



Ausrine Stundyte as Katerina

Screaming in the woods—to doyenne of the opera house

By Alan Mercer

In a case of the morning after the night before, I found myself face to face with Katerina, that's to say Shostakovich's Katerina, in real life a young Lithuanian soprano who, a handful of hours earlier, had purged every drop of equivocality from the Leskov-inspired heroine-villain. The packed Lyon Opera house witnessed a performance that blended the violent with the fragile, steeped in a production which, in contrast to its London counterpart from 2015, skilfully avoided the dramaturgical pitfalls of Dmitri Tcherniakov's modern-day setting. (See p. 61 for a review of the Lyon performance.)

As we sipped our coffees in the sunlit peace of the opera house's top floor, appropriately in full view of the nineteenth-century silk merchants' quarter, I wondered at the sense of absolute calm that this Katerina now exuded, after an evening of high-voltage, energy-sapping evocations of an array of less-than-wholesome aspects of the human condition.

DSCJ Journal: As the curtain came down on last evening's performance, it struck me that after three hours of an intensely dramatic, pulsating operatic performance during which you were continuously on stage, you appeared as spritely and energetic as you had at the outset. Just how is that possible?!



Lithuanian soprano Ausrine Stundyte

Ausrine Stundyte: It's much more difficult for me to sing smaller, lighter parts, or those parts where I am partially on stage and partially in my dressing room. I prefer being involved on stage for as much time as possible, giving me the time to express myself and to find the energy I need for my roles. When I was first studying in Lithuania, I believed that my voice was too small for opera. This was exacerbated by the fact that in Lithuania at that time we only did Verdi, Puccini, and much of the large-scale repertoire. I honestly thought I would never survive!

DSCJ: What happened to change this?

AS: I met a jazz musician—one of

the most famous in the former Soviet Union, and a real guru of the jazz scene at that time. His name was Vladimir Chekasin [Born February 24, 1947 in Yekaterinburg, Russia], and he was a saxophone player in the famous Ganelin Trio. This was in the 1970s and 1980s when they were at the peak of their fame.

DSCJ: Was this in Moscow or St Petersburg?

AS: Strangely enough, this was in Vilnius. The musicians were all Russian Jews, and somehow they liked Lithuania and chose to live and work there. So I began working with Chekasin,



but he quickly concluded that I would not be a jazz singer, and so he started working with me on the classical repertoire, but from a different viewpoint.

Dsch: In what way?

AS: It's as you mentioned earlier: the importance of energy for a performer. Chekasin taught me how to create energy—even if you don't necessarily feel that you have this resource—and then how to hold onto this energy as a performer. His view was that music is much more than just notes and style: what is fundamentally important is the energy that performers can invest in their music. After all, if music were reduced to mere sounds, computers would be able to perform and make music as well as humans do—hence the importance of this personal energy element I'm referring to. There are teachers who tackle this intuitively, without actually being aware of how they convey this to students, but Chekasin was able to formulate this and teach me how to do it consciously.

Dsch: You felt you had the need for this training?

AS: Oh, totally! [Chekasin] gave me so much, and this idea of deriving energy is something that I love working on. For me it is much more interesting than, say, beautiful technique. I don't care as much about the idea of "perfect" singing—I find this idea of energy to be more invigorating and much more interesting than looking for the "perfect singer."

Dsch: Tell me more about your background: your family and your musical education.

AS: I was born in 1976 in Vilnius. My parents were not musicians at all; in fact, both grew up in small villages. Of course, in a country like Lithuania, music is everywhere and constant, so most of the people are musical in some way. But my parents were really simple people.

Dsch: Has your family been in Lithuania for a number of generations?

AS: Yes—and in this respect I am quite "pure"—perfectly authentic! One story I like to tell—one I tell again and again—is about how my singing career is connected to my father, who at the time held an advantageous position working in a meat factory, which gave him access to sausages and other goods. In Russia at that time there were no poor and no rich; but all the same, many kinds of food were not available. In the end, I can honestly say that I began my singing career thanks to my father's sausages! How? Well it was at one of the so-called "privileged parties," where those who took part used the opportunity to exchange their produce for favours. My father met the director of the best girls' choir in Lithuania at one such "party." The choir had the privilege of travelling to the West, at a time when none of us could even dream about such a thing. The choir entered many competitions and won many prizes—they really were a very strong choir. So it was through this choir and its director that my father saw the opportunity for me to see other parts of the world. Thanks to him and the director, I was able to join the choir, much to my delight. This was one of my greatest passions at that time.

Dsch: Where did you travel to?

AS: We went quite often to France and to West Germany, as well as to Greece. But in fact, as it happened, Bulgaria was my first foreign country, and here I was very disappointed; the Bulgarians at that time were even poorer and lived in worse conditions and with more difficulties than we did—I really did not expect that. Later on, I went to study in Leipzig, and I discovered that East Germany was quite different to the Germany I knew already, through trips to the West.

Dsch: This was a girls-only choir?

AS: Yes—it was girls only, which was horrible. But nothing is perfect! It was a very large choir, with around 300 girls divided into groups by age.

Dsch: Was this when you saw your future as a professional singer?

AS: Yes—singing in the choir was for me a very positive experience. The quality of the singing was very high, and I was sometimes given small solos to sing, which was something I quickly grew to love. As a matter of fact, I began my singing career as an alto, but given that parts were only for sopranos, I had to set myself the task of becoming a soprano! So each summer, which I would spend in the tiny village where my grandma lived (there were literally only five houses, so there was very often nobody around), I would go into the woods and scream (I would certainly not have described this as singing!) as high as possible to try to raise the pitch of my voice, and—although I can't be sure whether it's because of this—it worked! I always used the same song—"Ave Maria" by Bach-Gounod. "Maria, Maria," higher and higher... I really love this song, and of course it contains plenty of high notes, which I would transpose and sing as high as possible.

Dsch: And the outcome?

AS: After each summer break—this was in September—the choir's organisers systematically checked all of our voices, and in my case, I was declared a soprano! I was 12 or 13 at that time, and this change may well have been due to the onset of puberty rather than my screaming in the woods!

Later on, our choir grew even bigger, and the director took the decision to make it more professional—to create a sort of musical school—and for this he asked a well-known Lithuanian mezzo-soprano to give lessons to those who might be interested. Her name was Birutė Almonaitytė, and she truly was a great mezzo-soprano, although she was never very well known in the West. She was what



I might call a “natural” singer: she had no clue how to teach, and she was already quite old—around 70 at that time. She sang with a huge vibrato, and so by the age of 18, I was also singing with this massive vibrato [imitates, singing]! My second Lithuanian teacher had a very strong influence on me: she was an incredible singer, who I think could have been up there with the best-known sopranos. Her name was Irena Milkevičiūtė, and she was also a teacher at the Conservatory in Vilnius, where I enrolled at the age of 17.

DsCH: Was the ambition of students entering the conservatory in Vilnius principally to allow them to develop their career, travel outside the country and the region, and to build an international career; or were ambitions more conservative: for example, to build a career in Lithuania and perhaps in the other Baltic states?

AS: We all wanted to make a career out of singing, but it was clear that Lithuania offered few possibilities, which explains why there are so many Lithuanian singers living and working elsewhere around the world. For example, when I was studying in Vilnius, there was only a single opera house. If you wanted to have a job for life, you could try to find a job at the Conservatory that you could keep until you retired, which was very much a remnant of the old Soviet system. This meant that all the places were completely taken, so as a young singer, it was immediately clear to me that I had absolutely no chance of building a career in Lithuania. In the end, I decided to go to Germany: this was in 2000. In fact, this was also my last year at the Conservatory in Vilnius, but it was agreed that I could leave and come back to give my concert as part of my final exam.

DsCH: This was Leipzig?

AS: Yes—and it was very hard! I had always assumed that we as Lithuanians had truly suffered from Russian-led

oppression and had been affected by the system more than foreigners could imagine. But when I went to Leipzig, even though the Cold War was long gone, I still felt strongly the after-effects of Russian domination.

DsCH: For example?

AS: In particular, it was the mentality of the people: the “damage” was still present, and I had huge problems with this; in fact, intellectually, I was much, much freer than they were. Sure, to an extent this is also somewhat typical of German mentality—you know, if they do something, they do it by the book. So they viewed socialism in this way, whereas in Lithuania we had been constantly trying to cheat the system—for 50 or 60 years! We never really, in our heart of hearts, belonged to the Soviet socialist system. But in Leipzig, I had the feeling that the Germans really did believe in it.

DsCH: How long did you live in Leipzig?

AS: For three years. In fact, I went to Leipzig thinking that within a couple of months I would be given a position in some grand opera house after which I would begin my great career. Strangely enough, nothing happened [laughs]! Of course, musical tastes and overall culture were completely different, and I had no experience of the different musical styles that belonged to this new environment. To be honest, I didn’t really understand: in Lithuania, the objective is “louder is better!”; this is the only criterion. Successful singing is not so much about beauty. Milkevičiūtė was a unique phenomenon—a born singer and musician who sang beautifully. But she was the exception. Otherwise, sheer volume was the only thing that counted. So when I arrived in Germany, everything was wrong; I had no confidence, and even though I thought I would be a big star, this was not at all the case. And so I had to learn all over again: I had to sing and not scream!

DsCH: Was your ambition still to be a singer at the opera house?

AS: Yes—absolutely. And I think this is what I am best at. You might say that I’m “designed” to do so.

DsCH: Who was your teacher at this time, in Leipzig?

AS: I studied with Professor Helga Forner. She had never had a singing career because she had eyesight problems. In fact, she became almost blind and could not work on the stage. In Germany, there is what one might call a “fetish” in terms of cultivating a very, very pure, clean voice, without a single mistake, and without power. Naturally, this was difficult for me; it was against my character. That said, the professor did at least approve of singers who “let it go”: she would encourage us to express ourselves and allow our personalities to emerge.

DsCH: After Leipzig came to an end, where did your career take you next?

AS: To Cologne, where I stayed for six years as a permanent singer with the Cologne Opera—as is the German tradition. This was such an important time for me: I had to learn to be independent and protect myself, and I also had to learn a whole new repertoire that was not my chosen one. I needed to learn how to survive! In Cologne, I felt as though I finally regained my freedom: not only did the city have a completely different mentality, but also on stage at the opera house, I was finally able to find myself as an artist. I soon understood what would and would not work with an audience, and I was given many opportunities to express myself and to grow, artistically speaking, and to try out different roles.

At that time, I adored Puccini and Italian opera, so when I had an opportunity to engage with this repertoire, I was so, so happy! I didn’t like Mozart much, I have to admit: I was happy to listen, but not to perform. I was saved from operettas, thank goodness:



especially since I don't know how to talk on stage—my speaking voice is very low—and so after the first rehearsal of an operetta, I was taken off, which I was very happy about! Operetta is fun, and I like fun, but it's always the same fun [she laughs]!

DsCH: What about contemporary opera?

AS: I haven't performed much contemporary opera. That said, my love for twentieth-century repertoire has grown with the years, and with experience. No matter how wonderful it is to sing Puccini, there just isn't what I would call a "second layer": everything in his music sits on the surface, whereas German twentieth-century music contains layer after layer—there is no end to what you can find. This means that perhaps for the audience this music is not so easy to understand, but for the performer it's much more exciting.

DsCH: So you spent six years in Cologne: what was the highlight of this time?

AS: It was *Madame Butterfly*! As a listener, this opera was never a favourite of mine: I found it to be a little "kitschy"—you know, the work never broke my heart. But when I started to learn it, I found that it was so, so well written! I was in shock, you might say. In fact, I will always love the truly dramatic operatic repertoire—those works where the music and the theatrical aspects of a production function extremely well together to provide true emotion. And it's amazing how Puccini wrote this piece: it's all in there. However, so few singers really seem to understand: they are much too busy with producing beautiful sound! And so I totally fell in love with this opera, helped by the fact that in Cologne we did a really good production where all the Japanese crap was cut because, let's be honest, it doesn't work: pretending to be a small Japanese child really does not work! In the end, the director decided that

we should focus on the human drama; and it was such a huge success—all the tickets were sold out—so much so that they had to add two extra performances! In fact, this was my last performance in Cologne, so it was a nice way to leave.

DsCH: Was there anything that didn't work out quite so well for you, or that you were personally unhappy with?

AS: Yes—it was also in Cologne that I experienced my one and—I hope!—only flop, in Offenbach's *Orphée aux Enfers*. In general terms, it was not a very successful production, and I was a part of that lack of success. This was also the second year of my full singing career, and I felt that I needed to move on at this point.

DsCH: And after Cologne?

AS: At this point, I decided to go freelance—or at least half freelance, as I now had a contract as a resident singer in Lübeck in northern Germany. This was only a small theatre, so whereas in Cologne I was one of many singers, in Lübeck, I was God! Meaning that I sang in two productions per year, and in which they gave me the principal roles: it was a really nice feeling to be in this position, especially as I also had freedom to do other things—so half and half.

DsCH: At this stage, did you want to focus on any particular repertoire?

AS: You know, it's crazy. I don't like to be too superstitious, but at this time it seemed that everything I wanted to do I was able to do, and at the same time, those things I didn't want to do simply went away—they didn't bother me. A good example was around five years ago when all I was being offered was Italian music. This was just fine by me, but then I became bored with this repertoire and—a miracle—I have had no more Italian offers since!

DsCH: So what about the influence of Russia on you and your art: as the giant neighbour just across the border

during your formative years in Lithuania, to what extent did Russian culture and politics impact on your career?

AS: In terms of culture, the impact on me was very positive. Although the Soviet system brought many bad things to many people, for me, being part of the former USSR at this time brought many positives. For example, there were just six TV channels throughout the whole of the Soviet Union, and in Lithuania, there was a single Lithuanian channel and five Russian channels: and these were full of culture. Also, as you probably know, all education was free in all schools, and everyone had equal access to the arts.

Another preconception is that we were brought up with music by only Russian composers, but this is simply not true—the opposite, even! In the opera house, we never did Russian music; in fact, in the various concert venues, we performed a lot of Western music. So quite honestly I'm thankful for the education I received, and at no time did I feel obliged to adopt any aspects of Russian culture. I do feel and understand the typical Russian mentality and its emotional substance, which is different to ours. It possesses a very specific, deep sense of melancholic pain, even in the smallest, craziest, and supposedly happy songs. I feel this pain, and it certainly helps my interpretation of Russian music.

This understanding is very much wrapped up in Lithuania being a neighbour to Russia: we're not really them, but we know them well; we're not Western either, although I think we are more connected to the Western mentality than the Russian mentality.

DsCH: So to come to this performance of *Lady Macbeth* in Lyon, is this the first time you have sung Katerina in France?

AS: This is the first time I've sung in France, in fact; strangely enough, I had never had the opportunity to perform as a professional singer here before. I did perform *Lady Macbeth* a couple of years ago in Belgium—in Antwerp.



You know, Katerina really is one of my all time favourite roles! This show was a great success, although the production and staging were completely different than the current one. It ran for seven performances in 2014.

Dsch: Which brings me to the question of the Lyon production, which to some audiences might all the same be considered controversial. It projects the action, based on Leskov's nineteenth-century novel, onto a very bland, relatively contemporary setting. I'm sure this is not the first "modern adaptation" of an opera production that you've worked on, but specifically with regard to *Lady Macbeth*, what challenges did this production pose for you, and how were you able to deal with those challenges?

AS: I relate well to productions that attempt to connect with today's world: I think it's better for audiences and also better for me, as I find it allows me to understand the character to a much deeper extent. Both of the productions I worked in—Lyon and also the one in Antwerp—used contemporary settings, and not necessarily based in Russia either. The Belgian production was actually set in the future, in a post-Apocalypse world where the entire system has collapsed and where the worst and the wildest side of people are free to emerge through the absence of law and order. In this way, the Antwerp production actually sharpened the environment in which Katarina lived, increasing the rationale for her becoming a killer: she was not predestined to murder, but her world was so cruel, so aggressive that it was almost as if she needed to kill if she wanted to survive. In the Lyon production, my interpretation was based on the idea of what I might call a "cultural collision," where one culture meets another culture, and the individuals concerned not only don't understand each other but also don't even try to do so; they don't try at all to integrate; likewise the outside world and society in general: no one tries to understand. This is also

something I can connect with: we don't have to look very far, just look in the streets—simply go outside and witness this: people live together, but they live in totally parallel universes. They don't connect.

Dsch: You don't feel too much distance lies between the original Leskov scenario, based on his vision of nineteenth-century Russian society, and this wholly contemporary setting? Relocating Katerina's plight to late-twentieth century society, you don't think it's stretching an idea too far?

AS: I don't think so. In our time, you can find exactly this kind of event taking place, and though it doesn't happen to all of our families, it's sufficient to look in a 15-km radius of where we live to see stories of this kind, happening today, every day. I never give much weight to outside circumstances or conditions—what is vital for me is what is occurring in the hearts of fellow human beings. So, no—a contemporary adaptation really helps me; I feel more comfortable and more able relate to the characters.

Dsch: Do you know Leskov's original story well?

AS: Yes—I read it before I sang Katerina in Belgium. You know, often when you come to adaptations of novels, in the cinema example, they are very often not as good as the original book, but in this case, I actually prefer Shostakovich's version of the Leskov! The Katerina who is portrayed in the original novel didn't have as many "colours"—she was a purely cold-hearted murderer, and I didn't empathise with her as much as I did in the opera.

Dsch: Which versions of *Lady Macbeth* or *Katerina Ismailova* did you listen to when you were first learning the role? Which did you like?

AS: Surprisingly, perhaps, I prefer filmed performances—notably the

Galina Vishnevskaya version, which is my favourite overall—to live ones. Of course, in the opera house you have the live contact with the audience, whereas with a recording you have to use quite different methods to reach the listener.

Dsch: What are the main challenges of the role?

AS: It's a simple answer: the length of the opera. It is really easy to lose control if you're not careful, so you have always to keep in mind never to completely lose yourself in the piece, and to take a few steps back; but of course not all the time! Technically speaking, I find it so well-written for my voice—it is really comfortable. There are some difficult passages, but each voice likes different things, and everything I find in there, I like. Because the libretto is so good, and the music is also so well connected, it's very easy to add colour but to remain natural in my interpretation.

Dsch: But the drama is extremely intense, isn't it?

AS: Yes—but I love it. It's perfect; intense is exactly what it's supposed to be. Opera will always be, at least for me, the queen of all arts, but to be honest, I find the first act to be so, so complex. So much so that I have to focus extremely hard during this act. It is so incredibly difficult to create a piece where everything is perfect. And *Lady Macbeth* has truly everything, and makes for one of the best evenings I can imagine. I love it—I love the exhaustion!

Dsch: To what extent would you consider Katerina to be a victim?

AS: If she is a victim, she's a victim of Sergei's manipulation: Sergei is the best manipulator in operatic literature, or one of the best. He pushes exactly the right buttons to make a woman melt—he does everything, and in Leskov's novel even more so. You might say that she was the victim



of her situation. But the moment at which she truly changes, turning to corruption and murder, is when she meets Sergei and becomes a victim of his manipulation.

DSCH: Katerina as a woman: do you, or can you sympathise or empathise with her?

AS: I must admit, I love her: the aspect of her character I admire most comes through when she finally sees what she really wants and goes for it, without any doubts. It's not as if she likes killing people, or hurting people, but she sees a goal and goes for it—like a tank, like a Panzer. Yesterday after the performance, we met with schoolchildren to talk about the opera, and one student asked why the opera was set in current times and not in nineteenth-century Russia? So I explained that there were a lot of women in different cultures who suffered, and were suffering in exactly the same way—or even worse. I do like what Katerina does—how she fights for her rights and for her dreams. Of course, I don't suggest that all women start killing their husbands! (Or maybe they should, and then the men will start wondering what's wrong!) Yes—one may criticise Katerina's methods, but if you look at society at that time, then she did not necessarily have a choice.

DSCH: To what extent do you think that it was naive or unrealistic for Shostakovich to hope to remain out of trouble with this opera in the 1930s?

AS: I think the fate of the opera amounted to a personal intervention from Stalin himself. The first years of the life of *Lady Macbeth* saw such successful productions, and the opera ran literally everywhere. At the same time, you can be sure that the censor had been busily working anyway during this time. It was a great success, and so it's impossible someone suddenly "discovered" the opera out of the blue, crying "Oh my god we cannot allow this!" So,

no—I don't think at all that it was reckless. Added to which, for official Soviet propaganda, this was a good plot: we see the rotten bourgeois, just how atrocious they were; the work was particularly critical of the past regime. It's also worth noting that Stalin did not leave until the end of the wedding scene: he did not leave after the sex scenes, and I am sure this was what provoked him—the depiction of the police and the references to rife corruption: this was all so Russian, and it very likely touched a nerve! In a way, this is not even something that is specific to Russia: every country—every regime where powers are held by certain individuals—has the same problem. So it's not surprising that someone who was wielding such a huge amount of power might feel aggrieved and, yes, targeted.

DSCH: What about the notion of the operatic trilogy that Shostakovich himself referred to? What's your view of that, and what pieces might he have chosen to set? Also, do you feel he would have been capable of sustaining the quality of the writing and music?

AS: Of course he would have, and it's such a tragedy that this project never happened. Perhaps he would have chosen Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, though this would have been even more controversial than *Lady Macbeth*! Russian literature offers such a huge quantity of material, much of which would surely have appealed to Shostakovich.

DSCH: What other works by Shostakovich have you performed?

AS: I performed Shostakovich's Fourteenth several times, and that's all for now. I like Shostakovich's symphonic language, which is sometimes a weird language, but nothing is like *Lady Macbeth*. I performed the Fourteenth a few times in Germany and would be very happy to perform again. I have listened to a lot of his works, including his symphonies, though I

don't remember what the numbers are, so don't ask me! I've never seen *The Nose*, for example, because it has never been performed in cities where I happened to be working. But I would be fascinated to see this work. I do know the cycle of Jewish folk poetry: this is something I've never performed but would love to do so; I had planned it, but it never happened.

DSCH: Tell us something about your upcoming role in the *Fiery Angel* by Prokofiev.

AS: This will be in October. For me, this opera is similar to *Bluebeard's Castle*. It's not the story itself that is key, but rather what you put into it. So next season will be the *Fiery Angel* year. I will be performing it here in Lyon and then in Zürich after which there will be a short tour.

DSCH: So there will be two separate productions of the opera?

AS: Yes—two separate productions. I do love Prokofiev and am so looking forward to it! You know, *Macbeth* is very well defined as a human story—you can change the staging and surrounding, but the story remains very clear. But in the *Fiery Angel*, I have no idea—until now, I have no understanding—no picture. Unlike when I was a young singer learning a new piece, when I would spend a huge amount of time exploring all kinds of ideas around the characters, and in the end spending an enormous amount of time, and energy, for nothing, these days I try to come to a new production with a blank sheet paper—with no preconceptions.

DSCH: And after *Fiery Angel*?

AS: I really want to sing *Salome*, and I've had two or three offers in the past, but for various reasons it never happened. But in the main, I have always been able to sing roles that I really wanted to. I'm very lucky.

