

HOME

FEATURES

IN REVIEW

RECORDINGS

SOUND BITES

DATELINE

WATCH & LISTEN

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On the Beat

Giordani saddles up to sing Dick Johnson at the Met; a Boston University academic makes *Fanciulla's* centennial her personal crusade.

by BRIAN KELLOW



Giordani: the Way West
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The vocal demands of Minnie in *La Fanciulla del West* may be enough to frighten the horses, as well as any soprano concerned with self-preservation, but the opera's tenor hero, Dick Johnson, isn't a role to take lightly, either. **MARCELLO GIORDANI**, who sings Johnson in the Met's revival of GIANCARLO DEL MONACO's 1991 production, opening this month, has waited to perform the role until he's had plenty of experience in Puccini territory. He feels the crucial preparation is singing des Grieux in *Manon Lescaut* and Calaf in *Turandot*.

Although Johnson's great excerptable moment, "Ch'ella mi creda," comes in Act III, it's Act II that's the whitewater raft ride for a tenor. At a memorable performance of the work given by OPERA ORCHESTRA OF NEW YORK in November 2004, with APRILE MILLO in superb form as Minnie, CARL TANNER struggled audibly with the act's formidable challenges. "There's no holding back in Puccini," says Giordani. "But he writes in such a way that he allows you to build to the big moments in Act II, of which the most challenging is 'Or son sei mesi.' Dramatically, it is the turning point for his character. He must become more sympathetic to the audience, I feel. Minnie has learned he has lied to her, and she's furious. He pours out his heart to her, explaining how he was forced in the last six months to take up his father's way of life and — on a very difficult long phrase with repeated high B-flats — he is filled with

shame. He says farewell to her, leaves and is immediately wounded by Rance's posse. Later, when he is about to be hanged, he sings 'Ch'ella mi creda,' making a plea not for himself but for Minnie, that she never learn of his fate. Minnie shows she forgives him by saving him, and I think the audience forgives him as well. But the turning point is in Act II."

When I first encountered *Fanciulla*, nearly thirty years ago, like a lot of people, I could see only what I thought were its ridiculous excesses. Over the years, I spent some more time with it, and when the Met's handsome del Monaco

production bowed in 1991, with BARBARA DANIELS in a richly satisfying performance, I had surrendered to the piece. (I told my then partner, one of the most sophisticated musicians I'd ever met, "You know, I really love *Fanciulla*." "No, you don't," he replied.) Now, almost twenty years later, the opera seems to me an even more moving expression of the quest for something called home. Giordani agrees. "From the first pages of the score," he says, "the gold miners remember the sweet moments spent at home, nostalgia for their mothers — the focal point of the whole opera from my point of view — and nostalgia for their country. In a modern interpretive key, we can say that *Fanciulla* is a story of our days. It brings up the immigration, which is a current problem. Back then, people were looking for El Dorado. Nowadays, they emigrate, they go abroad in search of a better future, leaving behind their families, their beloved ones, friends. Like in all of Puccini's operas, he brings to the listener the sentimental essence of life. The values determined by the circumstances of the characters urge the listeners to reflect about their own existence."

The tenor is also steeped in his work with the Marcello Giordani Foundation, which aims, among other things, to deepen young singers' understanding of Italian culture, language and music. "I emphasize technique very much in my teaching," says Giordani — "the vowels, and their proper formation. That goes for singers from America, Japan — and Italy. It's the foundation from which comes the style and ultimately the emotional connection." On December 8, the Foundation presents a gala concert at the Church of Saint Jean on Manhattan's East Side. That night, Giordani launches his new solo CD "Ti voglio tanto bene," a collection of Italian and Neapolitan songs arranged and conducted by STEVEN MERCURIO, who will be on hand along with CARMINE AUFIERO, LISE LINDSTROM, STEPHEN COSTELLO and several of the Foundation's young artists. The Foundation will also present its Lifetime Achievement Award to the great VIRGINIA ZEANI.

DEBORAH BURTON, an assistant professor of music, composition and theory at Boston University, would like more people to pay attention to *Fanciulla*. "No season goes by without a *Tosca*, *Bohème* or *Butterfly*. But many people have simply not heard *Fanciulla*," she says. So she decided to do something about it. Working with VITA PALADINO, director of Boston University's renowned HOWARD GOTLIEB ARCHIVAL RESEARCH CENTER, Burton has planned several promising events to coincide with the centennial of the opera's world premiere at the Met. On December 3, the day of the dress rehearsal of the Met's *Fanciulla* production, there will be a press event at New York's Italian Cultural Institute, with a lineup of speakers including WOLFREDO TOSCANINI, the conductor's grandson, and noted Toscanini scholar HARVEY SACHS. On December 6, Boston University is the site of a special symposium and exhibition that includes photographs and manuscripts belonging to the Gotlieb Archive, which houses the complete collections of DOROTHY KIRSTEN and TITO GOBBI, both artists famously associated with *Fanciulla*.

"I always loved Puccini," Burton says. "My University of Michigan dissertation was on *Tosca*, but I wrote about it in relationship to a number of his other operas, one of which was *Fanciulla*. It's fantastic music — so sophisticated and so surprising, compared to what you would have expected after *Butterfly*. Very modernistic — he strikes out in a whole new way, and yet you know it's Puccini."

Burton worked on her dissertation in Italy, and she remembers thinking one day, after being submerged in *Fanciulla* for weeks, "I can't stand this anymore — I have to take a break from all of these singing cowboys. I went to the local supermarket in a shopping mall, and that day was cowboy day at the mall. Every single person in there was Italian, wearing a cowboy outfit. I couldn't get away from it!" At the time, Burton faced a good deal of academic snobbery where Puccini was concerned. "It's gotten much better since I started, back in the '90s," she says. She does recall handing legendary *Tosca* hater JOSEPH KERMAN a copy of her finished dissertation. "He thanked me," Burton remembers, "but when he looked at the title, his smile suddenly vanished as if I had given him a dead fish." □