

# The Eden project

The singer on gardening, climate change and using music to propagate a topic

JOYCE DIDONATO is almost ludicrously aptly named—she is both joyous and in possession of a god-given (*donato di dio*) voice, a warmly expressive, agile and richly coloured mezzo-soprano. She also has what appear to be boundless supplies of stamina and engagement. The day after singing in the opening night of Handel's *Theodora* at the Royal Opera House, she is perched atop the bar in the Floral Hall, posing good naturedly for photographs. Hopping down, she grins, thanks everyone and plunges into conversation.

Where does she get her energy? 'From the music, from working with amazing colleagues. Also, however difficult it may have been, I've been able to profit from the past two years by taking a lot of rest. More than I've had in my entire life! I think I instinctively knew that it was the sabbatical I really needed, but probably would never have given myself. Now I am more than ready to be back in the thick of it.'

She has certainly gone into the thick of it, giving a masterclass for the Royal Opera's young artists' programme on the evening after *Theodora's* dress rehearsal, singing lustroly in that staged oratorio (all four hours of it, including intervals) and preparing for the tour of her latest project, EDEN.

From the relish with which she examined the role of Iago in Verdi's *Otello* during that masterclass, I suspect her of being a closet would-be baritone. 'Ha! Well I have always thought I'd love to sing Scarpia,' she says. 'But really, I'm so glad I'm a mezzo-soprano because I've been able to take on such a huge variety of roles, from young men and boys to princesses and sorceresses, to queens and villains and killers. They've grown up alongside

me, from Cherubino, a hormonally explosive adolescent, in *Le nozze di Figaro*, to powerful, real women who make their own choices—Semiramide and Agrippina and Didon in Berlioz's *The Trojans*.

'What is essential to me is to live the role, not merely to play it. We went to see the Royal Ballet in *Romeo and Juliet*. Natalia Osipova was astounding as Juliet (*Theatre*, page 96). I didn't breathe for the entire third act. My partner is a ballet dancer and he is the most critical person to go along with, but even he thought it was one of the best things he'd ever seen. I forgot she was dancing, I was just with her, I was feeling her. And that's what I want from any performance, my own or someone else's.'

Miss DiDonato lives just outside Barcelona on a little plot of land. 'I spent the past two years weeding! It was kind of an abandoned lot when we moved in, so we took months clearing it and then planting bulbs, probably about 6,000 of them. They're coming up right now and I'm not there to see them, which is very frustrating. We've got oranges, pomegranates, lemons and lots of veggies. I have my own garden and it's the thing I most needed in my life that I had no idea I needed.'

Time spent close to the land has fed into her plans for EDEN, which she began to think about five years ago, but which has needed a long gestation period. Her creative collaborators are the conductor Maxim Emelyanychev and Giulio d'Alessio, founder of Il Pomo d'Oro music ensemble. 'Giulio is like my musical brother. We spur each other on and whenever I've come to him with a crazy idea, he's agreed with it and gone one step further. We both knew after our last project, *In War & Peace*, that there had to be more. Not a sequel but a way of building on the formula of using our music to elevate a topic and to challenge the audience.'

'When you hear Mahler, you see the mountains, you smell the blossom'

'Giulio said immediately: "It's the climate—that's what we have to address." And I said: "Argh, I know you're right, but that's scary. It's so huge—where do we start?" Trying to put Nature on the stage overwhelmed me,

the urgency of it all. The whole thing eluded me for a while, I couldn't get a grip on it, but then I realised that it had to come from the small things. I'd been watching things grow, and noticing tiny changes day by day. That bit-by-bit growth is something we can all manage,' she observes.

'As always, I started with the music. I'm so lucky to have been immersed in the elevated poetry and perfection of Mozart and Handel and Strauss and Berlioz—there's always something bigger than us that we can connect to. When you hear Mahler, you see the mountains, you smell the linden blossom. As humans, we have to be rooted in exactly the same way as plants and trees, you have to go down to go up—that's where the voice comes from. Look at Rafa Nadal—how grounded he has to be to reach up and slam a tennis serve. It's exactly the same.'

The EDEN music ranges from Handel and Gluck to Copland and Rachel Portman, reflecting this connection to Nature. Each audience member will be given a seed, provided by Botanic Gardens Conservation International, to take away and plant.

'My most successful approach to things in life has always been from the positive side and that means I'm sometimes seen as naive,' she says. 'But, you know, kids are naive and they have infinite wisdom to teach us, the stuff that's leached out of us as we've grown. I didn't want to say that we'd plant a tree in Bolivia for every ticket we sold—that erases personal contribution and responsibility. I wanted to say to people: "Here, take this seed, plant it, just do this." If everyone does, we'll have thousands more flowers growing in the world.'

Henrietta Bredin

## On the record

EDEN is released on February 25 by Erato; the tour comes to the Barbican, London EC2, on April 5–6

**Favourite building?**  
Temple of Bacchus in Baalbek, Lebanon

**Alternative career?**  
High-school choir teacher or wildlife photographer

**Ideal dinner guests?**  
Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha and Mozart—

**I want the scoop from the horse's mouth!**

**The book I turn to**  
*Golden: The Power of Silence in a World of Noise* (Justin Talbot-Zorn and Leigh Marz, to be published in May). It's the book we need in 2022



Photograph by Richard Cannon