



INTERVIEW – Simon O’Neill - «Ich wusste, dass ich das kann»

INTERVIEW – “I knew, that I can do it”

The new star in Wagner heaven is called Simon O’Neill. The New Zealander has just debuted as *Lohengrin* in Bayreuth (substitute for Jonas Kaufmann), in the next year he will sing *Parsifal* there, and in the new communal *Ring* of *La Scala* and the *Berliner Staastoper* he is to be experienced in his signature role of *Siegmund*. In this season the 39 year-old sings at almost all of the largest opera houses of the world. His first recordings have also just appeared: the Wagner recital *Father and Son* and a recording of his *Otello* début with the London Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Sir Colin Davis.

Mr O’Neill, you are singing your way in turbo speed through the heavy repertoire: Max and Florestan, Siegmund and Lohengrin, Samson and Otello – are you not sometimes dizzy?

Yes, sometimes I wake in the night and ask myself, whether everything really is true. But it is like that. The career started in the last two years, and now I am a real opera singer, who sings in all the places, of which he five years ago could only dream about. I just have my first *Cavaradossi* in a repertoire performance at the *Deutsche Oper Berlin* behind me. Naturally is hard with only two days rehearsal time. But it was offered to me, and I absolutely wanted to sing the role. So, where's the problem?

That is also true even for Otello with you, which is for some tenors of the summit of their career.

Yes, even if it sounds unbelievable. The night before I had sung with Antonio Pappano in Rome and had drunk *Chianti* afterwards, and as I was on the way back back to London the next day, came the SMS from my manager with the question whether I would not like to sing the next evening *Otello* with Colin Davis. I said yes immediately, although I hardly knew the role. I had studied only parts and up to the Duett in the first Act I had never anything from *Otello* with orchestra. There was a lot that I had not ever looked at. But that occurred to me only after I had agreed. As I had the music on my laptop, I noticed that the ensembles are considerably tricky. I was somewhat ignorant. When I appeared at the Barbican, I first occurred to me that the performance would be recored live and produced as CD. Sir Colin asked me, what I wanted to rehearse. I said: Everything, Maestro. But since that was not possible, we preferred not rehearse anything at all. And then it simply ran. I immediately noticed that the role fitted me like a glove.

Will you now also sing the role on the stage?

I do not know whether I am already ripe for the role - although it has been offered to me at large houses. The circumstances of this concert performance and jumping-in were very special. I had originally thought, I was not *Otello* – the role is usually cast with a tenor, who sounds baritonal

and possesses a bronzed timbre. By comparison my voice resembles more historical *Otellos* like Aureliano Pertile, who sounded similarly brighter. I know, of course, also Pavarotti's recording or that of Windgassen and Max Lorenz, as well as the Duett *Si, per il ciel* with Björling and Merrill. That is, as it were, the "Otello" School, to which I add myself.

Did you have stage fright?

I felt a little like *Parsifal*: a pure fool. If one thinks about such a thing too much, one would never do it. My wife and my manager were much more worked-up than I was. Inside of me I knew that I can do it. With my *Lobengrin*, which I sang for the first time in Summer in Bayreuth at the last performance - as a substitute for Jonas Kaufmann - it was exactly the same. There one must simply get through.

Is the pressure greater, if one has only one performance, in order to prove that one can sing a role?

It is the duty of every young *Heldentenor*, who wants to sing in large houses, to simply have these roles ready and to be able to jump-in, if a colleague becomes ill. Although for Bayreuth great singers such as Klaus Florian Vogt and Johan Botha were available, the Wagner ladies chose me. Great!

You were Cover in production for Jonas Kaufmann. Is that a strange feeling - as if one must slip into a suit, which was tailored for someone else?

My career started as Cover for Plácido Domingo, who started as Cover for Franco Corelli. It is good that everyone begins in such a way in order to learn. The first two weeks I rehearsed *Lobengrin* with Hans Neuenfels, because Jonas Kaufmann was still on stage as *Cavaradossi* in Munich. I found Neuenfels terrific and gave him a bottle of beautiful *sauvignon blanc* from New Zealand. That, I believe, pleased him very much. And I also greatly liked the production - even if I did not perhaps understand everything.

Kaufmann has a completely different vocal profile than you. Has that influenced your role portrayal?

I am a Jonas Kaufmann fan, but we have extremely different voices. And completely generally stated: What occupies me most in these roles is not the robust *Heldentenor* side, but the beauty of tone. I work most intensively on it. My ideal for *Lobengrin* is the performance with Franz Völker from 1936, the Bayreuth Tietjen production. I admire this performance so much, that I even bought in a second-hand bookshop the 1936 Festival Guide.

Next year you are singing *Parsifal* in the Bayreuth production. Have you considered the role again after the acoustic experience of the *Festspielhaus* stage?

Lobengrin is more difficult for me. *Parsifal* lies lower and falls more easily to me. There I am pleased already enormous: I was allowed to observe a performance from the covered orchestra pit - there were no more tickets to be had - and find Mr. Herheim simply a genius! By the way that will also be my role début. It may be that some consider me mad. But you must strike high when you wanna go.

Does that also mean: no fear of large roles?

I would like to be a old-fashioned singer and sing German, Italian, Slavic and English repertoire, instead of completely limiting myself to a few roles.

That, for example, the voice must adjust itself between a more highly lying role such as Lohengrin and a deeper like Siegmund - is that a purely technical vocal problem?

Oh, I could sing *Siegmund* tomorrow without difficulty, and I do not change the way I sing at all. In the end Mozart is the basis for nearly all my roles. For my *Lohengrin* I warm-up with Tamino's *Bildnis* aria. I do that also for Florestan. I simply feel well with these roles, and also *Siegfried* in *Götterdämmerung* suited me at first attempt, when I sang pieces for the first time for my CD. I shall leave the young *Siegfried* for the present, likewise *Tristan* and *Tannhäuser*, but that has more to do with the fact that these roles need greater staying power.

Who actually discovered you?

Starting at 20 I was a completely ordinary baritone. Then my teacher in New Zealand suggested to me to try a little tenor repertoire. From 25 to 28 I studied tenor, then went with 28 to the Juilliard School, and the voice was actually finished with 31. However, I still have my three singing teachers, one in New York and two in New Zealand. And they immediately tell me if something is not correct. Only in recent years has my voice developed in such a way that I can now easily approach roles with a high C - I would have previously never thought that.

Was German pronunciation in Wagner more difficult for you to master than the vocal side of the roles?

I studied piano and have a diploma as a *Korrepetitor*. I have always loved the music, and studied the scores already. The challenge for me is actually the language: because Wagner is certainly not just the music, but also belongs to the greatest testimonials of German art - the same is true for Verdi and Italy. Therefore one owes these roles greatest possible word clarity. If my German was completely dreadful, Frau Wagner would probably not have let me on the Bayreuth stage. Naturally, when I listen to my CD, the things, which are not yet perfect, are noticeable to me. From today's perspective: I would probably not have sung *Lohengrin* in the first recording session. But one is always wiser afterwards. Generally speaking I am still happy with the result: To have achieved such a recording in New Zealand at all is a miracle - we even had to fly-in musicians from Australia.

You also studied tuba – in order to get the lungs for Siegfried?

As a child I had severe asthma and by the way still run around with the asthma spray in the bag. As therapy at that time my parents ordered for me two things: Swimming and to learn a wind instrument. With the instrument I had the choice between bagpipes and a brass wind instrument. It was then that I selected the tuba. Firstly in brass bands, then in the orchestra. I even have a university degree: I was rejected for singing, but I was allowed to study tuba. In Bayreuth this year I even bought an old Wagner tuba. Now I sit at home and play my children Wagner. They love it – as do I. As a Wagner singer one must love the brass. Is it always there, when one sings.

You have already mentioned Plácido Domingo. Did he also teach you?

He did not give me lessons, but when I was Cover for his *Siegmund*, I naturally listened to all performances. And while he waited in his dressing room after the first Act, he would sit down at the piano, and then we sang together: he *Iago* and I *Otello* and such things. However, I also had a Masterclass with Luciano Pavarotti at the Juilliard, which remains a strong memory. His way of singing helped me with *Lohengrin* a great deal.

One gets the impression that you do feel very comfortable in Germany – not only because of Wagner.

That's true. I am a fan of Germany, even when I live in London. The food, the beer, the music. If my twins had both been girls I would have called them *Helmwiese* and *Rossweisse*. However, they are a boy and a girl. But although they are called Thomas and Grace, I often call them Little *Siegmond* and Little *Sieglinde*. And in Bayreuth next year they will come to Daddy's opening performance of *Parsifal* in *Dirndl* and *Lederhosen*!

Did you never have fear of failure?

Yes, after my Bayreuth *Lohengrin*. My voice at the end of the performance was tired - also because I had previously been ill. I was certain before went in front of the curtain: Now you are going to be booed. I had the feeling for the first time in life. But then the audience was fortunately very kind.

Translation: Martin Snell