

March 16, 2007

MUSIC

That Actor Has a Pretty Good Voice

By [ANTHONY TOMMASINI](#)

Typically, when Rossini's Figaro, the title character of "Il Barbiere di Siviglia," first appears and sings his famous aria the "Largo al factotum," he is alone. Addressing the audience, he introduces himself. No mere barber, Figaro asserts that he is essential to the functioning of his town. Need a confidential note passed on? A scheme initiated? An eligible husband if you are a debutante; a new husband if you are a widow? Then I'm your man, Figaro says. Everyone needs him; everyone calls him.

In most productions, as Figaro, all alone, brags, his bravado seems somewhat poignant. He doesn't seem so much in demand at the moment.

But the charismatic, robust-voiced Swedish baritone Peter Mattei, a youthful 41, is no typical Figaro. And the director Bartlett Sher's boldly inventive and breezy production of this Rossini favorite, introduced at the [Metropolitan Opera](#) last fall, is no typical staging.

When the dashing Mr. Mattei, with his 6-foot-4-inch physique, arrives as Figaro, he is not some humble tradesman with a little barber shop around the corner. He is a big-time operator with a huge wagon that serves as his mobile establishment, pulled by a bevy of women who clearly find him adorable, with a donkey trailing behind.

Mr. Mattei returned to the role when "Barbiere" came back into the Met's repertory on Wednesday night. (He will sing in three more performances, starting tomorrow evening.) Mr. Mattei, an elegant singer who can spin a legato phrase with velveteen smoothness, has also received high praise for the dynamism and naturalness of his acting. He is a prime example of a new generation of opera singers, fine vocal artists who care deeply about acting and do it very well.

Think of the petite French coloratura soprano Natalie Dessay, who actually began a career as an actress before switching to opera. Though opinion was divided about Guy Joosten's somewhat cosmic new production of Gounod's "Roméo et Juliette" last season at the Met, Ms. Dessay won raves for her exquisitely sung and sensitive portrayal of the love-struck heroine. This Juliette was a hormonal, physically tremulous adolescent struggling to tame a rebel within.

And you will seldom see better acting in opera than that offered recently by the baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky as Onegin and the soprano [Renée Fleming](#) as Tatiana in the Met's production of [Tchaikovsky's](#) "Eugene Onegin." The suave Mr. Hvorostovsky captured his character's foolish diffidence, and Ms. Fleming, looking lovely, conveyed a young woman so twitching with impulsive and overpowering

love that it was almost disturbing to see.

Is there a new emphasis on acting in opera? Today's singers, it is true, grew up seeing opera on television and live in our image-obsessed culture. They also work increasingly with directors from the worlds of theater and film. Typically, conservatories tend not to offer voice students classes in straight acting, though actors from the legitimate theater are sometimes brought in to coach singers in opera workshops.

Mr. Mattei has his own take on the subject.

To begin with, he finds it impossible to distinguish acting and movement from singing. "If you separate them in learning a role, it is a mistake, because you only have to put them together later," he said in a recent interview at a cafe near [Lincoln Center](#). For him acting must be as natural and as flexible as walking.

"You are walking, but suddenly you have a mountain," he said. "You have to adjust, uphill, downhill. But you change because of the necessity of changing, not because you are trying to show something."

Mr. Mattei said he does research to find the right body language for a character. Just changing your body manner can change the way you feel, he explained, demonstrating by shifting his posture in his seat: first slumping, then sitting upright, then leaning on his elbow and then craning his neck to look upward. The expression on his face and the emotions he projected varied automatically with every shift of his frame.

He avoids overanalyzing characters, even one as complex as Don Giovanni, which he sang at the Met three years ago in the grippingly spare production directed by the actress [Marthe Keller](#). "I don't think even Don Giovanni has the answers to who he is," Mr. Mattei said. "If you know too much, it interferes with your instinct. If the instinct knows too much, it will no longer be an instinct."

Of course a singer's technique has to be secure enough that there is no need to think about it, Mr. Mattei stressed. In this regard one of his role models is, of all people, Muhammad Ali. Mr. Ali was so confident of his skills, Mr. Mattei said, that he was free to think instinctively and metaphorically in the public buildup to a fight.

"Ali never said, 'I'm going to knock him,' " Mr. Mattei explained. "He said: 'I'm going to sting him. I'm going to fly like a bee.' He's amazing."

As to whether his colleagues think more about acting these days, he noted that there had always been superb actors in opera. The refined Italian bass Ezio Pinza, for example, who won a Tony Award on Broadway for creating the role of Emile de Becque in "South Pacific." And of course Maria Callas.

"Maybe we are not improving in acting," Mr. Mattei said. "Maybe in opera we are making things more modern, or fashionable. Maybe we put a different light on acting and notice it more." Or perhaps other concerns are roiling our society, he said, like questions of appearance, and it is affecting how we perceive acting in opera.

Yet the new focus on this aspect of performance goes beyond the question of how people look.

The Met's premiere production of Tobias Picker's "American Tragedy" in 2005 was created for the baritone Nathan Gunn, who is so fit and handsome that he could be a [Calvin Klein](#) model. Mr. Gunn proved achingly right for the role of Clyde Griffiths, the ambitious son of a Midwestern family of street evangelists. Clyde is ashamed of his background. Yet when finally out on his own he realizes how attractive he is to people. Mr. Gunn, never preening or strutting, poignantly conveyed Clyde's genuine surprise, though the character soon learns to use his impact on people to effect.

Yet in the same production the powerhouse mezzo-soprano Dolora Zajick, a big-bodied woman, stole every scene she was in as Clive's long-suffering but indomitable mother. As Princess Eboli, the possessive mistress to King Philip II in [Verdi's](#) "Don Carlo," as the guilt-obsessed Gypsy mother Azucena in Verdi's "Trovatore," and even as the delightfully wicked witch in Dvorak's "Rusalka," Ms. Zajick is a force of nature onstage.

The American tenor Anthony Dean Griffey, a tall, hefty, baby-faced young man who boasts a beautifully lyrical yet naturally powerful voice, has won raves for his dramatically riveting portrayals, notably as the mentally deficient Lennie in Carlisle Floyd's operatic adaptation of John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" at the [New York City Opera](#) and elsewhere. Mr. Griffey, who will sing the title role in [Britten's](#) "Peter Grimes" at the Met next season, has spoken openly of the prejudice larger singers face. A physically courageous and revealing actor, he has said that less attention should go to how singers look and more to how they move and act.

There is no reason to doubt Mr. Mattei's assertion that instinct rules his rich, nimble and nuanced portrayal of Figaro. Still, get him talking about the character, and he has astute psychological insights.

Though officially the young Count Almaviva is the barber's superior, "Figaro is a free spirit who feels he is the equal of anybody," Mr. Mattei said. Figaro derives pleasure from facilitating relationships between people and understands the transforming potential of his tonsorial skills.

"Beauty is such an important thing in this society," Mr. Mattei said, referring to Figaro's Seville, though he could be talking about our own time and place. "A man who can make people feel beautiful has power over the rich and the poor." To Mr. Mattei, Figaro is like a psychotherapist. "After an hour of sitting in Figaro's chair and talking about themselves," he said, "people feel better and look better."

So far Mr. Mattei has focused on a limited number of roles. In part this has been a conscious choice to preserve time for life in Stockholm with his wife, Rose-Marie, who is a music teacher and vocal coach, and two young daughters. But the future brings formidable new challenges. He will sing Onegin this summer at the Salzburg Festival in Austria and Britten's Billy Budd this fall in Frankfurt.

An uneducated and fatally trusting young man who has been press-ganged into service aboard a British merchant ship, Billy has an effect on people, Mr. Mattei said. "He is innocent but not an idiot, and beautiful, yes." But his beauty "is a threat to people," he added. Billy's naïveté is a "special kind of gift," he

suggested, but it completely rattles his superior officers, especially the twisted master at arms, John Claggart.

Mr. Mattei emphasized that a good performance instinctively feeds off the performances of others. And this “Barbier” cast is rich with vocal artists who are vibrant actors. On Wednesday night, as in November, the dashing Peruvian tenor Juan Diego Flórez was a vocally brilliant and charming Count Almaviva. There were two newcomers. Having the scheming music master Don Basilio played by a young bass-baritone as virile and handsome as John Relyea made this broadly comic character seem much more dangerous. And the perky, rich-toned and vocally brilliant young American mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato had a triumph as Rosina, played here as a determined young woman you would not want to cross.

During the long ovations, when Mr. Mattei appeared on the stage platform that, in this production, extends partly over the orchestra pit, still in character as the barber of Seville, he bent down to pass out business cards to the audience. A sea of hands reached up to grab them.

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