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THE OPERA LOVER'S ESSENTIAL GUIDE

## MICHAEL FABIANO

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of tenor singing

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# Live. wire

By Helena Matheopoulos

American tenor Michael Fabiano is a man of parts, reaching into the complex depths of opera's great tenor roles on stage and investing in the future of the arts through his philanthropic work behind the scenes. We meet the singer as he looks forward to experiencing the visceral thrill of live performance once again

**L**ike many leading singers around the world, Michael Fabiano is finding himself busy again as opera houses look beyond the pandemic to restore their live programming in the season ahead. We chatted on Zoom recently, just as he was about to head to France to sing Cavaradossi in Paris Opera's *Tosca*. Needless to say, he was elated at the prospect of being in front of a real audience after such a long absence during Covid.

Fabiano compares the thrill of singing live in a theatre with the excitement of being in a sporting arena. He was a professional baseball umpire for 12 years, alongside his opera career, travelling all over the US and the world. 'I always make an equation between baseball and singing, in the sense that you have a stadium filled with thousands of spectators watching a great player go out to bat. And you're waiting to see if that ball is going to be a home run or if someone's going to catch it and it's going to be out.'



DIAGRAMMA



The crowd waits ... they hold their breath ... and in the end they go insane!

'It's the same on the operatic stage. When, for instance, I work my way up to sing a high C towards the end of a phrase, most people in the audience know that the big high note is coming. And they wait ... and they wait ... and if I do my job properly, when I'm done they go bananas! It's the same as in sport: There's an anticipatory reaction to great singing, and it's carnal, it's instinctive. People *need* to scream, they literally need to expel sound from their mouths to show the excitement and joy they experience through the carnal nature of the sung voice. This is what it's all about. And this was what was so frustrating when watching so many streamed performances last year during Covid. The frustration of not being able to scream one's enthusiasm was terrible! I'm going to sound like a naysayer on this, but I'm sick and tired of these virtual performances, and I think a lot of my colleagues are. Maybe a lot of them are too shy to say this, but I'm not. It's not that they weren't beneficial, given the restrictions. But the reality is that there is nothing like live theatre. There just isn't.'

Being a tenor gives Fabiano a head start when it comes to providing his audiences with thrills and spills. As everybody knows, there is nothing like a tenor in full throttle to arouse an audience to a frenzied state of near hysteria. What does Fabiano think is the reason for this? 'Well, I have to state that the tenor voice in particular is an "unnatural" instrument. It's not the same as the normal male speaking voice, which is that of a baritone. The tenor's sound on the other hand, is contrived and has to be *manufactured*: basically jacked up and emitted in a higher octave than the one in which the voice naturally sits. This is something I dwell on a lot in the classes I give to young singers. When the tenor sound comes out well, it has a very particular ability to raise goosebumps. It's the very unnaturalness of the sound that results in a congruent unnatural reaction from the public.'

After the run of performances as Cavaradossi in Paris and later in San Francisco, Fabiano heads to Bilbao in the north of Spain, where later this month he will sing the title role in Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, one of the more challenging roles in the tenor repertoire, not only vocally but, even more important, dramatically. Is Hoffmann rightly described as a marathon for the tenor?

'No! I find that, because it's so disjointed, it's hard to actually think of it as a musical journey like, for instance, Don Carlo's or Otello's. The character definitely has an evolution, but the music is not so much a marathon or a "tour de force", more of a triathlon. A tour de force suggests patterns and logic, >

*With feeling: revisiting anguish of unrequited love as Werther, with Opera Australia*





even if it twists and turns in odd ways. This role, on the other hand, is full of tricks: no experienced driver would drive on a roadway that has falling rocks, random mud slides, and occasional volcanic ash blowing in the wind screen. But tenors who sing Hoffman enjoy risk and reward more than, dare I say, Mike Conway or Lewis Hamilton.'

Does he see the three acts of *Hoffmann* as representing a man at three stages of his emotional and erotic development: an adolescent in love-with-love for the doll Olympia; real grown up love for Antonia; and the desperate search for consolation—from anyone, anywhere – in the Giulietta act?

'Yes. Olympia is the first young love of an ideal body, but not mind, which proves to be an empty suit; Antonia the true love who dies of a terrible illness that kills his soul; and Giulietta – and I agree that the Giulietta act should always be placed last – is the hangover-based sex worker type. But even she finds Hoffman so disgusting that, in her own way, she rejects him for his filth. Naturally this is reflected in the music and, of course, you need different colours for each act. The prologue is exciting and fun.

Passion and politics:  
as Cavaradossi in Paris  
Opera's Tosca



Olympia is pastoral in a way which requires a large amount of softer tones and work in the *passaggio* as a lyric tenor. The Antonia act is the dream act for a full-bodied tenor: beautiful, broad lines, paired with exciting high notes; Giulietta is also fun with the wonderful aria, 'O Dieu de quelle ivresse', which is a challenge for the voice – you have to take risks, but it's extremely rewarding.'

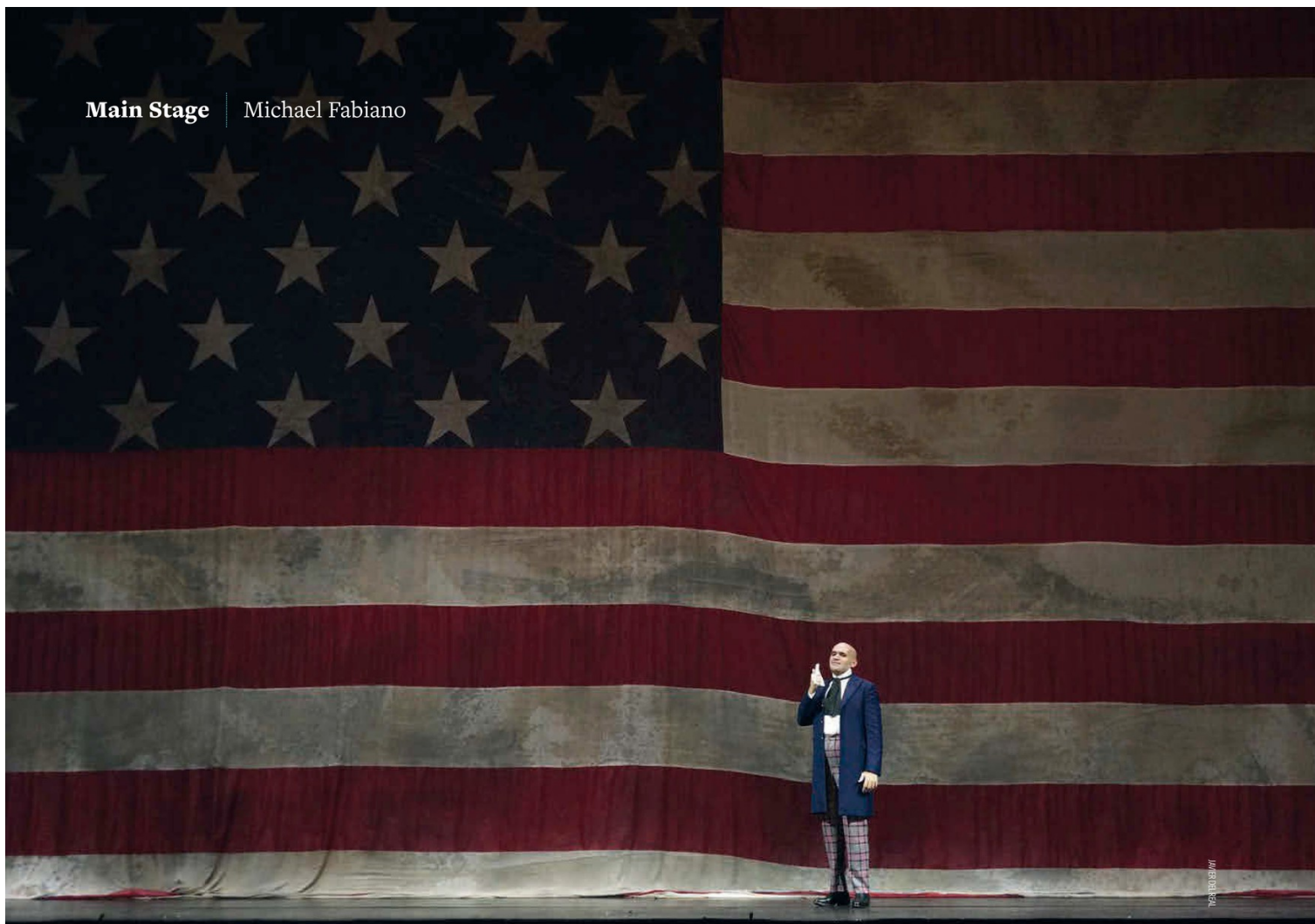
Fabiano loves taking calculated risks – one of his main hobbies is flying small planes. He acquired his superb vocal technique and an understanding of the crucial importance of breathing at the first-rate Michigan School of Music, Theatre and Dance. Yet before starting his musical studies he had planned to follow a quite different profession. What made him switch? What was the turning point that made him decide, 'I want to be an opera singer?'

'I would say that was a sense of moral obligation. When I got to Michigan University at the age of 18, my intention was to go into business education. I wanted to get my MBA, but I got into this particular institution partly because I had submitted a tape with two songs. They were sung in a classical style, but in reality they were two music theatre pieces – I don't even remember what they were any longer. What I do remember is taking some voice lessons with the acclaimed tenor George Shirley, the first prominent African American tenor to sing at the Met, and George said to me, "Mr Fabiano, do you know the talent that you have?" And I said "No Mr. Shirley, I do not". He replied, "You have a talent the like of which has never passed through this school before and is unlikely to do so in the future, either! And when someone is imbued with such talent at your young age, they have a moral duty to the rest of society to share their talent." Perhaps because I am a devout practising Catholic, I've always been compelled by moral imperatives and felt bound by them. So, if one has been blessed with a high-level God-given gift, as I believe mine to be, then the burden of that is to cherish, protect and then share this gift. So that's why I changed direction and how I got on to singing.'

So there is a spiritual dimension in his personality. Does this make an impact on his singing? Yes and this can make all the difference to our artistry, in a way, to the depth that goes *behind* the singing.'

Soon after Fabiano graduated from the music school at Michigan University he won the very prestigious Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions in 2007 and made his professional debut at Klagenfurt Opera as Alfredo in *La Traviata*, one of his favourite roles (which he has since sung 109 times but has now said goodbye to, along with the Duke in *Rigoletto* and soon to Rodolfo which he has sung 150 times). More and bigger assignments followed >





*Flying the flag: as Riccardo in Un ballo in maschera at the Teatro Real, Madrid*

until, in 2014, he had the distinction of winning both the Richard Tucker and the Beverly Sills awards – a helpful thing for a young singer’s career.

‘I’ve had the privilege of singing 52 roles in my career so far, which is a lot for a person my age. [This number includes some small roles]. But I enjoy the challenge of studying lots of roles. I wanted to kind of highlight the fact that there are some singers, like Alfredo Kraus, who never sang more than 22 roles in their entire career, while others, like Plácido Domingo, are the exact opposite, and are still singing and adding to the 160 they have already sung! I think I’m going to end up somewhere in between those two numbers. I don’t believe I’ll ever achieve 150, but who knows? My voice is changing – I am now 37 – and heading towards the heavier Verdi and veristic parts’.

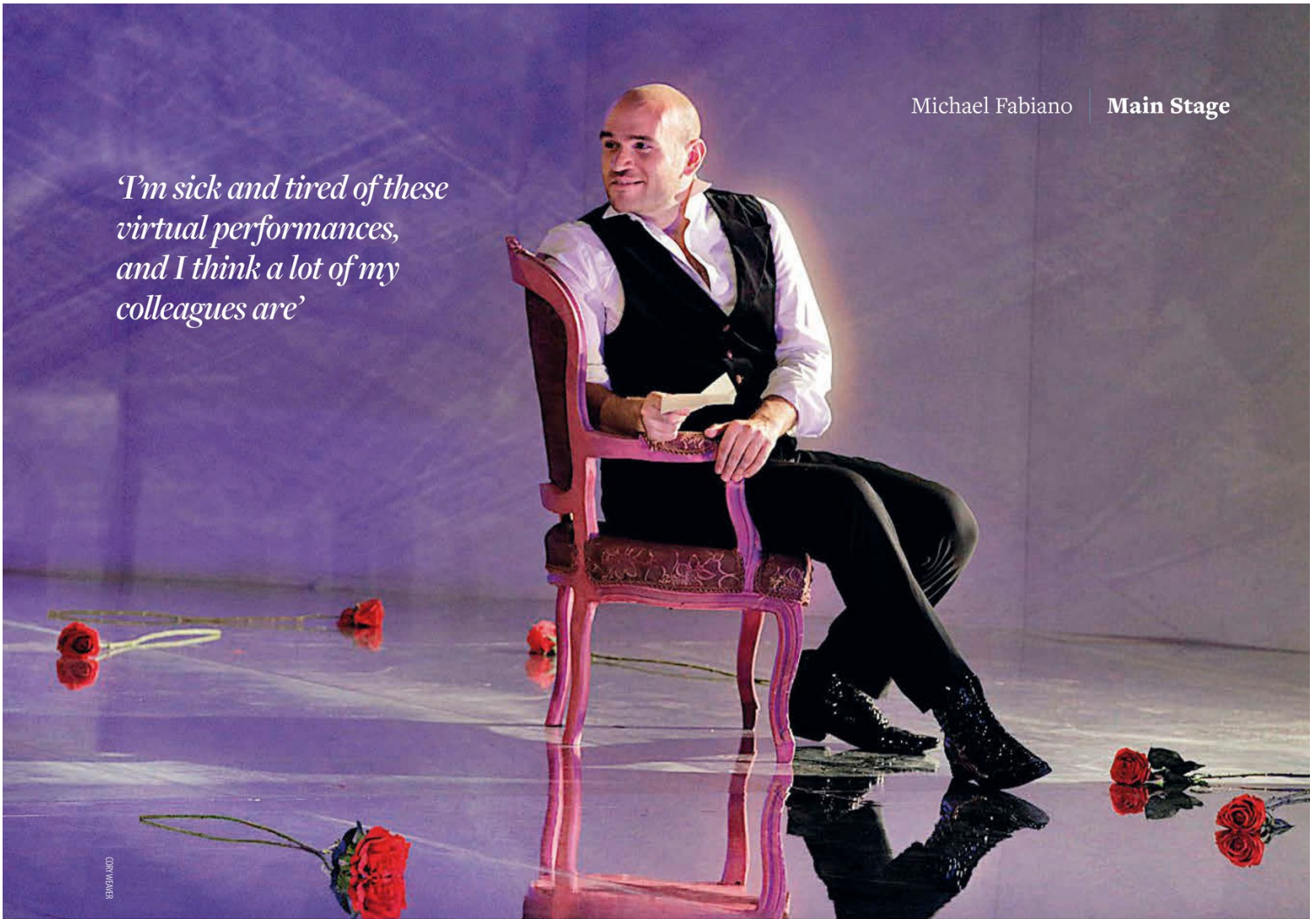
Among the roles Fabiano has most loved singing is Don Carlo in Verdi’s epic opera. ‘Part of the reason is that I’m a sucker for history, both European and American. And if we think carefully about the historical Don Carlos, we discover that he was dejected, degenerate, crippled, dyslexic, bipolar and rejected by his family. Yet no one ever thinks of Don Carlos this way in Verdi’s opera. They think of him as this romantic hero who loves and lusts after Queen Elisabetta, who becomes his stepmother at

the age of 21. But in reality Carlos has to be played as a complete anti-hero, a confused, suicidal man who had wanted to enter the priesthood and who, as well as being besotted with his stepmother, clearly also has bisexual leanings. So when I get to play Carlo that’s what I bring to the part – that frustration, confusion and anger. I love being able to explore this kind of depth of character and show it on stage.’

Another role with the complexity and psychological depth that Fabiano seeks out is the title role in Massenet’s *Werther*. ‘I love it because it’s an example, in my case, of how method acting can help opera singers create a character. We have to find people, places and things in our own lives that we relate to and bring them to our roles onstage. In *Werther*, you have a man who is a bookish and clearly intelligent. At the beginning of the opera, he is off as a delegate to some international commission. And he falls madly in love with Charlotte, who is plain and very simple. Throughout the evening he never says anything about her looks, her lips, her eyes... He never makes a single observation about her physicality. All he ever talks about is what a wonderful person she is, how deeply human she is, or the fact that she cares so much for children, her family and nature. He falls madly in love with this person and when he realises she is engaged



*'I'm sick and tired of these virtual performances, and I think a lot of my colleagues are'*



to be married, almost cheats on her fiancé, but snaps back in place in a minute. This makes him lose his mind and sends him out of control.

'And, as Michael Fabiano, I can say that six, seven years ago there was one person in my life with whom I was definitely infatuated. I remember the infatuation and I remember the feeling when I was summarily rejected, how terrible it felt and how for months I didn't understand why. You know, I never even properly went on a date – I was just rejected outright. Now, the difference is I didn't kill myself and I didn't go crazy like Werther. I completely moved on from that person when I realised they weren't as good as I thought they were. But the sense that I had for those months of infatuation and rejection, is the exact same feeling that is required in order to sing Werther well. That's the secret source for bringing characters to life: tapping into those moments in your own life and bringing them into the character, which is fascinating. And of course, the music is a very great help!'

Covid and its lockdowns provided an opportunity for Fabiano to prepare for the future, learning new roles and setting the course for how his voice will develop in the years ahead: 'All this time I when I was not performing, I was studying Gabriele Adorno

in *Simon Boccanegra* and looking at Andrea Chenier, Manrico (*Trovatore*) and Alvaro (*La Forza del destino*), a lot of the heavier Verdi roles as well as Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*. Two of those – I can't tell you which for now – are now scheduled for future seasons.'

Fresh from performances of *Tosca* in Paris and San Francisco, Fabiano found the opera's romantic lead, Cavaradossi, 'a more one-dimensional character than, say Don Carlos or Rodolfo in *Luisa Miller* or Don José in *Carmen*. His only moral beef is political, it's with the government. He has no personal crisis over the course of the opera, so your only duty as a singer is to show what a passionate, loving person he is. Even when he knows he's going to die, he pretends not to for Tosca's sake and plays up to her delusion that everything's going to be fine, up until the last second. It's the opposite of the finale in *La bohème*, where it's Mimì who comforts Rodolfo. Mimì is tranquil and smiling as she dies, and Rodolfo is the one crying his eyeballs out.'

After putting so much thought into the roles he sings during the years and months leading up to a production, how does Fabiano spend the day of the performance itself? 'I tend to wake up later on the day of a performance and believe that the peak of

*The romantic tenor: as Des Grieux in San Francisco Opera's Manon*



Soaring high: Fabiano prepares for take off



my day should be when I get on stage. So if I wake up at one or two in the afternoon on the day of a performance this is perfectly fine for me. I will have been awake for no more than four, five, maximum six hours before the time I have to get on stage. I have one square meal that day, and it's always the same, very specific meal: chicken, sweet potato and broccoli with a kind of "Michael Fabiano sauce" that I've created with my assistant. It's a great dish, and he always prepares it well for me. I always have fruit – bananas and apples – backstage with me. And on the day of a performance I have about four, maybe five, litres of water even before I get to the theatre.

'After the performance I never fall asleep before five in the morning, it's very hard, very hard ... the adrenaline is absolutely still flowing and my legs are on fire because, you know, I use my legs a lot to centre myself during the performance – so it's very hard to turn off the legs at night!'

Away from performing, Fabiano is a licensed pilot and he flies regularly. 'I'm not the only one, you know,' he points out. 'There are other great musicians who pioneered this hobby! The late Herbert von Karajan for one, and currently conductor Daniel Harding as well as baritone Leo Nucci both pilot small planes.'

His main undertaking away from the stage, however, is an organisation called ArtSmart which provides free music education on a weekly basis to underprivileged children in under-served communities all over the US.

'We go into schools that have no music in their curriculum and offer kids weekly music lessons and weekly voice lessons. Next year we are going to be in nine cities, up from six and all in major states. We'll be giving about 30,000 free music lessons to children next year. One of the reasons I put this organisation together is because, six years ago, I noticed that so many artists were out of work. And of course, now with the pandemic it's even worse. So, we pay working artists a living salary for teaching and mentoring children in underprivileged communities around the US.'

'And it's working! We're seeing kids who were not even set to graduate from high school, now getting into college. We even have kids who, after being in our programme for just a few years, have gotten into Juilliard and others who now have scholarships to some of the most prestigious schools in America and who credit our programme for this. Because, unlike most students, these children get a weekly mentor whom they get to look up to and they have a curriculum that is literally built for them. And I do this because I know that we have to build a new generation of arts ambassadors and arts soldiers. It's critical to do it right now. If we don't, in 20 years from now we're not going to have patronage, we're not going to have people who even care about this art form. So it's my job, as it is so many other people's job, to support our field and build music lovers and champions of all the classical arts.' **ON**