

## **“INTEGRITY, DISCIPLINE AND HUMBLE, CONSTANT HARD WORK – THESE ARE THE SECRETS OF A LONG AND SUCCESSFUL CAREER”**

**(An interview with Júlia Kirkósa, the celebrated soprano of the  
Hungarian Opera from Cluj-Napoca)**

**ADÉL FEKETE<sup>1</sup>**



**SUMMARY.** Júlia Kirkósa was born in 1947 in Gherla, Romania. After graduating from the “Gh. Dima” Music Academy in Cluj, in 1973 she became the lead singer of the Hungarian Opera from Cluj-Napoca. Throughout her career, she performed many prima donna roles (such as Saffi in *The Gypsy Baron* by Johann Strauss II, Countess Liza in *The Land of Smiles* by Franz Lehár, Rosalinda in *Die Fledermaus*, Victoria etc.) and has achieved well-deserved recognition for her interpretation of Verdi’s heroines – Abigaille, in *Nabucco*, Leonora in *Il Trovatore*, Amelia in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, Amelia Grimaldi in *Simon Boccanegra* as well as Lady Macbeth, but also for the roles of Micaëla (from *Carmen* by Georges Bizet), Santuzza (from *Cavaleria Rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni), Elisabeth (in Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*) or Puccini’s *Tosca*. Her talent was acknowledged both in Romania and abroad. Júlia Kirkósa has performed in Hungary, The Netherlands, England, Italy, Bulgaria etc., and has had the opportunity to work with famous opera directors, such as Hero Lupescu or Kürthy András. Following a very successful gala concert held in

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<sup>1</sup> The „Gheorghe Dima” Music Academy, Doctoral Studies, Address: RO-400079, Cluj-Napoca, I. C. Brătianu 25, E-mail: [fleda333@yahoo.com](mailto:fleda333@yahoo.com)

the honor of soprano Júlia Kirkósa – in which she herself also performed – we sat down to discuss her career and her life experiences both as an artist and a teacher.

**Keywords:** opera, singing, career, Verdi, soprano, lesson.

**Adél Fekete** - *How did it feel returning to the stage after an absence of nearly six years?*

**Júlia Kírkosa** - It was not easy, for sure. If a singer does not practice daily to maintain his or her voice in proper shape, then doubts can arise. However, during rehearsals I felt everything was slowly coming back to me. The orchestra rehearsals turned out to be quite interesting, for we insisted on certain fragments of some pieces, thus making me feel at ease with the repertoire and motivating me to give the very best performance in the concert.

**A. F.** - *Allow me to take you back in time in order to ask: what are your first memories about music?*

**J. K.** - When I was a child, my father had an old record player from before World War II, which played 78 turn records, a truly rare thing in those days. Hence, as a child I had the chance to listen to great singers, such as Enrico Caruso, Beniamino Gigli, Tito Schipa, Aureliano Pertile, Amelita Galli-Curci and so on, which I considered to be a more than a promising beginning for an artist. Moreover, despite the hardships of raising four children in Cluj at that time, my father always provided us with season tickets to the opera and theatre. On Saturdays, we would go to the performances at the Hungarian Opera, while on Sunday mornings to the ballet and opera matinees at the Romanian Opera. Hence, we were shielded in a way from the rather grim mundane life, and these experiences – along with my father's library and record collection – gave us a solid educational foundation.

**A. F.** - *When have you decided that singing was your calling?*

**J. K.** - This choice came rather late in life, after graduating high school. I did not consider it to be a serious option until that point in my life. I had doubts concerning my musical training, for I had not graduated from a music high school. I loved to sing and knew how to read a score, but not at the level of a music conservatory student. Then – not unlike a young pupil – I had to start everything from the beginning. I had first started to learn solmization from Mr. Florea, who was the prompter of the Romanian Opera, while I received my first singing lessons from Stella Simonetti. It was in this context that I met some of the graduates of the music conservatory, such as Margareta Fănățeanu,

Angela Nemeş, Georgeta Orlovschi, Dan Serbac, Ionel Pantea. They were either there for lessons, or visiting the teacher, while detailing the experiences they had and the awards they received at international singing competitions. I suppose it is useless to mention how terrified I was. However, I knew that through hard work one could achieve a great deal. One's talents can be developed only by way of hard work, done with modesty and humbleness. Sooner or later the results of this continuous effort will be noticed.

**A. F.** - *Please tell us a little bit about the years spent at the music academy and also, what do you remember about the manner in which you became the soloist of the Hungarian Opera from Cluj?*

**J. K.** - I was admitted initially to the pedagogy department of the music conservatory, subsequently transferring to the singing department. The amount of work put into it was enormous. I remember that many times I carried my music scores all day, since in that time we did not benefit from the luxury of copy machines. Still, during that time there was not an evening in which I did not attend an opera performance. I was singing mezzo-soprano in that period: Flora in *La Traviata*, Olga in Eugene Onegin, Azucena in *Il Trovatore*. At the time of my exam at the Hungarian Opera I was already performing roles meant for high mezzo-sopranos, from Donizetti's *Favorita*, Verdi's *Don Carlo*, *Samson and Delilah*, and the role of Santuzza, written for soprano. I had been asked at that time what my opinion was regarding stardom. I dared to reply that without stars the opera genre would not exist, thus making the representatives of the communist regime frown upon me. However, I was never the one to conform to the political agenda or to get ahead by making use of it. When using the term 'stars', I was not referring to "Hollywood movie stars", but rather to my understanding of scrupulous singers, who are well-aware of their worth, who continuously work for their art; to artists who are well-liked by their audience and can handle success, for the difficulty lies not in the journey towards the top, but in the struggle to maintain the level one has achieved.

**A. F.** - *What were the first things that you have learnt as a young member of the Opera House?*

**J. K.** - I started my career at the Opera House on September 1, 1973. However, I was already studying the role of Lucia Grisi from Schubert's *Das Dreimäderlhaus*, with the guidance of actor and director Horváth Béla. He was the one who first initiated me in the unwritten laws of stage performances. He taught me, for instance, to never sit on the whole surface of a chair, being mostly supported by my legs. That my back has to be straight and my

stomach sucked in. If this was not possible, then I would have to wear a corset. Never to walk on stage by stepping on the entire surface of my sole touching the floor – one should walk on tiptoes. Never to eat during a performance, only if the plot of the opera asks that of me; not to hum or whistle the melody backstage, in order not to disturb the other colleagues; never to sit in the first row – not even during rehearsals – not to distract the attention of the colleagues working on stage. I am grateful to this day for the advices he gave me. If it were not for him, I would not have had from whom to learn these unwritten laws of stage performance. Sadly, today's generations are not as fortunate as we were in this respect, and this is noticeable.

**A. F. - Which were your first roles?**

**J. K. -** In 1973 I was already learning the soprano roles of *Un Ballo in Maschera* and *The Land of Smiles*. I was, of course, part of the third cast. Ironically, the photographs of the performance were taken with the first cast, the premiere was performed by the second one, while the third cast sang more than a hundred performances of the opera... But I have agreed to these conditions, for I was a beginner. Still, all these things bore no difference, for my goal was to learn, to gain experience, to be on stage. I have observed all the rehearsals held, trying to retain when somebody did something good, or somebody else was given a pointer. I was already singing a number of roles at that time: the Grand Duchess Anna Pavlovna from Victor Jacobi's *Sybil*, Rolla from Albert Szirmai's *Mickey Magnate*, Donna Elvira from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Another interesting story I remember is linked to the opera *Eugene Onegin*, when alongside my colleague B. Vass Éva, we had to portray the roles of the mother and the nanny of all the other older female colleagues in the opera, although we were the youngest of the entire cast. In order to make my face look as old as my characters', I asked for help and advice from my hair-dresser, Tóth Doina. She created a wig made of white strands of hair for Larina, my character, and with the use of a dark shade foundation she achieved natural wrinkles on my face. Even after becoming a member of the Opera House, I continued with my singing lessons for another fourteen years, under the mentoring of artist Trenka Éva, for I felt I needed help to cross over from mezzo-soprano to soprano. She was my teacher and confidant for as long as she lived in the country and I am forever indebted to her guidance.

**A. F. - Which was the role that sprung you from the third cast?**

**J. K. -** I would say that the two roles from Wagner's *Tannhäuser*: Venus and Elisabeth, which I sang in the spring of 1981 and Tosca, interpreted in the winter of the same year. I believe these were the defining moments of

my career, when I no longer had to face technical problems. At the same time, I believe that the most important phase of one's career is not necessarily getting to the top, but maintaining that particular standard once he or she reached that level. Each role represents a new challenge and raises specific problems that have to be addressed. From a musical standpoint one role may be written in the bel canto style, another be a veristic one, while a third one be written by Richard Strauss... It may very well be easy for me to sing Verdi, however, what will I then do with a Mozart role? If the voice is not loose, if the voice emission is incorrect, then it is absolutely impossible to sing Mozart. A Mozart aria is built upon passages on the most sensitive soprano notes – c-e flat, between the middle and high register. Another very important matter to take into account – one also learnt from Trenka Éva – is that a singer must get to the point where after a half hour break, he or she should be able to sing the entire role again from the beginning. This is the point where true mastery begins – when one's voice does not 'end', when one is not vocally exhausted after a performance.

**A. F.** - *You have had the opportunity to sing both operetta and opera roles, being described as "an innate Verdi heroin", and as you yourself have stated, you feel quite comfortable in Puccini roles as well. Still, could you tell be which were the roles that became dearest to you along the years?*

**J. K.** - First of all I would have to say Tosca, because I identify with the character. Floria Tosca lived in Rome at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the libretto of the opera being based on her life. This resemblance, along with the spiritual qualities of the heroine with which I myself identify make Tosca a special role. Secondly, I would say the role of Leonora. Verdi's *Il Trovatore* evokes the epoch of the Middle Ages, that of emotional purity and emotional expression. I believe I would have loved living in that era. Throughout the four acts of the opera, we witness Leonora's evolution from a woman who was madly in love, to a person willing to take poison and sacrifice herself once she realizes she is the only one who can save her lover from death. She is a very interesting and beautiful character, a true challenge to portray. My third favorite role would have to be Amelia's role from Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*. I have had the chance to interpret this role in several different mise-en-scene and thus, an opportunity to grow within the role itself. My life was the main influence that had shaped the manner in which I related to the role; in her second aria, Amelia expresses her burning desire to see her child again – I can attest to the fact that I have lived this scene in a completely different way once I myself became a mother. To authentically interpret a role and convey the emotions of that character is only possible when the actor or singer has experienced those feelings. However, the role I have sung the

most throughout my career was that of Abigaille from *Nabucco*. I have been a permanent guest at opera houses in Timișoara, Constanța, Craiova, Bucharest (Romania) with this role between 1987 and 2003, having the opportunity to sing the role over sixty times in three languages under at least five different directions.

**A. F.** - *Let us now get to the heart of the matter: how does building a role start for you and how to you make it your own?*

**J. K.** - First of all, one has to be intimately familiar with the libretto of the work. However, many times I have used additional sources of information. The circumstances of the character itself have to be known – who was she? When did she live? etc. It is crucial to be acquainted with every available detail of the character's life, so that the artist can get inside the character, and not only put on a mask, but truly manage to identify with it, so he or she will be able to genuinely express the lyric or dramatic tension the composer wanted to convey with his music. It is hard work, however, constant practice makes all the difference. For studying a part during piano rehearsals is not much. A role has to be learnt first from a musical standpoint, then memorized, dealt with from a vocal and technical standpoint, so that by the time stage rehearsals start, the artist easily 'inhabit' the portrayed character. This is why I cannot understand the hurry that characterizes nowadays the preparation of new productions, these being put together in less than a month. During this time a singer does not even have ample time to learn a role, for this process alone requires at least four to six months' time. Also, for a role to have time to set in order for it to automatically be recalled from memory almost a year needs to pass. Everything must be prepared ahead of time, so that the singer does not risk losing his or her voice or have a heart attack on stage due to the stress of the performance. There are young singers today who are extraordinarily talented; however, I do not believe they should be cast in every performance, singing all kinds of roles. Also, a second and third cast should exist for every performance, so that these young people will not end up losing their voices in two or three years – at least this was the way things were done in my time... As for the actual singing of a part, it is highly important for an opera singer to arrive ahead of time to the opera house, to have ample time to disconnect from the outside world, in order to get into character. The process of getting into character requires a lot of practice – one cannot get to become a professional by only singing principle roles, for a lot can be learnt with regards to this process by way of interpreting supporting roles. It is just as hard to sing Kate Pinkerton's six lines on stage in the spirit of the age that particular piece of music was written in as it is to portray a high profile role. There is a saying in the world of theatre, according

to which there is no small parts, only poor actors or singers... Greatness can be achieved also with a supporting role, while playing supporting characters often leads one to eventually get to interpret a leading role.

**A. F.** - *You have undoubtedly had your share of applauses. Still, if you look back, what would you consider to be the moment of highest recognition of your career?*

**J. K.** - The first time I sang in Bucharest I performed in front of an audience of complete strangers. When, however, I stepped on stage at the beginning of the second performance, I was received with a standing ovation even before I had had the chance to utter a single note. This was perhaps one of the greatest surprises and a moment of recognition that has brought me immense joy. The director, Mr. Hero Lupescu has then told me that only the truly great singers, such as Nicolae Herlea, Elena Cernei, Ludovic Spiess, have been received in this manner by the public. I experienced a similar feeling the night of my farewell concert, when I have felt the audience's devotion even though I have not performed for several years prior to that event.

**A. F.** - *You talent has been recognized not only in Romania, but also abroad. Have you ever considered – after an audition or a tour in a foreign country – that it would have been best if you remained there?*

**J. K.** - I remember that during the communist regime in Romania it was very difficult to leave the country to go abroad, even to auditions. It was during that period that I prepared to go to an audition held by the impresario Ioan Hollender. I received a deadline from the comrade director of opera, according to which if I did not return to the Hungarian Opera from Cluj-Napoca by September, my contract would be terminated. I, however, was not startled by this threat. I have never considered to stay in Germany to sing in a choir and wait for someone to hand me a solo part as long as I had my job, family and audience waiting for me back home. I have not regretted a single day my decision to return home.

**A. F.** - *We have talked earlier about roles, success, audiences; but how important is it for a singer the support he or she gets from the conductor, director and colleagues?*

**J. K.** - They are vital. The soloist becomes incapable to perform his or her job if there is no one to guide the production from the standpoint of music and stage direction. All singers expect to be encouraged, guided, pampered. A singer can perform to the best of his or her abilities and talents only when

the entire crew – starting from the technical departments, costumes, sets, hair, make-up, lights, sounds and so on, and continuing with the director's conception through the musical management from the conductor's part – is there working so that the singer can step onto the stage and give his or her best. Everyone else is there in support of the singer and not vice versa, for the responsibility of the entire production lays on the shoulders of the singer. Without singers there is no musical theater.

**A. F.** - *My next question would regard your colleagues. How do you view other people's success?*

**J. K.** - We have to learn to acknowledge the success of others. For appreciating others leads to one's own appreciation. If someone asks for help, one must do everything in his power to help; but if one cannot help, then he or she must not interfere... Nevertheless, one should never do harm to anyone, under any circumstances. In addition I would like to mention another very important matter: there is no such thing as nationality in the world of opera singers.

**A. F.** - *You have managed to do something that is truly rare – especially in the world of art – that of maintaining a balance between your career and your family life.*

**J. K.** - Yes, but it was not without sacrifices. Nevertheless, I would argue that neither my professional nor my family life suffered in the detriment of the other. Moreover, I believe it has given balance to my life. My singing teacher once warned me about something: one must be in control of his or her physical fitness, in order to be able to sing at any given time. For many decades I woke up at 6.30 in the morning, taken the kids to kindergarten and school, and prepared for evening performances at the same time. Of course, nothing is possible without love and understanding. I have no doubt about the fact that there must have been times when my family missed me, but they understood that I had to go.

**A. F.** - *They say that the stage is not unlike a drug. How difficult was it to give it up once you retired?*

**J. K.** - This is what I miss the most since I retired from the stage in December 2005. The stage gives you a feeling of sheer euphoria, from which it is very difficult to escape back to the normalcy of "civilian life". This may be the reason why a singer can never fall asleep right after a performance – he or she is in a heightened state of alert and needs hours to 'calm down'. An opera singer has to be able to also manage this particular problem. It has always helped me to share with my friends and family after a performance everything I experienced on stage.



**A. F.** - *By retiring from the stage, your teaching has become your main professional activity. How do you perceive and approach the pedagogy of singing?*

**J. K.** - It gives me great pleasure to teach, I have been doing this for the past 18 years. I would say that first of all one needs to have great empathy to be able to properly teach. I cannot expect anyone to sing to me as long as I do not know what lies in that person's soul; if he or she is content or has certain problems... For a tense, anxious person cannot emit sounds, only a person who is relaxed, treated with respect and encouraged can do that, because when you sing you offer your heart and soul to the listener. Moreover, I do not believe there is an all-purpose recipe for voice training, one cannot teach everyone in the same manner. It is quite interesting to observe the fact that there are innate talents who naturally possess proper voice emission, but when we try to teach them, they suddenly lose their natural ability. As for beginners, one must be very careful with them and teach very simple folk songs or short works by Peri, Caccini or Scarlatti, something melodious and pretty, with reduced range. However, it is quite impossible to teach everyone to sing properly. There are those that can be molded, introduced to the right vocal technique, correct breathing, and still they will not be able to vocally manage until several years of study later. It is not enough to read a score well, nor it is sufficient to have an innate vocal talent – warm-ups, crunches and breathing are merely a small part of beautiful singing. It is possible for even the best singer to be unappreciated by the public. Here are just some of the aspects worth taken into account... Still, the molding the human voice is a very beautiful mission, in spite of the fact that it is a Sisyphean task, that lacks the glitz and glamour of stage performances. Unfortunately, not all of the people who train as singers will end up being internationally renowned opera singers. I am satisfied if my musical pedagogy students will get to be exemplary teachers, having the capacity of teaching a song to kindergarten children or to the church congregation they are in charge of.

**A. F.** - *In your opinion, is there still a need for opera nowadays?*

**J. K.** - I am very sorry that the leaders of today's society place the accent generally on football matches and beer festivals, a practice that reveals very low expectations and a high degree of uncultured. A real politician should know to respect and support true values. A beer festival dominated the historical center of Cluj not long ago, but I think that an opera festival could have easily taken its place if anyone would have thought about it and given this project priority, because I believe people fundamentally need beautiful, good things that elevate their spirit.

**A. F.** - *What would be the **ars poetica** that accompanied your career of more than three decades?*

**J. K.** - In a leveled world, in which one's personality is not tolerated not only the men of cloth, but also artists share a crucial calling. I have always considered that I have completed my mission if at least one person in the audience has forgotten about their daily problems for those few hours of the performance, and if – influenced by music – they have sensed their burden to be lighter and went home after the show feeling somewhat different.

**A. F.** - *After a very successful fare-well concert I would like to finally ask – what do singers need in order to be able to end their careers with their heads held high?*

**J. K.** - My teachers have taught me that a singer's career must last much longer than three days, similarly to a miracle. One needs to find a way to end their career with honor and a strong voice. Integrity, discipline and humble, constant hard work - these are the secrets of a long and successful career.