

Giordani, the genius of versatility

Gina Di Meo (September 23, 2007)



He is definitely the man of the moment, or rather the tenor of the moment, and he is Italian. The spotlights of the Metropolitan Opera are constantly trained on Marcello Giordani, a Sicilian from the town of Augusta, 44 years old, and...

...on the stage in four roles this season: Pinkerton in "Madama Butterfly" of Giacomo Puccini, Enzo in "La Gioconda" of Amilcare Ponchielli, Rodolfo in "La Bohème" of Giacomo Puccini, and Gabriele in "Simon Boccanegra" of Giuseppe Verdi.

The international press has acclaimed him as one of the most important of today's tenors. His exceptional versatility has allowed him to encompass a wide repertory, which spans the gamut from the bel canto of Bellini and Rossini, to the lyricism of the French opera repertory, and to the operas of Verdi and Puccini which demand the vocality of a "lirico-spinto". In short, someone like him would have plenty to be boastful about, but just the opposite is true, and I should know since I met him in person, the day after a performance of "Simon Boccanegra" when, with simplicity and a total lack of boastfulness, he talked about himself. Before considering his present successes, I immediately ask him how his singing career began.

"I began by singing in our church - he says - but it was really my father who encouraged me. He was a great opera lover, and I was curious about this passion of his. I used to sing along with his recordings, and he realized that it was unusual for a child my age to possess that kind of voice, and I remember like it was yesterday the first LP that I received as a gift, a compilation of famous arias sung by the Sicilian tenor Giuseppe Di Stefano".

Taking a look at your biography, I saw that as a youth you did not attend a voice school, but if your

father was aware of your potential, why didn't he enroll you in a music conservatory, for example?

"I come from a small town, and there in Sicily a steady job was more important. So my father said to me: 'First you get your diploma, and then we'll see if you really have the talent.' So, when I was 17 years old, I went for my first audition with a soprano in Catania. Naturally, I was singing by ear, and she said to me: 'You have potential, but it would be better to wait a few years.'"

And in the meanwhile?

"In the meanwhile, after I earned my accounting diploma, I began working in a bank, but I lasted only one year. I decided to quit, and I knew that my father would stand behind me, but everybody else in the family was against, beginning with my mother. Things took a different turn when I won the international singing competition in Spoleto in 1986. After that, I moved to Milan and began my career."

Let's go back a step. As a child, you were aware that you had a different voice from that of other boys

your age? And how did this difference affect you?

"Already when I was twelve I was thinking of becoming a singer, I wanted to go to the opera and I dreamed of being on stage. To many of my friends, I was the one who had to sing if there was singing to be done."

When you are not traveling for work, you live with your wife and your two children in your hometown of

Augusta. What do your fellow citizens say about you?

"Believe it or not, many still see me as the hometown boy with the ambition of becoming a singer, and they often ask me: 'What kind of work do you do for a living?'."

Let's talk about your debut, where did it take place?

"Actually, I spent the first ten years of my career in the United States, in Portland, Oregon, where I made my

debut during the 1988-89 season as Nadir in 'Les Pêcheurs de perles' of Georges Bizet. During the same

period, I also made my debut at La Scala of Milan as Rodolfo in "La Bohème".

How did you end up in Oregon?

"My former manager traveled to Italy often, and one day in Fano, where I was singing in 'Madama Butterfly', he heard me, recorded my voice and sent the tape to the manager of the Portland Opera who hired me. I want to add that Pavarotti also listened to that tape and said: 'This boy has a great potential'. I remained in Portland until 1995."

In 1994 your career had a bit of a setback. You had a vocal crisis and La Scala fired you from

"Rigoletto". Can you tell us about that period?

"I paid the consequences of poor teaching. I did not have a good technique, and I didn't know up to what point I could push my voice. I began to suffer from stage fright, I was prone to frequent crises, anxiety, fainting, and to add to this, my father passed away. He was my reference point, the one who encouraged me to sing. In brief, the world around me collapsed, and I almost decided to change occupation, to go back to work in a bank."

And what made you change your mind?

"I decided to take six months off to reflect. Here in New York I met Bill Schuman, the one whom I call my

teacher, who taught me how to retrain my voice, and helped me trust myself again. In spite of my difficulty in communicating in English, he knew immediately what I meant and what I felt. I consider those six months the most profitable period of my career. Now I understand what role suits my voice, and if, after I've tried it for a couple of months, I begin to feel tired, that means that it's not for me".

When was your debut at the Met?

"In 1993 with 'L'Elisir d'amore' of Donizetti, and by now I feel at home here. I have four productions this season and three the next, Lucia di Lammermoor, Manon Lescaut and Ernani. I must also say that the American public, unlike the Italian, has forgiven me the errors of my youth."

In 2006 you made an unexpected debut when, very little notice, you replaced José Calleja in the role of

the Duke in "Rigoletto", while at the same time you were singing "La Gioconda" and "Madama Butterfly", a considerable commitment since these operas involve three different kinds of singing.

"It was a challenge for me, since I hadn't sung 'Rigoletto' for four years. This opera has been the "croce e delizia" of my career, beginning with my debut at the Festival of Spoleto. At that time, I wasn't prepared. Then, at other times, I had vocal problems. In short, I've never been able to sing it well, but I finally I succeeded."

Your repertory includes a lot of Donizetti, Puccini and Verdi. Which of these three is your favorite

composer?

"Puccini, because, he's closer to my temperament, even if I owe much to Donizetti who has taught me how to sing. Together with Bellini and Verdi, he has given me the bel canto background which has enabled me to move to a more complex repertory.

And with "Lucia di Lammermoor", is it like going back to your "first love"?

"This too is a challenge. The last time I sang Donizetti was about seven years ago in Zurich. Lately I've been focusing on a more demanding repertory. To go back to Donizetti, and to sing bel canto, is also healthy for the voice, I learned that from Pavarotti."

Recently you appeared before the judges of the Supreme Court in Washington. How did you feel

about it?

"To tell you the truth, I didn't expect this invitation. Everybody said to me: "'It's a big deal, it's a great honor to sing for them'. Among other things, I found out that the parents of one of the judges, Antonin Scalia, are from Sicily."

It looks like Sicily is constantly producing talents. Salvatore Licitra is also of Sicilian origin. What's the

secret?

"It is the land of the Gods, the Magna Grecia. Because of its geographical position, Sicily has been subjected to all sorts of invasions, there has been a mixing of cultures, and I think this has contributed to the fact that art is innate in the Sicilian people. Like the Neapolitan, we have the ability to dramatize everything."

And in addition to the Supreme Court, the Manhattan School of Music also invited you for a

Masterclass...

"Yes, that was last November and, at the risk of repeating myself, it was another challenge for me. I've never taught, not to mention in English. But I wanted to give it a try anyway, and when I couldn't find the appropriate words, I demonstrated by singing along with them. It was exciting to share my experience with young singers. I told them about the problems I had when I was young, and advised them to be patient, otherwise you run the risk of disappearing from the stage very quickly."

You, instead, have been on the stage for a long time. What is the most beautiful thing that has been

written about you?

"Last year I celebrated the first twenty years of my career, and the most beautiful thing that I read about myself was that I am a good person, honest, loyal, and that the way I sing reflects my sincerity, and my unsullied soul. But, in spite of all the praise, there is one thing which I regret, that is the lack of attention on the part of the major Italian media, and of the Italian institutions in New York."

To compensate, you have the attention of Peter Gelb, the Met's general manager, who has defined you

as "the Italian tenor".

"I'm very flattered by it. At the Met I feel at home, and Peter Gelb has introduced a breath of fresh air, he is a



very forward-looking person."

You have sung in the most important theaters of the world. Is there any place left where you would like to perform?

"I'd like to sing for the Pope, that would be a wonderful thing."

(Translated from Italian by Fiorella Sampirisi)

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