

Globe Life & Arts



MUSIC

The soprano

Robert Harris traces Isabel Leonard's thrilling ride from Juilliard to the Met and the COC stage

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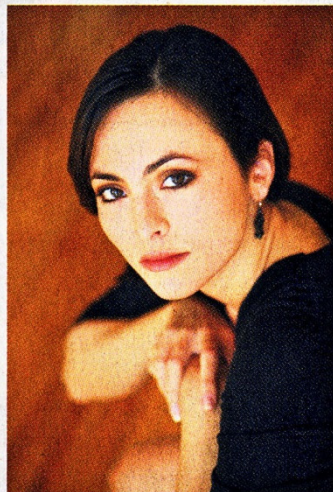
A down-to-earth diva

ROBERT HARRIS

Mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard, currently performing Sesto in the Canadian Opera Company's production of Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* in Toronto, is one of those people destined to be admired. She has a natural beauty, with her Argentine mother's brown eyes flashing from a composed, symmetrical face. She is blessed with a remarkable singing voice, a clear, effortless instrument with a range that doesn't know where to stop, at either end of the scale. She's a gifted actress. One of the chosen.

Don't believe it. Leonard is all those things (including being a devoted mother to Teo, her two-year old, with whom she travels the world). But she is no modern fairy princess. Leonard works. Hard. She's a devoted artist, but one for whom each success has been laboriously earned.

"I love to work, love getting into the process" she tells me as we sit in her chilly, somewhat spartan COC dressing room. As charming as she can be, that steady, determined resolve is never far from the surface.



Mezzo Isabel Leonard went straight from Juilliard to the Met. JARED SLATER

And this season, that perfectionist work ethic has been put severely to the test. The young singer, who jumped right to the Metropolitan Opera stages after her graduation from Juilliard in 2006, began this season at the Met creating the role of Miranda for Thomas Adès's new operatic version of *The Tempest*. She then

sang Rosina in Rossini's *Barber of Seville* in December. The Sesto she's performing here is a role debut for her. Two days after the run finishes, she's presenting a brand-new recital program in New York, then taking it on the road. Before summer arrives, she will also be learning her part for debuts in Berlioz's *Nuits d'été* and Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, as well as his *L'heure espagnole*.

The critics who have been praising Leonard for the past six years inevitably start with her clear, unaffected voice. But they invariably move on to the strength of her characterizations, noting that Leonard is as gifted an actor as a vocalist. "The music I sing comes to me as a beautiful, sublime gift," she says. "Generally, I love it all. But what's most interesting to me is how people tick, how characters tick. Where they've come from, how they've developed. As I prepare, it's the characters that give me the most fight."

And although this is the first time she has had to go a round or two with Sesto in *La Clemenza*, she has some clear ideas about this figure from Roman history, who allows his passion for the

seductive Vitellia to lead him to betray his comrade and friend, the emperor Tito. "I told Chris [Alden, *La Clemenza's* director]: Sesto is not a weak character. If he comes across as a weak character, we've lost the point of the opera. A weak character can't make a decision – and he's made a huge decision. There has to be responsibility in his choices."

Leonard's need to understand her characters and become them on stage has added interesting dimensions to the problems all opera singers face in their very demanding business. For one thing, it affects her ability to learn roles – a difficult task for all singers, who must inevitably learn long sections of text in a language not their own. "I have a hard time memorizing music I can't understand," she says. "If I can't connect with the words flying out of my mouth, memorization takes an exponentially longer time."

And she says that understanding is important to her vocal production as well. "If I don't hook up with a character, my voice doesn't completely work. I'll be in my lesson, and I'll do a run that doesn't quite come out the way I

want it to. And I know why! It's because I haven't found the essence of my character."

When she was applying to college programs, Leonard wrote a little essay explaining what she wanted to do in her life. "I said I wanted to allow members of an audience to sit in their nice comfy chairs and offer them something they would not otherwise be able to experience. To connect with them – do the whole animal-to-animal thing." Her greatest anxiety, she says, is "letting the little fears that you beat down every day take over your life, so that you lose your ground, and stop searching for honesty." So far, she's winning – and so are the audiences that watch her perform.

Leonard has taught son Teo to send her off to work every night with a friendly injunction. She calls out as she leaves him, "Mumma's going to the opera now," and he calls back, "Okay, Mumma. Sing loud; sing pretty!"

The COC's *La Clemenza di Tito* continues through Feb. 22.

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