

## AGNES BAL TSA

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Some time ago I asked for information about Agnes Balt sa. A steady flow of replies and recordings came my way and I acknowledge the kindness of those many people.

Agnes Balt sa is the most exciting mezzo of our day. As with fellow Greek, Maria Callas, she has tremendous energy and a simply gorgeous voice.

She was born on 19 November 1944 on the island of Lefkas in the Ionian sea. She had piano lessons from the age of six and tried composition writing little piece apparently sad in context. She also kept a diary indicating that from an early age she was methodical.



In 1959, at the age of fourteen, the family moved to Athens where Agnes studied at the Conservatoire graduating with the highest marks and winning the Maria Callas scholarship by which she could continue her studies in Munich. Here she took coaching in drama and learned the German language. Her period of study was three years. In 1968 she auditioned for the Frankfurt Opera under their new director, Christoph von Dohnanyi, and that year she made her debut as Cherubino in Mozart's Marriage of Figaro. She was with the Frankfurt Opera for two years. A year later, she made her debut with the Vienna Opera as Octavian in Richard Strauss's Der Rosenkavalier. She joined the Deutsche Opera in 1971 and also made her American debut in the title role of Bizet's Carmen. In 1976 she returned to America with the Vienna State Opera under Karl Böhm performing in Washington in the role of Dorabella in Mozart's C osi fan tutte. With the same forces she made her debut at La Scala as Dorabella. That year also saw her debuts at Covent Garden and the Paris Opera as Cherubino. She also sang in a concert hall in New York under Karajan.

Karajan was important to her in her early career mainly due to his wide experience.

Balt sa is a very wise singer in that she groups performances together which call for the same type of voice and style. She will put all her bel canto roles in sequence and allows herself several days to recover after performances particularly after a taxing dramatic role like Carmen.

Riccardo Muti has often been called a martinet when conducting, but Balt sa responded well to him as she did to Claudio Abbado with whom she first worked in January 1985 as Carmen and, in 1987 and 1988, in Rossini's The Italian Girl in Algiers and in 1989 in Verdi's Don Carlos. With Muti she sang the role of Romeo in Bellini's The Capulets and the Montagues, her most famous bel canto role.

Karajan was different. Balt sa first worked with him and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in 1974 in Beethoven's Missa Solemnis. She sang the part of Herodias in Richard Strauss's Salome with Hildegard Behrens in the title role.

In 1979 Balt sa sang Eboli in Don Carlos under Karajan in the Salzburg Festival and in 1983 at Salzburg, again under Karajan, she sang Octavian.

But the megalomania of Karajan displayed itself. Engaged to sing Carmen under his direction, Karajan

wanted her to sing it completely differently from the score and from the many times she had previously sung it so successfully. His demands did not make sense musically, or in any other way.

Baltsa was not happy.

Karajan's attitude was, 'you do it my way because I say so'. His way was often absurd and many suffered at his hands.

Rehearsing Carmen with Karajan was horrendous. She had performed Carmen many times before with unbridled success and now to be told that she was wrong and also told by Karajan, "You will do it my way because my way is right" which was typical of his arrogance.

Baltsa was troubled and sure that the maestro was wrong. Karajan sacked her. There is no doubt that Karajan was in the wrong completely. His extreme arrogance and narcissism was the foundation of the appalling way he treated Baltsa and others. To her credit she tried to resolve the difficulties and heal the breach and she sang in the performance of Mozart's Requiem in Salzburg Cathedral in memory of Karajan who died in the summer of 1989.

Her first performance in Saint-Saëns's Samson and Delilah was at Covent Garden in 1985 which role she repeated there in 1991. It was universally acclaimed. That year she sang Charlotte in Massenet's Werther following a great success as Elisabetta in Mary Stuart by Donizetti. Her first verismo role was as Santuzza in Cavalleria Rusticana by Mascagni. It brought out the remarks from that fine conductor, Giuseppe Sinopoli, who was 'overwhelmed by her incomparable talent'.

She starred in the German film Duett in 1992, as an opera singer!  
Her recent successes have been in Jenufa and Elektra.

She is married to the German opera singer Gunter Missenhardt and has homes in Berne and Athens

She is a truly great singer with a compelling stage presence. Someone has remarked that she could never be dull even if she tried. 'She is as great a singer as Callas at her best,' writes another. She adores her work and lives life to the full.



For my part she is very, very special, a view shared by many!

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