

Placido Domingo: A new success under his nose

The man dubbed 'the greatest operatic artist of modern times' is about to open in a little-known version of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Placido Domingo tells Jessica Duchon why, at 65, he sings on

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In New York, a headline dubbed it "The Schnozz". But Franco Alfano's opera *Cyrano de Bergerac* is about more than the super-sized snout that the unfortunate hero declares "precedes me by 15 minutes": it presents an unusual and thrilling challenge for its starring tenor. When it opens at Covent Garden next week - a co-production with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where it has been highly acclaimed - the role of *Cyrano* is played by a singer who must be its perfect protagonist: Placido Domingo.

Cyrano de Bergerac was premiered in Rome in 1936, but this is its first airing at the Royal Opera House. Alfano (1875-1954) was a lyrical, late-romantic composer, somewhat in the vein of late Puccini and Korngold. Today he is best-known for having completed *Turandot* after Puccini died, but he was a prolific composer in his own right, besides enjoying a varied career as a pianist, professor and opera-house director. He tackled Edmond Rostand's classic play with sensitivity and soulfulness - and the story is certainly a gift for a composer.

The poet and swordsman *Cyrano* believes that his appalling nose must prevent him from ever winning Roxane, whom he loves; sure enough, although she values poetry above all else, she falls in love with a handsome soldier, Christian, who lacks *Cyrano*'s way with words. *Cyrano* helps Christian to woo Roxane by providing him with appropriately eloquent expressions of love. Roxane learns the truth only at the end, by which time it is, tragically, too late.

Domingo spearheaded the Met and ROH staging. When we meet, he tells me how his curiosity about the work was first aroused when he heard that the tenor Ramon Vinay had performed the role in 1954: "I was interested because Vinay was one of the tenors I most admired, and we have a lot of repertoire in common," he says. "I thought at once: 'ah, this is something for me!' I love it so much and I'm very glad that I was able to convince the Met to stage it. The balcony scene is extremely beautiful and the final act is absolutely superb musically. It's not a pretentious work; the condensation of Rostand's play is very well done and it really gives you the chance to sing and act."

Rostand's original has been filmed in plenty of different guises, starring actors ranging from Jose Ferrer and Gérard Depardieu to Steve Martin. Domingo points out, though, "It's very different when you have to sing. We have a big

advantage, and also a big disadvantage. Our advantage is that the music, with the orchestration, with the colour, already creates the atmosphere; then you have to add to this with your singing and acting. Our disadvantage is that the actor can pick his own timing, but with the orchestra you cannot do that, you really have to follow."

Then there's the matter of sword-fights - Cyrano is an expert. "That's mostly a question of memorisation," Domingo explains. "One need not pretend to be the greatest swordfighter in the world. But "Cyrano's Ballad", his first aria in the first act, is very tough. You have to be doing the fighting while you sing, and that's difficult. There are some bars to rest, but you have to come back right away." And all this while wearing a large false nose. "I was afraid at the beginning that it would be hard to sing in the nose, but actually it doesn't get in the way. It just gets in the way of Cyrano's personality!"

He's full of admiration for Francesca Zambello, whose production takes a traditional approach: "She was so dedicated and she loved the piece. Because it was the first time people would see the opera, she went with the period, with the costumes and everything, and it's beautiful. I think the public at Covent Garden will enjoy it."

Domingo, now 65, is at a stage of life when most of us would rather be planning to spend more time tending our rose-bushes. But Cyrano is his 121st role and he has no intention of it being his last. "I'm not contemplating retiring," he declares. "I just don't want to go further than I should. I still feel strong physically, I've been moving on stage all my life and I can still manage long rehearsal periods, so I feel fine in the right repertoire. I suppose there's a certain limit: I don't want to be 70 and still singing opera. I don't think I will still be singing on 21 January 2011, which is my 70th birthday. If the destiny of God tells you, 'now you sang enough so you cannot sing any more,' I will understand. I will be sad, but I will realise how many years I sang and I'll be happy."

It's hard to imagine the operatic world without Domingo. One is struck not only by his obvious charisma, but his warmth and, most of all, his sheer enthusiasm for music, the stage, the young singers he has championed and the new roles he's tackling. Honours and decorations have been heaped upon him, most recently a Lifetime Achievement Award from this year's Classical Brits, declaring him "the greatest operatic artist of modern times". But he evidently sees none of that as a reason to rest on his laurels. "If I rest, I rust," runs his motto.

He'll be appearing at the Classical Brits awards ceremony on 4 May, where besides accepting the award he will sing extracts from his newest recording, *Italia Ti Amo*. Released on 1 May, the album is a personal selection of his favourite canzoni, Italian popular songs which will be more than familiar to any fans of Mario Lanza. At the other end of the musical spectrum, Deutsche Grammophon (the label for which he has recorded for 30 years) is also releasing a complete recording of Wagner's *Parsifal*, taken from a live performance at the Vienna State Opera, with Domingo in the title role and Christian Thielemann conducting. As if that wasn't enough, a further new

recording showcases Domingo in one of Puccini's least-known operas, *Edgar*; but then, the appetites of Domingo's fans are insatiable.

His voice has a unique appeal: its colouristic range, as striking for its darkness as for the higher, brighter register, combines with his fervent, generous and perfectly honed phrasing to claim the hearts of a huge public as well as dedicated opera buffs. His repertoire is as broad as his vocal range: though rooted firmly in the Italian operatic tradition, it extends from little-known rediscoveries like *Cyrano* through the gargantuan works of Wagner all the way to Christmas carols and, of course, the Three Tenors concerts and recordings. That phenomenon began when he, Luciano Pavarotti and Jose Carreras were invited to join forces for a single concert at the 1990 World Cup in Rome. The public's imagination was captured, and the resulting CD sold 20 million, the biggest-selling classical album ever. Four years later they were back again for the World Cup in Los Angeles, where they performed at Dodger Stadium to an audience of 60,000, with a further billion estimated to be watching worldwide on TV. Four years later, they were back again for Paris; and then Japan. "We never thought that it would be such an enormous success and that people would react in such a hysteric way," Domingo told Gramophone. "And something has begun - many new people came to opera." But the roller-coaster has almost certainly run its course; although Pavarotti (who is several years older than Domingo) suggested in a recent interview that more* * concerts might be possible, Domingo told *The Washington Post*: "I don't have any plans at all for this at the moment."

Not many singers could continue working at such levels of quality and quantity into their sixties. Domingo isn't indestructible, of course - he has recently cancelled planned performances of *Parsifal* in Zurich - but while Pavarotti's "farewell tour" in the US garnered some dubious write-ups, Domingo continues to attract rave reviews. He suggests that part of the reason for the durability of his vocal chords could be the fine technique that his voice-type virtually forced him to develop. "I was not a natural tenor," he explains. "I had to work out every single day and concentrate very hard on my technique, and I think that has helped."

He was born in Madrid; his parents were singers themselves, performers of zarzuela, the traditional Spanish form of operetta. They formed their own company in Mexico City when Domingo (whose name translates as "peaceful Sunday") was eight years old, and he appeared alongside them during some performances, but at first the voice was not his first concern. He entered the Mexico City Conservatory to study piano and conducting and it was only later that his voice's potential was discovered. As for its character, it was only when he auditioned for the Mexico National Opera as a baritone that it was suggested that he was really a tenor.

But the intensity of the work he took on as he began his career was not solely down to vocation: Domingo married at the age of 16 and became a father at 17. He appeared in his parents' zarzuelas as a baritone. He played piano for a touring ballet company, appeared as an actor on Mexican television, arranged pop songs, trained choruses, accompanied other singers in what he describes as "elegant and not so elegant" bars, and performed in light operettas and musicals, including the first Mexican staging of *My Fair Lady*, in 1959.

Opera claimed him via the small role of Borsa in Verdi's *Rigoletto* with the Mexican National Opera; his debut in a leading role, with the Monterrey Opera in 1961, was as Alfredo in Verdi's *La Traviata*. A period of serious groundwork followed, when he joined the company then known as the Opera Company of Israel, in Tel Aviv, giving 280 performances in 12 roles during two and a half years. At that time he had just married for the second time, to Marta Ornelas, a young Mexican soprano with a penchant for Mozart; the pair met as students at the Mexico City Conservatory and went to Israel together. Domingo's debut in the US followed just six months after they left Israel, when he appeared for the first time with New York City Opera; he first stepped on stage at the Met in 1968. In the UK, after his sensational appearance as Cavaradossi in Puccini's *Tosca* in 1971, he quickly became a regular audience favourite at Covent Garden.

Last year he appeared at the ROH as Siegmund in Wagner's *Die Walküre*; the company's performance of it at the Proms proved a historic occasion but marked, extraordinarily, Domingo's very first Prom appearance. "I'm sorry that for years I was never able to do it, but it's better late than never, no? So I'm lucky to make my debut. You'd never think that it would be in something so popular. In singing during almost 34 years at Covent Garden and the Festival Hall, I meant to come to this very prestigious festival but I never did it, so I'm very happy."

He found it quite an experience. "The atmosphere was unbelievable," he says, "At the beginning it's very impressive because you have the people so close. And it takes you a little while to get used to that. But you have to do it and then immediately you feel OK." He was impressed by the number of young people in the audience, "but not only young people - people of all ages, and this was the first time they heard me. That says something: it says unfortunately how expensive is opera for some people - they would like to come and hear someone at these prices and I wish that they would do it more and more. Because opera is expensive; what can you do?"

Domingo knows plenty about the cost of opera: as well as singing and conducting, he has become increasingly involved in opera-house administration over the years. He is the general director of both the Washington National Opera and the Los Angeles Opera, where his personal charm and overwhelming charisma have certainly helped him in the American opera-house director's inevitable role as fundraiser.

But more important to him is helping the development of young singers. In 1993, he founded the Operalia competition for young singers: the winners have included the charismatic young bass-baritone Erwin Schrott, who has recently been packing a punch as Figaro in the David McVicar production of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* at Covent Garden; the Swedish soprano Nina Stemme, who went on to record the title role in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* with Domingo last year; and the Mexican tenor Rolando Villazon - now a protégé of Domingo's, he is the latest emerging superstar in the opera world and has been signed up by Deutsche Grammophon, following in Domingo's footsteps.

"He is a wonderful singer," Domingo declares, "and we are very good friends. He accepted a cameo role in the *Tristan* recording, the young sailor who sings

the opening lines after the prelude, and he sang so beautifully - that was certainly a bonus and I thank him very much for doing it." Operalia is still going strong, and, says Domingo, "every year the number of singers has grown. It's been 13 years now and when you see the names of the singers who have come out of Operalia, it's really amazing."

All this could have been lifetimes' work for at least three people. How does he cope? "I just have a big passion and enthusiasm for what I do," he says with a shrug. "Otherwise, at this stage I wouldn't be doing it. I am immensely happy that I can carry on. Since I can, I am going to do it for a little while longer."

His next new project is as adventurous as anything he's done to date: he will star in the world premiere of an opera by Tan Dun, *The First Emperor*, opening at the Met in New York on 21 December. A preview in *The New York Times* predicted that the work "will be unlike anything that has ever been seen or heard on the Metropolitan Opera stage".

Looking further ahead, the Mexican composer Daniel Catan is writing an opera based on the Italian film *Il Postino* specifically for Domingo and Villazon. "Rolando will play the postino and I will be Pablo Neruda," Domingo says, smiling - the prospect is clearly a delight. And meanwhile, in partnership with the noted chef Richard Sandoval, Domingo has added to his curriculum vitae an involvement in an international chain of Mexican seafood restaurants.

The *Il Postino* opera is planned for Los Angeles in 2009: "That might be a nice time to retire," Domingo reflects, "but who knows..." With such adventures still ahead of him, it seems certain that Domingo will be as busy as ever for some time yet. His own peaceful Sundays will have to wait.

'Cyrano de Bergerac' is at the Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020-7304 4000; www.roh.org.uk) from 8 May