

When a wet tenor wowed Woody Allen

The director made him sing in the shower, Fabio Armiliato tells Jessica Duchen

Monday 14 January 2013

Fabio Armiliato's recent experience in itself reads almost like a Woody Allen film. The Italian tenor – who is about to make his London recital debut – was enjoying the full flow of his fine career, singing leading roles in opera houses all over the world, when Allen chose him to feature in a new movie. And one of its requirements was that from time to time he had to sing, please, just a little less well.

Allen's *To Rome with Love* presents a set of stories against the backdrop of the city – and you can't have Italy without opera. Armiliato is Giancarlo, a mortician who is overheard singing in the shower by Jerry, a retired opera director – the role is played by Allen himself. Jerry determines to make Giancarlo a star. The trouble is that he can sing only in the shower. Jerry tackles this by setting up a stage complete with booth, taps and soap.

Armiliato says he was astonished to find himself sharing his scenes with Allen, whom he admires "as much as Charlie Chaplin or Federico Fellini". But then, he was astonished to be in a film at all. Born in Genoa in 1956, he is that modern rarity, a true Italian operatic tenor – a phenomenon the mystique of which has never dimmed. With his dark and dramatic countenance and a voice as compelling in quiet expressivity as it is at high volume, he seems the real deal and hence the perfect choice to be Giancarlo.

For the fictional singer to convince that he could not deliver anywhere but the shower, though, Armiliato – having spent a quarter century honing his art – now had to try in some episodes to sound distinctly below par. Allen, he says, handled this with admirable tact. "Sometimes, he'd tell me, 'This was better than last time – can you sing just a little worse?'" Armiliato recounts.

"It was an amazing experience to work with Woody Allen because he showed such respect for opera and for me too," he adds. "The first time I read the story I was a bit embarrassed about what I would have to do, but he said, 'Don't worry, I'll do it in a very simple way, without putting you in any difficult situations.' And when we discussed the musical part he let me choose the pieces – it was only the final aria from *I Pagliacci* that he definitely wanted. He never pushed me to do something if I didn't feel comfortable."

Armiliato takes a pragmatic view of the almost legendary status held by Italian tenors. It springs, he suggests, from the fact that they are able to present most of the genre's finest works in their mother tongue: "Most of the great opera composers wrote in the Italian language, so we are very lucky. This helped the myth of the Italian tenor spread throughout the golden age of opera in the last century, with artists like Enrico Caruso, Beniamino Gigli and Mario del Monaco. Today, opera is more international and performers everywhere know the Italian style. But that means that the mission of the Italian tenors of the past has been achieved: spreading the understanding of this style to all parts of the world." His London recital will consist of extracts from favourite Italian operas, plus a little Beethoven.

Incidentally, he really does sing in the shower – "That's often how I learn new roles!" But unlike Giancarlo, he won't be in hot water without it.

Fabio Armiliato: Rosenblatt Recital Series, Wigmore Hall, London W1 (020 7935 2141) tonight