

# A beautiful challenge

**Cécile Balavoine:** Although you have been music director of the Orchestre National d'Île de France since 2012, opera still plays a major role in your musical life. Has this always been the case?

**Enrique Mazzola:** I grew up in Milan, in fact at La Scala, where I began singing in the children's chorus at the age of six. It was a dream-like universe that taught me about human feelings in a very dramatic manner: passion, jealousy, rivalry, vengeance, loss... I still vividly remember singing the solo part of Marie's Child in Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*. Claudio Abbado was conducting. At the time, I didn't know how mythic he was. But from the stage, I could see him on a tiny black and white screen and feel the vibration coming from the orchestra pit. I said to myself, *this is what I'll grow up to be*. And with the small sums I earned as a young singer, I started buying my first orchestra scores: Tchaikovsky, Dvořák, Berlioz.

**Is your passion for *bel canto* opera also linked to your Italian childhood?**

I wouldn't say so. Over the years, I conducted most of the Italian repertoire, from Paisiello to Mascagni or Puccini, and I've observed that *bel canto* was often neglected, sung by heavy, uneducated voices, sometimes without respect for its complex construction, its historical and musical values. I wanted to change that.

**So you took on the mission to give *bel canto* the respect it deserves, both among musicians and in the public eye?**

I made the conscious decision to gear my conducting career towards this period, which starts after Mozart and extends up to early

Verdi. This includes all of Bellini, Rossini and Donizetti, but also their lesser-known colleagues such as Mercadante, the early Meyerbeer, Pacini, and many more. I don't believe that this music should be classified as 'minor.' The art of *bel canto* requires a great discipline, a clarity of the voice, but also a lightness in its projection, a very precise knowledge of the style, especially in the cadenzas and ornaments. *Bel canto* is based on repetition, as opposed to the Wagnerian through-composed style. The 'ABA' form, or even 'ABAA', is its foundation. And the ornaments can only be achieved with a good knowledge of the tradition. Of course, in the early 19th century, this was a spontaneous art. Every singer would come with his or her own *arie di baule*, literally, arias that they 'carried around' in their luggage, often drawn from operas other than the ones in which they were singing. Mainly, it was all about putting the voice in the forefront. Today, this happens with a tight collaboration between the conductor, the singers and the vocal coaches.

**During this Festival you are conducting Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* with soprano Danielle de Niese as Rosina. Wasn't the role originally intended for a mezzo-soprano?**

In the beginning of my career, I adhered to the notion that most Rossini heroines were supposed to be performed by mezzo-sopranos. But over time, and with a growing knowledge of the history of the period, I realised that this wasn't the case. During Rossini's lifetime, the term '*soprano*' could refer to any treble voice. Singers were usually chosen for their large vocal ranges. Some could simply reach higher or deeper notes than others. Only the vocal ornaments would change, based on the tessitura, or comfortable range, of the singers. Then, towards the end of the 19th century, the trend of transposing the role of Rosina for a light coloratura soprano started to develop. But in reality, only the ornaments need to be adapted to enhance the qualities of a particular

voice. I love to offer the singers the freedom to create those ornaments, and to intervene only to guarantee a certain homogeneity, a coherence with the orchestra.

**How do you feel about bringing *Il barbiere di Siviglia* to the stage, as opposed to lesser-known *bel canto* operas such as *Poliuto* or *Tancredi*?**

I think the main difficulty with such a masterpiece is having the courage to open the score as if it were for the first time. Working on *Tancredi*, which I barely knew, was full of surprises. So I wanted to be surprised again. That's why I actually bought a new copy of the *Barbiere*, all fresh, without my usual markings, and I proceeded by observing Rossini's language through the many musical cells within larger divisions. Looking at the type of accompaniment, the *tenuto* for a calm tempo, or the rhythmic specificities is a way to rediscover and develop an organic reading of the whole. I want to play *tabula rasa* with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. And not to be afraid if there's nothing to 'reinvent.' Think of *Barbiere's* overture and its emotional power! This will be a lot of fun, and a beautiful challenge.

**Does your strong operatic background influence your conducting style with a symphonic orchestra?**

The longer that I am associated with *bel canto* opera, the better the orchestras and the singers I work with. This gives me the freedom to create a rigour of style, but also to accentuate the role of the orchestra as a support for the emotions that the voices provoke. So in my role as a music director for the Orchestre National d'Île de France, this triggered a desire to help the soloists of the orchestra regain the confidence to stand out in symphonic music. Twenty years ago, it was easy to recognise the individual sound of the major orchestras in the world. Each had a

very distinctive musical identity. Nowadays, there is a homogenisation. So I'm trying to make a recognisable and unique voice out of every instrument. This can feel scary to the musicians, because they have to take more risks. But this is an interesting way to apply the lessons of *bel canto* onto other repertoire. It cannot be done systematically, but it works very well with French music, which abounds in famous solos. Think of *Daphnis et Chloé*, or *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune*.

**You joined the Glyndebourne family in 2007, with *L'elisir d'amore* for the annual Glyndebourne Tour. Since then, you've conducted *La Cenerentola*, *Don Pasquale*, and *Poliuto* here. What impact has your work at Glyndebourne had on your musical path?**

After my first appearance at Glyndebourne, I started declining offers that didn't completely interest me so that I could really focus on *bel canto*. While at Glyndebourne, I not only encountered the best singers and players, but also complete artistic freedom. And this is what I cherish so much here. Glyndebourne is a creative space where I can work with absolute peace of mind in a climate of confidence between the singers, the players, the répétiteur, and the stage directors – Mariame Clément and Annabel Arden, especially. To me, Glyndebourne is like a Renaissance workshop where many artists work together on a single great fresco. In the end, you have a magnificent work, colourful, expressive, intense, but you still can recognise the identity of each and every hand. It is a thrilling experience to work hard as a team for a terrific result. This is how opera should be done today, in the spirit of the late John Christie. 🍷

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