

LONG DISTANCE RUN

by Roger Evans

"Keep your face in the light!" whispered Marilyn Horne to the young colleague beside her, who was making her Carnegie Hall debut on that night in 1972.

"From that day forward, I've been trying to do just that," says a grateful Frederica von Stade.

People who have been most strongly affected by Horne's career often cite one unforgotten moment or image that stands for all the others. My own came five Octobers ago in Barcelona.

Gathered in what is possibly the most beautiful concert hall in the world, the Palau de la Música Catalana, the audience avidly absorbed a program that proclaimed who Horne is and what she stands for. First, and characteristically, she took us down a pleasant byway of that inexhaustible recital repertory forwarded by the Marilyn Horne Foundation, as we heard songs of Thomas Arne. She continued with Brahms, which recalled her early studies under Lotte Lehmann (at the Music Academy of the West, where she now teaches). A series of Rossini songs reminded us which mezzo-soprano set new standards for bel canto technique and interpretation, both in once-neglected works of Rossini and in perennial touchstones such as Bellini's *Norma*.

After intermission, the singer for whom Stravinsky composed his last work interpreted a cycle by a favorite local composer, Xavier Montsalvatge, who sat beaming in the audience. And she ended by singing Cole Porter, Gershwin and Bernstein so vividly and seriously that the Catalans around me, including the critics, hailed the songs as true *cançons d'art americanes*.

What struck many that night was Horne's embodiment of universal artist and specifically American character. For her compatriots in the audience, the emotions produced by what we saw and heard were pleasingly complex. The subtle interplay of sympathies and the broad culture exemplified by Horne forbid any crude, simplistically competitive national pride. One suspects that the deeper complexity that underlies her art does much



HORNE, LIGHTING UP SAN FRANCISCO GALA, 1997

to account for her wide appeal, which on the surface might seem simply a product of her easy affability and musical fluency. It is a resonant appeal that extends both to the few (say, the scholars who specialize in Rossini) and to the many (such as the children who have seen her on *Sesame Street* giving Ruth Buzzi a singing lesson). Typically, her generous series of encores that night certified that there was time only for samples of what she could do. We were all Samson for a few minutes, as Dalila showed us how harrowing vocal drama can be, and Horne's chaste "Plaisir d'amour" exhibited perfect vocal style and technique.

Behind each skill displayed onstage were hidden stores of experience. How many of those who admire her way with vernacular song know that, in her teens, she "covered" hits of Kay Starr, Peggy Lee and others by recording supermarket singles that uncannily reproduced each star's style? How many who heard her miraculous duets with Joan Sutherland could have suspected that years of live-radio duets with a sister lay behind her developed sensitivity? This artist who became the only non-Italian to win the Rossini Medal had, after years of singing Musettas and Neddas, Marzellines and Giocondas in Germany, made a historic San

Francisco Opera debut as Marie in *Wozzeck* — years after she provided a kitenish soprano for the Hollywood soundtrack of *Carmen Jones* and years before she electrified the musical world as Handel's majestic Rinaldo.

This month, Horne will retire from singing classical repertory. (She will continue to perform popular music.) There will also be the teaching, her important Foundation, and the unique fellowship and communication inherent in her birthday celebrations. Even toward the end of this stage of her career, Horne has not settled into grooves: with a recent performance in Laramie, Wyoming, she has now sung in all fifty states, and at Carnegie Hall this month she will sing world premieres by William Bolcom, Richard Hundley and Adam Guettel.

While Horne's focused, somewhat reedy middle and lower voice has become instantly identifiable as a trademark, she has always had vast reserves of other sounds available. There is a recording of that von Stade debut, in which Horne soars as Strauss' Marschallin, and it is not the voice you know from Orfeo or Carmen. Even during her mature Rossini heyday, she was asked to introduce her famous *Wozzeck* Marie to the Met, which she was eager to do. But it would have been mixed in with performances of *L'Italiana in Algeri*, and the tragic soprano and the comic mezzo would not have been comfortable sharing a dressing room. As recent years have forced Horne to husband this prodigality of resources more carefully, she has continued to grow as an artist. There are listeners who appreciate her interpretations more now than when her voice could do almost anything her ear could imagine.

Marilyn Horne, whose face and song have been in the light — in so many places, in so many styles, through so many media, for so many years — may be the most influential singer in American history. □

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