

The new Three Tenors

With record-breaking tours and multi-platinum albums, Pavarotti, Domingo and Carreras took opera to the masses. Now a younger trio is vying to take their place. By Jessica Duchon

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It's been 18 years since the Three Tenors proved that classical music could sell. In 1990, they appeared together for the first time at the Baths of Caracala in Rome the night before the World Cup Final: Placido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti and Jose Carreras captured the public's imagination in a way never seen before or since. Albums shifted in millions. We'll never see their like again.

Or will we? Because now three young tenors, all thirty-something heart-throbs with voices to die for, are being groomed for triplicate stardom. Roll over, Three Tenors: here come Jonas Kaufmann, Juan Diego Florez and Rolando Villazon.

Though the relative youngsters haven't yet come together to celebrate a football tournament, their individual talents are badly needed in an industry in the throes of meltdown. Each has released a solo album under the umbrella of Universal Classics; the discs came out within a few months of each other; and none of the repertoire overlaps. It appears some careful coordination is taking place. Could there be plans to turn these charismatic characters into the new Three Tenors?

Leading UK classical music promoter Ian Rosenblatt brings big stars and the finest young opera singers alike to perform in London; he promoted Florez's very first London concert. "These are three very talented guys," he comments, "and anything that will bring operatic music to a wider public and encourage a broader appreciation of this kind of talent is good news as far as I'm concerned."

Mark Wilkinson, general manager of Universal Classics and Jazz, is all for it. "As far as I know, there are no immediate plans for this," he says. "They're three very different voices with different repertoires and different managers, and their diaries are planned way into the future. But the same issues didn't stop Domingo, Pavarotti and Carreras. What the Three Tenors did was to open up the world of classical music to millions. If three of the current generation's greatest voices can

do the same, that's something we should all encourage."

Universal's marketing manager, Richard Gay, adds: "It would require a major occasion, perhaps a sporting event like the World Cup or the Olympics. But I don't see why it wouldn't be something that they'd all consider at the right time in the future. They are certainly the three strongest contenders."

The editor of Opera Now magazine, Ash Khandekar, has his doubts. "It wasn't premeditated that the Three Tenors would become so enormous," he says. "Anyone trying to replicate something that depended so much on that particular chemistry is probably barking up the wrong tree." Kaufmann, Florez and Villazon, he adds, represent a new kind of opera star – "rugged and hungry!" – but the differences between their voices might make collaboration tricky. "You could package them nicely with bows and ribbons, but you'd get an artistically questionable result."

Still, there are distinct parallels between the new three and the original trio. Kaufmann bears the closest resemblance to Domingo. At 39, he's the finest actor, and the subtlest, most deep-thinking interpreter. When he starred in Tosca at the Royal Opera House, he overshadowed the rest of the cast so much that fans joked about changing the opera's name to Cavaradossi. He also made waves in the ROH's Carmen, which was televised last Christmas, presenting not only spellbinding singing but also a penetrating portrayal of Don Jose's psychological disintegration. Both these roles were strongly associated with Domingo in his heyday.

The owner of a dark, baritone tenor that is sizeable despite his slenderness, Kaufmann is in demand in the big romantic leads. And it mightn't be surprising if he comes out of a Wagnerian chrysalis in due course – he'll sing Siegmund in Die Walküre at the Met in 2011, has already done Parsifal and is scheduled for the title role in Lohengrin in his native Munich next summer. His first album for Decca features some of the most punch-packing of romantic arias – from Puccini's La Bohème and Tosca to Massenet's Werther by way of the Prize Song from Die Meistersinger. He's the real thing, a sophisticated and serious artist who could soon be one of the finest of the lot.

Florez is most like Pavarotti. He may put away fewer bacon sandwiches backstage – his light frame is far removed from that of "Big Lucy" – but Pavarotti himself once endorsed the Peruvian youngster as his most likely successor, and the way he soared through the notorious succession of high Cs in the aria "Ah, mes amis" in Donizetti's La Fille du Régiment last year recalled the moment when Pavarotti made his name doing likewise back in the Sixties.

Florez's latest album, entitled Bel Canto Spectacular, is just out; his next will be Bellini's La Sonnambula in which he partners the equally starry Cecilia Bartoli. His voice shares Pavarotti's high timbre; but instead of belt-it-out volume, he

offers a silky legato and airy, natural and irresistible musicality. He's about quality, not quantity; and to date he has taken good care of his remarkable larynx, sticking to the repertoire that suits it best, rather than forcing it towards the heavier heroes that might have been a temptation.

That leaves Villazon to match Carreras, but here the comparison grows less comfortable. Carreras is a survivor: he joined forces with Domingo and Pavarotti only after undergoing harrowing treatment for leukaemia. Villazon, at 36, will have to prove himself a survivor too, but not from physical disease. In his case the music industry, desperate for big-selling superstars, may have to take some of the blame.

His new album, *Cielo e Mar*, involves somewhat specialised, all-Italian repertoire: its best-known arias have been extracted from second-strata Verdi like Luisa Miller and Simon Boccanegra, while the rest features such niche composers as Boito, Ponchielli and Mercadante.

Why has Villazon been relegated to recording rarities? As recently as 2004 the youthful singer first took Covent Garden by storm in Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. Stardom ensued when he and the Russian soprano Anna Netrebko formed a duo, their performances and recordings engendering one of the biggest opera-world feeding frenzies since the Three Tenors themselves.

But Villazon took five months off last year; reports attributed his absence to exhaustion or depression. He has said himself that he was in danger of burnout. *Cielo e Mar* represents his solo return. The gorgeous voice, with its natural charisma and honeyed centre, is still there, but the necessary sense of security is not as present as it used to be. Can Villazon – far more hyped than were any of the Three Tenors at the same age – find his way back on track? He'll be back at Covent Garden singing *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* next season and is recording, rather oddly, a Handel album to tie in with the 250th anniversary of the composer's death next year. These will be tests indeed.

In their mid-thirties, Domingo, Pavarotti and Carreras were approaching the peak of their powers, but nobody had thrust them into excessive limelight; and their voices were as cared for as Stradivarius violins. But the celebrity machine already appears to have inflicted damage on Villazon; and after Florez's Barbican concert in early July, in which the Peruvian star declared himself beset by phlegm, opera lovers must be praying that the others don't go the same way. Lessons have to be learnt: voices like these do not grow on trees.

Those hungry for a new Three Tenors phenomenon will be eyeing the possibilities in choosing the right place at the right time: the 2012 Olympics spring to mind. But it's worth remembering that when Domingo, Pavarotti and Carreras joined forces, they were well into middle age. If Kaufmann, Florez and Villazon do stand up together in their fifties, that would be great – because it

would mean that they have withstood the pressures of today's ruthless, short-term celebrity culture for long enough to get there.

Villazon's 'Cielo e Mar' is on DG; Florez's 'Bel Canto Spectacular' and Kaufmann's 'Romantic Arias' are on Decca. All are out now

Jonas Kaufmann

Thanks to his sultry good looks, this 39-year-old from Munich is often described as "sexy" and an operatic "rock star", but is a consummate artist. Devoted to his young family, Kaufmann lives in Zurich and has said he won't do crossover. Versatile and intelligent, with a dark-coffee timbre balancing a powerful top register; excels in everything from Mozart to Wagner.

Juan Diego Florez

Son of a folk singer from Lima, at 35 he's the hero of Peru. Made waves at the tender age of 23 by stepping in at short notice for the obscure opera *Matilde di Shabran* at the Rossini Festival in Pesaro. Such is his celebrity status at home that his wedding to Julia Trappe in Lima Cathedral was televised. High, light-filled, open tone admired by Pavarotti. Repertoire: bel canto.

Rolando Villazon

This Mexican tenor, 36, won several prizes in Placido Domingo's Operalia Competition in 1999 and soon shot to stardom. Rugged Latin looks combined with warmth and charm; charismatic voice fuelled by high-octane energy. High points include a concert with Anna Netrebko and Domingo in Berlin to celebrate the 2006 World Cup. Took five months off last year suffering from exhaustion.