

Features

May 2013 — Vol. 77, No. 11 (http://www.operanews.org/Opera_News_Magazine/2013/5/May_2013.html)

The Lion Speaks

For decades, Ferruccio Furlanetto has exemplified the highest performing standard in opera. As he prepares to sing Filippo in Covent Garden's *Don Carlo*, the Italian bass speaks to BARRY SINGER about maintaining that standard — and where he fears the opera world is heading.



Portrait photographed by James Salzano at Maserati of Manhattan, New York City
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**Thomas Becket in *Assassinio nella Cattedrale* at La Scala, 2009
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**Fiesco in *Simon Boccanegra* at Lyric Opera of Chicago, 2012
an Rest 2013**

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Fiesco in *Simon Boccanegra* at Lyric Opera of Chicago, 2012
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"I belong to a generation that is almost gone now," says Ferruccio Furlanetto, who turns sixty-four this month. "When we started — when *I* started — I was in a position to learn daily from these amazing directors, from these amazing conductors. It was splendid. And a young kid could really grow and learn and gain a clear idea of each new role, and that role was then marked forever."

Epic vocal brilliance and an eloquent sensitivity to character have marked virtually every role undertaken by this esteemed bass from Sacile, Italy, over a thirty-nine-year professional career. His voice is cast in the classic mold of Furlanetto's own idol, Cesare Siepi — a dark-hued melding of tensile power and aching lush timbre, effortlessly produced and so extraordinarily expressive that it has rendered Furlanetto a veritable Verdian legend at opera houses around the world and a pillar of the Metropolitan Opera roster.

When we first spoke by telephone, he was in Moscow, following a run as Boris Godunov at the Bolshoi Opera, looking ahead to a February reprise at the Met of one of his greatest roles, that of Filippo (King Philip II) in Nicholas Hytner's staging of Verdi's *Don Carlo*. This month Furlanetto opens in the same role — same production — at London's Royal Opera House, where Hytner's staging originated in 2008.

"That production was done *on me*," Furlanetto states possessively, "from scratch. I was allowed to do whatever I felt — my own choices. This came at a point in my career when I had grown up. I knew exactly what kind of Philip I wanted to be. I remember when I was a kid in opera, and I was singing my second-ever production as a professional — I was the monk in *Don Carlo* in Italy with Boris Christoff as Philip. I adored Christoff. He was a sensational singer with the most amazing vocal technique, and he was a stunning actor. But I didn't want to do his kind of Philip, because his kind was extremely dry and hard. I thought even then that it would be nice to depict the private life of this all-powerful man. King Philip II was the most powerful man on earth in his time. I loved the idea of presenting him not in terms of the grand public scenes of spectacle, like the auto-da-fé, but in solitude. If you can really get across that behind four walls he is just a human being like anyone else, then you have space for pain, for tears, for happiness. And so I did. And, considering the music that Verdi wrote, I think this is the only way to play Philip. If Verdi would have wanted a more simplistic character, he would have written more densely. Instead, he left space for introspection, for a look into this man's soul."

Director Nicholas Hytner agrees. "Ferruccio," he explains via email, "is confident enough not to demonstrate his insights to the audience — rather, he allows them to emerge, unforced. He appears to do very little during the King's aria in Act IV. He is immersed so profoundly in the King's situation that he doesn't need to tell us about it. I count myself lucky to have been able to learn so much from him. He is a man of immense grace and intelligence, as emotionally truthful as he is musically scrupulous."



As Verdi's Attila at San Francisco Opera, 2012
© Cory Weaver 2013

Furlanetto's early career was spent in Italy — the first four years, at least. Very quickly, however, he became an operatic citizen of the world. Today, while maintaining two homes — one, tended by his wife of forty years, very near his Italian birthplace; the other a professional home base in Vienna — he views himself, for all intents, as a stateless minstrel. "I made my American debut with *Nabucco* in New Orleans in 1978," he notes. "I never really went home after that. In 1979, I was in *La Gioconda* with Luciano [Pavarotti] in San Francisco. Then, in 1980, I went to the Met for the first time, to sing *Don Carlo*. Maybe I did have a desire at the beginning, as an Italian, to perform again in Italy, but I was never lacking for work, and in Italy they did not book so far in advance, so I was not often available. I don't believe I have since sung there more than twice in a season. After all these years, most of them living abroad, I have no desire to go back. Especially in these times."

Furlanetto is scathing about the political landscape of his former homeland today. "Whatever direction you look, you only see private interest, corruption, bribery. It's really depressing. Most of the opera companies are struggling, severely struggling, and in the short term I do not foresee a positive future for any of them — or for music and art in general. The political class built there in this decade, the first thing that all of these gentlemen cut, when it's time to cut, are not *their* privileges — which



As Filippo in Nicholas Hytner's staging of *Don Carlo* at the Met, 2013
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exist.

"In 1985, he announced to me that I would be singing [the title role in] *Figaro* with him, directed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle at the Salzburg Festival, which was my summer debut there. Ponnelle became for me, as a director, *the Super One*. I did *Don Giovanni* with him, I did *Così*, I did the movies of *Rigoletto* and *Così* — as Guglielmo, which I never sang onstage. I did *Manon* with him at the Met. Ponnelle was a stage director, a set designer, a costume designer and a deep, deep musician. He was a pianist, you see. He couldn't have a career, because he broke his wrists, but he was a true pianist. He used the score — he took advantage of the magic embedded in these masterpieces. You can only do that if you yourself have great musical knowledge."

Salzburg remains Furlanetto's favorite festival. "It is the one that gave me the most," he says simply. "I was chosen by Karajan to play King Philip in the Easter Festival of 1986. That King Philip changed my life. I did my first Figaro there, with Ponnelle, my first Leporello, with Karajan, plus two more as Don Giovanni. Good times. Very good times. The Karajan festival was Olympus, but also the ten years of Mortier were very good. Very interesting. I will never forget the *Don Giovanni* I did with Patrice Chéreau in 1994. It stays in my mind and my heart as the most beautiful *Giovanni* ever.

are many — but culture. Culture is the first cut of the knife, because in their minds, of course, culture is something totally useless. In a country like Italy, a country that has given to the world so much culture, it is a double, triple, *quadruple* sin to do something like that."

Furlanetto's memory retains encyclopedic specificity about past work — dates, costars, venues and, most particularly, directors and conductors. "I met James Levine at an audition in 1978, in Salzburg," he recalls. "I passed by the opera house and saw that he was there conducting *Don Giovanni*. Jimmy has a great gift for immediately putting anyone at ease, even a young unknown, like I was. He was very sweet, very charming, very interested. Auditioning is simply the worst way to present oneself. You're so nervous, and you know everything is dependent on how you sing *now*. With Jimmy it was easy. He even let me sing what I wished. And immediately after that audition I received a contract for my Met debut — the Grand Inquisitor in *Don Carlo*, which I'd never sung before.

"I always thought that Jimmy was by far the best conductor in opera," Furlanetto continues, in an adamant, mellifluous growl. "He always conducted whatever piece we were doing by heart, which means he was always with the stage, always with us. And he was always smiling at the stage — making our jobs easier somehow. This is my heart talking. Jimmy always nurtured a truly easygoing, friendly environment, which is priceless in this profession. Most conductors impose a rigid discipline, and you must follow *them*. There is no space, no elasticity. With Jimmy such rigidity simply did not

"Still," Furlanetto points out, "the Met is where I really started my career. I was always pretty lucky. I had to cancel only one performance in thirty-three years. It was *Le Nozze di Figaro*. I had a tremendous cold. Vocally, I have never done anything different at the Met, big as it is. I trust my technique, my projection. The moment you feel the return of your sound, you automatically adjust. It's an unconscious response. The bigger risk is a smaller hall where the acoustic is not so brilliant — you have to be really careful not to push."

Baritone Thomas Hampson has sung frequently with Furlanetto over the years, most recently at Lyric Opera of Chicago in October of last year, in a production of *Simon Boccanegra*. "Away from the theater," Hampson observes appreciatively, "Ferruccio is kind, funny, mischievous and utterly supportive. What I cherish about him onstage could equally be applied to him as a friend, whether discussing the ills of the world, the beauties of our art or the wonders of a great golf course. He embodies the kind of old-school discipline that every year we wander farther and farther away from in opera — the quality of preparation, the continual questioning of motives, the risk-taking as his abilities have matured over the years, and his seeking for the truth of the character he is portraying. I think anyone who experiences Ferruccio onstage simply revels in the believability of what he does and what he sings. This is not an accident."



Boris Godunov at the Bolshoi, 2012
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Furlanetto's old-school professional decorum is almost as impregnable as King Philip's regal power. No colleague, no opera house, no onstage opera moment recollected elicits a negative word. Only one fissure cracks this decorous façade. Four years ago, at the Opéra Bastille, in a hyper-modern Paris Opera

production of Verdi's *Macbeth* directed by Dmitri Tcherniakov, Furlanetto suffered. Since then, he has not been shy about proclaiming what he endured.

"It was the worst experience that I have had in this business," he acknowledges now. "I found myself in this very new, very controversial production, and I detested it. It was the hardest time of my career — one and a half months of depression. The fact that I don't wish to work with this director ever again doesn't mean he shouldn't work, so I will not cast aspersions, but since then I have come to enforce my own personal blacklist where directors are concerned. What I really could not accept in this situation was the following — we opera singers today are most of the time signing contracts three and even five years in advance. When we sign, there usually isn't any director named — yet. Certainly in this instance in Paris there was not. Then the time comes, we arrive ready to work and find ourselves in an impossible situation with only two alternatives — stay and perform for the money only, or leave and lose everything. To sue cannot lead to anything positive. Why haven't we the right to say, this is not what I signed on for — I want to be paid and go? Instead, one's only choice is leave and save your dignity, or stay and be a prostitute. What I couldn't forget or forgive was that I was put in this position. I stayed for the second reason. And this is not right."

There is silence on the telephone line, but Furlanetto is merely gathering breath. "I grew up with the greatest professionals in opera," he goes on emphatically. "Professional directors meant they were absolutely in control — of music, of text, and they also had ideas, and they were prepared. They brought with them a culture in which to create. Now I find myself increasingly working with people who come from German *Schauspiele*, from the traditional theater, from avant garde theater, but not from opera. It's a different kind of thinking. It's an approach that believes that knowledge of music, knowledge of the text and of the language in which the opera was written, is not that important. I believe that with such an approach, we are in big trouble. It is a terrible, terrible wave of — what can I say? *Amateurs*. We find ourselves, highly professional singers of my generation, constantly in the hands of amateurs! I don't think this happens in any other profession. Why should we be put in this situation? The problem, I think, is with the opera administrators today. They are making these choices. Why? I really don't know. Maybe they are afraid to appear conservative. But a truly innovative director like Patrice Chéreau has proven you can make glorious operas without being traditional. To do so, however, you need extra talent. And there have never been many directors with extra talent."

At this, Furlanetto again falls silent. The interview is apparently at an end. And then: "I have been in several HD opera broadcasts," he says suddenly. "A beautiful experience. I don't do anything different in front of the camera. One simply cannot — in any live performance, you give everything for the audience that is in front of you. But it is a fantastic opportunity to be seen by another audience around the world. I remember last year with *Ernani*, or even *Don Carlo* the year before, it was grand to receive mail from Buenos Aires, from St. Petersburg, from Vienna. These broadcasts are a wonderful idea. And I'm sure they have enlarged the audience for opera. Last week I had the event of my career, singing Boris Godunov at Bolshoi Opera. Having already sung it at Mariinsky in St. Petersburg, I became the only Westerner in the history of *Boris Godunov* to sing the title role in both major Russian opera houses.

"I could see the audiences out in the house at Bolshoi," he adds pointedly. "So many were young people in their thirties, or younger. How wonderful! This must be due to the fact that opera today is in the cinema and on TV and DVD. The technology is enlarging the audience. I am convinced of it. The Cineplexes are full. The Bolshoi, with a strictly traditional *Boris Godunov* production from 1948, was full. I am very positive about this." He laughs, a surpassingly thunderous laugh. "Opera is not dying. There are a lot of people trying to kill it. But opera is not dying at all." □

BARRY SINGER is the author of *Churchill Style: The Art of Being Winston Churchill*, recently published by Abrams.

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