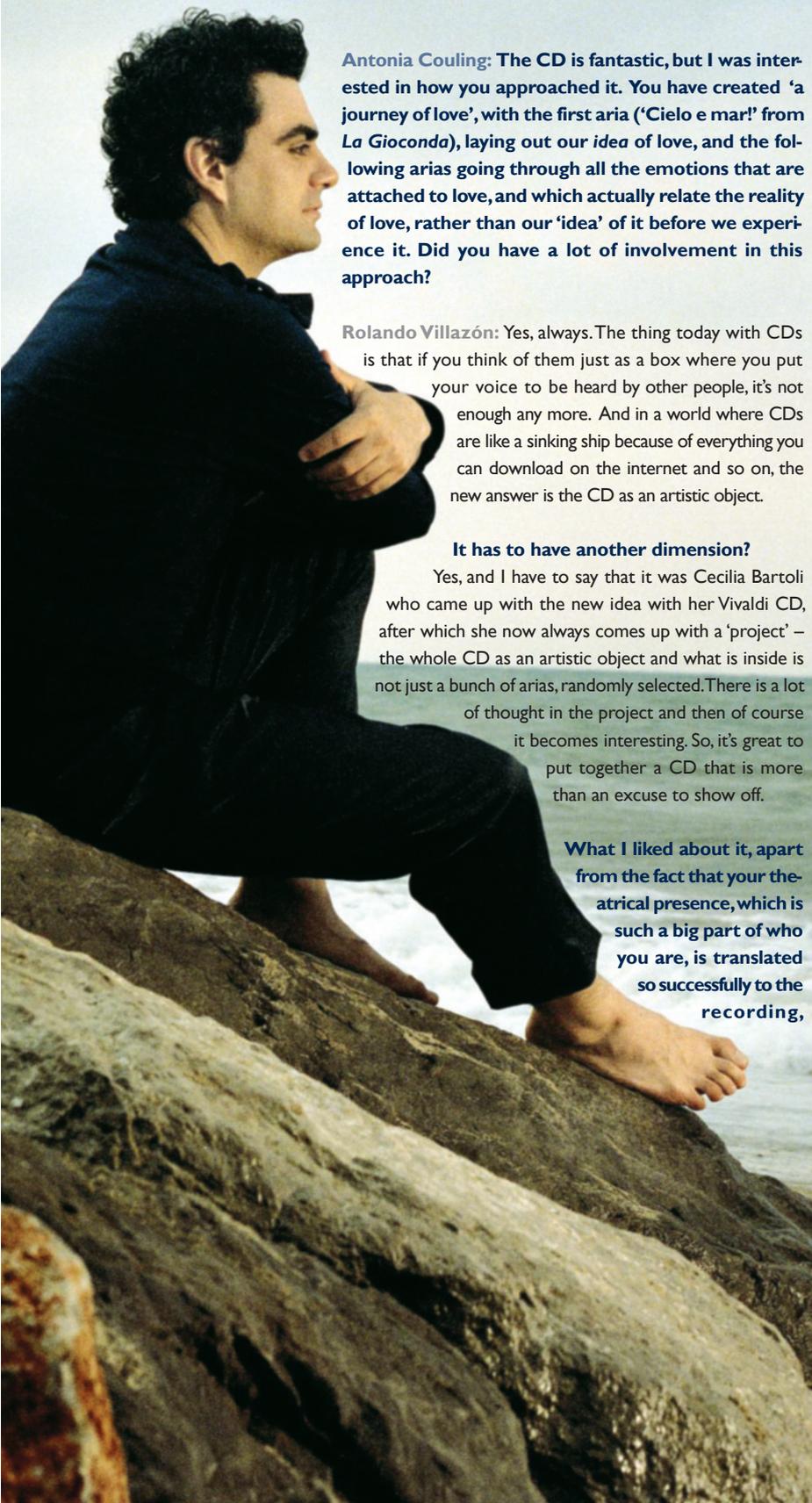


ANTONIA COULING
IN CONVERSATION
WITH...

Inside out

In the first of a new series of in-depth interviews with leading lights in the singing world, editor **Antonia Couling** talks to Mexican opera tenor Rolando Villazón about his new CD, how he makes sense of being a singer, maintains his artistic integrity and strives to be believable on stage



Antonia Couling: The CD is fantastic, but I was interested in how you approached it. You have created 'a journey of love', with the first aria ('Cielo e mar!' from *La Gioconda*), laying out our idea of love, and the following arias going through all the emotions that are attached to love, and which actually relate the reality of love, rather than our 'idea' of it before we experience it. Did you have a lot of involvement in this approach?

Rolando Villazón: Yes, always. The thing today with CDs is that if you think of them just as a box where you put your voice to be heard by other people, it's not enough any more. And in a world where CDs are like a sinking ship because of everything you can download on the internet and so on, the new answer is the CD as an artistic object.

It has to have another dimension?

Yes, and I have to say that it was Cecilia Bartoli who came up with the new idea with her Vivaldi CD, after which she now always comes up with a 'project' – the whole CD as an artistic object and what is inside is not just a bunch of arias, randomly selected. There is a lot of thought in the project and then of course it becomes interesting. So, it's great to put together a CD that is more than an excuse to show off.

What I liked about it, apart from the fact that your theatrical presence, which is such a big part of who you are, is translated so successfully to the recording,

is the story that you are trying to tell. But I wondered why you chose arias that are not so well-known – was this because if they were well-known people would not listen to that story?

It's true that when we hear 'Che gelida manina' we have heard it in the theatre and there is already a story that has been built up in ourselves, through this music. It's easier to take a poem that you have never read, read it for the first time and at that moment create a special reaction that will be new. This 'journey of love' is really about making it personal, making it what art should be, you know, art speaks directly, makes a general thing out of a particular circumstance. And also all these characters, in all these different times – and still now – we go through the same thing, all these emotions. The essential line of the journey on the CD can be the line of so many of our own stories today in 2008. Evolution is so important, but at the same time, what remains in the human beings and in a world that demands that we should be outside of ourselves more and more – is the same. That's what art is there for, to show the essence of human beings. And in the end, that's what these little poems are – about love, need, the fight against solitude, the need of companionship with other human beings, starting with family, but eventually becoming a sharing of life with one person – or many people, I don't know, that depends on the story!

Also, if we still have the opportunity today of making CDs, serving the music in a better way would be to put light into those pieces that are not so well-known. Not all of the CD is completely unknown, but some of the arias are really completely unknown. I mean, *Il Figliuol Prodigo* [by Angelo Zanardini] – nobody has heard it and it's gorgeous music.

And love is the common denominator across every class, nationality and circumstance.

It doesn't matter where you are, what you're doing, what time you are living in, it's the essence. But it's biological. I mean, dogs have this genetic information, they need to pair so the species continues. We have the same thing but we have imagination. And we make poetry out of it and we create love out of it. Everything is about art in our world. Politics and religion are big 'stagings' and this production of *Don Carlo* we are doing now is just as serious a staging. And when you go into the laboratory of the stage, it's about human beings and when you are making a CD, it's the same.

And that's why it's important to be able to take yourself out of the frame. So that you are really able to think of the emotions of what has been written and the genius in the way they were written.

What would I be if I would not sing Puccini – just a voice. It's not about us singers, it's about art. When you have a gift you have to work on this gift and when you have a talent you have to work on this talent, and you have to recognise also the *huge* responsibility you have. And then you have to work in real modesty. But real modesty, not modesty as in the 'other side of arrogance'.

Humility?

I don't know if it's humility because at the same time you have to be conscious of the fact that what you have is something special and therefore, I should just serve it. I am the one person who has to be the least self-adoring about that. You shouldn't be searching for adoration, although we all look for it at a certain moment in our lives. I mean, I stopped for five months and one of the reasons was because it came to a point where I realised it was my reflection who was singing, it was not me any more. I mean what *you* do, what *I* do, we need recognition for what we do, it's normal but ...

But if you're doing it with truth and honesty and integrity, you're putting something out for other people.

Yes, but when you are a public person, on a stage, it's very hard to maintain the balance and not to just switch and say 'Wow! It's great to be famous!' That's when things can go wrong, if you have a certain personality.

But what did you think you would find by stopping?

To reconcentrate on what was essential to me.

How?

By getting off the mountain and analysing the mountain from a distance. When you are on the mountain, you just see the jungle and you just react. When you go into the theatre and sit down for three or four hours, you stop. When you go to a gallery and take maybe half an hour to look at one painting, you stop. This gives you the time to go inside of yourself in a world which is just about the quick joke, the fast email, answering your texts, the running from one place to the other. You have to stop. And for me this is art – when you stop to explore the reality of how we are living – which is not nice. I mean our reality is not 'What a wonderful world', no it's the fight of making this terrible place a wonderful world.

You are so intense as a person and as a performer, how do you maintain that intensity and 'performing as if it is your first performance' all the time – without perhaps having to have another break sometime?

Probably I will. And this I won't change – I will throw myself into it with the same intensity and if the price of that is to have a short career, then I will have a short career and I will do something else. But otherwise, I'm not interested in creating pure tunes and nice pianissimo, you know, if it doesn't *come* from somewhere. Like on stage, I'm not interested in moving from one side of the stage to the other just to give another visual aspect of the thing – no, it has to come from inside.

Do you have good people around you who help you get perspective on things in your career, who speak honestly?

Yes, I was saying recently to someone that I want to avoid in particular those people who will only tell me how wonderful I am. I have a few, three or four people that are very honest.

Do you rely on that? You seem to rely on your own instincts a lot.

Yes I rely a lot on what I feel, but at the end of the day there are

certain aspects of myself that I will never see. I am somebody who reads a lot of reviews of myself, not to look for praise but to look for help.

Are critics important to you then?

My demand of critics is that they should be the most knowledgeable person in the theatre. They should know the story, the recordings, the language – or have a notion about it – they should know about theatre, everything. Which is not the case. There are some who have this. But you get to know which ones are really strong in which field and so you look for what he or she says about this area.

So you've reversed the process and you review the critics?

There is a beautiful essay by Oscar Wilde called *The Critic As Artist*, and the performer becomes a critic of the art form he is portraying and he has to have all the background and knowledge about what he is doing because at the same time as he is performing he is being a critic of it. And singers should be critics of themselves to make it personal and to give a new message.

But that's not easy, especially if you get caught up by your ego and the fame and everything?

I don't know. I speak for myself. You know when you came in I made a joke about not to expect clever phrases from me because of the fame tenors have for being stupid. But you know, there are no stupid people in this business. Everyone who is on a stage is smart – you have to be smart to be there. It's just that some people cannot verbalise some things. But why should they? They are performers who sing. Or they have their *own* philosophy and it might even be shocking to hear about it! But it works for them and they make us feel, wow!, you know.

But if your ego takes over too much you don't have the ability to listen to the right voice because you can only hear yourself?

For some people actually that's the only way for them to perform. It's hard to be on a stage in front of all these people. And for some of them, because of their own story and the way they were brought up culturally and personally, etc, their only way is to do it like that [puffs himself up and imitates walking with chest stuck out]. If we would ask them to do things otherwise, probably they would get too self-conscious about things and they would just collapse and not be able to do it.

And what role does the audience play?

For me, the audience has to be an 'awake' audience, they have to participate. If you come to the theatre, for me it's like a bottle of water with sediment in the bottom and when you come to the theatre the bottle is shaken up and all the particles fly around. And this is what you should experience. And you have to demand from the artists that they are completely committed and to exploit their talent to the most – one hundred per cent.

And how important is the audience in terms of making you give of your best vocally and in your whole performance?

It's everything.

What do you want from them?

This is hard to explain because it depends on the performance ... Two things can happen: if you don't want to see truth, if you don't want to open yourself to what is happening you can say, Oh this is horrible, or fall asleep or whatever. If not, if you are open, if you are looking for something or you don't know you're looking for it but it's happening

in you – you are curious enough – then pum! you are right there.

What do I want? Hm, it's a feeling. I always say that when I sing it's a bridge that goes from chest to chest. It doesn't have to do with what we hear or don't hear. I don't have scientific explanations but an audience can fire you.

But are you open to whatever might happen when you go on stage, or do you expect that to happen every time, or do you wait to see?

You wait to see. I think the more you come on stage ready for spontaneity and improvisation, the better. And that can even be a cough in the audience. And sometimes coughing might not be the worst thing in the world – perhaps coughing is people being disturbed by what is happening on stage ...

What do you think actually takes place, chemically as it were, between the audience and a singer? And why do you think people are drawn to one singer over another? For some people you are completely their cup of tea, and for others not.

Well – some are right and some are wrong! [Explodes with laughter]

Good answer!

But the problem is I still haven't worked out which is which! [More laughter]

But what do you think is being created in a listener that makes them respond to a certain voice?

I would like to think that the people I am able to connect with ... it's because of the emotions I am able to transmit to them, and that everything else, how I do it – with the pianos or the mezza voce or the well-placed voice or whatever – is just the method I use to transmit this. And I guess it's what people expect from opera, you know. Some people don't care too much for the aaaagh [growls passionately]. They want the pure voice, the crystal thing, the pure lines – they want to hear the transparency, the right shapes – a very clear image of it. And I don't think I give that, you know. I think what I do – I want to believe it has the struggle in the middle of it, so the clean line is not that clean and the circle is not really a circle.

That's just one example. Sometimes it's also the timbre of the voice. It can bring back childhood memories about other voices – an uncle who had a timbre like that ... I guess it can be as basic as this. It can be also the first time you heard an opera voice or heard that particular aria, and in fact it's the aria that captured you but because you heard it with this tenor, now it's the tenor who also grabs you. And for some other people it's a choice. It's like, there are writers I like and writers I don't like.

How involved do you get with the characters you play?

I do have a distance with my characters. I don't relate the emotions of Don Carlo or Don José with my own emotions. If anything I try to make comparisons with other characters of literature.

But you apply yourself so much to the acting side, it's something that's quite unique with you – I still find it amazing how unimportant acting seems to be to most opera singers.

Yes, but singers go to the conservatory and they only have harmony and solfeggio, and contrapunto and history of music – there's no acting at all.

But they will end up standing on a stage!

But I have to say, an actor has to have a talent for acting inside. A singer doesn't necessarily have to have a talent for acting.

But there are also basic methods for engaging yourself, acting-wise.

Yes, yes – and this is what I mean – this was missing for decades, and even today, when I hear in the schools 'Yes they have half an hour a week of movement!' Acting should be as important as solfeggio, or even more important – they will kill me, but a singer can learn an aria with a pianist – it's harder and will take more time that way, which is why you need solfeggio, but acting you absolutely need! There is no piano that can make you act and, as you say, there are basic physical things that once you learn and practise them, you have something to help you be more believable.

I also think there are two kinds of singers. One kind honestly doesn't care about that. They say it's all about voice – give me a place where I can breathe well and my voice can come out correctly and I can look good.

And as we were saying earlier, there are enough people in the audience who will respond to that as enough for them too.

Yes, I've heard people say, OK, enough of acting, it is about singing. I've heard this. But there is the other kind of singer. I think Domingo was perhaps the first one who really started this, the actor-singer. Of course there were others ...

Callas?

Yes, but I think Callas was Callas. I have the impression that she was just this huge personality – this huge diva giving her heroines life.

But there are the elements of her voice that the purists complain about that one could interpret as acting, where she pushes it and so on.

Yes, but that's emotion. She gave the intensity – that her soul spoke through her voice, that is so clear. But that's different from acting. Because I've seen colleagues where you close your eyes and you are so moved, there is so much emotion, but they don't move well on stage – the voice is acting.

Maybe those people fear that they would lose that acting in the voice if they put more into theatrical acting.

You do. Sometimes you risk not having the right high note at the right moment if you are going like this [anguished growl], because it's true that in order to produce the best sound, it's better to be still. For sure the quality of the sound will be better. I don't want that. I don't want an ugly sound – I want a combination. Like when I read I want the poetry but also the philosophy. I want to read about ideas and the struggle of the ideas. It's the same thing. I fight very hard to give the beauty in the tone, but full of the emotion. You don't always succeed, but for me that's what's exciting. ■

Rolando's new CD, *Cielo e Mar* is available from Deutsche Grammophon (DG 4777224).

Don Carlos runs at the Royal Opera House from 6 June. www.rolandovillazon.com

