

Bravo, Domingo!

By Kathleen Watt

PLACIDO DOMINGO IS universally acknowledged as opera's leading lyrico-dramatic tenor, and the history of opera at the turn of the 21st century will be all but defined by the



accomplishments of this astonishingly versatile artist. Domingo sings with equal facility all the greatest roles of the Italian, French and German repertoire, and he is a formidable actor of remarkable generosity. He is at home in the Metropolitan Opera House and in all the great houses: La Scala, Covent Garden, Paris, Vienna, Barcelona, Bayreuth. Domingo has recorded all the standard works, many of them three and four times, many of them on film. And in his tireless artistic adventure, he has brought to life many non-standard works—long lost, obscure, or brand new.

Domingo is a worldwide superstar, not least because he is a thoroughly modern tenor, embracing the technology of global mass media. Millions worldwide have been caught in the thrall of the *Three Tenors* phenomenon. And he is the most successful crossover artist of all time, his vocal virtuosity matched only by his personal charisma.

The occasion of his 30th anniversary year at the Metropolitan Opera offers an opportunity to plumb Deutsche Grammophon's deep catalogue of Domingo's recordings for highlights of a triumphant career. These excerpts boast a *Who's Who* of the top conductors in the world of the last three decades, and a voice unblemished by more than 30 years on the international circuit. Bravo, Domingo!

CD I:

1. Domingo made his Italian debut in Puccini's *Turandot*, in the role of Calaf, the Unknown Prince, at the Verona Arena on July 16, 1969, singing opposite the mighty Birgit Nilsson as the Ice Princess Turandot. Domingo was not exactly “unknown” at the time, but this was an auspicious launch. At the Metropolitan Opera, Domingo was the first Calaf of many to perform Zeffirelli's famously spectacular production. When Calaf sings “Nessun dorma” at the beginning of Act III, he has already won the chilly hand of Turandot—unless she is able to discover his true identity by the morrow. He resolves to relieve the anguish of Turandot's subjects—and be victorious. Incidentally, this is the aria that in the last decade has made of the “old” cult of the Tenor a “new” phenomenon for the '90's.
2. “Largo al factotum,” the barber's self-introduction in Rossini's *Barbiere di Siviglia*, is one of the most famous arias in the operatic literature—for baritone! Domingo's distinctive voice is plush with the dark sonorities that normally characterize the lower voice categories. In this 1992 recording Domingo negotiates Figaro's fioratura romp with irresistible aplomb.
3. In Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs des Perles* Domingo's command of French line, language and style is exquisite. In the romanza “Je crois entendre encore,” the Ceylonese fisherman Nadir expresses his love for the chaste princess Leila. This is one of the gems of the repertoire that lofted Enrico Caruso to early fame.
4. “Pays merveilleux...0 Paradis” is Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama's rapturous paeon to the island of Madagascar, in Act IV of *L'Africaine*. This often-excerpted aria is a tenor showpiece that reveals Meyerbeer at the height of his melodic inspiration.
5. Halévy's *La Juive* is French opera in the grand tradition. When Jewish goldsmith Eleazar sings his heartrending prayer, “Rachel, quand du Seigneur,” he and his adopted daughter have been condemned to boil in oil for their faith. Eleazar wrestles with the knowledge that he can save Rachel's life by revealing that she

is actually the daughter of the Cardinal. It was Adolphe Nourrit, the tenor who originated the role, who persuaded Halévy to include this, the opera's most famous aria, in the fourth act. Small wonder that this role has become a favored vehicle of tenors who can sing it.

6. Offenbach's masterpiece *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* has been in Domingo's repertoire since someone asked him to learn it at the age of twenty-four. The role of the poet Hoffmann is a lyrical, high-lying role, into which Domingo admits he has grown, over time and hundreds of performances. "Hoffmann is a man who suffers at the hands of humanity," writes Domingo. "He is too idealistic, too passionate...even a Rigoletto, [who] is laughed at for his physical deformity and strikes back with a spiteful, vindictive humor, is less tragic than a Hoffmann, [whose] love is misunderstood, and is laughed at for his personal tragedy." In the prologue aria, "Il était une fois a la cour d'Eisenach," here excerpted from a 1989 recording, Domingo recounts the legend of Kleinzach, a hunchback dwarf at the Eisenach Court.
7. Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* is of the "verismo" school of Italian opera, in which realism in plot and characterization is paramount. Canio, the leader of a travelling theater troupe, is the poignant clown who laughs on the outside but weeps on the inside. This is one of the great acting roles for tenor, associated with the best singer-actors from Caruso on. In "Vesti la giubba" Canio bitterly laments the irony of playing comic fool on the stage opposite his wife, Nedda, while his heart is breaking, because he knows she has not been true to him.
8. When Arrigo Boito urged Verdi to set his libretto based on Shakespeare's *Othello*, Verdi had been in contented retirement for fifteen years. Persuaded by the power of Boito's text, he emerged to compose his monumental *Otello*. In his musical maturity, Verdi's characteristic Italian lyricism had taken on dramatic depth and a dark power. This *Otello* requires the ability both to rage and to weep, vocally and dramatically. "Nun mi tema" is the tragic last gasp of a glorious man in ruins, sung in Act IV, just after *Otello* has killed Desdemona, and just before he

kills himself. Tenors who can truly realize the Moor are rare. Since he first took it on in 1975, Domingo has made Otello a signature role.

9. In Verdi's *Macbeth*, MacDuff is the pivotal character who discovers Macbeth's initial crime in Act I and avenges it in Act IV. In this 1976 recording of “O figli...Ah, la paterna mano,” Domingo sings MacDuff's poignant lament over his slaughtered wife and child. His is surely a broken heart, with ample cause to assassinate Macbeth and thereby fulfill the witches' prophecy.
10. The role of Walther von Stoltzing, in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, was one of Domingo's early ventures into the Teutonic repertory. Initially he expressed doubt about whether he would be able to sustain such a role on the stage. Nevertheless, Domingo did undertake a recording of the opera for Deutsche Grammophon in 1976. The soaring “Prize song” wins for Walther the Mastersingers' singing contest the gold chain of the Masters' Guild, and the hand of his beloved Eva.
11. Domingo's robust vocalism has always made him a candidate for “heavier” repertoire. As early as 1968 Domingo essayed the role of Lohengrin in two performances only, after which he returned to the French and Italian repertoire to build the core of his career. But in 1984 he reprised his Lohengrin with great success, and followed with this recording of *Tannhauser* in 1988. These operas are the last from Wagner's “early period,” and carry seeds of the music dramas to come—the use of leitmotif, powerful orchestration, and the expository narrative that so characterizes the *Ring Cycle*. One such passage is the so-called “Rome narrative,” in which Tannhauser hopelessly describes the Pope's refusal to grant him absolution for his sin. In his narration, he sets up the miracle that will redeem him at the end of the opera. Here, too, is Domingo as the nascent heldentenor, who later will render the roles of Parsifal and Siegmund with a lush lyricism that has ultimately redefined the vocal parameters of the Wagnerian hero.

12. In *L'Elisir d'Amore* Donizetti produced a delightful opera buffa which has never been out of the repertory. Near the end, after an evening of rollicking comedy, is the plangent, aching lovely “Una furtiva lagrima”—an eternal gift to tenors everywhere, and to their listeners. It is Nemorino's sighing promise that he would die to console his beloved Adina, on seeing the furtive tear in her eye, which proves her love for him. A limpid tone and simplicity of phrase are the requirements of this aria. This 1981 offering is Domingo at his Italianate best.
13. From Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* Riccardo sings “Forsè la soglia attinse...” as he signs the document exiling his friend Renato and his family. It is a lament, but not for Renato—for Riccardo is also consigning himself to a life apart from Amelia, Renato's wife, whom he has long loved, though honorably from afar.
14. Verdi's *Luisa Miller* was once considered a rarity in the repertoire, perhaps because it straddles, sometimes unevenly, the composer's early and middle periods. Recently, however, the opera has regained its rightful place in the repertory. In his second act aria, “Quando le sere al placido”, Rodolfo, son of Count Walter disguised as a penniless painter, has learned through a letter that his beloved Luisa, daughter of a retired soldier, has chosen Wurm, a henchman of the Count, over himself. Rodolfo can't fathom her reasons, his heart gives way, and his love curdles into hatred and vengeance.
15. Puccini's *Tosca* is based on a Sardou play of sadism, murder, suicide—and jealous love—written as a vehicle for the great tragedienne Sarah Bernhardt. By Act III, the painter Cavaradossi has been tortured and sentenced to death by firing squad for his political intrigues. In the dungeon of the Castel' Sant' Angelo, he sings of starlit evenings with his lover Tosca in happier times. “E lucevan le stelle” is his farewell to Tosca, to art, and to life.

CD II

1. Domingo is at ease with a love song in any language or genre, whether crooning a popular Italian tune like “Non ti scordar di me,” or borrowing a showpiece like “Be my love” from American matinee idol Mario Lanza. And he unleashes a special gusto when he sings in his native Spanish of “Granada” and “Muñequita Linda.”
2. For more crossover, how about a tango? Domingo recorded “Nostalgias” and “El día que me quieras” for this 1981 *Tangos* album while in Madrid for five appearances as *Otello*. He has written that “immediately after each of the last three of those performances, I spent the rest of the night in the recording studio—because my voice is much less fatigued by continuing to sing immediately after a performance.” Domingo's tone was never so embracingly sweet as in these steamy songs of love lost, won or hoped for.
3. In Verdi's *Rigoletto* the Duke of Mantua is a handsome but dastardly character. Only for a moment do we catch a glimpse of any humanity in this man. In Act II the Duke sings the soliloquy “Ella mi fu rapita...Parmi veder le lagrime.” He is in distress for the unnamed sweetheart who has lately enthralled him, because she seems to be missing. He imagines she must have suffered. He even regrets that he was not nearby to answer her cries. What he does not yet know is that the unnamed damsel is Gilda, daughter of the Duke's hunchbacked jester, Rigoletto, and that his own courtiers have abducted her, to his own home, for his amusement. More typical of the Duke is his Act IV treatise on the changeable nature of women, with which he cynically and jauntily justifies his own misdeeds: “La donna è mobile” is one of the most famous arias in all of Italian opera.
4. Carl Maria von Weber's *Oberon*, for all its unwieldy twists and turns through fairy worlds and fantastical interventions, is considered a cornerstone of German Romantic opera. In “Von Jugend auf...,” Sir Hüon de Bordeaux, Knight of Charlemagne's Court, is charmed, delighted, and literally transported by his magic horn from France to Baghdad, where he is to do penance—and claim his

destiny in the love of Rezia, the Caliph's daughter. Domingo calls this aria “one of the most terrifying numbers I have ever sung.” All the more triumphant then is his 1970 recording of this dramatic coloratura tour de force.

5. Bizet's *Carmen* is French lyric opera at its most dramatic, and the role of José, the corporal of the guard in Seville, requires not only the lush flexibility of a true lyric tenor, but one with almost Wagnerian heft. Domingo is arguably opera's greatest Don José since Jon Vickers. What's more, there is an authenticity to Domingo's characterization that derives from the fact that his own mother is from the Basque country, like José, and Domingo himself spent much time there as a child. In the famous “Flower Song,” Don José sings with hopeless infatuation of the flower which the gypsy seductress Carmen has tossed his way
6. Verdi's *Don Carlos* was written in French for the Paris Opera, in the five acts characteristic of French grand opera. This 1983 performance is the only existing recording of the five-act version in its original French. In Act I, the Spanish Infante Don Carlos sings “Fontainebleau! Fôret immense et solitaire...Je l'ai vue,” delighted, after meeting Elizabeth of Valois, who is to be his wife by arrangement of State. In the Italian version, which is normally performed, Act I is cut, and this aria is moved to Act II. Says Domingo, “If there were another aria, Don Carlos would be my favorite part. The protagonist is not simply an unfortunate; misunderstood man, another good-looking tenor. He is weak, indecisive—and that is how he must be portrayed.”
7. *Manon Lescaut* is the opera that announced Puccini's extravagant musical gifts to the world. In it appear the elements that forever after would be known as “Puccinian”—generosity of melody, charming characters, the wealth of dramatic feeling. “Donna non vidi mai” is the Chevalier Des Grieux's ecstatic discourse on the young and fickle Manon, whom he has just met. This melody has its origin in an early Puccini song. Says Domingo, “Puccini was a Tuscan and his aria writing followed the natural pattern of the Tuscan 'stornello,' making it possible for young

tenors to...in a sense, sing Puccini as we sing a song...[with] an inevitable up-and-down quality.”

8. Verdi's *Aida* opens with a formidable challenge for the tenor singing the Egyptian captain Radames. Only minutes after the curtain is rung up, he must hold forth with his biggest musical moment of the evening. “Se quel guerrier io fossi...Celeste Aida” is Radames' rhapsody to heavenly Aida. His dream is that he will be the Egyptian warrior chosen to vanquish the Ethiopian enemy, and lay the fruits of his victory at the feet of the woman he loves—the Ethiopian slave, Aida. With his superb control of the “Verdian line” and the full-throated splendor of even the most dolce passages at the top of his range, Domingo sings the defining Radames of our time. Heavenly indeed.
9. *La Fanciulla del West* is Puccini's tale of the California Gold Rush of 1849. Despite its cultural inconsistency with Italian lyricism, the opera has a thoroughly American history. It derives from David Belasco's *Girl of the Golden West*, which Puccini first saw on Broadway in New York City. It was commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera in 1907, and received its premiere there in 1910. Requiring Wild West bravado, the role of the outlaw Ramerrez a.k.a. Dick Johnson is particularly associated with Domingo at the Metropolitan Opera, where in 1991 a new production of *Fanciulla* was mounted for him. In Act III, when a mob of miners threatens to lynch him, Johnson sings “Ch'ella mi creda libero,” imploring the mob to persuade his lover Minnie that he has escaped to freedom. Incidentally, this aria is said to have been used as marching music by Italian soldiers in World War I.
10. During the overture, before the curtain rises on Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, the Sicilian peasant Turiddu sings an offstage serenade to Lola, his ex-girlfriend, now married to Alfio. “O Lola, ch'hai di latti la cammisa” is written in Sicilian dialect, unlike the rest of the opera, and sets the tone for the vernacular passions about to erupt. *Cavalleria Rusticana*, like *Pagliacci*, is of the Italian “verismo”

school, and the two operas are often paired on the same evening, with the same tenor singing both Turiddu and Canio, as Domingo has often done.

11. *La Traviata* is Verdi's version of Alexandre Dumas' *La Dame aux Camellias*, set in the demi-monde of 19th-century Paris. Alfredo Germont is a young man of position, who loves the intoxicating Violetta Valery, a courtesan by profession, afflicted with consumption. By Act II they have begun a new life together in the country, flouting all propriety. Alfredo sings "Lunge da lei...De' miei bollenti spiriti," at the peak of his happiness with Violetta, when he still believes that youth and ardor are enough to defeat convention and prejudice. Domingo cuts a dashing figure opposite Teresa Stratas as Violetta, in the sumptuous 1982 Zeffirelli film of the opera.
12. In Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, the brilliant writing for coloratura soprano is rivaled by the dramatic opulence of Edgardo's final scene in Ravenswood Cemetery. Edgardo, Master of Ravenswood, is mortal enemy to Lord Ashton of Lammermoor, but he has fallen in love with Ashton's sister, Lucia. Ashton has a double purpose in conscripting Lucia to marry Lord Arturo, who is wealthy. But Ashton achieves her consent only by convincing her that Edgardo has forsaken her. Thus does he drive his sister ultimately to madness and broken-hearted death. All of this remains unknown to Edgardo. In the aria and scena "Tombe degl'avi miei...Fra poco a me ricavero" he expresses his despair over the inexplicable inconstancy of Lucia. When he sees her mourners pass, and hears the bell toll, he realizes that not only has Lucia died, but that she has always been true to him—and he longs only for relief in death.
13. Verdi's *Trovatore* is famous for its diabolically convoluted plot lines—and some of the most splendid music ever written. "Di quella pira" is a muscular bolero in which Manrico, a troubadour and dissident military leader, vows to rescue his mother, the gypsy Azucena, from execution at the hands of Count di Luna, for her past trespasses. Coming as it does directly after the lyrical "Ah, si ben mio," this aria is no small vocal feat for the tenor. As if that were not enough, an

expectation has developed for the tenor singing Manrico to interpolate a high “C” at the end of the aria. As Domingo says, “One unwritten note has turned a middle-range part into one of the most difficult roles in the repertoire...Clearly an absurd state of affairs.” Nevertheless, in this 1981 recording Domingo does toss off a thrilling high “C”—purely for our listening pleasure.