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## Singing for peace



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*During the recent Asian Global Leadership Forum at Pangkor Laut Resort, American soprano Cynthia Lawrence shared the stage with famed tenor Luciano Pavarotti in a special concert for world peace. CHRISTINA KOH speaks with Lawrence, who shares her insights on her life, her craft and the man she has sung with in over 60 concerts all over the world.*

OPERA is an extremely difficult sport, or at least so says American soprano Cynthia Lawrence.

"You actually get injured a lot on stage, because you're running around and even falling on cue. I have had bruises on my knees, elbows and arms.

"One time, a man got stabbed by a dummy dagger and we had to stop.

"Sometimes, I'd have blood trickling down my arm after a performance and I'd go, 'How did I get that?' When you sing, you find yourself so into it that you don't even realise you're injured," she says.

Lawrence performed with famed tenor Luciano Pavarotti, flautist Andrea Griminelli and the Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia under conductor Leone Magiera in a special concert for world peace at the Asian Global Leadership Forum from Sept 6 to 8.

Fresh after the concert the night before, the 42-year-old soprano was explaining why she seems to employ more gestures in her singing during the performance while Pavarotti mostly stood still, letting his voice carry the song effortlessly.

She says the reason has a little to do with the maestro's age – he turns 67 on Oct 12 – and his experience on stage with the demands of the craft.

"He's a perfect gentleman, and I believe that he likes to be treated as a human being, to be treated with respect even though he is the biggest, possibly the greatest, opera tenor of all time," Cynthia Lawrence says of Luciano Pavarotti.

"Luciano is from an older school of opera, and he's actually concentrating a lot when he sings. He is an artiste first and foremost. Where he comes from, people do not move very much on stage. Americans are generally more expressive and active in opera."

Against the backdrop of a rainforest at the concert venue in Emerald Bay, Pangkor, the tenor sang nine arias and three duets with Lawrence. This was Pavarotti's second trip to Malaysia; his first was in

1994.

In the audience was Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali as the guests of honour, US Ambassador to Malaysia Marie T. Huhtala, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Razak, Forbes Inc chief executive officer Steve Forbes, YTL Corporation Berhad group managing director Tan Sri Francis Yeoh and other local and international forum participants.

Warm and unassuming, the California-born, Colorado-grown singer says she first met the maestro about 14 years ago during the Luciano Pavarotti International Voice Competition which attracted 6,000 girls to sing for him.

Early experience in controlling her emotions while riding horses – so that the horse does not pick up on an eight-year-old's nervousness and go wild – helped Lawrence keep her cool when her turn came to shine in that competition.

"Here was the chance to sing for the maestro and maybe be discovered! There were so many singers who were nervous at the idea.

"Out of those 6,000, he was to choose only one and in the end, he chose me.

"I'm not sure why, but from the beginning, he did not scare me. He's human, I know that now. He's a perfect gentleman, and I believe that he likes to be treated as a human being, to be treated with respect even though he is the biggest, possibly the greatest, opera tenor of all time."

On stories that the maestro was occasionally temperamental, Lawrence says: "Look at his position. There are millions of people out there who think he walks on water. Whether or not he likes it, he's there. He is a warm, genuine human being, and he has a big heart. He cares very deeply for people.

"He has no patience however for people who want to kiss his feet."

Having sung with him in more than 60 performances, Lawrence says she is now used to the changing routines of a world tour with the man who has since become a treasured friend.

They play cards, exchange recipes, cook for each other – the tenor being a known lover of the culinary arts – and her long association with the maestro also allows her some insights into the man's habits.

Take, for instance, the scarf-like piece of cloth Pavarotti had in his left hand throughout the Emerald Bay concert.

"It's actually a kind of signature. Before he performs, he would get a white piece of cloth, usually a napkin made of linen, and keep it in hand. People think there's nothing there, but there's actually a small piece of green apple inside.

"Because we are singing for a long time, the mouth tends to get a little dry. Sometimes he would squeeze the apple to get a bit of moisture in, which helps revive the voice a lot. He doesn't use it every time, but it's something to have just in case.

"Sometimes, he would later sign the napkin and throw it – without the apple – into the audience like a kind of signature," she says.

She has even heard stories, after performances with the other two Tenors Jose Carreras and Placido Domingo, of people approaching Pavarotti backstage asking him to sign weird things, like ladies' undergarments.

A rising star in the world of opera, Lawrence says her agreeing to perform in Malaysia for the first time had partly to do with the aftermath of Sept 11.

"I was supposed to be performing at the Metropolitan Opera, and I arrived in New York on Oct 5, less than a month after what happened.

"I was a little afraid of what I would find, but I found that for the first time, people wanted to talk about their feelings, their fears, which was an incredible thing because in New York, nobody talks. Everything felt and looked different.

"When we sang opera and people came to hear us, it was like we wanted to sing and give a little more, to tell everyone that we needed to go on. In a way, it was like a big group hug," she says, reflecting that if anything good came out of the Sept 11 tragedy at all, it was that it brought people closer together and made them realise what was important in life.

"Singers would ask me how they can sing in light of such sadness and devastation. A very dear friend of mine was asked to sing on the site of Ground Zero. She didn't know how she could, but she sang *Amazing Grace* and it was like God was speaking to her.

"So when Francis (Yeoh) asked me to sing during the forum, I felt like it was something I had to do," she says.

Yeoh, who met up with Lawrence at her concert with Pavarotti in Hong Kong and Shanghai, had excitedly told her about his vision of a forum which would advocate peace while having local and international speakers discuss the changing landscapes after Sept 11.

Experiencing Malaysia and seeing it for the first time has left the soprano amazed at its "cultural diversity, beauty and depth."

"I do not think there is any other country, as far as I know in my years of travel, that has this much diversity. It is so different."

Although her husband Mark Calkins had initially raised concerns about security, Lawrence says she has always felt very safe, even to the extent of allowing herself to go "a little crazy".

"Just before the concert, I was walking along the beach in my opera dress; I'm very logical about wild and crazy ideas."

While Pavarotti is renowned as one of the Three Tenors, Lawrence is known as one of the Three Sopranos alongside Kathleen Cassello and Kallen Esperian.

Having sung professionally for 18 years, she had, at one time, been leaning towards either studying singing or chemistry.

She attributes her first interest in opera to her father, who was a rocket scientist.

"He would play opera music in the house to help him think. I kept hearing it and I ended up singing it everywhere all the time.

"When singing in a chorus as a child, they would say I sang too loud but I couldn't help it! It's like I couldn't keep the music inside.

"When I was 17, my mother took me to a voice instructor and said, 'I'm not sure, but I think there's something here. Could you do something with her?' My family didn't have much background in music and so my mother couldn't quite tell if I was good."

Lawrence is quick to dispel the common myth that opera is only for and understood by the high brow.

"In the beginning, opera was written for the common people. I've always wanted people – especially youths – to walk into an opera house and be able to identify with the emotions. I'd like them to think they can clap and cry anytime. I want them to think 'opera is cool'."

She describes opera as visual, poetic, musical, emotional, and, as she often likes to repeat, "real".

"Opera is about love, disappointment, tragedy, death! It's about real life itself, and all of this in two and a half hours (of performance)."

"It's not just about singing with a beautiful voice, without knowing what you feel about the song. It has to be from the heart. Whenever I sing, I like to single out one face in the audience, and be able to take them to a beautiful place," she adds.

What surprises many is that other than her contribution in the *Three Soprano* CDs, she has yet to have her own solo recording, something she plans to undertake next year.

Some of the numbers might include songs from *Madam Butterfly* – one of her favourite operas – *Macbeth*, Richard Strauss' *Four Last Songs* and a combination of other fast and slow numbers.

"After a concert, a lot of people would come up to me and ask where they can get my CD, and I have to tell them I don't have one.

"I think I have sung for more people with Luciano than many other people who have their own CD recordings," she muses.

Lawrence, whose next project is *Jenufa* at the Metropolitan Opera, lives in Minnesota with her husband and two daughters, seven-year-old Rowan and Shannon, aged four-and-a-half.



For soprano Cynthia Lawrence, opera is 'cool'. It is also visual, poetic, musical, emotional, and as she likes to repeat, 'real'.