

# ‘THE AUDIENCE MUST CRY’

By Tridwip Das

When Elena Moşuc was just a girl, she heard an album by Maria Amarghioalei – better known as Naarghita – who had fallen under the spell of Bollywood legend Raj Kapoor after seeing him in an epic film called Shri 420 released in 1955.

Naarghita recorded several albums of Hindi film songs and introduced Indian music and culture to her native Romania. Elena heard those albums over and over again,



humming and singing along to the exotic music and strange words. Several decades later, Elena is here in Muscat to play the lead role of Lakme about a Hindu priestess who lived during the British Raj in India. Elena believes there’s more than just coincidence in the scheme of things.

Lakme, an opera by Leo Delibes, is a production of Royal Opera House Muscat in collaboration with Los Angeles Opera, Teatro dell’Opera di Roma, Fondazione Arena di Verona, Cairo Opera House, Astana Opera, National Centre for the Performing Arts of Beijing and Opera Australia. Its world premiere is scheduled on March 28 with Elena essaying the lead on opening night and March 30. Directed by Davide Livermore, it features the orchestra and chorus of Teatro Carlo Felice di Genova conducted by Jordi Bernàcer.

## Major production

The word exotic appears several times in Elena’s description of Lakme which will be performed in French. “It has many influences, wonderful costumes, screen projections, water formations on stage... a production of this scale is not common,” she says.

In Lakme, a young British officer Gerald falls in love with the daughter of a high-ranking Hindu priest Neelakantha who wants him dead. Lakme saves the officer but when she finds out that he is already engaged, she decides to have a poisonous flower and end her life. “It’s normal in opera for the heroine to die,” Elena says in jest when asked about the tragic end in many operas. “It’s mostly the heroines who die.”

Elena is counted among the most expressive and versatile sopranos of bel canto, a vocal style that originated in Italy and performed throughout Europe during the 18th and early 19th century. In 1990, she won the ARD International Music Competition in Munich which flagged off her international career debuting in a Zurich Opera House production of Mozart’s Magic Flute as the Queen of the Night. She went on to be appointed an Officer of the Arts by the Romanian presidency in 2005 and being conferred Romania’s ‘Woman of the Year’ title in 2009.

Having been cast in several title roles gave her insights into another common element besides tragic ends in opera - madness in signature operatic roles. It prompted her to study it further. “(Gaetano) Donizetti’s Lucia and Anna

Bolena, (Vincenzo) Bellini's Elvira and Norma... she had her moments too. I have done many roles involving madness," she explains. So when a friend suggested she pursue a doctorate, to help her prospects in academia after retiring from stage, she took up the challenge in 2009.

### **Madness in opera**

Elena's doctorate - The Theme of Madness in the Italian opera of the first half of the 19th century – enhanced her interpretation and performances of these characters. "I was also able to demonstrate through the study that not just the drama but the music, the language of the music, depicts madness."

Besides opera, Elena has recorded CDs, videos and performed concerts because she needs creative variety, and hopes to bring her concert titled Resonance featuring pop music orchestrated in a classical style to Oman some day.

This is Elena's fourth visit to Oman, the first being in 2012 for the opening season of Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM). She came again in 2016 in the role of Lucia and last year to be Bellini's Norma. Of the opera audience in Oman, Elena described them as appreciative, while French and the Italian audiences as the most critical. "I suppose that's only natural, considering opera was born in Italy. Audiences in the Far East are very happy and satisfied," she says, adding that she was perplexed the first time she received fruits as a present from an enthusiastic fan in Tokyo. "It was a beautiful gesture but a strange way to show appreciation."

After performances in festivals and opera houses from Berlin to Beijing and Salzburg to Seoul, she is in a position to state with some authority that ROHM isn't just an architectural beauty but has perfect acoustics for opera. "The only thing for me is the air conditioning. It is too cold and the blow too strong," she says, adding that this is a common feature in the Americas and some East Asian countries. "We are not habituated to this; we don't have this problem in Europe. Cold and dry air is not good for the voice."

### **Vocal acrobatics**

Trust Elena to know about these things. With a voice capable of remarkable vocal acrobatics, Elena needs to be very particular about it besides making sure she remains fit and healthy. She has eliminated carbohydrates and is on a diet of proteins, vegetables and fruits, and bread that she bakes herself with almonds to stay strong and energetic for the physically strenuous and exacting standards of opera singing.

A video clip on Elena's homepage gives a fair idea of the incredible physical demands of her roles. This particular clip from Anna Bolena performed two years ago shows her singing full-throated even as she crawls and wriggles on the floor as the role demands. "Opera singing is whole body singing. If the breathing technique is right, the sound will come from the body not just from the vocal cords. The emotions are better when you sing with the whole body rather than just the vocal cords. The emotions are important, after all the audience must cry at the end," Elena says.