

Opera Singing Models in the Second Half of the 20th Century. Leontyne Price and Maria Slătinaru-Nistor

LOREDANA IAȚEȘEN, Associate Prof. PhD
“George Enescu” National University of the Arts Iași
ROMANIA*

Abstract: Considering that one of the artists with an exceptional national and international career, Maria Slătinaru-Nistor, celebrates her 85th birthday this year, we intend to celebrate this event in a special way, by reminding the already known biography or singing career information and at the same time by focusing on her opera singing career through a comparative approach with the distinguished figure of another contemporary singer, Leontyne Price, in a commentary on a representative score from the verismo repertoire, namely Floria Tosca’s aria in Act II (Giacomo Puccini’s *Tosca*). Therefore, in this paper we will sketch the portraits of the two sopranos, Leontyne Price and Maria Slătinaru-Nistor, in order to identify similarities and differences in their approach to the aria in question, with the aim of demonstrating one particular critical approach, according to which Maria Slătinaru-Nistor’s artistic personality is a natural continuation of Leontyne Price’s.

Keywords: Maria Slătinaru-Nistor, Leontyne Price, *Tosca*, comparative analysis of their singing.

Argument

Our attempt to compare two different personalities of the art of singing, Leontyne Price and Maria Slătinaru-Nistor, is at first glance a paradox, since most of the constituent elements of the training, evolution and peak of their stage careers differ. Born a decade apart, with different cultural and geographical backgrounds (Leontyne Price was born in 1927, in Laurel, Mississippi, USA and Maria Slătinaru in 1938, in Iași), the two musicians have had extensive singing careers throughout the world in the second half of the last century. In the case of the American soprano, it is worth recalling that, after her debut in 1952, in a Broadway show entitled *Four Saints in Three Acts* by Virgil Thomson to a libretto by Gertrude Stein, she sang in various prestigious institutions: San Francisco Opera, La Scala in Milan, Philadelphia Opera, Carnegie Hall, Berlin Philharmonic, with a 1961-1969 peak, when she appeared in 118 performances at the Metropolitan alone. For her part, the Romanian artist Maria Slătinaru made her debut on the stage of the Romanian National Opera in Bucharest in 1969, in the role of Elisabeta de Valois in Giuseppe Verdi’s *Don Carlos*, impressing the audience with the warmth of her timbre and

* iatesenloredana@yahoo.com

her stage play, qualities that opened the way to a formidable international career (Vienna State Opera, The Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, La Fenice in Venice, La Monnaie in Brussels, the Metropolitan, Operas in Paris, San Francisco, Munich, Berlin, Hamburg, Melbourne, Toronto, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Basel).

1. Introduction

And yet, how did the idea of a comparison between the voices of the two singers, different temperamentally, culturally and in the sequence of their musical becoming, come about? Although similar in their general vocal color, they have different technique nuances in their approach to their characters, the presence of deeply dramatic accents in Leontyne Price and modulations with lyrical inflections in the case of Maria Slătinaru. They are similar however in their striving to build a formidable international career, each of them overcoming, by personal efforts, the difficulties of their time (racial – Leontyne Price is the first black singer to gain international recognition; or ideological – Maria Slătinaru toured abroad during the disastrous period of the communist system’s bans), through their romantic-verismo repertoire, through the unanimous praises from critics and members of professional juries alike, who awarded them valuable prizes and distinctions (Leontyne Price won more than 20 Grammy Awards and Maria Slătinaru was awarded: Romania’s Star in the rank of Officer, 2000 / Cultural Merit, rank of Commander, 2008; Royal House of Romania: *Nihil Sine Deo*, 2012; Honorary Doctorate - Ovidius University, Constanta, 2009; “Gh. Dima” National Academy of Music in Cluj, 2014; “George Enescu” National University of Arts in Iasi, 2016).

2. Aim of the Research

Here is an idea on which I reflected and on which I tried to shed light in a particular paper, when I read one of the reviews by Costin Popa, a music critic who admired Maria Slătinaru in various performances. “...Her colleagues-partners, the choir singers, the critics and teachers, all of us who appreciated her voice and let it carry us far away called her Price. And we had every reason to compare her to the great Leontyne Price! Maria Slătinaru undoubtedly had the most beautiful soprano voice over a time span of many decades, both before and after her career” (Popa, 2008). Therefore, this paper is devoted to achieving a general overview of the artistic activity of the two sopranos, Leontyne Price and Maria Slătinaru-Nistor. We will then focus our attention briefly on the comparative analysis of the aria of Floria Tosca in the second act of Giacomo Puccini’s *Tosca*, with a view to highlight similarities and differences in the approach to this musical moment.

3. Years of Musical Training

According to information in various dictionaries and encyclopedias, Leontyne Price discovered her love of music in her family environment. Her

parents, amateur musicians, encouraged her to learn to play the piano and to sing in the choir of St. Paul's Church in Laurel, where she often distinguished herself in various solo roles. She graduated from the *Central State College* in Wilberforce, Ohio, wanting to become a music teacher, although her dream of becoming an opera singer was beginning to take shape. Opportunity knocked, so she earned a four-year scholarship to the *Juilliard School* in New York City, where she would hone her vocal and stage technique with Florence Page Kimball, a teacher whom Leontyne fondly mentioned in her memories (Tikkanen, 2023).

The first years of artistic training are different for Maria Slătinaru-Nistor, a sensitive musician, who has opened up over time to critics, journalists, musicologists, who were close to her and followed her career. For example, on the occasion of another anniversary in 2018, when the soprano turned 80, Grigore Constantinescu achieved "a biographical retrospective of her unique destiny, starting with her birth in the capital city of Moldova region, where she walked, for a few years, on the path of youthful ideals... attending the «Oltea Doamna» High School. Her singing voice started making an impression and she was wholeheartedly accepted at the singing art class of by her first teacher, the dramatic soprano Florica Mărieș. Her higher education was completed at «Ciprian Porumbescu» Conservatory in Bucharest... under the guidance of the renowned Arta Florescu" (Constantinescu, 2018, p. 78).

4. A Selective Approach to Moments of Grace in her Singing Career

Shortly after her performance in Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*, Leontyne Price, the African-American singer, started touring as Bess (in George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*), which was a wonderful fit. Quickly gaining critical attention in New York, she was honored with an offer to star in the NBC television production of Puccini's *Tosca*, becoming the first black singer to perform an opera on TV. An accomplishment that led to further requests in this role with performances of *The Magic Flute*, *Don Giovanni* and *The Carmelite Dialogue*. Her performance in the last of these operas was highly praised in the American press in 1957, a turning point for Leontyne Price's debut at the San Francisco Opera. Despite the recognition and appreciation that she enjoyed in the late 1950s, her debut at the Metropolitan Opera was delayed until January 1961, when she achieved a brilliant performance as Leonora in *Il Trovatore*. The artist then became a constant presence at this prestigious opera house where she embodied well-known protagonists like Cio-Cio-San (*Madame Butterfly*), Donna Anna (*Don Giovanni*) and Liu (*Turandot*). In a career spanning almost four decades, soprano Leontyne Price has offered new versions of roles in various performances by Giuseppe Verdi, Giacomo Puccini, Jules Massenet, Richard Strauss, George Gershwin, under the baton of conductors who adored her: Herbert von Karajan, Georg Solti, James Levine, Zubin Mehta, etc. The many articles and interviews portraying Leontyne's personality, published in

renowned cultural and musical journals: *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *San Francisco Classical Voice*, *The Metropolitan Opera Guild*, bear witness to this. Among the authors of texts dedicated to the artist (Susan Heler Anderson, *Still the Diva*; David Patrick Stearns, *Icon: Leontyne Price*; Anthony Tommasini, *Leontyne Price, Legendary Diva, Is a Movie Star at 90*; Malika Kodavantiganti, *Leontyne Price: An International Opera Star*), we will focus on an excerpt from Oussama Zahr's review entitled *Leontyne Price at the Met*, which we find enlightening in capturing the bigger picture of the singer's artistic personality. "In her two and a half decades at the Metropolitan Opera, the soprano Leontyne Price brought lyrical splendor to the heroines of Giuseppe Verdi, with singing that radiated densely packed colors. The Met celebrates the ninety-three-year-old's career with a two-disk compilation of live excerpts, from a fresh-voiced *Il Trovatore*, in 1961, to her farewell in *Aida*, in 1985. Price's timbre is swathed in an impenetrable glow that transcends the limitations of recording technology. There's a voluptuous Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*, a romantic *Tosca*, a powerfully acrobatic *Ermani*, and an especially ravishing *Trovatore*, from 1969. The album closes, of necessity, with *O patria mia*, from her final *Aida*, a rendition that received raucous applause thirty-five years ago and consecrated one of the Met's great legacies." (Zahr, 2020).

Unlike Leontyne Price, whose breakthrough came with her graduation from the *Juilliard School*, Maria Slătinaru-Nistor's participation in specialist competitions during her training years at the Conservatory (*Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky*, Moscow 1966, Toulouse, 1967, *George Enescu*, Bucharest, 1967, *Hertogenbosch*, Netherlands, 1969, *Francesco Viñas*, Barcelona, Spain) recommended her for the position of soloist at the Romanian National Opera in Bucharest, where she worked with many famous Romanian conductors and singers in operas belonging to a wide range of music cultures - Italian, German, French, Russian and Romanian, achieving unique renditions of a multitude of roles of great technical and expressive difficulty (Poen, 2018).

Her artistic personality, her successes on the stages of national and international opera houses, aroused the interest of many journalists, critics, musicologists, who devoted interviews, articles, portraits or reviews to her in the written press. She was often invited on national and international radio stations, when listeners were able to enjoy her lovely presence, her warm tone, and her gentle voice when she spoke of her beautiful achievements, which she described with modesty, with the naturalness of an elite spirit, who dedicated her life to art and became a role model for future generations of performers.

For instance, we learn about her international career from the artist herself in a conversation with Ileana Ocolişan Baba recorded at Radio Novi Sad in Belgrade on 3 April 1998. "I sang with Franco Bonisolli, Matteo Manuguerra, Giacomo Arhangeli Santi. I performed *Tosca* more than 250 times, I sang as dramatic soprano. Sometimes I performed Leonora in *Fidelio*, and *Tosca* in

parallel, I also sang Wagner, *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, *The Ghost Ship*, *Andréa Chénier*, *Gioconda* with which I debuted in America in 1983 with great success, after which I returned to San Francisco where I had three performances of *The Force of Destiny*.” (Baba Ocolişan, 2020)

Along the same line of rendering the personality of the soprano Maria Slătinaru, we should also mention the heartwarming commentary of journalist Alex Vasiliu, who followed the artist’s career over time, and devoted radio broadcasts, articles, interviews in cultural newspapers to her, promoting her image with perfect professionalism. “Speaking of one of the qualities of Maria Slătinaru Nistor’s voice, evident since the early years of her stage performance in Iaşi, I chose the word *natural*.... Whatever one listens to in Maria Slătinaru Nistor’s interpretation, whatever the stylistic requirements, one has an impression of *strength, suppleness, refined mobility of nuances*.” (Vasiliu, 2023)

5. Leontyne Price and Maria Slătinaru: Two Role Models in the Art of Singing

I have not found any information about Leontyne Price’s teaching career. However, an article published on the occasion of her 90th birthday caught my eye, where the baritone Sherril Milnes said that “Leontyne, through her personality, through her voice and her influence, then really opened the door — the crack that Marion Anderson had opened — and made a place for the African-American. She opened the door for the ones of my generation: Martina Arroyo, Grace Bumbry, Reri Grist and others” (Huizenga, 2017). According to another critic, Tim page, “she became a star at about the time that the civil rights movement was coming into its heyday. This was all happening at a point when the doors were beginning — albeit, especially at the start, reluctantly — to swing open for African-American artists in a number of different fields. It was a very big movement in the late '50s, early '60s. She really came to power at the heart of that. It was a wonderful happenstance of time and space” (Huizenga, 2017).

Unlike Leontyne Price, Maria Slătinaru-Nistor collaborated with the Department of Singing of the National University of Music in Bucharest, where she was trained and where she taught between 1990 and 2016. Whereas in the first two and a half decades the artist focused on her singing career, the next quarter of a century was devoted to teaching the art of singing, fully investing herself with her students who wanted to improve their skills: Irina Iordăchescu, Roxana Constantinescu, Arona Bogdan, Oana Andra, Ruxandra Urdăreanu, Cristina Radu, Mirela Bunoaică, Iulia Dan, Simonida Luţescu, Iulia Surdu and Georgiana Marin. As an experienced singing teacher and artist, she was invited by several music academies in Canada, Switzerland and Bulgaria and she was appointed as a member of the juries of important international singing competitions in Barcelona, Verviers, Pretoria, Belgrade, Sofia, Munich, etc.

6. *Vissi d'arte* from Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*.

Landmark Performances: Leontyne Price and Maria Slătinaru Nistor

Reflecting on this musical moment is driven by several considerations. Both artists have tackled the role of Floria Tosca many times in the course of their singing career. In order to draw a possible interpretative parallel, it was necessary to choose two versions that are chronologically close to each other, each of the performances under consideration representing a high point in the evolution of their careers. Whereas for Leontyne Price we chose a recording from 1973, when she was 46, under the musical direction of Zubin Mehta, with the New Philharmonia Orchestra of Massachusetts¹, for Maria Slătinaru Nistor we selected a recording from 1988, when she was 50, with the Montreal Orchestra², conducted by Michelangelo Veltri.

6.1. Leontyne Price – *Vissi d'arte*

Reviewing the 1972 recording, Robert Levine said in *Classics Today* that “Price, though still rich of middle and upper voice and intelligent of interpretation without actually plumbing any depths, nevertheless gives us a sketch of Tosca filled with stock operatic emotings and some nasty-sounding chest tones that are more longshoreman than diva” (Levine, 1972). Interestingly enough, the same critic, only a few years earlier, in another disc review, on the occasion of the black soprano's debut at the Metropolitan on 2 April 1962, commented that Price is a “big, exciting voice, who lightens her tone when needed and unleashes waves of gorgeous, expressive sound” (Levine, 1962). Although it seems difficult to believe that the two reviews of the same performer by the same author are so different only a decade apart, revisiting the singing performance³ under scrutiny is enlightening in drawing a conclusion.

It is obvious that in Leontyne Price's version, the protagonist Floria Tosca stands out with an intensification of drama, an expression enhanced by the singer's native qualities, endowed with a powerful dark voice, yet comfortable with the high-pitch technique. Although she still had the strength shown before in performing *Aida*, *Il Trovatore*, or *negro-spiritual* pieces, we notice, in the aria *Vissi d'arte* analyzed here, that the soprano's voice is slightly tired, probably due to her many stage performances, which materializes in a slow exposition of the

¹ Performers: Leontyne, Plácido Domingo, Sherrill Milnes, Clifford Grant, Paul Plishka, Francis Egerton, John Gibbs, Michael Rippon, David Pearl, New Philharmonia Orchestra, Conductor: Zubin Mehta.

² Performers: Maria Slatinaru, Rubèn Dominguez, Louis Quilico, Jean-Clément Bergeron, Renato Capecchi, André Lortie, Charles Prévost, Jean-Luc Houde, Antonio Funicelli, Conductor: Michelangelo Veltri.

³ Aria Floria Tosca, second act, *Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini, recording of the performance staged in 1973; New Philharmonia Orchestra, Conductor: Zubin Mehta, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1sdTuNe1B4>

melodic line, in a lack of homogeneity of ranges (the lower range being visibly affected), with glottal attacks in the intonation of some phrases, with ornaments sung in a baroque rather than verismo style, with forbidden breaths in the middle of musical *crescendos*. We note that these imperfections in the performance of the aria *Vissi d'arte* are only a passing moment in Leontyne Price's career, as proven by her achievements in this role in over 250 performances.

6.2. Maria Slătinaru – *Vissi d'arte*

Tosca is the role that Maria Slătinaru-Nistor considers her most significant interpretative achievement, which she performed more than 300 times, the highlight being its performance on the Metropolitan Theatre stage in New York. After watching her in the roles of Leonore (*Fidelio*) and Floria Tosca (*Tosca*), the German critic Peter Dannenberg wrote in 1977 in the famous magazine *Opern Welt*: “Slătinaru has no rival in the world in these two roles” (Arvunescu, 2018). On the other hand, on the occasion of the soprano's debut with *Tosca* at the Metropolitan in 1986, another critic, Will Crutchfield, stated in *The Times* that although “her high notes were unsteady and she had trouble sustaining them, she is attractive and a good actress, and the basic quality of her voice is agreeable when not forced” (Crutchfield, 1986, p. 30). A year later, in 1987, with the opera *Tosca* staged in Montreal, the Canadian magazine *La Presse* read that “at times, Maria Slătinaru's signing brought to mind no more and no less than *La Divina* Maria Callas” (Arvunescu, 2018).

Based on these opinions, we turn our attention to the aria *Vissi d'arte*, taken from the performance with the Montreal Orchestra, recorded in 1988⁴.

Unlike Leontyne Price's version, the soprano Maria Slătinaru-Nistor impressed us with her soft voice and open sounds, in which the lyrical expression is predominant, and in which the harmony of the phrases, the subtle Puccini-like ornaments, the appropriate dosage of sound intensity in all ranges and the absence of glottal attacks stand out. The expressiveness and candor of her singing, and the naturalness of her performance are qualities that the soprano achieved through hard work and discipline, a willingness to overcome all technical difficulties, and attention to detail in every stage appearance. As the journalist Alex Vasiliu pointed out, she had the “the wisdom to wait for the right vocal seasons for each role. Maria Slătinaru Nistor was not impatient to sing anything to proudly prove her vocal-interpretive qualities. She respected and cared for her precious, sensitive instrument, preserving its longevity” (Vasiliu, 2023).

⁴ Aria Floria Tosca, second act, *Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini, recording of the performance staged in 1988, Montreal Opera Orchestra, conductor: Michelangelo Veltri, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfS03vXw7-I>

7. Conclusions

Although they were born 11 years apart and come from different geographical and cultural backgrounds, both singers have had solid musical education, have gone through distinct stages in their artistic training, overcoming social, racial and ideological difficulties in their artistic becoming and fabulous careers. Endowed with full voices, with similar timbre (in the case of Maria Slătinaru the *spinto*-dramatic color was associated with the lyrical one, depending on the repertoire), the two sopranos have tackled works from different musical cultures, with a preference for romantic and verismo scores, being loved by the listeners and praised by the critics for their attachment to certain creators and representative works. Whereas Leontyne Price is remembered by listeners for the strength of her expression, for the vocal drama with which she portrayed the character of *Aida* in the eponymous opera by G. Verdi, Maria Slătinaru is especially known for the sweetness of her voice, coupled with an exceptional stage experience of the protagonist of the opera *Tosca* by G. Puccini. Their work has not remained without echo, as witnessed by the awards and distinctions they have received throughout their careers, and even more so, in the case of Maria Slătinaru, by invitations to give masterclasses at various prestigious universities, to sit on the juries of specialist competitions or to mentor young people in search of meaning in the field of opera. Unlike the Romanian soprano, a selfless professional focused on study, on the accumulation of general cultural and specialized knowledge, on the thorough study of her roles, being a role model of cultivated musician who nobly shares her gifts with her disciples, the more intuitive black soprano Leontyne Price, often displaying her dynamic temperament and leadership spirit, is another type of interpretive role model, that of the feisty artist trying to be convincing, to perpetually demonstrate that the value of one's singing does not depend on the color of one's skin.

The tackling in this paper of the two contemporary musicians, Leontyne Price (96 years old) and Maria Slătinaru-Nistor (85 years old), both in the twilight of their lives and solo careers, is intended not only as a reminder of their fascinating singing careers, but as a challenge to today's singers to have the patience to look for the right mentor to guide them on the path of this form of art, not by integrating them into their own lives, but with the wisdom to help them discover the key to their own artistic destiny.

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