

# The Washington Post

## From rising star to grande dame, Martina Arroyo never forgot who she was

By ANNE MIDGETTE | WASHINGTON POST | 12/6/13



Endowment for the Arts' Opera Honors in 2010.

She was talking about Arroyo's heyday in the 1970s, when the soprano was a frequent guest on both the Metropolitan Opera stage and Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show." Her quips were certainly quotable, and some haunt her to this day: singing the role of Cio-Cio San in one of Puccini's most beloved operas, she referred to herself not as "Madame Butterfly," but as "Madame Butterball."

This is the person who comes out in conversation — the Arroyo whom the Times reporter got to hang out with in 1968, and whom I got to chat with the day after the black-tie dinner in her duplex apartment on a high floor of a building on Central Park South, where she sat, beautifully clothed and coiffed, against a backdrop of glass cases of objets d'art and side tables with framed photographs of herself and her husband, Michel Maurel, who died in 2011.

But her sense of humor is not, of course, the reason she is being recognized with a Kennedy Center Honor. She's being honored for her voice: her beautiful, clear, soaring, pure sound. She was, or is, a real Verdi singer — "was" because, now 76, she hasn't sung an opera role on stage since 1991, and "is" because her speaking voice still has the clear, high pitch and extra resonance of a singer.

As for "Verdi singer," it denotes a voice that can soar, that has heft to carry over an orchestra and lightness to mount the scale, and that has an innate sense of drama. "Drama" can mean different things to different people. Some found Arroyo's early singing relatively cool; others, like the late stage director Lotfi Mansouri, who worked with her from the early days of her career at the Zurich Opera in the early 1960s, found that she "has a wonderful way of connecting with the audience."

"It's such a rich, rotund and luscious sound," said the tenor George Shirley, a professor emeritus of voice at the University of Michigan. "I saw a few years ago a video of her singing Bess [in "Porgy and Bess"] in Sweden when she was quite young. It was just amazing. . . . There was a quality of the tone and her artistry that made her distinctive."

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/from-rising-star-to-grande-dame-martina-arroyo-never-forgot-who-she-was/2013/12/05/39958edc-5798-11e3-835d-e7173847c7cc\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/from-rising-star-to-grande-dame-martina-arroyo-never-forgot-who-she-was/2013/12/05/39958edc-5798-11e3-835d-e7173847c7cc_story.html)

NEW YORK — When the soprano Martina Arroyo was interviewed by the New York Times in 1968, she had the interviewer over to her place with some friends and her mother for chateaubriand and lasagne. When I interviewed her for The Washington Post this fall, she invited me to a black-tie dinner with a couple of hundred well-heeled New Yorkers. The two meals bracket a career track from rising star to grande dame.

Both interviewers, though, talked to the same down-to-earth, riotously funny, and not at all diva-esque person — which says a lot about how well Arroyo has negotiated that trajectory.

Divas are goddesses, worshipped from afar. Arroyo is a human being, and people flat-out love her. Mention her name and they wax enthusiastic about the pure, warm, round beauty of her voice — and then, invariably, mention her sense of humor. "The funniest person I think I'd ever seen on a talk show," reminisced the dramaturg Cori Ellison in a video when Arroyo won the National