

Rossini as Extreme Sport — and Great Joy

By Kathleen Watt



Juan Diego Flórez as Lindoro in Rossini's "L'Italiana in Algeri."
Photo: Marty Sohl/Metropolitan Opera

LINDORO is a lot of fun,” says tenor Juan Diego Flórez. His role in *L’Italiana in Algeri*, in which he is making his WNO debut, is one of nine Rossini roles in his repertoire—roles that critics have called “hideously difficult,” and “notoriously strangulated.” Flórez is making Rossini positively hip, again, dazzling with halcyon high notes and precision coloratura, diamond-bright—and thrillingly robust. Says Flórez, “Lindoro is one of those Rossini roles that is like extreme sport. You have to be fit, vocally and physically. The first aria,” he says, searching a CD label, “is eight minutes long! With high D’s!” He says it in

delighted amazement at the feat the composer has posed the intrepid tenor—the way a pole-vaulter trumpets his winning centimeter.

Claiming no personal regimen other than getting enough sleep, Flórez is as elegant and fit of figure as he is in voice. In Madrid, he’s called “the Beckham of opera”, after England’s superstar footballer, invoking both athletic agility and marquee quality. Los Angeleans queue up for Flórez as if for red-carpet royalty. In his native Peru, he is merely mobbed. “I would not like to be famous everywhere like I am in Peru,” he laughs. There, he’s just The Tenor. “Even people who have never heard me know me,” says Flórez, “and they are proud for the country.”

Flórez packs the world’s greatest opera houses. In Pesaro, Italy, birthplace of Gioacchino Rossini, home of the International Rossini Festival, Flórez is hailed as a tenor to wear the mantle. His voice is the exquisitely specific *tenore di grazia*—literally, *tenor of gracefulness*—for which Rossini composed his most spectacular passages.

It's not just that Flórez executes with dash and aplomb. He's also dusting off long silenced show-stoppers just as though he didn't know they've been considered "unsingable" since about 1840. This is one tenor heart-throb whose best feature is his way with Rossini, reminding us why, in its day, the extravagance and bravura of this music drove listeners of all persuasions into paroxysms of swooning delight.

"I sing it in a very full way with a natural voice—very clear, very forward, brightening the sound in the Italian way." It's what Flórez most admires about Luciano Pavarotti, "one of my idols", whose *lirico spinto* repertoire overlaps only barely with his own. "His sound is so spontaneous. So much a part of his nature. I try to do the same." A much-ballyhooed endorsement of himself by Pavarotti, says Flórez, refers to this openness of the voice, from bottom to top. "The important thing is to maintain the *nature* of your voice, always."

Flórez reveals the organic relationship of his roles to his nature, and his voice. "*L'Italiana*, especially, is very refined singing. It sits right on the best part of my voice, and keeps me in vocal health. And I try to reschedule an opera with enough distance that I will have time to miss it. When I come back to *Il barbiere* or *L'Italiana*, it is for me a great joy." A "singer's conductor" is another express pleasure.

"When conductors love voices and really *enjoy* singers, they 'breathe' with them, phrase with them, and understand their needs," he says, adding, "I also like a conductor who takes a situation into his hands and leads." In combination, these qualities allow the accomplished rossinian to offer authentic *bel canto* ornamentation. Flórez sometimes composes his own, and confesses to improvising cadences as well—sometimes to the dismay of an unsuspecting conductor.

"You hear a hint of a variation that sounds like it might go well and you just—*do* it!" He is revving up. "You feel taken back to the *bel canto* time when singers were trained for that—and they *lived* for that—like a jazz improviser—and you come up with great things! Especially singing certain roles, you feel a *thrill*..."

In “*L’Italiana in Algeri*, Flórez eagerly anticipates a challenge he sets for himself: “Concedi amor piëtoso”. Originally composed for Lindoro, this aria is usually transferred to the mezzo-soprano, or cut entirely, for lack of tenors who can negotiate it. Flórez, who sings it splendidly, doesn’t always get to, “because directors don’t like to stop the action while everyone stands around looking at the tenor.” When Flórez first proposed it at La Scala in 1999, he was summarily overruled. Now, having unveiled it at New York’s Metropolitan Opera in 2004, he sometimes finds the aria mandated by contract. “Of course I am not the only one to sing it,” he demurs. “I think [mentor/manager Ernesto] Palacio was first to revive it in modern times.” But Flórez is clearly proud of this accomplishment. “I had enough confidence in myself to gamble on it, and I have seen it come true.”

Finding a way to manage the physical and psychological rigors of constant travel and the vicissitudes of fame is crucial. “I try to become independent. I try to have my own technique and be able to resolve vocal problems myself. It’s important for a young singer to have *self-sufficiency*,” he asserts. “Of course, the great Ernesto comes with me when he can, to rehearsals or debut of new roles. And,” he adds, “Julia comes with me almost always....”

Julia Trappe, the German beauty now engaged to Flórez, has deferred her own singing to join him in opera’s nomadic lifestyle, which suits them both. “More than three or four weeks in one place and you begin to feel something is not right. It becomes the natural way of living,” he laughs.

Flórez, for the present, seems impervious to celebrity’s infamous perils. “I am very artistically centered. I care a lot about how I sing. I am always very picky about myself. I am never completely happy with it. I think that helps maintain the center—in your artistry, in your music, your voice. When you are like that, it is very difficult just to say ‘Oh, I’m so great.’ I think people appreciate me because of what I deliver. And that feels great.”