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*Rejecting the 'quick fix' of instant celebrity, Ramón Vargas has allowed time for his tenor voice to mature into a naturally beautiful and deeply affecting instrument. **Antonia Couling** discovers that his is a voice worth lingering over*

Slow and steady wins the race. But even with four or five years on some of the other main tenor contenders, and almost 30 years in the business, Ramón Vargas says he isn't competing – 'We are not horses!' he comments. Besides which we both decide not to have *that* conversation. Nonetheless, the slow and steady approach seems to be standing the Mexican tenor in good stead. Vargas has a solid musical background, one for which he is grateful and to

which he remains true: 'My brother was in a church choir – he's 11 years older than me – and when I was nine, I wanted to join as well. I auditioned and they took me. And I did my first solo when I was 10 – almost 29 years ago!' For Vargas' brother, singing was only a hobby, but it made a big impression on his younger sibling. 'It was very important for me because it gave me such a good a musical basis. I started with Gregorian chant, a lot of motets and polyphony. A lot of opera singers

first encounter music at college with, perhaps, Puccini or Verdi, maybe Mozart; but for me, it's not that I feel it more deeply than other singers, but I think I understand the history of what I sing.'

The voice is clear – some describe it as small, but I would say gentle – and intensely musical and emotional. I met him while he was performing at the Expo in Hanover during a festival of Mexican culture (a welcome antidote to the town's cool Saxon reserve). On stage, he radiated a heartfelt love for what he was doing and brought some members of the audience close to tears with his renditions of 'Una furtiva lagrima' and 'Pouquoi me réveiller'. His recital disc, *L'amour, l'amour*, contains many well-known bel canto songs, sung with great sensitivity – his rendition of Lensky's aria from *Onegin* is particularly beautiful. He has also recently paired with *Opera Now*'s joint Artist of the Year, Vesselina Kasarova (see page 16) for several opera recordings: *Tancredi*, *Capuleti e i Montecchi*, *Werther* and most recently, *La favourite*. They sang together for the first time in Vienna in 1991 in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and Vargas felt immediately that there was artistic chemistry in the air: 'She has a great voice and she's a great musician. All the things we have done together have been very special. It's just a pity that she's not a soprano, so that we could have more to sing together!' Nevertheless, they are hoping to do a duet album as well.

Vargas hasn't left the choral repertoire behind. It makes up a sizeable part of his diary – he recently sang in Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* for the first time in Mexico, for example. And he admits that choral music has left its imprint on his whole performance style. 'I don't like to use operatic clichés to help me win the public over in an easy way. I am a very intimate singer and I am not prepared to perform in a more spectacular or "tenor-like" way – playing to the gallery – I cannot do it. I go another way, a little bit slower perhaps, but I am happy with that.'

The other advantage of having sung from a very early age, is that it affords you an intimate knowledge of your own voice, and Vargas clearly has the intelligence to use that knowledge well. 'I permit my voice to show me which way I should go, which operas I should sing. I try not to force my instrument.' And yet the repertoire is wide, ranging from Donizetti and Puccini to Verdi and Schumann Lieder.

From the age of 20, when he chose to follow an operatic path instead of teaching psychology or sociology as planned, Vargas has followed wherever his voice has led him, without any particular plan as far as roles go, happy to be singing and clearly satisfied with his



Ramón Vargas as Werther  
at Madrid's Teatro Real

choice of career. But now he has begun to fulfil a few long-held dreams for certain roles. 'A couple of years ago I had the chance to sing a role which is perhaps every tenor's dream – Gustavus III in *Ballo in maschera*. I did it in Mexico and I knew that in two years' time I would be able to do it better. Then, at the end of last season, I did it in San Francisco and it was much better, and I am sure that in two years' time when I am scheduled to do it again it will be even better again. But if a new role didn't feel right, I wouldn't do it – I'd leave it for another time. That happened for me with *Bobème* – I sang it first in '91 in Mexico, and afterwards I thought, no, I'll put it on hold. And I didn't do it again for another seven years. Now, I feel better about it. You have to be wise in this career – I've had so many people say different things to me about what kind of singer I am. One person will tell me I am a "lirico leggero" tenor, and another will say I'm a "lirico spinto" – that's a big difference! And if you listen to absolutely everyone, then you will be lost. I believe in myself, and there are a few people whose advice I listen to.'

Vargas is also mindful of the competitive nature of the singing business, and looks back at himself as a child singer with certain wryness. 'When I joined the choir, I was a soloist almost from day one. And then at the Conservatoire in Mexico I was again immedi-

ately more or less the best. I wasn't looking for this – it just happened. But when I started to be professional, it was different. I realised, Oh my God, I am not the only one – there are many people like me! And it was good that I discovered this when I was young, because it drove me on to become better.'

Vargas admits to being competitive, but only when it comes to himself. That's where it ends, and he is very generous towards other singers. 'If I hear another singer perform well, I am very happy. Even if it's a tenor! For me, it is important that art lives alone and not just for the sake of the names associated with it – for *their* fame. The public tends to forget the art itself. A great many people are confused by the commercialism and the hype surrounding opera today. A few have the courage to decide which singers they really like, regardless of whether they're famous or not. But most people don't – the main problem is they don't have the reference points by which to make up their own mind.'

Vargas is clearly saddened that the public is so lost, and wishes they weren't so blinded by the headlights of the 'big machines': 'With a voice like Bryn Terfel, for example, the talent is so mind-blowing and evident, that many people think *all* singers have to be just as obvious and big, but that's not the case.' He believes that, in a world of quick fixes, people are unused to the pace at which opera unfolds. 'It's a problem in the world generally, with computers and the internet and everything. For many, opera just takes too long and you have to prepare your senses: you go into the theatre, disconnect from the real world and say, "Now I want to be there and understand what is happening". Life should operate at different paces. Perhaps we need to learn to pull the plug out from the wall every now and then.'

Vargas, the slow horse, has perfected the art of giving himself time to savour his career rather than galloping headlong into the fast stream; and today, he's reaping the (undoubtedly long-lasting) rewards. 'Near the beginning of my career I did some auditions in Germany, because they were interested in me and at the end they said, "Yes, you sing very nicely". That is when I realised I really wanted to make it my career. I came back and said to my wife, I don't want to be a star, I just want to sing. For me it's enough. I love to sing. I don't have to be at La Scala or the Metropolitan. It's the same wherever I sing. I still don't think of myself in that way – as a "star" – work comes in and for me, that's okay. Maybe it won't be as wonderful one day as it is now, but that's okay too. I enjoy every moment that I live.' **ON**

**Waiting game:** Vargas took his time before tackling the role of Rodolfo in *Bohème* on the international stage. He sang it at Covent Garden earlier this year.



JAVIER DEL REAL FERNÁNDEZ

BILL COOPER