



THE TENOR

A CULTURAL HISTORY

MATTHEW BOYDEN

THE TENOR: A CULTURAL HISTORY

MATTHEW BOYDEN

Ragueneau Press
7 Friars Mill
Bath Lane
Leicester
LE3 5BJ

hello@ragueneaupress.com
www.ragueneaupress.com

The Tenor: A Cultural History

Matthew Boyden

First Published 2021

Ragueneau Press works within the framework of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, and retains all rights for electronic storage and reproduction.

Matthew Boyden has asserted his moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Jacket Design by Lee Haynes © Ragueneau Press 2021

Typeset in Garamond Pro by Jill Sweet

Front Cover: Franco Corelli (1921–2003), singing “Recondita armonia” from Tosca, at the New York Metropolitan Opera, in 1966.

Back cover: Enrico Caruso (1873–1921), in Pagliacci, photographed by the studio of Aimé Dupont in 1903, the year of his debut as Canio at the New York Metropolitan Opera.

ISBN: 978-1-3999-0017-1

Printed and Bound in the United Kingdom

Sabbatini³² and Salvatore Fisichella.³³ The former was successful as *the* Rossini tenor of the 1980s and '90s (partnering often with Cecilia Bartoli) while the latter never enjoyed anything like the success to which he was entitled by talent and training. Like Kraus, Fisichella forged a resolute technique when young, which enabled him to continue singing well into his 60s. His breakout moment – recording Rodrigo with Carreras in the title role of Rossini's *Otello* for Philips in 1978 – established his credentials as a *virtuoso* lyric tenor with thrilling *spinto* sensibilities. Apart from a studio recording as Aronne in *Mosè in Egitto*, however, he was not engaged by any of the studios to build on his flawless foundations. It was a sign of the times as they were in the 1970s and 80s that Fisichella was surplus to requirements and unable to persuade A&R departments to take their eyes off the usual suspects. Had he made his debut 20 years later, things would have been very different indeed. If Fisichella was not the most subtle of vocalists then his clear and open tone, focussed *vibrato*, and brilliant high notes (which reached D5 without loss of line or tone) set him apart. His fluency when singing Bellini in particular made him the only tenor to rival Pavarotti during the decade when the big man focussed on *bel canto* repertoire.

The heavier end of the Italian dramatic repertoire after Del Monaco's retirement was inherited by a coterie of big voices, none of which was sufficiently merchantable to warrant more than infrequent recording. Carlos Cossutta³⁴ is remembered for having sung *Otello* for Decca, with Solti, in 1977³⁵ – one of just two studio recordings by the tenor – while Nicola Martinucci³⁶ and Lando Bartolini³⁷ made almost none. Though Martinucci had a big voice, it was heavy-set and lacked personality. Bartolini appeared, on the other hand, to be channelling his idol, Del Monaco. He made his debut in 1973, just as Del Monaco's career was coming to an end, and many thought him an imitator of the fading warhorse, so similar are their voices in the resonance of their lowered larynxes. In fairness to Bartolini, he was in many respects a finer artist; he used his large and resonant heroic-*spinto* voice with greater refinement, as is obvious from some of his live recordings as Andrea Chénier. There is pirate footage of him in circulation, recorded in Marseille in 1991, that is entirely magnificent. Other than because taste was changing, it is difficult to know why Bartolini wasn't more successful. He was not engaged to record a complete opera in the studio until 1983, when he sang Giosta Berling (a role created by Franco Lo Giudice) in Riccardo Zandonai's *I Cavalieri Di Ekebù*.³⁸ He can otherwise be heard at his most thrilling on live recordings, many of them sadly hard to find. Bartolini worked in Europe for almost his entire career before the age of 50,³⁹ during which period he developed a reputation as one of the world's small coterie of singers able to do justice to Calaf.

32 11 May, 1957 –

33 15 May, 1943 –

34 8 May, 1932 – 22 January, 2000.

35 Cossutta made only one other complete studio recording of an opera – as Paco in *La vida breve* by Manuel Falla, conducted by Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos, for EMI in 1965.

36 28 March, 1941 –

37 11 April, 1937.

38 Conducted by Gianandrea Gavazzeni, with Fiorenza Cossotto as La Comandante ('The Commander'). The opera was premiered on 7 March, 1925, conducted by Arturo Toscanini.

39 He made his debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 1988 – when he was 51 years old.

He was one of a handful globally with the weight and power necessary to make the best of a role that was shortly to become associated eternally with a *lirico-spinto* tenor who sang it on stage on only a handful of occasions. The best of Bartolini's *many* live recordings as Calaf are from 1987 (conducted by Giuseppe Patanè, at the Bayerischen Staatsoper) and 1993 (conducted by Nello Santi, at the Teatro Colón).

Equally overlooked was Maurice Stern,⁴⁰ an American-born tenor raised in the Cantorial tradition who, like Jan Peerce before him and Neil Shicoff after him, survives in the Pantheon as one of the most talented Jewish-American tenors of the 20th century, a star of whom the general public remains almost entirely in ignorance. Readers of different ages and inclinations will know his work as a celebrated sculptor,⁴¹ while others may know of his daughter, the rock-Goddess Jennifer Rush (born Heidi Stern). Both of these considerable achievements warrant commentary, but they pale beside what little can be said of his abilities as one of the most thrilling dramatic tenors of his age. Only little can now be said because Stern made almost no recordings, and none in the studio of a complete opera. This is a tragedy considering the sensational mix of resonance and artistry for which his work during the 1970s and 1980s is remembered by those privileged to hear it.

Like Peerce, Stern's technique was military by discipline and supine in its *apparent* ease. He played the long game while young, specialising in lighter lyric repertoire before morphing effortlessly into dramatic roles that spanned Manrico, Radamès, Don Alvaro, Otello, Samson, Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Canio, Dick Johnson, Andrea Chénier and Bacchus. He sang across the United States, Canada, Mexico, South America, Europe and China – but was overlooked by the Met (despite being booked to appear in the 1989–90 season as cover for Domingo and Gary Lakes in *Samson et Dalila*). The live recordings in circulation of his performances in *Otello*,⁴² *Turandot* and *La fanciulla del West* suggest he was barely rivalled in these roles during the early 1980s – when he should have been admitted to the first rank of dramatic tenors.

His career as an anomaly was evidenced by his appearance as Johnson for the Spoleto Festival in 1985 in a production by the film director Bruce Beresford, with designs by Ken Adam. On 30 May, Will Crutchfield wrote for the *New York Times* a review of the second of four performances in Charleston, in which the critic's isolated commentary on Stern's performance as Johnson was that he was "security itself on the top notes, but his tone is hard and dry, and his style fiercely uningratiating." There is a recording and a telecast of this production which suggests that Crutchfield had been spoiled on this occasion by the privilege of his experience.⁴³ Stern's performance

40 22 October, 1928 –

41 His sculpture of a seated Dustin Hoffmann was shown at the Coronet theatre on the debut of Mike Nichols' romantic comedy *The Graduate* in 1967.

42 Stern's first performances as Otello (conducted by Alberto Erede) were in 1982; his last were in 1992 – when he was ten years older than he appeared. Stern's abilities past the age of 60 would have been remarkable had he been 45, in which respect he stands in equivalence with the equally ageless Jan Peerce.

43 Crutchfield's standards were of the highest, of course, as the *Times*' critic; it would be interesting to know what he thinks of Stern with thirty years' hindsight, and how he would respond to such a voice as the Artistic Director of the Teatro Nuovo. In any event, the remorseful, bitter aspect of Stern's portrayal as Johnson was recognised by Harold Farwell in *Opera News* for October, 1985. He wrote that ".... Maurice Stern's stoical bandit complemented this. His 'Or son sei mesi' was an explanation, not an apology, with singing that was Eastwood steel, not Italian sobs."

is outstanding. The voice is that of a dramatic tenor, rather than a lifted baritone, and it is rich and easy – with not the slightest “hardness.” The extension is, as Crutchfield acknowledges, superb, but it is Stern’s phrasing and articulation that set him apart. The empathy generated by his performance of “*Ch’ella mi creda*” attests to an ideal theatrical sensibility and a musician of rare insight. He is entirely persuasive and makes a glorious sound, the focus of which does much to highlight the quality of Civinini and Zangarini’s often-overlooked verse.

So why did Stern’s career fail to match his talent? The explanation provides no excuse. Stern began life as a character tenor, chiefly for the New York City Opera, in which capacity his success and popularity combined to trap him in roles for which he was suited ideally but not creatively. His debut as the Emperor Altoum at New York City Opera was singled out by Eric Salzman for the *New York Times*,⁴⁴ whose recognition of Stern’s ability as an actor was shared by the Company’s Viennese management, John White, Felix Popper and Julius Rudel. They did all they could to hold onto him, and Stern waited too long to break into the repertoire for which he was technically and emotionally ideal. In this respect he was either too early or too late, having been born just seven years after Corelli and only seven years before Pavarotti. He reached his maturity as a singer at the same time as Domingo, in much the same repertoire. His evolution as one of the finest dramatic tenors of the century occurred too late for him to compete with the Manrico and Chénier of Corelli and Tucker, and by the time his *Otello* blossomed, as undeniably it did, he had been overtaken by the lighter-voiced Domingo. It grieves that Domingo was able to sing and record the role as often as he did while Stern was neglected entirely. His decision during the 1960s to change his professional name to “Mauro Lampi”⁴⁵ attests to frustrations that are easy to understand. Stern was born under an evil star of bad timing, one that saw him, like so many others, lost to the brilliance of the *holy trinity*.

Less naturally gifted than Stern, but better known thanks to a small catalogue of recordings sufficient for posterity to form a view, was Giuseppe Giacomini.⁴⁶ He made his debut in 1966 as Pinkerton and was acclaimed soon after as Turiddu in Parma and Modena. His first triumphs were outside Italy, in Berlin (1970), Lisbon (1971), Barcelona (1972) Vienna (1973), Munich (1973) and Buenos Aires (1974). When returning to Italy, Giacomini triumphed as Alvaro and Rodolfo at La Scala, and established himself as one of the first-rank dramatic-*spinto* tenors to rival Pavarotti and Domingo as Macduff, Don Carlo, Manrico, Cavaradossi, Canio and Des Grieux. For all his achievements, however, Giacomini was little more than a solid performer; his powerful voice lacked character and excitement, and it was given also to thickness. His appearance compounded his unsuitability as a bill-board artist to rival the prevailing triumvirate.

44 Stern’s portrayal as the old and frail Altoum was so convincing that Felix Popper, standing at the bottom of the tall platform on which the tenor was seated, demanded that someone clamber up a ladder to deliver him water. Popper feared that Stern was suffering a seizure, and an ambulance was called. When the perfectly healthy Stern descended at the end of the act, a party had gathered to deliver him to hospital.

45 On the “advice” of the conductor Anton Guadagno.

46 7 September, 1940 –



X001F766N5

105866268

The Tenor: A Cultural History

NewItem