



Theme & Variations

BRUNO BORRALHINHO

Monthly column about the world of such music that people usually call *classical*. Subjects of abundant subjectivity and, at times, little free of controversy. Those that all musicians talk and discuss about, but never come to firm conclusions.

Those that allow the enthusiastic public to satisfy its curiosity and, by the way, to build communicational bridges and viaducts between the stage and the audience. And so that no one dares to take the themes less seriously, the variations will be commented and discussed exclusively with some of the best musicians on the planet.

The voice of singing

According to Richard Wagner, «the oldest, most genuine and most beautiful element of music, the element to which our music owes its very existence, is the human voice». Enrico Caruso, for his part and certainly with some sense of humour in the mix, defended that to be a good singer it is enough to have «a huge lung, a big mouth, ninety per cent of memory, ten per cent of intelligence, be hard-working and have a little something in the heart». After all, who are these singing protagonists that we both idolize and estrange, sometimes even as if they were an alien species within the musical milieu itself?

Talking about singers implies for many an inevitable reference to the usual stereotypes that divas and prima donnas feed and have fed without contrition throughout their careers. I honestly cannot confirm such clichés, at least by no means as being exclusive to singers: I know wanna-be divas in all musical categories –instrumentalists, researchers and conductors– who behave like it without even having any plausible justification, beyond their own conceit and vanity. On the contrary, all the singers I had the opportunity to work with throughout my (possibly still

FEATURED GUEST

René Pape



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René Pape is one of the most prestigious singers of our time and his fantastic career counts more than 160 performances and 18 different roles at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. A regular guest at the world's leading opera houses, he has been a member of the ensemble of the Staatsoper Berlin since 1988 and is a recognized specialist in the Wagnerian repertoire. Pape has recorded for Deutsche Gramophone and EMI, has been acclaimed in recitals in the Carnegie Hall, the Wiener Staatsoper or the Wigmore Hall, and is the recipient of numerous international awards.

too short) career are musicians with enormous sensitivity and with great willingness to discover, learn and work hard in a very rigorous, demanding and context.

René Pape is one of the most prestigious and revered bass singers in the world, in the present and ever since. Fate wanted him to be my neighbour too and therefore I couldn't help but ask him for help in my mini-investigation on the vicissitudes of being a singer in the limelight, on the way there and on what it is like to be able to present the world with the genius of this fascinating instrument we call voice. Especially known for his immaculate and fulminating Wagnerian interpretations, his repertoire is however much broader and versatile, in a career that has made him one of the most assiduous and adored guests of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, of the major opera houses in Vienna, Paris, London and Berlin, in Salzburg or in Bayreuth.

Born in Dresden, Pape began his musical studies at the boarding school for boys of the famous Dresdner Kreuzchor, an institution founded in the 14th century with an emphasis on training young singers which has achieved great international prestige and is in fact one of the very few of the kind outlasting over the centuries. «I wasn't a particularly diligent or ambitious student but I had a certain talent and above all a very firm belief in my abilities», says Pape. «I grew up with sacred music, I tried it in all kinds of voices, and composers like Schütz, Bach and Reger were very striking for me.» He formally began to study singing at the Hochschule für Musik in Dresden at the age of 17 and a few years later he was already invited to join the ensemble of the Staatsoper in Berlin, of which he has been a member since 1988. «After the fall of the "Berlin Wall" in 1989 many doors and gates opened for me and I was able to immediately start making music with great international artists», recognizes Pape, remembering at the same time that his colleagues at the time Peter Schreier and Theo Adam «had a great influence and awakened in me a certain ambition». Secrets to success? Pape confesses that some luck is also needed along with the almost mandatory talent and work. But he emphasizes that, above all, «singing has always given me and continues to give me immense pleasure».

A question I often ask myself is, what does the singer himself think about his/her voice or, for example, an instrumentalist about his/her sound, and what are the priorities in this unique and peculiar process of sound production. Pape responds without hesitation: «I think my voice can cover a very wide spectrum of timbres and feelings. The clarity of the text and therefore the comprehensibility of the content undoubtedly play a very important role. In addition there are also important aspects such as expressiveness and the pleasure of acting, at least in opera. But to be honest, when I sing I try not to think about anything other than the music itself as a whole and, in the case of opera, the interaction with the other characters.»

Returning to Wagner's quote on the «most genuine and beautiful element of music», to what extent can the properties of the human voice be compared to those of a music instrument? Can the timbres and characteristics of certain instruments serve as an occasional or general reference to a singer? Pape emphasizes that «the human voice is a very special instrument because it is heard thanks to the vibration of only two tiny strings located in the larynx. For that reason it is normal to compare the human voice with a stringed instrument, although in practice we can imitate other instruments». Even if sometimes unconsciously, this association with instrumental timbres is real, just as the colours and

timbres of the human voice are sought in the interpretation of works for piano, violin or clarinet by Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and so many others.

Speaking of repertoire, Pape recognizes that having dedicated himself to «a wide variety of roles, composers and periods throughout the career», he ended up developing «love and preference for romanticism». «But of course I am totally open to other styles of music: I like Bach just as Mozart, Verdi just as Wagner, Czech music no less than French.» In any case, he does not consider it to be a premeditated preference for adapting this repertoire to his own voice and only admits, «formulating the matter diplomatically», that he does not feel «special bond» with contemporary music. «Despite the fact that I also engage in fields that no one associates me with, the truth is that I am most sought after by the repertoire for which I am already known and I have sung the most throughout my career.»

On the hypothesis that the world of singing might be especially competitive, Pape confesses that competitiveness is a topic that he does not care about. «The only competitions I've participated in and I've been successful in have been contests in which I competed in a very cordial way with other colleagues. I never felt the need to get into that system of dispute and rivalry because this did not exist in the environment of where I came from when I was a youngster.» Pape declares with some pride that he has always been «one step ahead of this society regulated by jostling». «The most important thing for me is still the pleasure that singing gives me and being able to make other people happy because of it.»