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MEET DR ROLLO

Barry Manilow, Pixie Lott, Peter Kay – and a top opera star? What on earth is Rolando Villazón doing in the Royal Variety Performance?

“It’s fun,” declares the celebrated Mexican tenor, 39. “It’s different from what I normally do, but it’s an opportunity for me to have a great time.” His contribution to the annual bonanza of stage entertainment, on ITV on 14 December, is not especially operatic: he sings “Smile” from the Charlie Chaplin film *Modern Times* (which is on his album of songs from the movies, *La Strada*) and “Tonight” from *West Side Story*. The latter is a duet with Hayley Westenra, who is better known for her appearances at rugby grounds and military occasions than for actual opera. Cue cries of horror from opera purists: oh no, Villazón is doing the dreaded “crossover” again!

Don’t sniff. Villazón says it was crossover that led him to opera, rather than vice-versa.

He might never have started singing if, aged about ten and growing up in the suburbs of Mexico City, he had not heard Plácido Domingo’s album of “crossover” love songs. “There was nobody in my home who was close to opera or classical music,” he says. “Then by accident, I ended up with this album. I would never have put on a recording of Domingo singing classical arias, but I heard these love songs and I fell in love with his voice. I bought all the crossover albums of Domingo – I was listening to them, trying to sing like them, learning the songs. It all started there. I had a crazy dream that one day I’d sing with him – something I never expected to come true.”

But come true it did. In 1999 Villazón entered Operalia, the competition for young singers that Domingo had founded; he scooped two top prizes, one for zarzuela (traditional Spanish operetta), plus the Audience Prize. At the winners’ concert, he and Domingo sang together: “It was absolutely amazing. Afterwards we became good friends. He has been extremely important in my career: an inspiration, a friend and an example.”

Villazón, who is appearing next summer in a London gala to mark the 20th anniversary of Operalia, credits Domingo with having sparked a new golden age of operatic singing. “There has been an evolution in the way people act and sing; there was a time before Domingo and a time since. He learned everything there was to learn from Maria Callas, Giuseppe di Stefano and that great generation of artists, but with the musicality, the intelligence and the generosity to transform it. We are all sons of that now. Many people say that past times were the greatest – but look at today! I don’t think there has ever been a more complete tenor than Jonas Kaufmann, or someone with the technique of Juan Diego Flórez. Joyce DiDonato? She’s a volcano. Diana Damrau? My goodness!”

But he himself nearly had to drop out of that roster altogether: he has recently made a triumphant comeback following an operation in 2009 to remove a cyst from inside one of his vocal cords. The

condition could have cost him his career – indeed his voice – had the cord not healed successfully. After his operation, Domingo flew in to visit him at home in Paris: “We just hugged and cried,” Villazón remembers.

An onslaught of criticism dogged his recovery, ready to blame his problems on singing too much, too soon. Yet the cyst had nothing to do with singing, he emphasises: it was “genetic” and could happen to anyone, singer or not.

“I was doing a lot – but am I the only one? Of course not,” he insists. “There are unwritten rules in the world of opera that we should destroy. For instance, ‘One has to learn to say no’. We all say no to a thousand things. One has to learn to say yes! You have to be ready to take up opportunities, because this absurd system of signing four or five years in advance means that if you don’t, you could wait ten years for another chance. I came out of Operalia and jumped into La Traviata in Paris to replace someone. I had done auditions in every major theatre and they all said no. After La Traviata, everyone came back and said yes.”

It was in the romantic hero roles of 19th century opera that Villazón made his name – Alfredo in Verdi’s La Traviata, the eponymous poet in Offenbach’s Les contes d’Hoffmann and Massenet’s Werther in which his long-awaited return took Covent Garden by storm last spring. Romantic he may be – an effusive, energetic personality who never quite stops performing – but he has also had to be tough.

Last year he made further waves by agreeing to be a judge on Pop Star to Opera Star, where his presence appeared to give the TV talent show a credibility its critics weren’t convinced it deserved. The TV world took him by surprise in many ways. “I don’t watch TV,” he explains. “I haven’t watched TV for years. They asked me about The X Factor and I didn’t know what it was. Katherine Jenkins used to laugh at me because they’d mention names of famous people and I didn’t know them.

“I remember in this programme thinking I need to say something stupid, something that stays in people’s minds. If I tried to say important things – ‘opera serves the subconscious,’ and so on – nobody cares and they don’t remember. Either you play the game, or you say no, so I came up with ‘chaca-chaca’. It’s from a 1970s Mexican commercial for soap powder. They used to put soap in a machine and say: ‘Look, this soap doesn’t move; but this one over here has chaca-chaca’. So I say: give me ‘chaca-chaca’ in your performance!”

If you thought Villazón was clowning, you wouldn’t be wrong. Clowning has become something of an obsession, one that bounces through his TV appearances, the cartoons he draws and the operas he sometimes directs (his clown-based production of Werther drew a mixed reception). He even used his months away from singing to write a novel about a clown. Maybe most significantly, he works with Red Noses Clowndoctors International, which brings clowns to perform in children’s hospitals and hospices: donning a clown costume, he turns himself into ‘Dr Rollo’. “I have been an ambassador for them for six or seven years,” he says. “The doctors love it because the children become more motivated.

“The clown figure laughs at structures and rules,” he adds. “It gets rid of the little professor inside me that keeps saying, ‘You are a serious opera singer, where is your jacket, where is your tie, you need to speak very seriously...’ The clown liberates you.”

Suitably liberated, Villazón has bounced back. He has undergone the greatest danger a singer can experience and emerged stronger than ever. “It was difficult,” he acknowledges. “But it was also a great time. If I had to live my career over again, I wouldn’t change a thing. Not even the cyst.”

The Royal Variety Performance is broadcast on ITV on 14 December. La Strada is out now on Decca.