



Features

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Enter Manrico

Marcelo Álvarez's ever-developing artistry has taken him to the operatic summit. This month the Argentine tenor steps into the title role of the Met's new *Trovatore*. BARRY SINGER reports.



Photographed by Javier Del Real at The Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia, Valencia, Spain
Grooming by Isabel Cuevas Gutiérrez
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Some tenors can be difficult, others are just difficult to find. Marcelo Álvarez is an effusive, expansive tenor, an estimable colleague and, by all accounts, a genuinely nice guy. But with the hours literally ticking down on the final deadline for an interview that would place him on the cover of *OPERA NEWS* - an interview that has pursued Señor Álvarez futilely now for weeks - he is still proving hard to find. At least the mystery of his whereabouts has been narrowed to Valencia, Spain, where rehearsals for a production of *Luisa Miller* are definitely under way. The name and telephone number of his hotel have been confirmed and an hour fixed for a transatlantic interview by phone. The hotel operator, at the appointed hour, concedes that Señor Álvarez is indeed registered. Yet he is not in his room.

"Please again try later," the operator offers desultorily. And then: "No, wait - I see him, I think! In the lobby. There! One moment, please."

Many minutes later, with apologies all around, the long-awaited interview has commenced - in Italian. The Argentinian-born Álvarez is uncomfortable with English. The interview, he has stipulated, must be conducted in either Spanish or Italian. And so, with the assistance of an interpreter, it is.

"Salvatore Licitra," begins the interviewer, in English. "He is a good friend of yours, no?" "It's true!" booms Álvarez back, in English too, before the question can even be translated.

It has been three months since the Metropolitan Opera's August announcement that tenor Licitra had withdrawn "for personal reasons" from the title role in the Met's new February 2009 production of *Il Trovatore*, and that Marcelo Álvarez would replace him. Clearly, Álvarez and Licitra are not strangers, having recorded together a heavily hyped crossover album, *Duetto*, for Sony Classical some six years ago. The two toured behind *Duetto* as a team, performing, among other places, at a massive, Three Tenors-like outdoor extravaganza in the Roman Colosseum. They sang together on television and still pop up jointly on YouTube, even when Googled singly.

So, has Señor Álvarez spoken to Signore Licitra about the Met's announcement? The question is translated into Italian. "No," comes the reply.

Perche?



***Un Ballo in Maschera* at Teatro Real, 2008**

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(<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/teatrealballolg2109.jpg>)

Un Ballo in Maschera at Teatro Real, 2008

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As Don José in *Carmen* at the Met, 2008

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As Don José in *Carmen* at the Met, 2008

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"I didn't speak with him about this because it is none of my business," Álvarez answers blithely in Italian. "Was it his decision or the Met's decision? I don't know. It is not my concern. The Met called me and said, 'Licitra is not in this anymore, there is no contract with him - are you interested?' And I said yes. Sometimes it happens the other way around - sometimes I cancel, and my friends go and sing for me. This is very normal. I much prefer that my friends sing for me than my enemies."



In the Met's *Manon*, with Renée Fleming, 2005

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The story of Marcelo Álvarez's rise to the operatic summit is a tasty one that he has obviously told many times before. It is also obvious that he has not yet tired of telling it.

"My wife, Patricia, and I have spent all of our lives together almost!" he begins. "She was fifteen, I was seventeen when we met. Now I am forty-seven, and she is forty-four. We got married in 1992. I had always wanted to sing, but I didn't know how. I was born in Córdoba, and I attended the Niños Cantores there as a child, a special school where I studied music. Eventually I even got a degree as a music professor - I taught child choruses. But I thought that my life really had nothing to do with music, and I began studying to be a '*commercialista*.'"

"From eighteen, I worked in the family business, the furniture business. Without knowing anything about opera, my Patricia always had this incredible intuition, though. 'I think you should leave your job and sing opera,' she would tell me. And then one day she suddenly says, 'Mamma mia, my mother *knows* a tenor!' He was a teacher, this tenor. An introduction was arranged. 'Sing

"O Sole mio" for me,' he says. 'I don't know it,' I say. I only knew pop tunes! Patricia and I both loved Donna Summer. I could have sung anything else for him, but nothing operatic. Still, he agreed to give me lessons. And that was it. I sold the business. From then on, I was a singer."

Álvarez made his Metropolitan Opera debut in November 1998 as a replacement for Roberto Alagna in the ill-fated Franco Zeffirelli production of *La Traviata* that famously chewed up and spat out Alagna, his wife, Angela Gheorghiu, her replacement, Renée Fleming, and even the scheduled conductor, Simone Young, before rehearsals even began. Álvarez survived, returning to the Met a season later as the Duke in *Rigoletto*. He thrived over the ensuing years at opera houses worldwide, making his Munich debut in a new production of Gounod's *Faust*, performing his first *Hoffmann* at Covent Garden, singing *La Traviata* at La Scala under Riccardo Muti.



As Rodolfo to Ruth Ann Swenson's Mimì at the Met, 2004

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He sang at the epicenter of a P.R.-fueled tempest that touted him and other rising young singers as heirs to the so-called "Fourth Tenor" title, even concertizing on Central Park's Great Lawn in *duetto* with one of his prime competitors for this designation, the aforementioned Licitra, in July 2003. In October 2004, Álvarez tackled Rodolfo at the Met, standing out, according to *The New York Times*, among the minions of Zeffirelli's densely populated *Bohème* with "his big, husky voice, his solid top notes and a delivery that was at once ardent and suave." Two more warmly received Met appearances followed, as des Grieux in Massenet's *Manon*, in September 2005, and just this past February, as Don José in *Carmen*.

Álvarez's current *Trovatore* pinch-hit at the Met has proved a two-fold headline. The tenor already was on the schedule to appear this February as Maurizio in *Adriana Lecouvreur*. Now his place will be taken, in turn, by none other than Plácido Domingo, revisiting the role in which he made his Met debut forty years ago.

There is symmetry for Álvarez in this substitution. Though Álvarez claims Luciano Pavarotti as his greatest idol, Domingo is the superstar tenor he actually has most come to resemble over the years, both vocally and in terms of acting intensity. Álvarez's earliest appearances at the Met were awkward affairs, to say the least. A great cloud of promotional hot air preceded them, and some critics left those performances disoriented, if not indisposed toward what they'd heard and seen. "Many struggling singers would envy the way Mr. Álvarez has been promoted," wrote the *Times*'s Anthony Tommasini, reviewing a December 2000 performance of *La Traviata*. "But the campaign has built up expectations that the tenor has been unable to fulfill in person. He has a basically warm and appealing voice and a husky, handsome stage presence. But his voice is not exceptional or especially charismatic. And he still seems to be acquiring style and technique."

To Álvarez's credit, this acquiring of style and technique, his ability to learn and develop as a singer and actor, have redounded powerfully to his benefit over time. The voice, always sizable, has grown darker but also more pliant, less blustery with age, while his interpretive choices, always passionate, have gained insight and nuance. In this sense he is much more akin to the ever-developing artist that Domingo personifies. Still, Álvarez is not shy in proclaiming how much he will always owe Luciano Pavarotti.

"Buenos Aires didn't allow me to sing even in the bathroom!" he maintains. "They said I wasn't any good, that I should go back to the furniture factory. Then Pavarotti came to Buenos Aires. He came for his competition, to conduct auditions. I was the first of sixty singers he listened to that day. He only had three spots to give away. He chose me before he even went on to listen to anyone else. 'Bienvenuto, Marcelo,' he said to me, the moment I finished singing."

"Pavarotti then got me a visa to travel. This visa allowed me to go to Europe. Patricia and I decided to pack our bags and move to Italy in pursuit of a professional career. We were actually gambling with our lives, but as we were younger and full of dreams, I think the seriousness of this step and risk were not so clear to me as they are now. Luckily things did work out."

Soon after his arrival, Álvarez was auditioned by the artistic director of Venice's Teatro La Fenice, Francesco Siciliani, perhaps in response to a nudge from Pavarotti. Siciliani then offered Álvarez the role of Elvino in *La Sonnambula* on tour with La Fenice in Padua.



With Maria José Montiel in Valencia's *Luisa Miller*, 2008

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"I was a beginner, but Siciliani took the risk," Álvarez says happily. "After these contracts were signed, I wrote Pavarotti a letter. It isn't logical now, I said to him, that I come to your competition and steal a place from someone who needs a job. I now have a job, thanks to you. You should give my spot to some needful student. Even if you don't know it, you did a lot for me."

Loyalty, for Álvarez, is a very big deal. "I am very faithful to those who have believed in me," he says. "I have a long relationship, for example, with Peter Gelb, going back to when he was president of Sony Classical, my record label. **[Editors' Note: While Marcelo Alvarez did once record for Sony Classical, he is now a Decca Recording Artist.]** Peter Gelb was always on my side. He is the kind of person who honors his word, who doesn't play around with artists. When I heard he had gotten the job at the Met, I decided to make myself available to him - so much so that I am accepting these long rehearsal periods for new productions like *Trovatore*. My home theater is Covent Garden, but now with Peter Gelb in charge I'm ready to open up my market to New York."

Nicolas Joël, recently named artistic director of the Paris Opera, is another pillar in Álvarez's loyalty pantheon. The two first crossed paths in 1995 at the inaugural International Leyla Gencer Voice Competition in Istanbul, when Joël was a judge and Álvarez placed second. "He engaged me immediately for the Théâtre du Capitole in Toulouse, where he was artistic director," Álvarez recalls approvingly, "and he has remained one of my greatest champions, supporters and friends. He is now planning many exciting productions for me over the next years at the Opéra Bastille, including *Andrea Chénier* and *La Forza del Destino*."

Álvarez's reputation as a devout team player has suffered only one significant public bruising. In December 2007, in a disagreement with Teatro alla Scala general manager Stéphane Lissner, Álvarez walked out on a much-anticipated June 2008 production of *Chénier* scheduled to be directed by former Monty Pythonite Terry Gilliam.

"I have never had problems with the opera public," Álvarez insists, sidestepping a report that he once was booed at La Scala. "My problem was with the artistic director. The directorship at La Scala disrespected me. I wouldn't stand for it. If there is agony backstage, if the work isn't pleasurable, then I don't want to be part of it. If you're in despair, it's no fun."

And is La Scala right now in despair?

"Not the working staff, no, not the technicians. The most important thing I can say is that I have since spoken with the boss and he was very kind. There is a chance I will go back in 2012, maybe in *Tosca*. But my schedule is so very tight."

The time has come to say goodbye. Álvarez announces this apologetically, in Italian. The interviewer responds with "Arrivederci," and the tenor laughs, then grows thoughtful. "I've been singing professionally now for thirteen years," he muses. "I started with bel canto, and now I've made the transition to lyric, and it's going wonderfully. It's a dream. I want you to understand this. I have the ability to take joy from my career. I appreciate it. Every opera performance I've ever done is dear to me. I cannot begin to say which one was bigger or dearer. I don't fall in love with particular roles. Though one or another may be a bigger favorite with the public, I try to give them all life. I love change. I love having to sing different styles, different ages. It keeps my voice fresh. I am Latin, though - I am passionate. Those roles that allow me to be passionate are the roles I am drawn to."

Like Manrico in *Trovatore*?

"The first time I sang *Trovatore* was in Parma," he recalls, "which was where Corelli sang it. I spoke to the people at Parma and reminded them that I was coming to play the part of a boy. Manrico is a youth. 'Di quella pira,' his great aria, is a big, acrobatic moment for the voice, but it's also a ridiculous moment. Yes, the high notes get the ovations. In Parma, I got a wonderful response, but what really gave me satisfaction was my last duet, the final scene, when I chose to take the volume down instead of up, and someone in the audience shouted out, 'Grazie!'"

"Grazie?" repeats the translator.

"Grazie," reiterates Marcelo Álvarez. □

BARRY SINGER won a 2007 ASCAP Deems Taylor award for his most recent book, *Alive at the Village Vanguard*.

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