

Linās JEGELEVICIUS

French mezzo-soprano Marie Elizabeth Seager is not foreign to the Baltics. The celebrity singer and international award-winning Latvian pianist Toms Ostrovskis have received rave reviews for their first performance of Messiaen's song cycle *Harawi*, Song of love and death, at the National Library of Latvia. The two also performed the piece at the Bastille Vocal festival in Paris in March 2019. M. E. Seager kindly agreed to take questions by *The Baltic Times*.

**How has life amid the COVID-19 pandemic changed for you, a world-class artist?**

It has changed radically. Before covid my life was defined by travel to do auditions and to work abroad, and in between these professional travels, I often went climbing in the French mountains.

But suddenly, we were confined, for months. Personally, I was locked down with my boyfriend in his small flat in the north of Paris, without any open parks around to rest from the rash urbanity of the city. It was a welcomed rest at first, a time when you could do things you never have time to do properly, like reading, cooking, learning languages, etc. But then, a tougher reality set in.

In the 2019-2020 season, I sang roles in Brussels, London, Zwickau and Plauen in Germany and I was about to sing my first Amneris in *Aida* in Germany in May 2021, but that was cancelled because of the pandemic. I had to work for months on my own and with coaches – at my own expense – to prepare this exiting but enormous part, because I was a “guest” artist, which means I was expected to arrive completely ready for the final stage rehearsals, before the shows. When this was cancelled, I did not receive a penny in compensation. And after that, nothing. No work, no auditions.

Financially it has been tough, but, luckily, I am able to teach a little. Travels in France are limited, as we have had that 6pm curfew for months now. The question of traveling abroad hardly arises anymore, because the countries I tend to work in the most have closed all their music venues. I only went to Latvia, in January. I had to do a PCR test both ways and isolate for my whole time there... The taste of travel definitely isn't the same as before. We never know until the last minute if it will happen or not...

I've heard that some Baltic singers sunk into depression as a result of the COVID-19 gloom and the deprivation of their primary livelihood, singing. Reportedly, some had to sell their posh theatrical attire dirt cheap to make ends meet. Have you

# Marie Elizabeth Seager: “The pandemic has changed my independent professions and many



**French mezzo-soprano Marie Elizabeth Seager has received rave reviews for her first performance at the National Library of Latvia.**

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS BEEN DISASTROUS FOR MANY. SOME OF MY FRIENDS HAVE HAD TO QUIT SINGING ALTOGETHER TO DO A DELIVERY JOB, OR WORK IN MARKETS OR WHEREVER THERE IS A POSSIBILITY TO EARN MONEY. IT IS TERRIBLE, BECAUSE SINGING IS NOT SOMETHING YOU CAN STOP DOING FOR TOO LONG, BECAUSE YOU LOSE YOUR LEVEL VERY QUICKLY, LIKE A HIGH-LEVEL SPORTSMAN. IT REQUIRES SO MUCH ENERGY AND FITNESS TO STAY ON TOP OF YOUR GAME!

**heard of any cases of the kind in Paris and elsewhere?**

The pandemic has certainly brought a lot of precariousness amongst many independent professions and many musicians across Europe are completely broke. In France, we have a special status for freelance artists and technicians who get enough declared work in the first place. It is a magnificent support system, whereby these artists receive money on the days when they don't have work, so that they can prepare for their next jobs without having to do another, non-artistic job to earn a living.

But many French soloists who work internationally, students or artists who can't declare all their work cannot obtain this support, and have to live entirely on their earnings during off-work periods, like most artists all around the world. So if you had an enormous career and stacks of money, perhaps you could survive a whole year without earning, but for young soloists who tend to be underpaid anyway, and even for well-established singers, not to mention students, the COVID-19 pandemic has been disastrous. Some of my friends have had to quit singing altogether to do a

delivery job, or work in markets or wherever there is a possibility to earn money. It is terrible, because singing is not something you can stop doing for too long, because you lose your level very quickly, like a high-level sportsman. It requires so much energy and fitness to stay on top of your game! To practise singing and learn a big role at the end of a long day waiting at tables or talking to customers in a shop (if your neighbours allow you to sing in the evenings!) is nearly impossible to do. Plus, you have to keep contacts with everyone in the profession, you have to stay present, make and send recordings, update your website constantly, write to potential employers etc. If you can't do all this on a daily basis, you're out of the profession very quickly. And all this requires money! So if you're poor, it's much harder anyway.

But thankfully, there are institutions and organizations that care for music and musicians in this world - from my pianist Toms Ostrovskis, I understand that a great deal of support has been provided to the arts and music by the Latvian State Culture Capital Fund, that Jazeps Vitols Latvian Academy of Music is constantly participating

in supportive activities for the most vulnerable groups among us, including young and upcoming artists, music students. And no less important is the willingness of concert venues to host online events, to support the artists by providing a stage, like the Latvian National Library does, for example.

**Where do you now seek spiritual solace and inspiration?**

Primarily in music, love, friendship and nature. But my number one solution to stay well and inspired is to organize projects that I love and to keep thinking that everything is possible, despite appearances. I've already experienced the power of that many times in my life. When you do what you love, your mood is enhanced and everything around you starts feeding into that good energy. And you start feeling connected to a wider dimension, beyond the material, where everything makes sense, where every experience is there for a reason.

If I wait for the world to change, if I expect happiness and activity to come from the outside in this time of pandemic, I would be quickly disappointed. So I set goals for myself, sticking to what I love.

Lately, for example, I've worked on a new recital program, with

music that I adore, a theme that inspires me and a pianist that I admire and love working with. This has been keeping me nourished artistically and spiritually in the past months. I'll do this French song recital in several French music salons this spring, and at the Latvian National Library on the 24th of April, with my duo pianist Toms Ostrovskis.

Reading the stunning and heart-breaking First World War testimony of Maurice Genevoix, “Ceux de 14”, also helped me take some more distance with what we're going through now.

**What do you do to keep the superb shape of your voice, the most precious God's gift you have?**

Thank you!

I do breathing exercises, devil affirmations (to own rather than deny negative emotions that are inside) and try to keep my singing as close to primal gestures and emotions as I can. I vocalize methodically and sigh deeply. Generally, I don't sing too much and work a lot mentally. I keep physically fit, especially the flexibility of my articulations. I always warm up my entire body before singing, much like I do before climbing, for example. I practise yoga daily, to keep a flowing energy in the body. And, as much as possible, I eat lightly and healthily, following the Ayurvedic\* guidelines for my constitution (\*Ayurveda is the ancient Indian science of life), though I do indulge occasionally in good company! Pleasure is important to stay well, and therefore, to sing well!

**Did you have to perform online amid the COVID-19 pandemic? What was the experience for you?**

I haven't yet. But it is planned for the spring.

However, in preparation for my upcoming online recitals, I've been closely studying the various components and challenges of singing in such circumstances, by watching other colleagues do it, for instance.

In general, I must say that in an online real-time situation with various elements of performance, the balances of which we have taken for granted, shift and change their roles. The audience becomes much more difficult to reach and to communicate with, the performance related stress can increase due to an added level of anxiety, as there is no real feedback - are they listening to me, does the voice saturate the microphone, is the microphone even on? You have to remember that inspiration doesn't only come

# emic has been disastrous for many musicians across Europe”

**Longing for escapes**  
A journey far from the current spleen through the exotic Asia

**MARIE ELIZABETH SEAGER,**  
mezzo-soprano  
and  
**TOMS OSTROVSKIS,**  
piano  
will perform in a live stream recital  
on Saturday 24 April 2021  
Time the  
at the Latvian National Library, Riga

Welcome to a concert of French songs, that will take you to the poetic rooftops of Paris and the ancient regions of Persia, Cambodia and Greece! Get your screens ready!

**Programme**  
Cinq Poèmes de Baudelaire  
Debussy  
Shéhérazade  
Ravel  
Cinq Chansons Cambodgiennes  
Daniel-Lesur  
Chansons de Bilitis  
Debussy

More info soon to be found on [www.marielizabethseager.com](http://www.marielizabethseager.com)

from the energy of the public, but mainly from inside of us. If you stick to the text and to what you want to express, your intentions and the power of music and poetry will help you stay connected to your own emotions.

Also, the emphasis on the image being much stronger, it does change the way you express yourself physically. You feel scrutinized. Visual details come to the fore in a way that would be unnatural on an opera stage. I imagine that a theatre comedian being suddenly hired to act in a film must feel about the same in that respect. It brings some kind of anxiety, but offers an opportunity to express yourself differently as well. In front of a camera

and a microphone, you project your entire self and your voice more intimately.

In these situations, the musicians become much more aware of the significance of the tools at their disposal - both the ones that comfort and the ones that make practical music making possible. Cosy, soft lighting, the warmth of wooden walls and floors. Windows of a cathedral may reveal the view of people walking outside, confirming that the musician is not alone in his world with his music. And, of course, able and clever technicians - sound engineers and video operators are simply indispensable!

All this makes me glad that we have the opportunity to perform

in the Latvian National Library rooftop hall; at this point, who knows, if we will be able to host a live audience, but we will perform at our best, inspired by the performance space with its large windows providing almost a 360 degree view of Riga, including the beautiful old town, supported by the optimal acoustic parameters and high ceilings of the “A” shaped hall, the superb grand piano, and some very experienced live music broadcasters, who shall put us at ease regarding the microphones. They will be on, we are sure.”

You and an international award-winning Latvian pianist, Toms Ostrovskis, received rave reviews for your first performance of Messiaen’s song cycle Harawi, Song of love and death, at the National Library of Latvia in 2019. What other Baltic artists have come along your way? What has been your experience?

I have worked with a few Baltic artists and some of them became my friends, ever since I studied in London, at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Actually, overall, my fondest memories in music making are with Baltic musicians. It is very peculiar! Toms Ostrovskis of course, but also Inese Klotina another pianist, who saved my final recital at the end of my singing studies. I had had a hard time with a French pianist. One of my flatmates at the time was an Estonian singer, a great musician who inspired me. And I also did a series of recitals in Paris with a beautiful soprano, Silga Tiruma, who is initially from Riga. With all of them, I was under the impression of being with powerful, serious and committed artists, who knew who they were, with a kind of pride and modesty at the same time. Each time it was a great experience.

I also had the chance to give several masterclasses at the

Jazeps Vitols Latvian Academy of Music, and I must say I was impressed with the level of preparedness of the students I worked with. There are some serious talents in Latvia!

Are artists from the former Soviet bloc, part of which the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia were until the 1990s, different in a way? I mean in their mentality, preparedness, etc?

They are different. The way I perceive it is that they have a special capacity to express sincere emotions, not in a wild but true and compelling way. You can sense very strong personalities that are not flashy and ostentatious, but honest and powerful. They are very professional, committed to giving their best, reliable and deeply cultured. I was also struck by the students’ attitude at the Latvian Music Academy. I am a young teacher, and yet, I always felt respected and valued by them. They have some kind of modesty and an eagerness to learn and improve, and a very positive attitude towards practice that was truly refreshing. They always came well-prepared.

What does the word “talent” mean to you? What key elements are attributive to it?

Talent involves lots of ingredients. A special gift of course, a capacity to learn fast and integrate knowledge in a certain field. That’s the raw material. Work is the second most important keyword. You take the raw material and you have to make something out of it. It takes years of applied work to do something extremely well. It needs a huge dose of self-belief and addiction to maintain your dedication to it. Sometimes you are alone thinking that you will make something out of it. But you persevere despite the obstacles. But hard-work doesn’t

necessarily help a talent to shine and reach other people’s sensitivity. Talent really shines when magic comes out of it. The magic is a combination of mastery, creativity and magnetism, something indescribable that touches, brings tears to someone’s eyes, or makes someone laugh sincerely. Or be angry or shocked. I think that everything beyond the raw material and the applied work - so basically, the special sensitivity of the talented person, an attitude of curiosity towards the world, an openness that comes from experience - are necessary to bring the talent out into the light of the world.

Are you happy in your life?

Yes! I sing for a living, so work is a pleasure for me. I have family, friends, and a roof over my head, I am healthy and I appreciate all the things that I choose and that I have. I am aware that I am extremely lucky. So I cannot be unhappy!

Is there something your desire most?

Yes. To achieve having a singing career and a family, and find the right balance between those two.

Are you in love with someone special in your life?

Yes... I’ve been in love for seven years.

How many of the concerts for 2021 are still on your calendar? Where will they take you? To the Baltics too?

I have several recital dates in France that need to be confirmed, and I look forward to doing my French song recital with Toms Ostrovskis at the Latvian National Library on April 24th. The programme, called “Longing for escapes” is an answer to the feeling of being locked up that many people are having around the world in this time of restrictions. It will make us - public and performers - travel with our senses and imagination, to exotic places like Greece, Cambodia, the Ancient Persia, and ... Paris. We will play some early, Wagnerian Debussy, the Five Baudelaire Poems, and some more mature Debussy, the Chansons de Bilitis; Ravel’s Shéhérazade, and Daniel Lesur’s Cambodian Songs.

Ukrzaliznytsia (Ukrainian railways), Ukrferry (Black Sea ferryboats), FerriPlus (logistics) and LTG Cargo, the largest cargo group dealing with railway business in the Baltic States member of Lietuvos Geležinkeliai (Lithuanian railways), have signed an agreement to develop together the international multimodal route Turkey-Ukraine-Lithuania-Poland.

As the press service of Ukrzaliznytsia reported with reference to Edwin Berzins, executive director of the subsidiary of Ukrzaliznytsia “Center of transport service Liski”, the parties signed a corresponding memorandum. According to him, it’s about

## New logistic route from Turkey, through Ukraine and Lithuania, to Poland

the implementation of the operation of the route Karasu port (Turkey) – railway terminal of the port Chernomorsk (Ukraine) – Vilnius / Kaunas / Klaipeda (Lithuania) / Kaunas / Bialystok (Poland).

The signatories of the memorandum agreed to jointly work out the possibility of organising regular intermodal transportation along the specified route and creating an effective transport corridor between the Black

and Baltic Seas, using the transport capacity of all countries involved, as well as ferry transport. In addition, the goal of the joint work will be to increase the railway transportation of goods between Turkey and Central and Northern Europe, as well as to increase the competitiveness of such transportation and, as a result, their profitability.

Ukraine, which is the center of Europe, simply has no chance

not to take into account all the possibilities for the development of multimodal and any other transportation between countries. Today’s memorandum confirms our resolute position on such development and strong partnership.

The main goal of the project is to increase the volume of cargo transportation between Turkey and Central and Northern Europe, to increase the competi-

tiveness of such transportation and increase their profitability.

In January 2021, the Lithuanian cargo company LTG Cargo, which is part of the largest railway company in the Baltics, Lietuvos Geležinkeliai (LTG), opened a subsidiary LTG Cargo Ukraine in Ukraine to implement its international development strategy and expand its activities.

[www.odessa-journal.com](http://www.odessa-journal.com)