



A man for all seasons

*Life as one of the world's leading singers would be an all-absorbing challenge for most people. But for Plácido Domingo, it's just not enough. **Antonia Couling** catches up with the tenor as he juggles his career as a singer and conductor on the international opera circuit, along with his role as artistic supremo in two major American opera companies, with visionary plans for their future*

Many hard-working people approaching 60 would be thinking of throwing it all in for a quiet life, a cottage by the sea and the occasional world cruise – but not Plácido Domingo. On the contrary, he seems to be revving his engines up for possibly the busiest time of his career. And it's not simply a case of zooming from venue to venue to sing, but pressure of a different kind, for Domingo has to do a fine juggling act between the different elements that now make up his working year. Not only have his conducting dates become regular fixtures in his diary, and not only is he well into his third year as artistic director of Washington Opera, but he continues to sing punishing roles, learn new ones, and has now been asked to take over from Peter Hemmings as artistic director at Los Angeles Opera. Washington doesn't need to panic, however, because Domingo intends to combine both jobs – he has been asked by Washington to extend his initial four-year contract until the year 2004 and will begin a three-year contract in Los Angeles in 2000.

I met him in his offices in Washington during a week in November typical of his hectic life: the night before, he had sung *Fedora* with Mirella Freni, that evening he was to conduct the new production of *Samson et Dalila* with José Cura and Denyce Graves, with another *Fedora* two days later. Meanwhile, there was a pile of administration work (and interviews) slotted in between. (The only indication that his age might be catching up with him was that he had to rest his leg up on a chair as it was giving him gyp from a fall last summer and he was going to be standing all evening.)

I begin our conversation by politely pointing out that his schedule is crazy. 'It's not crazy!' he retorts, 'It's very well thought-out!' Well, busy then. Isn't it all a bit too much? But of course no one's forcing him to do what he does and the power to stop or slow down lies in his own hands: 'I think that the amount of work you can cope with depends on your shoulders – I have the shoulders for the amount that I do. I feel when I am working just like a child feels when you give it candy – everything is exciting and I am really full of happiness and energy to do it. And that carries me. It's so marvellous, the career I have chosen. The singing, the conducting and now realising the ambition of being able to do some executive work.'

As for running two houses at opposite ends of the USA, Domingo is already no stranger to LA Opera. He has been connected with the company in an advisory capacity since its inception in 1986 and views this new job as a promotion: 'Of course it's a very important promotion, because now all the

decisions are mine. Before it was just a matter of talking with Peter Hemmings and exchanging ideas. Now it will have to be my own organisation and way of doing things.'

And what is his way of doing things? I wondered if he intended to make an impact when he takes over in LA. Would it be difficult to follow in the footsteps of Hemmings, who has done so much with the company, to the point of being able to be quite experimental, with many adventurous productions and new commissions, such as the recent *Fantastic Mr Fox* by Tobias Picker. After all, there are those who accuse Domingo of being a little conservative. 'I don't think I am conservative. I think it is a matter of different taste. I don't criticise Peter. I think that the two of us together have had the right combination of thoughts, because if he tried to go in one direction, I would tell him, "Peter, maybe we should do it *this way*"; and if I were to go too much in one direction, he would tell me so. I think we are both adventurous, but in different ways. Maybe I'll do things differently in LA, but I will still be taking risks. What I won't risk is that, for my first LA season, I would really like to bring more people into the theatre. The season after that will be a big one of transition, because it's when the Los Angeles Philharmonic moves into the new Disney Hall and the opera company will have more time for its own development. We will have to extend the repertoire, to add maybe a couple more operas. You have to warm the people up, to get them to come more and more. I mean, I'm not going to do ABCD – *Aïda*, *Bobème*, *Carmen* and *Don Giovanni* – in the same season! But I would really like to do quite a popular season to bring the public in.'

It's enough to make you tear your hair out when you start to analyse the responsibilities that an artistic director has: do you educate your existing audience beyond the 'ABCD' repertoire? Or do you try to bring more people to the artform generally, and can you only do this by presenting unchallenging, recognised work? Striking the right balance is very difficult, but Domingo claims that he knows the public's needs. 'I think that they have been quite happy in Washington with my third season's repertoire. [*Simon Boccanegra*, *Fedora*, *Samson*, *The Crucible*, *Entführung*, *Boris Godunov*, *Tristan*, *Sly*] One of the difficult things is that you have to make a choice between what the public would like to see and staying true to your vision as an artistic director. You have to do interesting and important things. It would be easy just to please the public. I could do a never-ending programme of crowd-pleasers and we would have 100 per cent sold-out houses, but I think that's wrong. The idea is that you have to see what is important, what anniversaries are important, which works the company hasn't done, and look at a range of repertoire – Verdi, Puccini, Mozart, Wagner, French

opera.' All this has to be achieved within the small number of productions in each season. 'You don't have many operas in a season. If you were allowed 15, 18 or even 12, it would allow for the repeating of composers and so on.'

Domingo's own prestigious international profile, most famously (or infamously, some

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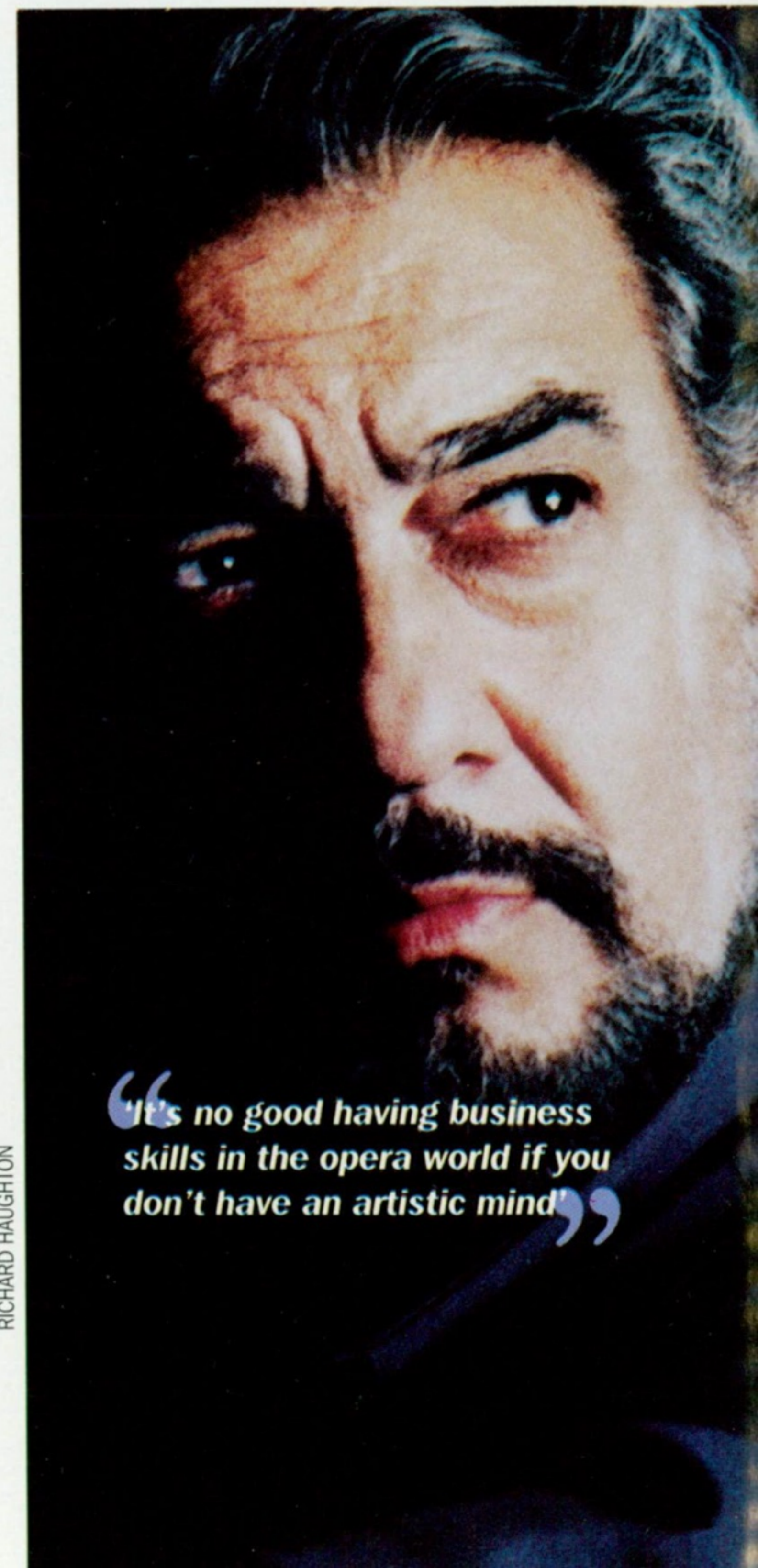
would say) as one of the Three Tenors, has certainly not been a hindrance to his work as an artistic director in Washington. Quite the opposite: 'If you have been an artist, you can bring money to the company, because people are more enthusiastic about helping. Also, it means that a lot of my colleagues are willing to come here. People like Mirella Freni, Sam Ramey, José Carreras, José Cura from this season – it's my personal friendship that has brought them here, you know, because there are so many opera houses and they have so many choices as to where they sing. So, although I am not sitting here every day doing numbers – I have a wonderful executive director in Patricia Mossel and artistic administrator in Ed Purrington who do tremendous work and are a real asset to the company – I find that I am not only thinking about artistic things, but I have also been able to attract interesting people, and money. For instance, we did a big gala here to welcome me and it raised more than \$2mn which provided an endowment for the company. We are doing another in March 2000, when we will be looking for \$3mn.'

Would he say that it's better for those running the opera houses to come from artistic rather than business backgrounds? (I was mindful of the recent deliberations over appointments at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.) 'It's no good having business skills in the opera world if you don't have an artistic mind. Somebody from the musical world could make a good general director, because you can always learn about numbers – and charisma and personality go a long way.

But if you bring in somebody from the business world, you have to divide up your artistic and financial roles.' So he didn't consider going over to Covent Garden to be the artistic director there as well, then? 'I have my hands full!' he laughs. 'I don't think they'd ask me and of course I cannot do it, but I would like to see it in the best hands and I would like to see that in my last years as an artist, I can go back there and work with whoever will be there. They want to re-open on the 1 and 4 December with two galas and I am looking forward to being there.'

Domingo, like many other artists, is missing the Royal Opera House, during its closure. 'It's very sad. I feel especially sad for the artists. When it reopens, the house will be getting rid of some of the people who have been working there for years. Some of them need to go, but they might also lose a lot of people of real quality. The first violin, Vasco Vasiliev, from Bulgaria – his quality is unbelievable, he is really a great artist. It is an extraordinary company.'

As far as his singing is concerned, there is no sign of Domingo's letting up. 'I don't intend to take it easy and just fall back on the success of the Three Tenors concerts. I will do some more of them. They are very important, special and exciting, but the rest of the time I am happy doing what I am doing. The LA move will probably mean that I may re-organise my



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singing to be a little more geographically convenient. Until now, I have been able to do all my organisation for Washington from New York, where I live – sometimes singing in New York and then commuting down here. Now I will have to do the same in LA. If I am performing there then it's okay, but whenever I'm not, I will have to commute while I'm singing somewhere else.' A little difficult to do from Europe? 'Yes, I suppose what is going to suffer is the European work. But there are some theatres which I will be doing regularly, like Covent Garden, Vienna, Madrid and La Scala. I guess probably Madrid and Covent Garden will be fixed and then I will alternate between Vienna and La Scala each year.'

Washington and Los Angeles are very different places and Domingo is aware that both cities have different needs from their opera houses. In light of LA's huge Hispanic population, he intends to incorporate Zarzuelas in the opera company's repertoire (as he has done at Washington), which he believes will go down particularly well on America's West Coast. This genre of Spanish operetta is close to Domingo's heart, as his parents were successful Zarzuela singers who lived through its golden age in Spain. He himself learned much of his stagecraft both on stage and behind the scenes as he was growing up and touring with them. He revealed to me a few plans up his sleeve that go beyond just bringing Zarzuela to LA opera.

The first is to create a Zarzuela company that will tour the United States. I wondered whether America was ready for that: 'I think so. I believe that the Latin/Hispanic community here doesn't have enough to relate to, culturally. They have TV stations, Salsa music, comedians, also opera, but they don't have good theatre, which is what Zarzuela is. In Washington, we've had a fantastic reaction from audiences who come to hear Zarzuela – and it's not because I am singing!'

The second part of Domingo's master plan is to set up theatres which run arts programmes geared principally towards Hispanic communities. 'I don't see any reason why New York, Los Angeles or Washington don't have a Spanish theatre with Spanish drama, Zarzuela and ballet every day and, two times a week, a kind of popular festival with Salsa music and so on. You need to mix popular art with more serious art and encourage people to come along to both. The thing is, a lot of people only go to the easy things. And those who are in charge of the arts tend to say, let's have them happy. It's very easy to make people happy, but it's not enough. I think you have to entertain them, but you have to give them something that goes deeper. And if you show them quality, many of them will know it and recognise it. They will go and see it and love it. I see a Hispanic arts venue as something that could be realistic, financially possible and, depending on how you do it, it could

even be profitable. I think the government might be willing to get involved and it would be very interesting generally for the US, because it would give the Hispanic people more to relate to.'

Domingo is clearly committed to creating new audiences, and the education aspect of this project is, he feels, at the root of creating audiences for classical music and opera for the future. 'There are many people who can afford to go to the opera, but would not dream of it, because opera is not part of their background. Children these days, let's face it, have only pop music available everywhere – their parents listen to it, they listen to it on their Walkmans at breaktime in school – it's pop music most of the time. It would be so easy to do an educational programme worldwide, introducing children to different types of music, including opera. Children in schools could be taught the stories of opera, the principal arias, they could play some of the characters – all in a way that's entertaining, so that they don't even know they are learning. This will be the key to the development of opera. There are a lot more people who could afford to go to the opera, and even take 20 friends if they really wanted to spend their money that way. But they spend it in other ways because they are not interested, and lack of interest comes basically from a lack of education.'

And of course the media only fuels the way in which people are encouraged to close their minds off to opera and classical music. 'Yes, but the media is not educated either. This is a big snowball: if children are given a proper music education, then everybody will benefit, because the classical music world will grow and the media will have to be interested in it as well.' At the same time, Domingo insists that the time is ripe for change and is hopeful that the audience for opera is about to increase. 'I think there is a lot of new public for opera, which we, as artists, are partly responsible for, and this is wonderful. I believe that this is a very positive time. A tremendous revolution is coming.' Not least because of the new crop of opera stars that are emerging, many of whom speak a different, more open and approachable operatic language than many of their predecessors. Indeed one of the keys to Domingo's own success is that he has always spoken this language: 'What I have done with my career is to always go with the next generation. I don't try to put myself in a stationary position and say "I belong to the old guard". No, I like to move. Not to be old-fashioned. It's the only way to keep the freshness and enthusiasm.'

It's a little too early to be talking about the legacy of one of the key operatic figures of this (and I should think, the next) century, but he certainly holds the power to win friends for opera and influence people – and he seems set on doing so. **ON**



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