



Ewa Podleś

by Richard Dyer

EWA PODLEŚ is quite forthright about admitting she has been on the operatic stage for more than 50 years.

The Polish contralto, who had just begun rehearsals for Opera Boston's forthcoming production of Rossini's *Tancredi*, recently stopped by the Brasserie Jo in the Colonnade Hotel for a luncheon interview; she was joined by her husband, the Polish pianist Jerzy Marchwinski, who for many years collaborated with Podleś on the recital platform.

Podleś was quick to explain that her debut came at the age of three, when she took the part of Trouble, the love child of Lt. B. F. Pinkerton and Madama Butterfly; the role remained in her repertory until she outgrew it. Her collaborator in Puccini's opera was the prominent soprano Alina Bolechowska; a few years later Mme. Bolechowska would become Podleś's only teacher and a beloved mentor. She lived long enough to attend her student's performances at international opera houses like Covent Garden and La Scala.

Podleś is a small woman who is larger than life, and she's theatrical even in conversation; she speaks in bold English, and always with emphasis. Her hands are voluble too, circling, pointing, and underlining everything she means. She knows who she is and what she wants; apparently she always did. As a young student in the Warsaw Conservatory, she was sent to a throat specialist who told her she had the vocal cords of a soprano. "How do you know that?" Podleś asked him, and continued to study and sing as a contralto. "Of course I have big notes at the top, and I profit from them, but my voice cannot spend its life up there," Podleś says today. "I learned this from what happened to my sister, who had an incredible instrument, but whose teachers constantly forced her voice upwards, so even when she was still in school she was not able to sing her final concert. I knew I had to follow my own path. I am a contralto, which is a rare voice, with three octaves, and I still have my voice after four decades as a singer."

Podleś was already in mid-career when she took on the role of *Tancredi*; Naxos records issued a live recording of a concert

performance with Podleś that was her first widely-distributed complete opera recording. That recording brought Podleś worldwide plaudits, and Tancredi became one of her signature roles, a part she has since sung all over Europe, in Canada and in the United States.

But her first encounter with the opera was in the supporting role of Isaura in Brussels in 1990. “Even then,” Podleś recalls, “I was angry at my agent for proposing such a role to me. But Gerard Mortier, who was head of the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie then, explained to me that the music for all the roles in this opera is very difficult and that he wanted an important singer for each part. Isaura’s part is so short that people were laughing when I would stand up from my chair, sing two words, and sit down again (this was a concert performance too). But Isaura does have one aria, and I added ornaments and cadenzas to it. I sang low and high, loud and soft, fast and slow – everything. And people went crazy and they were asking why didn’t I sing Tancredi. This was an early lesson in how it is possible to achieve something important even if you have only a small role.”

Over the years, Podleś has sung Tancredi in several variant versions. On her recording, she sings Rossini’s original happy ending. “Alberto Zedda, who conducted, is a very happy man so he prefers the happy ending. Because it is very difficult to figure out how to die in a concert performance, I accepted the happy ending. But in my stage performances, I really do prefer the tragic ending because I love so much to die onstage.”

Podleś illustrates her point by singing a poignant “Addio,” and for a moment as she flutters down to the restaurant table, it appears as if she might perish on her plate.

The Boston production will have some original touches; Opera Boston’s *Amenaide* is pregnant, so this has been worked into the plot. “I think it makes the story make better sense,” Podleś says, and it does make the accusations against *Amenaide* more serious and her perils more plausible.

The contralto’s own interpretation of Tancredi has also changed and deepened, and she no longer wishes to sing all the dazzling ornamentation she once added to the role. “The heroine, *Amenaide*, has all the music that Rossini decorated himself and that he intended for the singer to decorate some more. I used to think that I needed to try to match her, but over the years I started to ask myself why – this opera is not a race for the singers. I do not need to do this. Rossini intended Tancredi’s music to be less complicated than *Amenaide*’s; he is a very direct character, a counterpoint to *Amenaide*. What I want to do now is not to bring gasps of admiration from the public, but instead to lead them to tears. Tancredi is a dramatic role, and his music is not the place to show off all your possibilities. Rossini was a good composer, and he knew what he was doing.”

Podleś made her operatic debut in Warsaw as Rosina in Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville*; she won a competition, and the prize was a debut. But the performance was so impressive the Warsaw Opera immediately offered her a regular place on the roster. Always a vivid anecdotalist, Podleś recalls an early performance as Lola in Mascagni’s

Cavalleria rusticana. She went on without rehearsal, but at the end of the opera the stage manager told her to run down the stairs and “throw herself on the body.” When she arrived on the stage floor, there were two bodies onstage and she hurled herself onto the wrong one. “Get out of here,” hissed the supine and surprised prima donna, who was singing Santuzza. Podleś avoids unrehearsed productions these days, calling them “operatic fast food.” She is also not fond of bizarre Eurotrash updating, and of conductors who don’t know as much as she does. Once in rehearsal she stopped a prominent conductor and orchestra in mid-introduction to the tragic aria “Che farò?” from Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice*. “You make it sound like Orfeo wants to dance on Euridice’s grave,” Podleś announced in commanding tones.

Over the years she won a major reputation in Rossini, singing the leading mezzo and contralto roles in seven of his operas; she must have sung nearly as many Handel operas – her unremarked Metropolitan Opera debut in 1984 was at the close of the run of a production of Handel’s *Rinaldo* that was originally staged for Marilyn Horne.

But Podleś says she is no longer interested in proving how fast she can sing all the little notes in coloratura music – and she mimics some long Handelian melismas. “My voice was always dark and rich, but it was also a light voice, and it was natural and easy for me to sing such music. I never did anything to change my voice artificially, but it naturally changed itself, and I have to go where it leads me. It is not any more a voice for Rossini’s *Cenerentola*, but I have proven everything I can do in such operas. Now I can sing roles that

were not possible for me before, and I have sung Azucena and Eboli and Ulrica in Verdi operas. I can sing Eboli’s two arias without any problem, but I found singing them in the context of the whole very tiring, so I will not sing the opera again. If I had sung such roles when they were first proposed to me, I would not be here now. I have learned that singers pay dearly for their wrong choices; the impresarios and conductors and managers simply don’t care.”

Podleś has always been a controversial singer, and seems to relish the controversy. Many people love her voice from first hearing; some people can’t stand it, possibly because the timbre is so unusual, and the contralto voice is much less common than it was a century ago - or maybe such voices are trained differently these days, not always to their advantage.

“Critics sometimes say that I have three voices,” Podleś declares. “Of course I do. No one can sing a high C the same way you sing a C two or even three octaves lower.” And it is clear from her recordings of works like Mussorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death* that she revels not just in three registers, but in a vast number of character-revealing timbres that she exploits fearlessly.

She is as busy as concert and recital singer as she is in opera, and her preferred pianist these days is Garrick Ohlsson who plays all of Podleś’s music from memory in a completely interactive way. He calls her an “earth mother”; once, on the phone with Ohlsson, this writer asked him what that strange noise was in the background. “Ewa is chopping vegetables for dinner,” he replied.

Podleś is not in the least interested in working with a servile accompanist, and told Ohlsson to play with the piano lid all the way up and using every resource of the great soloist he is. “My husband always used to play my recitals from memory too. I really hate page turners. There is a stranger on the stage, and it’s like having a third person watching you when you are making love.”

By now Podleś has appeared in most of the major opera houses and concert series in the world, but she has never been a permanent member of any opera company outside of Poland, and her appearances in many places have been sporadic – 24 years separated her Metropolitan Opera debut from her next engagement there, in *La Gioconda* last season, for example.

Whatever her feelings may have been earlier in her career, Podleś is philosophical now about the unusual directions her career has taken and continues to take. “I have never done auditions. Proposals come to me, and I accept or reject them. Sometimes the agents think I am crazy to turn things down, but I am the one who has to sing and pay the consequences. I did not sing at the Metropolitan for a long time, but I was always singing in New York in recitals and orchestral concerts, and people were always asking ‘Why is Podleś not at the Met?’

“I have sung long roles in long operas for a long time, and now I enjoy singing a short but impressive role like the Old Princess in Puccini’s *Suor Angelica* which I just sang with Patricia Racette in San Francisco. They also offered me the low parts in the other operas of Puccini’s trilogy, but those are parts that anyone can sing and that make no impact; in *Suor Angelica* you can make create a character and leave an impression. Next year I am going to sing Klytemnestra in Strauss’s *Elektra* in Warsaw. The Metropolitan Opera offered me to sing the Old Countess in Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades* next season, but I could not accept this because of engagements to perform in Massenet’s *Cinderella* in Europe.”

Today Podleś says she feels her mission is to “touch people” with her singing. “You can reach more people with words, colors and expression than with all the virtuoso coloratura in the world. People say that when I sing Rossini’s *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, it gives them goose bumps. Of course I love it when people go crazy like that, but I love it even more when they don’t know when to applaud because they are crying.”