

Nicol Brunel: 'Painting Is Freedom for Me' **By Stephanie Celano, Staff Writer**

NICOL Brunel is an elegant and fascinating woman. A gifted opera singer and painter who performs primarily in France and throughout Europe, Nicol has appeared in numerous productions including *La Bohème*, *Romeo and Juliette*, *The Magic Flute*, *Manon* and *Idomeneo*. She has won first-prize awards in vocal competitions from the Nice Music Conservatory and Marseille International Opera Competition.

Beyond the drama and glamour, Nicol's life as an opera singer has been very regimented, wrought with many sacrifices. She began studying opera at 14 at the music conservatory in Nice, France. "It was very difficult," she recalls. "I studied very hard and I had to make a lot of sacrifices, and I still do. My whole life is immersed in the study of opera. It is very intoxicating. When I learn a role, everything is so intense and dramatic. I love that, but it's difficult to develop friendships outside my art when I'm so consumed by it."

Nicol, in addition to being an opera diva, is a talented oil painter. Bursting into full bloom, Nicol's landscapes and paintings of flower gardens are impressionistic montages of color imbued with her enthusiasm. "I like to paint with oil because it's more difficult than acrylic," she explains. "I just like the process. You have to paint and wait until it dries and then paint again."

"I paint for myself because I like to create. I feel like I'm giving a present to someone or like I'm giving a cookie to a kid. I really love painting and I'm not eager to sell them. Slowly they are all selling, mostly by word of mouth."

Her brothers Gerard and Alain, both successful artists who were prodigies by the ages of 4 and 6, have been her greatest influences. "I just grew up painting and drawing and copying them. It wasn't until later that I studied fine art. It's not like it was a choice or anything. It has always been a part of my life."

Nicol confesses she's abandoned all the rules and techniques—color, shape, symmetry, negative space—that she learned in art school. Nor does she feel the need to convey any messages, political or otherwise. "Now I paint until the painting smiles at me, until it makes me happy. When people say, "Oh, your paintings are so happy!" That's all I need. The extent of my goal in art is for people to enjoy my painting."

Painting provides a respite from Nicol's rigorous and structured role as an opera singer. "Singing opera is so precise. So exact. Painting is freedom for me. I can decide to paint with a color that doesn't even exist and nobody has anything to say about it. I visit gardens and museums and then I paint them from memory. I like to create wild, colorful gardens because it's unrestrictive. I try to make something that looks beautiful to me—as if you are walking in a garden that is not well manicured and it doesn't matter."

Nicol began practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism eighteen years ago in Los Angeles when she moved to the United States with jazz musician Bunny Brunel, who later became her husband. She met a woman at one of Bunny's concerts who told her about the SGI-USA. "She didn't try to force it on me, so my

Title: Nicol Brunel: 'Painting Is Freedom for Me'

Subject: Living Buddhism 07/98 v.2 n.7 p.47 LB9807p47

Author: Stephanie Celano

Keywords: Artists Brunel Career Experiences Expressions Freedom Gallery Nicol Painting

introduction was kind of gradual. At that time in my life, I couldn't have asked for anything more. I was in love, I was successful in my opera career. I had already won several competitions."

Nicol decided to chant and began studying and learning gongyo. "I wanted to prove it didn't work. After two months I felt really good. At the same time I didn't want my happiness to be dependent on anything, so I stopped and that happy feeling went. I thought, "That cannot be." So I started again and never stopped since."

Last year Nicol says she experienced her most important revelations in her Buddhist practice. Due to a hemorrhage that never healed, she underwent a complicated microscopic surgery on her vocal cords. The vocal cords are perfectly aligned, so for an opera singer, this type of surgery is very serious because the slightest change in the cords is reflected in the voice.

THE decision to have this operation was difficult because it could have ruined her singing voice and thus her career. "If the doctor removed too much during the operation, it would create a whisper in my voice or I could sound hoarse. I was totally panicked because all my tools were gone. For five months I literally couldn't talk, sing or chant. I had to chant and do gongyo in my head and communicate by writing everything down on pads of paper."

She was referred to the top voice surgeon in Los Angeles, but he wouldn't perform the operation himself; he assigned her to one of his assistants. She became so despondent that she cried for two days. "I was feeling sorry for myself. I felt like a victim. I was shattered. My behavior was contrary to everything that I learned through all my years of Buddhist practice. Then I realized that it was slanderous for him to treat me like he did and for me to be so influenced. I also realized that I needed to generate within me the strength and confidence I knew I gained with the practice. And that if I could not chant or do gongyo aloud at the time, it didn't matter because this practice is inside of me. It was a big awakening for me."

In *Learning from the Goshō: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Nicol found encouragement from the following passage:

To put ourselves down is to denigrate the world of Buddhahood in our lives. It is tantamount to slandering the Gohonzon. The same is true of setting your mind that absolutely nothing can be done about a particular problem. (p. 92)

In the aftermath, Nicol had to trust all those years of practice. The assistant surgeon turned out to be the most compassionate person for the job. "When the surgeon walked in the room, I felt like I knew him. He was like a friend. Of course, I had never met him. The surgery was unbelievable."

Two months later Nicol was singing and performing—high Cs and all. At the follow-up visit, the doctor thanked her for allowing him to perform the surgery.

"Deep down in my heart, I feel how profound this practice is. When I sing Puccini, my heart smiles. I am totally content and I know that I am creating value." This passion for creating, whether through her music or oil painting is inextricably linked to Nicol's desire to bring happiness to others. □