

Antoni Mendezona

The young soprano dishes out the details on how she prepares for her roles and why it was emotional for her to play Maria Clara in the New York production of *Noli Me Tangere*

by Sheryl Songsong photography Dale Jabagat

ABURGEONING LUMINARY of opera and the theater, Antoni Mendezona has heads turning whenever she sets the stage on fire by performing exciting roles such as Sophie in Tobias Picker's *Emmeline*, or as Veronique in the New York premiere of Pasatieri's *The Hotel Casablanca*. Known as the coloratura with a "pealing voice and bubbly personality," it would make you wonder where the 26-year-old Antoni draws out such emotion and grace.

Even before her Carnegie Hall debut for the world premiere of Karl Jenkins' *The Peacemakers* in 2011 (this marked the first Filipina soprano to grace this stage in 30 years), Filipino-Spanish Antoni takes us back to Cebu and fondly recalls her childhood, when she and her sisters would play the piano and sing scenes from *Les Miserables* and *Miss Saigon*. Through her teens, she dabbled in choir and jazz, but majored in Vocal Performance and Pedagogy after her family moved to the US. Praised for offering dramatic singing and connecting to her audience by truly owning the characters she portrays, we fast forward to now; and Antoni is still amazed at herself, saying, "I would have never imagined in a million years that I would end up being an opera singer."

Still an undergrad at that time, Antoni's first operatic role was in *The Magic Flute*; while her professional debut was with a topnotch cast, when she sang the role of Flora in *The Turn of the Screw*. Antoni describes, "It could not have been a better experience. The people I worked with were incredibly generous and friendly. Stage director

Chuck Hudson was phenomenal. I had done about four lead roles in school before this, so I knew the lingo and what to do for sure, but to sing in a 3200 seat house was incredibly exciting."

Antoni gives diverse performances from coloratura works to Kundiman. In fact, a few years back, she gave an extensive concert tour in the Philippines collaborating with local and international musicians in an effort to introduce and nurture classical music. When asked about performing, she says that there are so many things to prepare for an opera. Voice and technique come first, while memorizing the lyrics (which most of the time is in foreign language) poses as a challenge. "You have to learn and make sure to sing the music correctly, and also to add the drama and remember the staging." According to Antoni, being in the moment is key to delivering a successful performance. "That's why there's a rehearsal period, so you can do it over and over and over again" until it becomes second nature to a performer. "So that by the time you go onstage, it just 'happens.'"

Some actors and singers have certain habits before going onstage, or perhaps, rituals when preparing for a role. For Antoni, she likes to spend the hours before a performance by herself, have a nice meal of soup or salad (nothing heavy). Some of Antoni's roles are vocally complex by nature. She says, "how I prepare depends on the type of role I'm playing. Opera singing doesn't use amplification; so a day before the performance, I preserve my voice by not speaking so much. I focus on my technique while I warm up, and never sing more than 45 minutes before the curtain goes up. If it's a dramatic



role, I like to keep to myself and try to feel the emotions and 'set the stage' so to speak. If it's a funny or lovely role with a lot less pressure, I like to spend time with the rest of the cast to get pumped up. I suppose the one ritual I [do] have is to just hydrate, hydrate, hydrate. And I like to stretch."

One of her most recent accomplishments is close to Antoni's heart, because literally, the piece is close to home. Based on the 1887 classic novel *Noli Me Tangere* by Jose Rizal, Antoni auditioned for the role of Maria Clara and got the part in the New York presentation last month. Antoni raves, "I was very excited to be part of *Noli*. Being cast as Maria Clara meant a lot to me. It was interesting to play her because I am the opposite of Maria Clara. She was an introvert; I'm an extrovert. I'm a lot more aggressive than she was, and more outspoken. It was interesting for me to switch gears and put myself in someone else's shoes, one that was completely different from who

I am." This is indeed another milestone for Antoni, which she describes as a very emotional experience. "My parents raised me to be very patriotic and being a Filipina meant a lot to me as a child and still does as an adult. It is my blood. The Filipino passion and strength is a huge part of my make-up and to be able to participate in *Noli* re-ignited that."

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Antoni Mendezona has a bright future ahead of her, and with the accomplishments up her sleeve, this is only the beginning of her career in theater. She imparts, "If there's one thing I've learned thus far, it's that everyone's path is different. There are so many roads that lead to success that I would drive myself insane to try and emulate it all. All I can do is to relentlessly focus on my own path,

in preparing for it technically and spiritually, and in being open to all roads and trusting that if I do all these things, success will be manifested."

Multi-cultural audiences with discriminating tastes will definitely hear more from this songbird who ultimately just loves to perform. Antoni concludes, "Performing forces me to be in the moment and to not worry about the future. It reminds me that I am alive. And if I allow myself, it gives me the ability to share energy with the audience, with the orchestra, with other singers and that is an indescribable feeling. It's intoxicating."

Whether hearing her sing makes you heart beat in a syncopated rhythm or brings you to a blissful state of mind, or penetrates you in a way only opera can, I reckon, Antoni Mendezona is the new and different spirit in theater. It's only a matter of time when she is able to grace theater-goers around the world with her presence. And as for us, we'll be hooked for a long time. ■

