

Marriage made in opera heaven



Photo Andrew Crowley

It'll be the operatic wedding of the century. Angela Gheorghiu reveals exclusively to Ismene Brown she and Roberto Alagna are to marry

**“We work together.
We are in love
with this profession.
We are at one
each other”**

AT FIRST she said that it was their secret - “our darling, darling secret”. But then it bubbled out in a happy stream. The soprano Angela Gheorghiu and the tenor Roberto Alagna, the most exciting young opera stars in the world, will marry next month in New York during their booking at the Metropolitan Opera House to sing the opera that brought them together, *La Bohème*.

This is *Blind Date* beyond highbrows' dreams. It hardly seemed possible, even when a year ago the couple announced that they were in love. There are illustrious singing marriages today - Ann Murray and Philip Langridge, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Julia Varady - but this one is unquestionably the most *operatic*. Love, tragedy and artistic triumph weave through their story.

A year ago Gheorghiu and Alagna had scored individual successes that in themselves are the stuff of opera legend. Alagna's *Bohème* and *Roméo et Juliette* had set him up at 32 as the heir apparent of the Three Tenors. Gheorghiu's *Traviata* had made her a star overnight at 29, as spectacularly as Sutherland in 1959 in *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

So when Covent Garden's two new sensations announced that they were in love last May, soon after the early death of Alagna's first wife, and with Gheorghiu flushed with her first taste of acclaim, you wouldn't place long bets on it lasting, though it was definitely good for business.

But next month's wedding puts paid to cynicism. And so indeed did meeting Angela Gheorghiu herself last week. Despite pallor and a sore throat, she was in radiant spirits, about to take Roberto and his small daughter to Romania this weekend to see her parental home for the first time. In London to promote her debut recital disc, her first remark about it was to praise her fiancé for guiding the selection of arias.

She said “destiny” brought them together. “Of course. We met in the theatre, in singing - there are so many details which I can say must be destiny. *Good* destiny - until now, thank you God!” Nervous hands unclasped and tapped on the table.

Destiny has indeed been friendly to Gheorghiu. She says she was destined to be an opera singer from the age of five; destiny decreed that the Ceausescu regime should fall just when she wanted to launch an international career outside Romania.

She used to say in interviews that she was destined to marry her first husband, Andrei Gheorghiu, a plumber - this time she told me sharply, “The subject is closed.” They divorced last May, after which she and Alagna went public.

And what else but destiny can explain how two stars of equal lustre, of equal age and musical ambition, would be thrown together not once but twice, in propitious circumstances behind Covent Garden's plush red curtains? It is uncanny.

Gheorghiu paints an excited picture of their life together in Paris that nevertheless has the air of real personal harmony. “We work together, in the same room. We are quick learners. We talk about music for hours and hours. We are in *love* with this profession. We are one with each other, we try to help each other be our best. We have so much in common.”

They play with Alagna's four-year-old daughter Ornella. They read, play CDs, go to the movies, singing together as they walk down the street.

Increasingly, of course, this dream home life is being overrun by interviews, air tickets, hotels, suitcases,

but so far, says Gheorghiu, it “feels perfect!”

ECSTASY apart, the other obvious thing about Gheorghiu is her level head. In everything about her, the requirements of fantasy and reality seem abundantly well balanced. Her singing voice has an exquisite poignancy to it, but technically it is exceptionally sound. She is the most photogenic of tragic heroines; in reality she has a healthy, attractively toothy smile. Her emotion on stage brings audiences to tears, yet she was cautious at first about accepting *La Traviata*, feeling that “I was too young”.

The marketing-heaven wedding plans are also sincerely motivated. *La Bohème* is where it all started. To them, *La Bohème* was not Mimi and Rodolfo enmeshed in Puccini’s romantic skeins of melody, it was two singers brought together in a rehearsal studio by the Royal Opera House’s distinguished talent scout Peter Katona, taking a considerable gamble - on her, in particular.

For Gheorghiu it was “the *coup de foudre*” on seeing Alagna, but he had a new-born daughter and his wife, Florence, had just been diagnosed with a brain tumour.

Gheorghiu says they did not meet again for two years, until once again they coincided at Covent Garden. Alagna, newly widowed, was being hailed for his Roméo. Gheorghiu, now separated from her husband, was preparing to appear in her first *Traviata*, under Sir Georg Solti. Initially doubtful about Katona’s faith in this unknown Romanian, Solti kept other sopranos in mind until very late on, when, says Katona, suddenly he declared at a searing rehearsal with Gheorghiu, “This is it!”

And that is what critics said too, when the curtain went up, and what the public saw on the BBC transmission. This newspaper’s opera critic Michael Kennedy wrote: “We were present, and we knew it, at one of those occasions when a singer lays claim to inseparable association with a role.”

Now Gheorghiu is in no danger of being eclipsed by Alagna, much though the world craves a great new tenor. Jimmy Lock, Decca’s chief sound engineer, who has made recordings for hundreds of divas, calls hers “a voice in 20 or 30 years. I’ve never really come across so expressive a voice. One is captivated.”

KATONA says it was the “utter beauty” of her voice that felled him the moment he heard the 26-year-old from Bucharest. When he at once put her forward for Mimi opposite the intended star of the 1992 *Bohème*, Alagna, “people thought I was crazy. But she was extraordinary in it, although it wasn’t recognised by everybody.” Indeed, everybody was too busy raving about Alagna.

Katona is gratified by the *Traviata* sensation; he thinks Gheorghiu is destined for greatness. “She’s stable, focused, extremely choosy. I just hope that this early success doesn’t go to her head and take out the spontaneity and emotion.”

He points out that Pavarotti and Domingo had 15 to 20 years of “normal” careers behind them when they created the concept of the opera superstar. Gheorghiu and Alagna are the obvious consequence: two young singers hyped from the word go, and it’s dangerous.

Alagna has already been accused of capriciousness; Gheorghiu, nice as pie with me, was tetchy with our photographer later. Once married, they will be able to drive any bargain they want, these two.

Gheorghiu is unlikely, though, to demand roles she is not ready for, though some have fears for the bolder Alagna. She told me, “My dreams are logical, real, I like to feel safe.”

Her recital disc, with arias from lesser-known Italian and French operas, signals a desire to broaden out, but only cautiously. She told me about her love of Schubert *Lieder* and Tchaikovsky, of French song and forgotten Romanian operas. She would like to do a Wigmore Hall recital.

She repeats her great *Traviata* at Covent Garden in July, this time with Alagna opposite her, and the double act is likely to become a regular attraction in London.

Like her husband-to-be, Gheorghiu does not welcome comparisons with, in her case, Maria Callas and Ileana Cotrubas, the greatest of recent Violettas. She disclaims any idol except one.

I lit the touchpaper and stood well back. “Miss Gheorghiu, what do you think of Roberto Alagna’s voice?”

Squeals and flying hands shattered the quiet of the Hyde Park Hotel’s conservatory. “MMMMMMMM!! I LOVE it! Oh my GOD!!!”

Angela Gheorghiu: Arias is released by Decca on April 14