

ANGELA GHEORGHIU

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By BARRYMORE LAURENCE SCHERER *New York* I am Romanian, but to follow an international career you need to live in an airplane and be all the time in other places than Romania," says soprano Angela Gheorghiu, following rehearsals at the Metropolitan Opera. "So we have homes in Bucharest, Geneva and Paris, but we live a kind of Gypsy existence." In fact, a moment earlier she got off her cellphone with her husband, tenor Roberto Alagna, who had just landed at Kennedy Airport -- in March he stars in the Metropolitan Opera's "Cavalleria Rusticana" and "Pagliacci" double bill. Ken Howard Angela Gheorghiu, leading lady of 'La Rondine.' We are having tea in the Mandarin Oriental sky lobby, 35 stories above Columbus Circle. Below us, winter's dusk envelops Central Park and its surrounding avenues, the lights of the skyline and slowly moving traffic softened by falling sleet and snow. Ms. Gheorghiu is starring in the first Metropolitan Opera revival in over seven decades of Puccini's sumptuously beautiful but relatively unfamiliar opera "La Rondine," which bowed on New Year's Eve. The opera's title means "The Swallow," and refers to what Ms. Gheorghiu characterizes as "a woman's need for her own liberty." The work, which premiered at Monte-Carlo in 1917, tells the story of Magda (Ms. Gheorghiu), a Parisian courtesan of a certain age, who enjoys a heady romance with Ruggero, a handsome and adoring provincial youth. But when he proposes marriage, underscoring it with a letter from his mother welcoming a prospective daughter-in-law so long as she is pure, Magda leaves Ruggero to resume the glittering life she has enjoyed as the mistress of a wealthy banker. The music of Giacomo Puccini features notably in Ms. Gheorghiu's current season. Her recently released CD-DVD set, "My Puccini" (EMI Classics), documents her traversal of his heroines from Manon Lescaut onward. "Puccini wrote magnificently for the tenor voice because he understood its importance," she says. "But he was in love with the female voice." She says that she feels a special connection with Puccini not just because of the melodic lushness of his music, but also because of "the continuous way he wrote the important moments for his characters." She observes: "He lived during the time when film and recording were being developed. His music is often like listening to a soundtrack -- there are not big differences between the dialogue and the arias. And also the arias are so compressed -- Puccini can say in only two or three pages what other

composers take 10 pages to say. And because of this, Puccini arias are extraordinarily powerful." **Read More In This Puccini Work, Only a Dream Dies** (1/13/09) Having listened over the years to her singing, I note that she has a particular affinity for Puccini's words, which she articulates with the dramatic urgency of a genuine actress. "When I sing Puccini I feel I am not simply a soloist but part of the whole ensemble -- voice and instruments. You can actually hear how the phrases of the libretto -- the words -- are always reflected in his orchestration. When you sing each phrase of 'La Bohème' or 'Tosca' or 'La Rondine,' you cannot believe for a moment that Puccini could have written these combinations of melody and instrumentation in any other way." Though Ms. Gheorghiu has been singing Magda on stage for the past five years, she actually first learned the role for her 1996 recording with her husband (EMI Classics). She says that her recordings, apart from "Traviata" and "Bohème," have tended to represent her initial essay of each role. "I'm not the type of singer who feels, oh, I must do the role on stage a number of times before making the recording. No, no, I always wanted the spontaneity of a fresh role whenever I was about to record," she says. "I'm rather quick at studying. And by the time I have gone through a score for the first time, I usually have an understanding of the role." Asked if her approach to Magda has changed over the past five years, she says that "because I'm always trying to find new ways to color the music in my voice, I sing certain phrases a little differently than I did at the start, but these are not huge differences." Her latest Puccini role is Madame Butterfly, which she recently recorded, "because at this moment in my career I felt ready for it. I spent two weeks in Rome rehearsing for the sessions -- I sang Butterfly for three or four hours each day. It is the most demanding role for me because I feel I am not just singing it, but actually living the part. And having the music in my throat actually helps me to say Cio Cio San's words. They are so incredibly moving. And for me, from the first moment she opens her mouth she is a tragic figure." Having just listened to advance copies, I can say that under Antonio Pappano's profoundly sensitive baton Ms. Gheorghiu and tenor Jonas Kaufmann deliver a heartbreaking performance to treasure. Zina Saunders As a Romanian who takes great pride in her nation's culture, Ms. Gheorghiu has included Romanian songs in her recital programs. But "Romania doesn't have a big operatic legacy. The best-known Romanian opera -- though not the best of them -- is 'Oedipe' of Georges Enescu." Others include "Hamlet" by another 20th-century composer, Pascal Bentoiu. And she has a particular soft spot for Romanian operettas. "They are wonderful, full of waltzes and *csrds* numbers like Johann Strauss and Lehr, but with a strong national color and flavor." What is she currently listening to on her iPod and laptop? "Well, I don't want to mention an opera because it's too close to the bone," she says. "But in instrumental music I very much like piano literature -- each month I want to have something by Dinu Lipatti [the splendid, but short-lived Romanian pianist]. I also like salsa and the tango -- not only

Argentine tangos but European ones. Of vocal music I have Madeleine Peyroux -- wonderful jazz singer -- and Michael Bubl. And in movies I always want to carry something by Cary Grant each month." This month's selection is "The Philadelphia Story," which also stars another of her favorites, Katharine Hepburn. Ms. Gheorghiu also cites her "favorite perfect actress," Judi Dench. "'Ladies in Lavender' -- such a beautiful film. She made a fantastic, very tough, movie, 'Notes on a Scandal,' with Richard Eyre [who directed Ms. Gheorghiu in 'La Traviata' at Covent Garden]. Also with Cate Blanchett, such a huge talent." Ms. Gheorghiu observes, almost with a note of envy, that spoken acting allows something that opera singers don't have -- the freedom to deliver a truly different performance each time. "Singers have to perform words *and* music. And this requires a conductor -- otherwise, we would be out of tempo. But that tempo imposes a strictness on how we perform a role from night to night. Still, I wish there would be more of that sense of flexibility." I like to imagine a lot of the time that I am singing with the composer before me. The only thing a composer wants is the success of his work. That's why we are on stage. It doesn't matter if it is a tragedy a comedy -- it is an entertainment. It is our job to please. Otherwise what is the use of all my training, all those years of study since the age of 14 . . . ? For what? For one result: to please the audience and to move their emotions."