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PUCCINI ON THE LAKE

Daniela Dessì and Fabio Armiliato
at the Torre del Lago festival

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Power couple

Fabio Armiliato and Daniela Dessì are married in real life as well as having brought to life some of the operatic repertoire's most famous love stories. This summer they bring their magic to the Torre del Lago Puccini Festival. Interview by Courtney Smith

Equilibrium – elusive to many, intuitive to few, but essential to Italian opera couple Fabio Armiliato and Daniela Dessì. The Genovese pair – celebrating 15 years onstage and off – chatted in their Ligurian hometown while preparing for Umberto Giordano's rarely performed *Fedora* at Teatro Carlo Felice. It's a premiere of sorts – they will execute protagonist roles as a couple (Armiliato sang it opposite Mirella Freni in 1997 at The Met and Dessì with Plácido Domingo

in 1999 at the Opera di Roma) before titling *Tosca* this summer at the Torre del Lago Festival Puccini.

As an opera couple, the odds are against them – operatic couplings fail with such regularity that it's almost commonplace – but Armiliato believes that workplace rigours are surmountable by 'connecting with an artistically mature mate with an established, stable career'.

'We never bring work home,' says Dessì on the secret to tranquil homesteading,

tucked among rolling Franciacorta vineyards, where they raised two children from previous relationships. 'We focus on family,' says Armiliato.

Onstage coupling, they explain, can often transcend relationship trappings. 'Maybe there was a day where we'd disagreed and hadn't been speaking,' says Dessì. 'But we'd go onstage and undergo the character transformation – Des Grieux and Manon Lescaut or Don Carlo and Elisabetta – and everything gets put back

◀ Onstage chemistry: *Bohème* at last year's Puccini Festival and, left, in *Tosca* at the Teatro Carlo Felice, Genoa in 2010



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▲ 'There are many things in her that I can identify within myself' – Daniela Dessì as Tosca at the Teatro Carlo Felice in 2010

“ Onstage, you sing in full view of Puccini’s house, which brings an incredible emotion and positive energy ”

together with an embrace, a look or a kiss.’ Armiliato jokes, ‘Singing under another name, personality and backstory can be like a study in psychology.’

Despite early careers in divergent repertory (Dessì was singing baroque, Italian bel canto and early Verdi, while Armiliato was singing *più spinto* roles), verismo brought them together in 1997, when he was singing *Cavalleria Rusticana* and she was in *Pagliacci* during a Japanese tour with The Met. After singing their first role together in 2000 – Giordano’s *Andrea Chénier* – the three-year, platonic friendship blossomed into romance.

‘We knew that our vocal and artistic personalities were a good match, but we didn’t realise our strong chemistry until we sang together,’ says Armiliato on coupling evergreens such as *Chénier* and *Tosca*, the latter of which they’ll sing this summer at Torre del Lago, the home of the Lucca-based festival in its 61st season devoted to Puccini’s legacy.

Its artistic director, Daniele De Plano, ranks *Tosca* as one of the festival’s most beloved titles, composed by Puccini among the city’s ancient columns and church bells, despite its Roman landscapes. Dessì – who made her festival premiere in 2004



© MARCELLO ORSELLI

Over seasoned careers, Armiliato and Dessì have sung numerous versions of *Tosca* – their couple premiere was in 2001 in Chicago under Bruno Bartoletti, while the last one at Torre del Lago was in 2006 in an Igor Mitoraj production.

‘Modern and traditional, we’ve done them all,’ says Dessì. ‘*Tosca* kills herself with a gun, throws herself into a grave, is stoned by the crowds – but if you want *Tosca* to work, you just need to find balance between good taste and respect for the music.’

Through the years, they have nurtured deep resonance with the characters. ‘I’m very similar to Floria Tosca,’ says Dessì. ‘There are many things in her that I can identify within myself – we’re both artists and women “fuori dalle righe” [literally, outside of the lines – colloquially, an independent rule-breaker], passionate and intense, with a certain fragility that also gives strength. I understand her hopeful idea that with love, things can always improve. And I understand her jealousy – although I’m not as extreme as her – but if I discover that he’s cheating, I’ll kill him!’

The couple laughs, and Armiliato demurs, ‘You identify with her impulsiveness, perhaps?’ Dessì shoots him a withering look, bats her eyelashes and replies, ‘What are you trying to imply?’ A discussion on *Tosca*’s tempestuousness commences – ‘Let’s say that she’s “exuberant”,’ she says with a wry smile.

On Mario Cavaradossi, Armiliato finds affinity with the Roman painter’s deeply artistic soul. ‘What’s most important to him is friendship – idealised love for a friend, which he believes makes life richer. “*La vita*

mi costasse, vi salverò!” is the key phrase.’

Intense, onstage chemistry can sometimes overwhelm the couple, especially for Dessì during the interrogation and torture of Cavaradossi by Scarpia. ‘Dramatically, it’s a beautiful scene with lots of strong tension, but at that moment, if I let go of my concentration on the character, and I listen to his [Armiliato’s] screams, it affects me – there’ve been times when I’ve cried!’

She recounts a particularly harrowing *Tosca* in Lecce, where direction called for Armiliato to be bound by cords during the torture scene. ‘When he was shot, he slumped over so realistically and laid so still that my heart started beating out of control,’ says Dessì. ‘I cried, “Mario! Mario!”, and when I touched him, I had to make sure that he still had a pulse! That one really hit me hard – I had exited from *Tosca* and entered back into Daniela.’

The couple has good reason to react viscerally to the torture scene – in 1995 at the Macerata Opera Festival, Armiliato suffered a leg fracture after he was accidentally shot by a malfunctioning, blank bullet from Scarpia’s pistol. ‘Thanks to that incident, he [Armiliato] really knows how to pull off getting shot and dying,’ jokes Dessì. ‘He’s really effective – he totally goes down!’

After *Tosca*, they will close the summer with a masterclass. ‘It’s so important to lend our experience to students in their formative years, not only on vocal technique but on how to make good choices with the right onstage partner,’ says Armiliato. ‘One has to look backward before looking forward.’ ■

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against Armiliato in *Manon Lescaut* – finds resonance in the festival’s proximity to the Lucchesi maestro. ‘Onstage, you sing in full view of Puccini’s house, which brings an incredible emotion and positive energy,’ she says.

This summer, the couple stars in a new Vivien Hewitt production (‘classic and close to Puccini’s vision,’ according to De Plano) under the baton of Valerio Galli (‘a young, bravo Pucciniano!’). ‘They’re a *cannonata*,’ says De Plano, describing the couple as a force-of-nature knockout. ‘They always give their maximum – vocally, artistically and dramatically.’

▼ Open-air opera: The Teatro Puccini in Torre del Lago

