina* which, conducted by René Jacobs, was the toast of Brussels and Paris.

However, early 17th century Italian music in particular continues to remain a significant part of her music-making. How many other artists have sung both Poppea and Nerone in Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*? While she has performed Poppea more often, her power-drunk, dreadlocked Nerone was a special highlight of the McVicar production I saw at Paris's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 2004, especially when in league with Patrizia Ciofi's Poppea: what a rare joy to hear two native Italian singers relishing Busenello's pungent text.

My first live exposure to Antonacci was her New York City debut in February 1999, a concert with Accademia Bizantina at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Strikingly, three of the four pieces that make up *Era la Notte* were also performed at *that* concert: Monteverdi's "Lamento d'Arianna" and "Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda," along with Pietro Giramo's "Lamento della Pazza."

Back then ago Antonacci simply sang those challenging monologues concert style; in *Era la Notte*, clad mostly in an elaborate white gown by **Christian Lacroix**, she enacted them, along with Barbara Strozzi's "Lagrime mie," against **Cécile Degos**'s wall of blazing long white tapers to the back of the mostly bare stage where a pool of water ran across the front. The small instrumental ensemble was positioned to the right of the playing space, and, in addition to accompanying the singing, played the six instrumental works by Biagio Marini.

After a short prelude, Antonacci, her voice still a bit rough, entered for the Giramo portraying a woman driven mad by love. She masterfully conveyed the *pazza*'s ever-shifting moods, beautifully differentiating the six iterations of the opening strophe that dot the piece:

*Chi non mi conosce
Dirà che la mia
Sia vera pazzia
Che lieta mi fa.*

*Ma tutt' E'furore,
Effetto d'Amore,
Effetto d'Amore,
Ch'al core mi sta*

Her moving performance of Ariadne's aching lament over Theseus's abandonment (the only surviving extract from Monteverdi's opera *L'Arianna*) demonstrated how far the art of singing this music has evolved.

The Strozzi, while the least interesting piece, did provide rare moments of melody.

But, after discarding the gown and reentering in a black tunic and pants with her hair pulled back, Antonacci ended the program with one of her specialties—a piece she has sung with both Muti and **Claudio Abbado**—Monteverdi’s great “Combattimento” which narrates the story of two disguised lovers—Tancredi and Clorinda—who meet on the battlefield and fight resulting in Clorinda’s sad death. So vivid was Antonacci’s story-telling that one dared not take one’s eyes off of her to glance at the titles high above the stage.

Since it’s written for baritone (or low tenor) with lines for a soprano Clorinda and tenor Tancredi, Antonacci’s appropriation of the work is unusual: I’ve never otherwise heard of the piece being sung by a woman or as a solo. That she has sung it successfully for much of her career speaks to her sovereign mastery of Monteverdi’s musical language.

One oddity was the use of violins in a piece normally only accompanied by *continuo*; however, the string realization used wasn’t overly jarring.

All of Antonacci’s most striking qualities were on display throughout Wednesday evening: the searing vocal and dramatic commitment, the uniquely smoky timbre joined to an arresting connection to the text. Those looking for perfect, ear-soothing singing might have come away unsatisfied: her sometimes raw voice has never been conventionally beautiful, but it has always served its mistress’s art. It was surprising to hear how little her voice has changed since 1995 when she [recorded](#) Monteverdi’s “Lasciatemi morire” and the Giramo lament, along with Antonio Cesti’s “Lamento della Madre Ebraa (!)”.

I hadn’t listened to that CD in a long while and was struck how the top of the voice was already then problematic. On Wednesday anything remotely high was quickly abandoned, but those 17th century pieces nearly always fell within her most evocative middle voice, although there were signs that she’s increasingly building up her lower voice. While Antonacci describes herself as a soprano, it’s clear that her choices have always been dictated by her recalcitrant upper register. Many of her parts are out-and-out mezzo roles or those ascribed to a *Falcon* soprano.



While *Era la Notte* finally provided NYC audiences with a bewitching chance to sample Antonacci’s formidable

acting talents, it must be said that the evening proved an occasionally monochrome affair. The four vocal pieces were much too alike in both musical style and emotional content. Except for a few moments in the Strozzi, they were pure recitative, without much melodic interest. Although a dramatic tour-de-force, it felt longer than an hour, perhaps due to the relentlessly dark, mournful mood. Deschamps argues that one should think of the monologues as the utterances of a single character, but neither her dramaturgy nor the choice of music proved convincing.

Much has been made of Antonacci's having never appeared at the Met, yet it's not really surprising. Other than Carmen (which she only took on in 2006), her repertoire has never included operas in the standard repertoire: the Met has never had a Cherubini Medea or Bellini Romeo on its stage, for example. Her most significant Verdi role is, after all, the Marchesa in *Un Giorno di Regno*, a portrayal preserved on [two competing](#) DVDs.

However, the MET did miss a great opportunity last season: instead of **Barbara Frittoli's** blowsy Vitellia, we might have had a flamingly intense Antonacci portrayal that would surely have held its own opposite the sterling Sesto of **Elina Garanca**, as it did in Paris in 2006.

One hopes Lincoln Center will continue to invite Antonacci to New York: I pray for another chance to hear some of her Berlioz: *La Mort de Cléopâtre* or *Les Nuits d'Été*. Or perhaps her other solo performance piece *Altre Stelle* which includes glimpses of Armide, Rameau's Phèdre and, based on a broadcast, a most glorious Berlioz Didon. New York too rarely sees such a hypnotic artist.

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