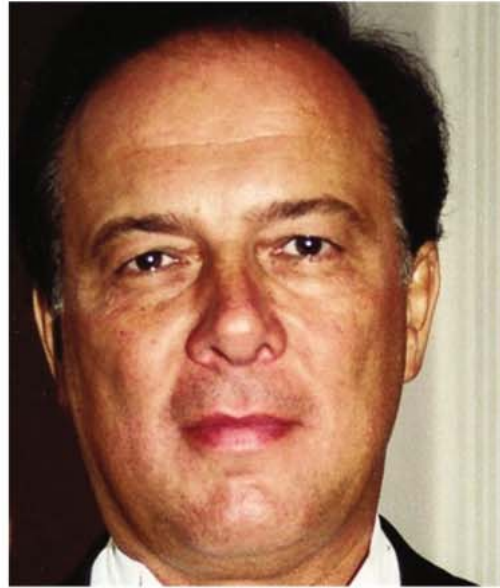


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FERRUCCIO FURLANETTO

Hugh Canning

Furlanetto sings Philip II in Covent Garden's 'Don Carlos' this month



During what seems like a current dearth of native Verdi voices, the *basso cantante* Ferruccio Furlanetto has maintained Italian honour and established himself, almost by stealth, as the leading exponent in our time of Philip II in *Don Carlos*, Fiesco in *Simon Boccanegra*, the Padre Guardiano in *La forza del destino*, Zaccaria in *Nabucco* and Don Gomez de Silva in *Ernani*. This month he brings his internationally acclaimed portrayal of the 16th-century Spanish king to the Royal Opera House in Nicholas Hytner's new production of the five-act 'Modena' version of *Don Carlos*, conducted by Antonio Pappano.

It is perhaps Furlanetto's most prestigious assignment to date at Covent Garden, a theatre he says he loves, and one that should garner for him the attention he has sometimes been denied in the past. For a singer who rose to international prominence primarily in the Mozart repertoire—especially as Figaro, Don Giovanni and Leporello—his transition to the great Verdi roles has been a gradual and, he says, natural one, following in the footsteps of his great compatriot Cesare Siepi, a singer celebrated as Don Giovanni and Figaro, but later as King Philip, Fiesco and Boito's Mefistofele.

'Siepi, for sure, was the light I was following when I started during the second half of the '60s. It was the great era of pop—my son is still listening to some of that music—and it was difficult not to be involved. But I didn't like the ambience of pop music, and so pursued studies that had nothing to do with music. After high school, I decided to study agriculture, finally settling on forestry. But the moment came—I had already started to make the first steps in opera—when I had to make a career decision. I decided to sing.'

By 1973, Furlanetto was embarking on the profession as 'a deep Italian *basso*'. For competitions he studied Sarastro in Italian, and he made his debut the following year in Loniga near Vicenza—he comes from Friuli in north-eastern Italy, between the Austrian and Slovenian borders—as Sparafucile. 'At that time—and this was a good thing—a young singer, and especially a bass, didn't have a chance to get a major role, so for at least four years I had the possibility to grow up, without being over-exposed, singing Sparafucile in *Rigoletto* and Colline in *La Bohème*—good comprimario roles, and very useful for building up experience.'

His first big break came in 1977 when he won a competition. ‘The prize was the role of Don Giovanni in Treviso—a small theatre—so I had a chance to be Don Giovanni quite early, which then led to me singing it in Torino. At that time, it was almost impossible for a 27-year-old to be cast as Don Giovanni. Normally, I would probably have had to wait another ten years. After that, Don Giovanni became a big part of my vocal life. It opened a lot of doors, especially after I was asked by Karajan to do my first Leporello, when I already had been singing Giovanni for ten years.’

Furlanetto attributes his vocal longevity—he is 59 and he has been singing professionally for 34 years—to the virtually consistent diet of Mozart he sang for the first half of his career. (Although it should be noted that he sang Melibeeo in Haydn’s *La fedeltà premiata* at Glyndebourne, his British debut, in 1980, and returned to Sussex as Don Basilio in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* the following year.) ‘This was extremely important, because Mozart is pure medicine for the singer. For a bass, the years between 30 and 45 are when you develop physiologically and to have this constant medicine for 15 years makes everything so easy afterwards.’

These days, though, he seems to be singing better as a Verdi bass than he ever did as a Mozartian. ‘Without any doubt. My voice has developed at a natural pace and it has become bigger. Early on, when I jumped in as Filippo in *Don Carlos* for Karajan, or sang my first Attila, in those years I remember sweating blood. If I do it now, I don’t have a problem. The approach I had at that time with Filippo is quite different from how I sing it today. Now I have the role completely under my skin.’

■ *Ferruccio Furlanetto as Boris Godunov in San Diego last year, with Lisa Agazzi as Fyodor*





■ Furlanetto's British debut: as Melibeo in *'La fedeltà premiata'* at Glyndebourne in 1980, with Linda Zoghby as Amaranta

Two summers ago, reviewing him in Hugo De Ana's monumental staging of *Don Carlos* in Turin, I wrote in these pages that his Philip was 'probably the most idiomatic around at the moment'. He clearly enjoyed performing in De Ana's traditionally opulent production as much as I had revelled in seeing it, and although he has participated in his fair share of *Regietheater* stagings—in Vienna, especially, where he is a regular guest—he has a preference for traditional production styles, especially when he is singing the three roles he cites as the cornerstones of his current repertoire: Philip, Boris Godunov and Don Quichotte. In recent seasons he has sung both Philip and Boris with one of his favourite conductors, Semyon Bychkov—'we are good friends: I was the best man at his marriage [to the pianist Marielle Labèque]'—and he is proud to have been chosen to sing Mussorgsky's tormented Tsar by a Russian conductor at the Maggio Musicale in Florence (he has also sung the role as a guest at the Maryinsky Theatre in St Petersburg for Valery Gergiev).

Not many Italian basses have achieved that accolade. 'Well, Pinza sang Boris, and Raimondi did. But I don't know if Siepi did. For me it came after a series of recitals of Mussorgsky and Rachmaninov songs which I sang for a few years with Alexis Weissenberg. This was a huge amount of work, which took a good two years to put together, but when I came to sing Boris, my Russian was almost there. The first Boris I did was supposed to be the first version—the seven scenes without the Polish act—in Rome. It took me four months just to digest it. Then 20 days before the beginning of the rehearsals, there was some fighting and the conductor left—and they decided to do the second version, which has a good 30 per cent more text and music. I had one week to learn the score, working perhaps 16 or 17 hours a day, but I did it. They would have paid me off because the contract was clear, but I would have lost that opportunity and it was a gorgeous Piero Faggioni production. He's a genius.'

A slightly mad genius, I suggest, if stories of his tantrums, walkouts and impossible demands are even half true. 'Well, yes, perhaps,' Furlanetto concedes, 'but I love the production of *Don Quichotte* he did in the time Raimondi was singing the role. Unfortunately, I have never done it. We would like to do it together and maybe it will happen in Venice, but I don't know. In Italy it's always very difficult getting these things together. I last sang Don Quichotte in Nice, four years ago. I will do it again in San Diego—my favourite place in the United States—in 2009.'

Furlanetto is one of those leading Italian singers who feels slightly underappreciated in his native country—Pavarotti was another, and Cecilia Bartoli is known at home as ‘the famous Italian singer who rarely sings in Italy’—even though things are changing. In recent years, he says, he has sung once or twice per season in Italy, but no more.

‘It wasn’t really a choice. I had more offers from abroad than Italy. At the beginning of my career I was a bit disturbed by this, but as time goes on, I couldn’t care less. I went to the Met to sing my first *Procida* and my first *Fiesco*—not Italy. But you know, to some extent that was true of Pavarotti during much of his career. Siepi was at the Met and Vienna, but Italy preferred Christoff. At the beginning of my time it was more important to have Nesterenko. At that time in Italy there was Bonaldo Giaiotti, a wonderful singer, a glorious voice, but he didn’t have a great career in Italy.’

This really doesn’t come across as a whinge. Furlanetto is booked up for his big Verdi roles, plus Boris and Don Quichotte, to 2012 and beyond at the world’s most prestigious theatres. The Met has him signed up for another series of *Fiesco* and Philip when Hytner’s Royal Opera production crosses the Atlantic. And he returns to Covent Garden for *Il barbiere* next season (‘Don Basilio is not my favourite role—he is a grotesque and I don’t like the grotesque—but I love the aria, and it’s a wonderful cast), for a revival of *Don Carlos* conducted by Bychkov in 2010, and again the following season for what, before he jumped in for an indisposed Orlin Anastassov in the Royal Opera’s revival in early May, had been scheduled as his first London *Fiescos* (‘in which Mr Domingo, apparently, will sing Simon Boccanegra,’ he remarks, without sounding completely convinced). The new regime at La Scala, too, has belatedly acknowledged

■ *Furlanetto (centre) as Fernando in ‘La gazza ladra’ at Pesaro in 1989, with Samuel Ramey (Podestà) and Katia Ricciarelli (Ninetta)*





■ Furlanetto as Zaccaria, Verona, 2000

wouldn't recognize me because they made a mask that covered my face and I really looked 90 years old. The third act, starting with Filippo's aria, through the duet with the Inquisitor, the duet with Elisabetta and then the quartet, is one of the sublime sequences in Verdi and in all opera. It's unique.' I ask whether he prefers the four- or five-act version. 'Well, if they do the five-act version with Fontainebleau, it makes no difference to me, as I only appear in Act 2, but I think you should only do it if you have a wonderful tenor and a wonderful soprano for the original first act.' The Turin *Don Carlos* was in the four-act version that Verdi made for La Scala, almost invariably the choice of Italian theatres, but Furlanetto had previously sung the five-act version in a reconstruction of Covent Garden's legendary Visconti production in Rome. 'It looked very out of fashion,' he remarks stoically, 'and there were long intermissions.' Did you have the dogs in the monastery garden scene? 'Yes, of course! And I loved *them*.'

He reminds me, too, that he sang in the original French (five-act) *Don Carlos* when the Royal Opera took Luc Bondy's production to the Edinburgh Festival—but, given the choice, understandably perhaps, he would rather sing Filippo than Philippe. 'It was written in French first, of course, but Verdi remodelled the entire piece as an Italian opera. Maybe because I am Italian, I didn't feel as comfortable doing it in French. On

Furlanetto's supremacy in the big bass repertoire. He opens the 2008-9 season in December with a new *Don Carlos* conducted by Daniele Gatti, and returns for Fiesco, Boris, Padre Guardiano, and even Orovoso in *Norma*—another Siepi role. This will be a role debut for Furlanetto.

It is *Don Carlos*, though, that has been of singular significance on his career journey. 'My first important debut was as Colline in Trieste in December 1974, but the following January I did my first performances of *Don Carlos* in Torino. I was the Monk and my King Philip was Boris Christoff. He was already 64 or 65 and it was after his brain operation, but he was still sensational.' It was as the Inquisitor that he made his Met debut in 1980. 'And I did it again in 1982, when they made the video with Freni, Domingo, Bumbry and Ghiaurov. You



■ Furlanetto in ensemble: (l.) as Don Alfonso in 'Così fan tutte' at Salzburg, 1993, with Bruce Ford as Ferrando and Jeffrey Black as Guglielmo; (r.) as Méphistophélès in 'Faust' in San Diego, 1988, with Richard Leech in the title role

the other hand, I didn't have any problems when I did *Les Vêpres siciliennes* in French, or *Jérusalem*, the French version of *I Lombardi*.'

Don Carlists will argue endlessly over which version corresponds more closely to Verdi's wishes—scholars tend to favour the original French, singers generally the standard Italian translation—but few opera-lovers who care about text will deny the special pleasure to be derived from hearing Italians in their own language. 'It's fundamental,' says Furlanetto, 'and for a very simple reason: you need singing actors who really live through the words. The most important vehicle for the drama in opera—it doesn't matter if the libretto is brilliant or stupid—is the text. When you hear the monologue of Filippo, where the words are in any case great, you are experiencing not only great opera but great theatre. The words that Filippo has in Verdi are showing a kind of human aspect which is missing in the Schiller play.'

Nicholas Hytner must be one of the few living directors—at least outside Germany—to have tackled both Schiller's play and Verdi's opera. Furlanetto has worked with him before. 'I did a beautiful, beautiful *Figaro* with him in Geneva, twice I think, in 1989 and 1993. I am very glad to work with him again after quite a few years, and especially on a piece such as *Don Carlos*. And I love working with Tony Pappano, whom I have known since he was the pianist in the Mozart Festival of Barenboim and Ponnelle in Paris and Washington, when I did my first *Figaro*. Tony is not only a great pianist and a great conductor: he really understands voices.'

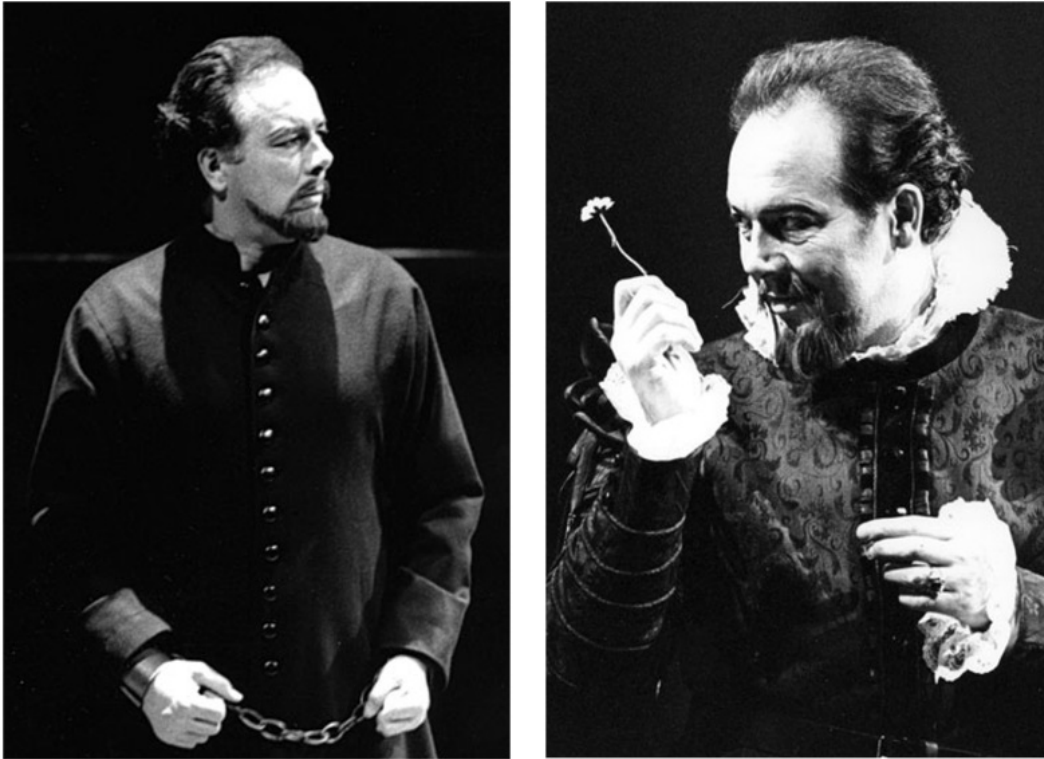
Furlanetto has worked with most of world's leading opera conductors over the last three decades. Barenboim, Muti and Levine are obvious favourites, but he retains fond memories of Herbert von Karajan, even though he first sang with him towards the end of the great Austrian maestro's life. 'I will never forget the time when I was doing Leporello with Karajan in Salzburg and Don Giovanni with Muti in Milano—the glorious Strehler production—almost at the same time. It was fascinating to experience the difference between these two great conductors in the trio at the beginning, and at the death of the Commendatore. Karajan was quite old at the time and had a very different attitude to death from Muti, a much younger man, who treated the scene much more aggressively. Karajan was almost resigned at this point. Now I feel very much the same about Filippo or Boris. If you sing these roles when you are 50, it will be different from when you were 35. And more interesting, I would say.'

Despite his reverence for the Salzburg supremo, Furlanetto is not uncritical—indeed he is refreshingly candid about some of his more notorious miscastings. 'Karajan had some strange ideas—Carreras as Radames, Ricciarelli as Turandot—and I remember one day in a break during a rehearsal, he said to me, "I think you should do Escamillo!" You couldn't say no to Karajan, so I was clever and I said to him, "Oh, by the way, maestro, did you see the new Porsche that just came out?"', and he forgot completely about Escamillo. Thank goodness for me, because it is much too high.'

He is no less upfront when discussing Karajan's successor in Salzburg, Gerard Mortier, now the director of the Opéra in Paris where Furlanetto recently sang Fiesco in what he calls 'an ugly production' of *Simon Boccanegra*. 'I was in Salzburg for the entire time of Mortier. He did some beautiful things. There were some crazy ones, too, but the *Don Giovanni* with Chéreau was for me the best I have ever done. When you do *Don Giovanni* for as many years as I did, you know there is a sort of damnation or curse behind the piece and you will never be totally satisfied with any production. Even Jean-Pierre Ponnelle—who was a god among stage directors for me—his *Don Giovanni* was too much like himself. But Chéreau's was the finest production I have appeared in. I did eight performances each summer for three years [1994-6], and I will never forget the moment of the great D minor chord and the huge head of the Commendatore crashing through this great wall—and I had to stop it. I was almost crushed by it. I was always terrified.'

Furlanetto speaks as he sings, with a sepulchral *basso profondo*. It's the voice of devils and villains; I wonder about comic roles, other than Don Basilio, which he might still be tempted to sing. 'Well, I adore Mustafà in *L'italiana in Algeri*, especially in the Ponnelle production, which I have done at the Met, several times in Vienna and in Munich. That's by far my favourite comic role. Pavarotti always wanted me to do Dulcamara with him, but it never happened. I once did Don Pasquale—but only once—because Muti wanted it, but I didn't really enjoy it. I feel extremely comfortable with the repertoire I am doing.'

Although his repertoire is much larger than our discussion makes out, encompassing *Così fan tutte*—both Guglielmo and Don Alfonso—*La gazza ladra*, *Maometto secondo* and *Semiramide*, *La Gioconda*, *La Juive*, *Faust*, *Le Cid*, *Hérodiade*, *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Yevgeny Onegin*, I ask about other plans for new roles. 'Almost all the roles I wanted to do, I have already done. But there is one left, which for an Italian was always and remains quite a challenge: Baron Ochs. I have loved it since I sang the Polizeikommissar in *Der Rosenkavalier*—the third opera of my career—in Trieste. The Ochs was Manfred Jungwirth. I watched him from the wings and thought, well, maybe one day I should try



■ Furlanetto (l.) as Procida in 'Les Vêpres siciliennes' in Rome, 1997; (r.) as Don Giovanni at Covent Garden, 1996

to sing it. I saw other great Ochsens such as Kurt Moll, but for me Jungwirth was the most Viennese Ochs. It will be an enormous amount of work, as there is an enormous amount of text, but I have my good friends in Vienna who will help me, I hope. I will do it in 2011 in San Diego for the first time. But I love a challenge.'

Although in earlier times there was a thriving tradition of Italian basses singing Wagner, he doesn't feel drawn to the repertoire, and mentions his lack of fluent German as a drawback. Falstaff was scheduled, but he studied the role and changed his mind—he insists he is a true bass and not a bass-baritone. In New York last year, he was offered a role in the Broadway production of *South Pacific*, which he would love to do if he could find the time. 'Pinza sang it in the 1940s and it was a big success for him.'

This probably doesn't presage a crossover into musicals and movies, however, since Furlanetto has a well-defined sense of his destiny and has pursued his career with a judicious self-appraisal and caution that reminds one of his compatriot, the soprano Mirella Freni. 'Last year I sang some concerts and a recording of Leporello in Budapest to mark the tenth anniversary of Solti's death, and it seemed to me easier than ever. This year they want to do *Figaro*, and I'm still happy to do these roles in concert, but never again on stage. You know, some years ago, I saw a colleague of mine as Figaro who was famous in this role, but he was already 55 or more and to be frank, he moved and looked like a 55-year-old when Figaro should be at most a 30-year-old, especially when having to climb steps or a ladder. I promised myself that when I arrived at that moment, it's time to go.'

Happily, for Philip, Fiesco, Boris and Don Quichotte, Furlanetto's bass is just about at its peak—he has years ahead of him before it will be time to go.