

June 25, 2010

Placido Domingo: 'If I rest, I rust'

Placido Domingo is the best-known, and best-loved, tenor in the world. Next week he makes his Covent Garden debut as a baritone. He may sound different but he's still the hottest ticket in town, says Jessica Duchen

Love opera? Love Placido Domingo. For any opera fan, this towering tenor is king of the world. It's hard - no, impossible - to think of any other classical musician as loved and respected as he is. With a stage presence as radiant, warm and imposing as his voice, it's no wonder that this musical megastar holds pride of place in so many hearts.

From next week, he's back at Covent Garden, in a new capacity that would be a surprise move for any singer: aged 69, he's singing Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*. What's so unusual? Well, it's a role for a baritone rather than a tenor. And Domingo, as we all know, is a tenor. He sang the lead in this roller-coaster of politics and paternity for the first time last autumn; it could mark a wholesale shift in his vocal capacity. If anybody in the music world is unstoppable, it appears to be him.

But even he is human. In March he underwent surgery in New York to remove a small cancerous polyp from his colon. He feared it might be the end of his career: "For a few interminable moments I was anguished and feared that I could not sing any more," he told Italy's *Corriere della Sera*. He was forced to pull out of the Royal Opera House's *Tamerlano*; fans disappointed then will no doubt queue round the block for any chance to hear him in *Boccanegra*. Tickets at the Royal Opera House have been limited to two per applicant and the production's visit to the Proms on 18 July sold out in a day.

But maybe we should all queue: few singers can achieve a vocal longevity that allows them to perform leading roles aged nearly 70, let alone beyond. It's a terrible thought, but will he ever sing in London again? Will this be Domingo's last stand?

I hope not, because an artist as complete as Domingo appears once in a generation. And a good part of it is about his personal charisma. Domingo has about him an exceptional atmosphere - call it an aura, if you like - that seems to affect the air of whatever stage or room he's in. It's not only that he looks taller than he really is (he does), or that you can't quite believe you're facing the real McCoy in person; everything near him begins to function with extra intensity and focus.

Like the few comparable people that exist - Valery Gergiev, for example, or even, er, Margaret Thatcher - he seems to have the energy of three or four ordinary humans. But with Domingo there's something extra: a warmth, generosity and solidity that suggests not only a great heart but a strong and sensible mind. You don't only admire him; you trust him. What comes first, the artistry or the man? I'd like to think that, indivisibly, they fuel one another.

When I met Domingo, when he was last in London, he was by no means taking his continuing career for granted. We talked backstage. Domingo in his silk dressing-gown emanated not just his extraordinary charisma, but genuine warmth, wisdom and charm. He was not contemplating retirement, he explained, but was ready for it should it prove necessary.

"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," he told me. But he went on to say: "I just don't want to go further than I should. 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."

Doesn't time fly when you're having fun? Now that would give him a scant seven more months on stage. But if his voice is still in good shape and physical health allows, there's no reason he should stop; after all, no mandatory retirement age exists for artists like him, to whom music is not a job, but the substance and meaning of life. "If I rest, I rust," he declares.

Everything is determined by vocal health, and Domingo, though he seems to be a workaholic, has taken remarkably good care of that priceless larynx. His tone is instantly recognisable for its many-shaded timbre, its focused power, flexibility and sense of unimpeded expression straight from the heart. Its flavour is as bittersweet as the best Seville orange marmalade and its humanity so overwhelming that to listen to it is to feel embraced by it. As for versatility, he has turned it to everything from the Three Tenors to the most challenging operatic roles in the repertoire. And it's still turning.

Luciano Pavarotti, too, sang on well beyond the age at which most voices begin to decline - but strong criticism followed the superstar Italian tenor's performances in his "farewell tour" of 2004. Domingo, though, has already sung Simon Boccanegra in Berlin and at La Scala, Milan; in Berlin, at least, it appears to have been a resounding triumph. The New York Times reported: "Domingo's noble performance establishes Boccanegra as one of those rare roles where stature transcends voice type," and added that he was "in sterling form throughout."

Should his 70th birthday prove his cut-off point (and hopefully it won't), he will have been packing in the activities in those seven months. Highlights are to include a new opera written especially for him: the Mexican composer Daniel Catan has adapted the story of the film *Il Postino* and Domingo will sing the role of the poet Pablo Neruda. The title role was originally intended for his protégé Rolando Villazon, but at not much more than half Domingo's age the Mexican tenor seems to have had infinitely more vocal problems. The premiere was postponed from last September; it is now scheduled for 23 September and Villazó*is out. Charles Castronovo replaces him. For Domingo it's all in a day's work, another new addition to his roster of roles, at least 129 of them and rising.

But here comes yet another: it seems he's to tackle *Rigoletto*, another Verdi baritone lead that presents a massive challenge, emotional as well as musical. The *Corriere della Sera* announced that he will take the role of the beleaguered hunchback in September in Mantua, where the opera is set, and that RAI television intends to film it. Domingo was remaining circumspect about the plan, quoted as saying: "It depends on my energy levels and on the way the audience will judge my *Boccanegra*."

There's another matter to consider as Domingo heads for London. How come he can sing baritone roles at all? Some tenor voices are completely natural, for example, Juan Diego Florez's. But true tenors are rare creatures - even choral societies and church choirs have trouble finding enough of them. Is it possible that Domingo's original voice might have been rather lower? He certainly thought it was.

And he admitted as much: "I was not a natural tenor," he told me, during that interview. Yet his careful training has probably contributed to his enduring vocal health. Is the genius of such a voice perhaps, as Edison would say, one per cent inspiration and 99 per cent perspiration? "I had to work out [vocally] every single day," Domingo declared, "and concentrate on my technique. And I think that has helped."

Still, Domingo is more than a singer: he's a man of the theatre, in every sense. By now there are few spheres of operatic activity that his influence has not touched. He conducts, is general director of two opera houses, and founded today's most important annual competition for young singers.

He was virtually born for the stage. His parents, Placido Domingo Sr and Pepita Embil, were both fêted singers of zarzuela (Spanish operetta) in Madrid, but after frequent tours to Mexico the family decided to settle there and established their own Domingo Embil Company in the capital in 1949. Their small son would sometimes tread the boards alongside the two of them.

At first the teenaged Placido little thought of becoming a singer. Entering the Music Conservatory in Mexico City at the age of only 14, he enrolled to study piano and conducting rather than voice.

But life intervened. He married at just 16 and his wife, Ana Maria Guerra Cue, gave birth to their son Jose a year later. Aged 17, Placido had a family to support, so he began to work as a jobbing musician. The dizzying range of activities he then undertook helped to set up his lifelong pattern of tireless hard work and multi-tasking wizardry.

At that time he adopted every musical and stage-related activity he could find. He sang in his parents' zarzuela company - as a baritone - and in light operetta and musicals. In the first staging in Mexico of *My Fair Lady*, which ran for 170 performances, he sang a small role and served as assistant conductor and vocal coach. He played the piano for a touring ballet company, worked as a television actor, arranged pop songs, sang in "elegant and not so elegant" bars. At one point he hosted his own music show on Mexican television. Eventually in 1959 he auditioned for the Mexican National Opera, again as a baritone. It was suggested at the audition that maybe, just maybe, he was really a tenor. And it was in that capacity that he entered the company.

Domingo spent many years building up his voice, reputation and experience before attempting anything that brought him serious international limelight. He made his debut as Alfredo in Verdi's *La Traviata* in Monterrey, then spent two and a half years with the Israeli National Opera in Tel Aviv, where he sang 280 performances of 12 different roles. But after he made his debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1968, as Maurizio in Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur* - a role written for the legendary Enrico Caruso - there was no turning back. In Covent Garden, too, he created a sensation upon his 1971 house debut as Cavaradossi in *Tosca*.

Meanwhile his early marriage had ended within a few years. In 1962 he married Marta Ornelas, a young soprano who had won the prestigious Mexican Singer of the Year award, but subsequently devoted herself to his career rather than her own until 1991, when she made her debut as a stage director. The couple have two sons, Placido Jr, who is a composer, and Alvaro, a film producer.

Many individuals might have been content, in career terms, not to look further than the phenomenal popularity that Domingo won with Luciano Pavarotti and Jose Carreras for their appearances and recordings as the Three Tenors. They appeared together for the first time at the Baths of Caracalla in Rome to sing before the final of the 1990 World Cup. This astounding event led to many repeat appearances and caused a surge in classical CD sales - actually, just theirs - which the industry, unfortunately, has been attempting to replicate ever since. For Domingo, the Three Tenors was all in a particularly good day's work, and not only financially. He's a devoted football fan.

But he never thought of stopping there. Perhaps what is most remarkable about him, voice and charisma aside, is that he constantly seeks out ambitious new challenges and mostly hits the jackpot with them. His dual appointments at the Los Angeles Opera and the Washington National Opera attracted some disapprobation at first: how could a busy singer, who also conducts, be general director at the same time of two gigantic artistic endeavours on opposite sides of the USA? Surely he had to come a cropper?

Not a bit of it; his contracts at both houses were extended to the end of the 2011 season, which will have given him eight years in his current post at each of them, having already been artistic director in Washington since 1996 and artistic consultant in Los Angeles since as early as 1984. Add to the list of Domingo's talents "artistic diplomat and fundraiser extraordinaire".

Recently, he has needed to be both. Earlier this year extraordinary scenes in Los Angeles accompanied the ambitious staging of Wagner's Ring Cycle by the German director Achim Freyer, a protégé of Berthold Brecht. Planned for ten years, it has cost the opera company a not-too-cool \$32m and, according to Anne Midgette of The Washington Post, clocked up debts of \$14m. The cycle's opening in April even saw protests outside from some select ideologues who disapproved of such an amount being spent on "elitist" opera by a composer who was notoriously anti-Semitic. And while The New York Times spoke of the production's "dazzling, whimsical and affecting imagery", the director was nevertheless greeted by some vociferous booing. Loved or loathed, the Ring Cycle that Domingo built seems to be making history.

Presenting this Ring, Domingo took a risk, aimed high and, many would say, shot straight. In public, he has kept relatively quiet about it - except when he was singing its Siegmund, that is. The ever-popular blogger Opera Chic nailed the issue, commenting: "This is one of the reasons why Placido Domingo is still around after all these years - he wrote the playbook on how to behave in public as a celebrity. Most politicians aren't nearly that skillful."

As a singer Domingo came relatively late to Wagner. Though his recording of Tristan und Isolde with the Swedish soprano Nina Stemme won most awards that a CD can win, he has never sung Tristan on stage. Parsifal, yes; but even there he has been known to have to cancel performances. Singing Siegmund in Die Walküre, though, he triumphed everywhere. Another new endeavour embraced and proven.

But one of his most important innovations has not involved him singing a note. It is the Operalia Competition, initiated in 1993 by "Placidone" (as he's nicknamed in Italy) and now the largest such contest in the world, offering prizes annually worth some \$200,000. It rotates between various cities in Europe, the US and Mexico; and through it some of opera's brightest young stars in opera have found a public and launched their careers. Among its most significant winners have been Rolando Villazon, Erwin Schrott, Joyce DiDonato and Nina Stemme, Domingo's Isolde. This year's laureates, soprano Sonya Yoncheva from Bulgaria and tenor Stefan Pop from Romania, are worth a watch.

Domingo himself has been showered with so many honours that we can assume if he hasn't won something, it's not worth winning. Most recently, a dazzling \$1m landed in his lap last October: a new prize initiated by the great Wagnerian soprano Birgit Nilsson, apparently the biggest award in all classical music. Nilsson died in 2005, but when she set up the finances for the award in her last years, she chose Domingo to be its first winner.

Receiving it, he displayed typical diplomacy, tact and grace. "When Birgit and I sang three performances of Turandot at the Metropolitan Opera, there were moments when I was so overwhelmed with admiration for her vocal abilities and power that I almost forgot to continue singing," he commented. "My greatest regret was that Birgit and I never performed together in Die Walküre or Tristan und Isolde. I remember telling her this many years ago, to which she replied: "Well then, you better hurry up."

That's typical. The big Placido: generous, appreciative and never short of a twinkle in the eye. Still singing, to his own surprise, he's lucky and knows it.

"I just have a big passion and enthusiasm for what I do," he told me. "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. 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." We're lucky to have him.

'Simon Boccanegra', Royal Opera House, London WC2 (02007304 4000) 26 June to 15 July and at BBC Proms, 18 July (Bbc.co.uk/proms). Also showing on BP Big Screens, 13 July (Roh.org.uk/bpbigscreens) and on BBC2 on 10 July