

Nico de Villiers

Photo: Sebastian Charlesworth

# Do Not Go My Love

‘...there’s something about it that just stays with you.’

- Roberta Alexander

This year marks the centenary of the publication of Richard Hageman’s 1917 setting of the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore's poem 'Do not go, my love, without asking my leave' from his 1913 collection entitled *The Gardener*.

In a series of interviews pianist Nico de Villiers — Richard Hageman scholar and director of the Richard Hageman Society — explores various performers’ impressions of Hageman’s most famous art song and his music in general. The celebrated American lyric soprano **Roberta Alexander** shares her thoughts on her close association with *Do Not Go, My Love*, and comments on the technical challenges that Hageman’s song sets.

**Nico de Villiers: Can you recall the first time you came across *Do Not Go, My Love*?**

Roberta Alexander: My mom was a soprano and she had *Do Not Go, My Love* in her repertoire, along with a lot of those composers that unfortunately fell out of favour like Vitoria Giannini, Margaret Spross, Ernest Charles... She had all of them in her repertoire so when she did her recitals, *Do Not Go, My Love* was often on there. So, as a girl I’ve always thought it was just the most beautiful song.

**NdV: What do you think it was about the song that, even as a child, caught your attention?**

RA: It’s that melody! The melody and the sense of longing. The music is so descriptive, everything is just right there. I liked it so much that I



Roberta Alexander

Photo: ??????????



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was only allowed to go to my mother's recitals if I didn't sing along!

**NdV: When you first studied the song seriously where did you start, the music or the text?**

RA: I'm always led by the music. That's just me. I have whole stories that I make up about symphonies and what I see when I listen to the music, what I imagine is happening. But thinking about specifically when I learned the song is difficult, because I have known it my entire life. What was very difficult was that I am a lyric soprano and my mother was a *spinto*. And because I had her voice in mind I had a clear idea of what I wanted to sound like. I killed myself to get a certain kind of colour, because that's what I wanted to hear back but that of course was not happening. I then realised, 'Wait, I have to do this with what I have.' So then I had to do the technical part, very consciously saying, 'Okay so that's bothering me here, so somewhere over there must be something that's going wrong.' But coming back to your question, yes, for me, it's always the music. But *Do Not Go, My Love* is one of those cases where the text and the music is so entwined that you couldn't imagine it any other way, I don't think.

**NdV: What would you say are particular technical challenges for the singer in *Do Not Go, My Love*?**

RA: It is in a rough key — all of those F sharps on E vowels! Its very unforgiving so you need to really work out what you want to do technically. I wouldn't dream of giving it to a young student — maybe a master student, yes, someone who is technically capable of not pushing and shoving on their instrument, and someone who can bring a depth of understanding to the song. Young students are still working out how to sing, so if you learnt it prematurely and wanted to sing it again later in life you'll be fighting all those bad habits.

**NdV: You pointed out the E vowels on the F sharps. I'm curious to know what other particulars stand out for you. Would you say a little more about this?**

RA: The words '...without asking my leave' come back three times with 'leave' on an F sharp, and then there is of course 'Is it a dream?' on a high G.

**NdV: How do you deal with that moment?**

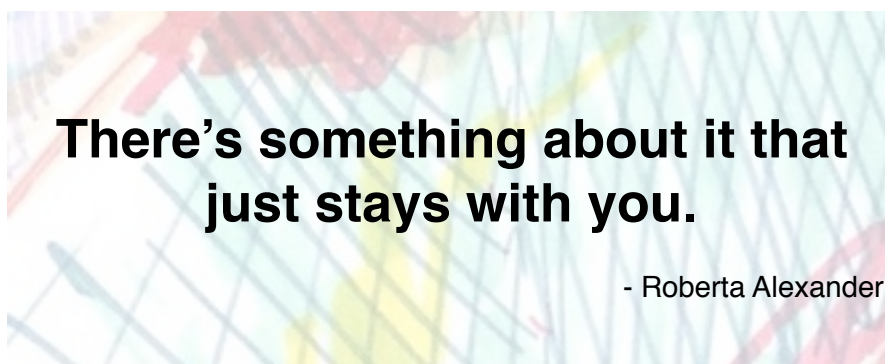
RA: I pretend like I'm in Detroit and kind of separate it into two syllables. [laughs] No, I of course wouldn't literally separate it into two syllables. It's more thinking of it *being* two

syllables than actually singing them separately. If you use the space of A in 'is it a...', and you think of E [for dream], then it lines itself up.

**NdV: How important would you say is it for a singer to know the context around *Do Not Go My Love* in order to perform it?**

RA: Well, I've always wondered about certain things — for instance that line about 'could I but entangle your feet with my heart' — but it never deterred me from performing it or for using my own imagination to make the story my own so I could relate to it. The music in this instance, for me, was more important...well not more important, but like I said, it's so descriptive. The way the harmony is under the word 'leave'... This song never fails. Whenever I sing it and people do not know this music, they're blown away every time, saying, 'Why didn't we know about him?' I never get tired of singing it.

**NdV: It is clear that *Do Not Go, My Love* has become a part of your fibre. However, how would you say has your relationship with the song evolved over the years?**



RA: Oh it means more. Just the fact that I'm still able to sing it...at this age...so that in itself makes it mean more! It's like putting on a coat, you just plug right into what you did before but it means more.

**NdV: Do you think you connected so easily with it because it is a well-written song or is it that it serves the voice well?**

Actually, I don't think it serves the voice well at all, seen from a purely technical point of view: it is difficult as a lot of the song is written in, and around the "passaggio" which takes quite a lot of manoeuvring to sound right, and the text to be understood in that area. But then, of course there's those melodies that just...there's something about it that just stays with you. I think it's a really, really beautiful thing, and for me it's right up there with *Phidylé* [Duparc]. *Do Not Go, My Love* is one of those songs where every time you get ready to do it you're happy. It makes you happy to make the music. And that is rare. Even with all its technical ins and outs, it still is so worth it! ■

*Roberta Alexander, enjoys international renown for her riveting, incisive characterisations, miraculous vocal and dramatic range. In addition to her illustrious operatic career Alexander is an uncommonly communicative recitalist having offered acclaimed programs at New York's Carnegie Recital Hall, the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, the Vienna Musikverein, London's Wigmore Hall and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw. An especially ardent and persuasive interpreter of American masterworks, her latest recordings include Songs My Mother Taught Me and With You (the latter an anthology of Broadway songs). [www.robertaalexander.com](http://www.robertaalexander.com)*