



## **Classical Singer Magazine: Extending the Stage**

**Interview by Megan Gloss**

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Carla Dirlikov might possess the classical music industry's most unique formula to what it takes to make a successful operatic career. She envisions it backward.

"Many singers think of where they hope to be and work toward that goal," she says. "I think of how I might hope my children will think of me at the end of my life. At the end of the day, I want the work that I did to reflect who I was. What did I do with my life and my work to make the world a better place? You almost have to build backward from that."

Although the mezzo-soprano has earned a wealth of acclaim on international stages—much of which she attributes to her extensive work in the title role of Bizet’s operatic classic *Carmen*—Dirlikov’s reach extends far beyond the scope of her musical aspirations. She has embraced opportunities to put the success she has found in singing to good use as a United States State Department Cultural Envoy. It enables Dirlikov to promote American culture, the importance of the arts, and an exposure to classical music and opera to those who might not otherwise have the opportunity to ever encounter it.

On March 19, as a result of her extensive outreach work, Dirlikov became the first singer to receive the Sphinx Medal of Excellence. The award recognizes the work of black and Latino leaders in music who—early in their careers—show artistic excellence, a strong work ethic, and a spirit of determination and leadership. She was bestowed with the honor from Sonia Sotomayor, associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. Currently residing in Philadelphia with her husband, this daughter of a Bulgarian father and a Mexican mother credits music education and outreach as a defining factor for her body of work. It’s one that Dirlikov said has served as her motivation throughout the years, yielding a strong sense of self-awareness and discovery and enabling her to respond to a calling to give back and remain grounded. And, she said, her outreach has been shaped more by what she can do, rather than what it can do for her.

## Music as a Human Experience

Dirlikov stumbled upon her passion for voice in an unlikely place—at a violin lesson.

“In my lessons, the teacher often would have me sing the line of music,” Dirlikov recalls, with a laugh. “I discovered that it was easier and I was good at it. I found that I like the combination of text and music even more.”

Realizing she was in the “wrong place,” Dirlikov quickly took to singing. She would go on to receive her bachelor of music degree from the University of Michigan—the state from which she originally hails—before continuing her music studies at the Conservatoire National de Paris and completing her master’s degree in opera performance at McGill University in Montreal. She also is an alumna of the prestigious Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia.

Since then, she has been an in-demand force in opera houses and concert halls across the globe, championing such roles as Adalgisa in *Norma*, Maddalena in *Rigoletto*, Preziosilla in *La forza del destino*, Princess Eboli in *Don Carlo*, the Composer in *Ariadne auf Naxos*,





Giulietta in *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, Dalila in *Samson et Dalila*, Fenena in *Nabucco*, Cornelia in *Giulio Cesare*, Maddalena in *Linda di Chamounix*, and her signature title role in *Carmen*.

She has been described by *Opera Magazine* as having "the most compelling voice of the evening, one that grabbed the heartstrings with its dramatic force and musicality."

As a highly sought-after concert soloist, Dirlikov has lent her voice to the likes of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at Avery Fisher Hall with the National Chorale, Handel's *Messiah* at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center, Mahler's Second Symphony with the Columbus Symphony Orchestra, Verdi's Requiem with the New Jersey Master Chorale, Ravel's "Shéhérazade" with the Delaware Chamber Music Festival, Mendelssohn's *Elijah* with the Fairfax Choral Society, and Mozart's Coronation Mass with MidAmerica Productions.

She first became involved with the State Department in 2005, when one of her mentors connected her with the United States Embassy in Mexico City. The embassy was looking for a vocalist to do some outreach work. Dirlikov jumped at the opportunity. Since then, her outreach has extended into several countries, where she frequently offers masterclasses and teaches music to orphans and poverty-stricken youth.

Among the many locations she's worked, Dirlikov has embraced several kismet opportunities to travel to China, which also influenced her to add Chinese to her language roster.

"The opportunities I have to do outreach work vary so much, but I do as much as I can," Dirlikov says. "When I'm scheduled to perform abroad, I will contact the State Department and ask what I can do, based on what my rehearsal and performance schedule dictates."

Sometimes, she explains, opportunities might include outreach activities with youth in schools. On other occasions, Dirlikov might work with communities that have no outlet or exposure to classical music or opera otherwise. For her, it's all a part of promoting music as a tool for greater communication. Dirlikov has a fascination with the deeper roots of communication and with the relationship that is manifested between the performer and audience, the mentor and the student, and the music and the listener. And, always a student of the art of communication, she finds cues in even the most unlikely of places.

"My dog has truly changed my life," Dirlikov says, laughing. "Animals are fascinating to me. Without words, language, or music, they can communicate their needs. It's just silence. But they can read you. You can read them. There is a sense of awareness."

This passion and deep curiosity for the essence of communication has become key to Dirlikov's unique approach as both an ambassador and a performer.

"For me, singing is a part of what I do," she says. "But music is so much bigger. It creates a community. It's a part of the human experience and it connects us. Music can reveal some of people's most honest moments. When it suddenly becomes accessible, it opens up and reveals something new to people. That exchange can be life changing."



## Defining Moments

Among Dirlikov's many roles on the operatic stage, it's the role as a kind of gateway to opera—spreading awareness, bringing exposure to the art form, and offering a glimmer of hope through the power of music—that Dirlikov, perhaps, takes the most seriously, particularly since being recognized with the Sphinx Medal of Excellence.

"I was absolutely shocked when I got the call," Dirlikov says, of earning the honor. "There was no

application process. I had no idea I was being considered. It came as such a huge surprise when it finally sunk in."

With the honor came a sizeable monetary award—a \$50,000 career grant, which Dirlikov put to use by digging into her roots, spotlighting Mexican baroque pieces that have not been sung in nearly 200 years—and an even deeper sense of responsibility to her true musical mission.

"That they picked me made me more aware of wanting to live up to being seen as a model leader and someone that can make a positive difference through what I do," Dirlikov says. "It also made me think

outside the box about my role in music and as a singer. Using that to give back has become something I'm very passionate about."

### **What the Future Holds**

In addition to her busy performance schedule, coupled with her outreach activities that find her traveling frequently, Dirlikov recently landed a television show, *Articulate*, which will air on PBS in Philadelphia beginning in early October and aims to show how art explains life. She also will be speaking on behalf of the White House Initiative on the topic of Educational Excellence for Hispanics at the 2014 National Policy Forum on Music and the Arts, set for Aug. 27–28 at Pixar Animation Studios in Emeryville, Calif. The Initiative will highlight the benefits of music and the arts and the importance of increasing access of each for Hispanic students.

"To be able to reach out and talk with kids, one on one, about classical music and, perhaps, get them to think about and change their perception of opera...it's very fulfilling," Dirlikov says. "It feeds me. It's very powerful to see them connect and get enthused by it... to give them something to be more hopeful toward and to show them that anything is possible. It's those experiences and sharing in moments of truth and honesty that keep you going as an artist."

### **Advice to Budding Young Artists**

Dirlikov said she always advises young singers and those aspiring for a career in opera to think outside the box when it comes to career planning and development.

"My heart goes out to young singers today," she says. "It's much harder than it was when I was getting started in my career. There are so many singers, the competition is fierce, and there are only so many opportunities. It's great to have goals. But it's important to

know why you have to do this—the joy of singing. It's about being aware of your true self and the journey and the discovery you'll make about who you are and what you're passionate about along the way. Keep your options open as you travel upward on the ladder and find good people to mentor you. You don't necessarily have to follow the usual path."