SHIRLEY VERRETT:

STAR OF GRAND OPERA... AND A TOP ACTRESS TOO!

Characteristically, when concert and opera singer Shirley Verrett unveiled her "new" soprano voice before a critical New York audience at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center, she chose two of the most difficult possible selections from all soprano literature to show it off.

Philharmonic conducted by Zubin Mehta, Verrett started her part of the program with Mozart's coloratura motet, Exsultate Jubilate! ("Exhult, rejoice!"), sung in Italian, and concluded with one of Wagner's most demanding soprano scenes, the Liebestod (Love Death) from the end of the opera Tristan und Isolde, sung in German.

Standing still as a priestess, elegantly gowned in flowing fuchsia chiffon, set off only by pearl button earrings, with no amplifying microphone (only recording microphones suspended high above the stage), the soprano sent her "new" voice riding gloriously over the full 105 pieces of the orchestra.

She earned an ovation and, though critical reviews were mixed, the artist left no doubt this time, nor in the three identical concerts which followed during the week, that she has indeed added a soprano range to the dramatic mezzo voice which has been so long admired in concert halls and opera houses here and abroad.

Minimal Gestures

Now in her mid-forties, Verrett is tall, regal and statuesque, a gracious hostess and subject for interview. Straight as an arrow, whether standing or seated, she moves with catlike grace, watches her weight carefully and is learning to keep gestures and movement to an absolute minimum.

Her smooth, dark brown complexion covers classic features and her even, white teeth, highlights of frequent radiant smiles, are complemented, when this happens by the crinkling of her large sable - brown eyes.

The Verrett speaking voice is well-modulated, low and soft, but PAGE 6

Management of the Metropolitan Opera considered Shirley Verrett rather "aloof" and "difficult." But now the Met is in new hands, and she believes relations are much better.

By Ben F. Carruthers



REGAL BEAUTY—Classic beauty is exemplified by Shirley Verrett in costume for the role of Cassandra in the opera, "The Trojans."

well projected with cello-like vibrations. Her vocabulary is rich and occasionally peppered with un-diva-like slang expressions for emphasis while communicating enthusiasm for all aspects of the vocal art and for the joy of living itself.

Nature normally gives women one of three voices—soprano,

mezzo or contralto with most voices falling into the first category.

Sometimes, however, even nature seems unable to make up her mind. Occasionally, sopranos lower their ranges to mezzo, often in order to prolong careers. But it is rare indeed for a singer to discover in mid-career that she possesses a "true" soprano in addition to her established mezzo voice. Verrett is the latest example of such an exception.

Not only is she moving into the soprano register in operatic pertrayals but she is polishing her own interpretation of the title role in Bellini's Norma, possibly the most demanding role in all of Italian operatic repertory and one which has challenged the talents of prima donnas since it was written in 1831.

In past seasons Shirley Verrett gained world-wide fame as one of the finest of Adalgisas, the mezzo priestess who shares the spotlight with Norma in florid arias and duets.

Better Relations

Asked about her decade-long relationship with the Met, our premier opera house, Verrett admits that previous managements found her "aloof" and even "difficult," but she believes that the current management is more understanding so that relations are much better.

Born in New Orleans, Verrett grew up in Ventura and Los Angeles, California, where her father was a successful building contractor and also served as choirmaster in a Seventh-day Adventist church where the Verretts were the only black members.

Young Shirley was introduced to music at six, but as she grew older, and announced a desire to make classical music her career, the family assumed that she would be limited to oratorios and recitals.

Anyway, they thought, classical music could hardly make for a successful, moneymaking, life-long career. Moreover, since Adventists have strict attitudes regarding the stage, the future prima donna was persuaded to major in accounting at college and, when she was graduated, to sell real estate for a while.

But the young woman's deepseated musical ambitions were
not to be denied, and she soon
found a serious teacher in Mme.
Anna Fitziu, a former
Metropolitan Opera soprano,
living in Hollywood, with whom
she studied twice a day for five
months!

Early in their relationship the

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teacher realized that she could not characterize the Verrett voice.

"We'll work as soprano at this point," she said, so the future diva began formal operatic training with "Vissi d'Arte" from Puccini's "Tosca" and "Oh Had I Jubal's Lyre" from Handel's "Joshua," two stunning showpieces from the soprano repertory.

Pianissimo Trouble

Early in this experience, however, the pupil noted that she had difficulty with soft or piano passages since they were not, as she says, "born in my instrument."

Interestingly enough, this teacher, who herself had a naturally beautiful piano, could not teach her eager student how to execute them.

Nor could her successor at Juilliard School of Music in New York, Mme. Marian Sekeley-Freschl, who had heard the young artist when she won top honors on Arthur Godfrey's "Talent Scouts" television program.

On that occasion the candidate switched her offering to "Mon coeur s'ouvre a ta voix" ("My

Accepting the Achievement Award of the Greater New York

Chapter of the National Women's Division of Albert Einstein

College of Medicine. Tom Snyder of NBC-TV made the presen-

tation. The award, given in 1975, was for Opera.

The Wiglet Slipped!

As for opera, Verrett finds audiences at La Scala Milan among the most enthusiastic. Several seasons ago, she says merrily, when she made her debut at La Scala in Saint-Saens' Samson and Delilah, she discovered, midway through the crucial "seduction scene," that her generous wig, adorned with an extra "hank of hair" in a braid, began to slip.

In this scene, Delilah is trying to learn the secret of Samson's strength which, of course, is in his hair.

Son, who was also making his La Scala debut, somehow got his hand tangled in the temptress' braid and caused it to loosen.

Suddenly, this Delilah had

visions of becoming "hairless" and thus sharing the fate of her soon-to-be-shorn Samson! Fortunately, there was napanic and the offending wig stayed in place until the curtain mercifully descended.

From then on, our heroine has made doubly sure of the security of wig placements no matter what the role.

Heart at thy Sweet Voice"), the mezzo highlight from Saint-Saens' "Samson and Delilah." It was then that Mme. Freschl decided that her talented pupil-to-be was a true mezzo.

Although not entirely convinced that this decision was correct. Verrett now says that she learned a lot from Mme.

Freschi who, "put me on the straight and narrow."

"I'm glad I sang mezzo all those years," Verrett confesses, "it gave me time to find myself, step by step. But in the end, I have learned so much about my voice that I recently decided to give myself six months to apply what I have learned on my own."

There is no question that Verrett considers herself her own most serious critic and readily admits that, in the present crucial period of moving into soprano repertory, if she were to feel any vocal retrogression, she would search the world over for a teacher who she feels knows something about her instrument.

Effective, worthwhile voice teaching is hard work, she admits, but she advises ambitious young singers to exercise extreme caution.

"Some friends and advisors are trying to get me to teach now," she says proudly, "but no way! First of all, it's terrible for a pupil to have to walt around for a teacher who is often in absentia. I may teach when I've finished my career, but I certainly want to have some voice left when I do!

"One person whom I helped in Vienna," she adds, "had gone through seven teachers. We went over scales together and I found only two or three notes that were really hers, so I said, 'That's your real voice—all the rest has been manufactured so far as my ear is concerned."

"The young woman was supposed to be a soprano but could not reach a 'G' which is duck

Shirley Verrett as she looked in her role as Selika of "L'Africaine." This was her debut at the San Francisco Opera in 1972.

soup for a mezzo! Before we finished, I had been able to take her up to a 'B' flat without letting her see the piano.

"She was overjoyed, but then I said, 'You're the first and last student I'll have until I retire.

"The young woman didn't even know how to stand to sing effectively. Surely one of the seven teachers should have taught her that!"

Find A New One

Anything that makes a singer uncomfortable, any strain will

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