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R



# CONTENTS



MONIKA RITTERSHAUS

Günter Papendell as Don Giovanni at the Komische Oper Berlin.



MARCELLO ORSELLI



CLIVE BARRIA



ROD WILLINGTON

## FRONT OF HOUSE

### 5 EDITORIAL

Awards for excellence in opera

### 6 FEEDBACK

Readers' letters, emails and online posts

### 9 NEWS & NOTES

ENO reveals plans to open up the Coliseum's foyer | Director Richard Jones triumphs at this year's Olivier Awards | Opera world mourns singers lost in plane crash | and more...

## MAIN STAGE

### 12 COVER FEATURE

*Opera Now* celebrates the achievements of the **Komische Oper Berlin**, winner of the Company category at this year's International Opera Awards

### 21 GRANTING WISHES

The International Opera Awards Foundation supports talented young opera professionals as they take their first steps in the profession. We meet some of this year's bursary recipients

### 24 A WEEKEND IN...

Chicago – the heart of America's Midwest is home to the country's third largest opera company

### 27 OPERA LANDMARKS

From Indianola to Wichita, we explore the surprisingly rich operatic landscape of America's Midwestern corn belt

### 34 A FINE ROMANCE

Fabio Armiliato and Daniela Dessi discuss love and marriage – on stage and off

### 38 A BLAST FROM THE PAST

Robert Turnbull looks forward to the first staging of Cavalli's *Veremonda* since 1652

### 41 A PASSION FOR OPERA

Monika Saunders shares some highs and lows of her 15 years at the helm of Woodhouse Opera

### 44 REVOLUTIONARY ROAD

An historic meeting between Fidel Castro and Che Guevara provides the inspiration for Cuba's first opera in 50 years

### 48 THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

Szymanowski's extraordinary *Król Roger* receives its Covent Garden premiere

### 51 TRAVELS WITH MY OPERA GLASSES

Anthony Ogus marvels at a student production in Manchester

### 55 CRITICAL THINKING

Michael Tanner on forgiveness in Mozart's *Figaro*

### 58 SQUILLO

Is opera losing great talent to bad teaching?

### 60 A YEAR IN THE LIFE

Oliver Awards public panellist Tim Crocker-Buque surveys the 2014 London season

## THE CRITICAL VIEW

### 63-83 LIVE REVIEWS

Weill's *Mahagonny* gets a provocative new staging at Covent Garden | Rilke poem inspires premiere in Vilnius | A trio of triumphs at Sarasota Opera | More new productions in London, Berlin, Stuttgart, Bergen, Budapest and Sofia

## MULTIMEDIA

### 84 NEW RELEASES

Opera on CD, DVD and Blu-ray

## BACK STAGE

### 86 SPECIAL OFFER

Join the ISM and enjoy four months' free membership

### 98 EPILOGUE

*Opera Now's* cryptic crossword and monthly prize draw for opera lovers

### 89-97 SPOTLIGHT

*Opera Now's* INTERNATIONAL GUIDE to the best live performances this spring

### COMPETITIONS

98 Win 10 complete Donizetti operas on CD from Opera Rara





# Fine romance

Italian opera stars Fabio Armiliato and Daniela Dessì have been married for 15 years, and often appear in operas together cast as the romantic leads. Courtney Smith met the couple in their hometown of Genoa to discuss the dramas and intense emotions in their relationship onstage and off.

Finding any sort of equilibrium in life is elusive for many of us – but in a profession that is fraught with volatility, it's an absolute essential for husband-and-wife opera stars Fabio Armiliato and Daniela Dessì. The couple, celebrating 15 years together onstage and off, chatted in their hometown of Genoa while rehearsing for *Fedora* at the Teatro Carlo Felice. It's a premiere of sorts, since it is the first time the pair will sing the lead roles in Umberto Giordano's opera together on the same stage. Armiliato sang opposite Mirella Freni in 1997 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York; Dessì with Plácido Domingo in 1999 at the Opera di Roma. This rarely performed verismo roller-coaster of passion and jealousy is the perfect warm-up as the pair prepares to sing Puccini's *Tosca* this summer at the Torre del Lago Festival, near the composer's lakeside home in Torre del Lago.

Marriage and opera is a tricky business: operatic couplings fail with a regularity that is almost predictable, and sometimes in an unwelcome blaze of publicity, as with Angela Gheorghiu and Roberto Alagna. Armiliato, on the other hand, believes that the rigours of the profession are surmountable by 'connecting with an artistically mature mate with an established, stable career.'

'We never bring work home,' says Dessì, on the secret of a peaceful home life. The two live tucked away among rolling Franciacorta vineyards along the sunny coast of Liguria, where they raised two children from previous relationships. 'We focus on family,' says Armiliato.

Their life on the stage, they explain, can even help them through difficult times in the real world. 'Maybe there was a day where we'd disagreed and hadn't been speaking,' says Dessì. 'We'd go on stage and undergo a character transformation – Des Grieux and Manon Lescaut perhaps, or Don Carlo and Elisabetta – and everything gets put back 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'.

The couple's early careers were spent singing very different repertory – Daniella's speciality was Baroque, bel canto and early Verdi, while Fabio was singing 'spinto' roles, typical of a great Verdian tenor. It was a famous verismo double bill that finally saw them sharing the same stage if not at the same time – he in *Cavalleria rusticana* and she in *Pagliacci* during a Met Opera tour of Japan. They struck up a friendship there and then, but it wasn't until three years later, when they both appeared in Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*, that a platonic relationship blossomed into romance. 'We knew that our vocal and artistic personalities were a good match, but we didn't realise there was a strong chemistry between us until we sang together,' says Armiliato.

That chemistry will come into force once more in this summer's *Tosca*, which the pair will sing in the Puccini Festival theatre on the shores of Lake Massaciuccoli near the composer's home. Dessì – who made her Torre del Lago debut in 2004 opposite Armiliato in *Manon Lescaut* – finds resonance in the Festival's links to Puccini. 'On stage, you sing in full view of Puccini's house, which brings an incredible emotion and positive energy,' she says. The production is by Vivien Hewitt ('It'll be a classic staging and close to Puccini's vision,' says the Festival's general manager Daniele De Plano) under the baton of the youthful Valerio Galli. 'They're a *cannonata*,' explains De Plano, describing the couple as a force-of-nature knockout. 'They always give their maximum – vocally, artistically and dramatically.'

Over their long careers, Armiliato and Dessì have sung in



▲ The emotion on stage can be overwhelming: Fabio Armiliato and Daniela Dessì in *La Bohème* at the Puccini Festival in Torre del Lago

▼ Artistically mature mates: Dessì and Armiliato

numerous different productions of *Tosca*. Their first time as a couple 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've nurtured deep connections with the characters in Puccini's opera: 'I'm very similar to Floria Tosca,' admits Dessì. 'There are many things in her that I can identify within myself – we're both artists and women *fuori dalle righe* (beyond the boundaries), 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: I'm not as extreme as her – but if I discover that he's cheating, I'll kill him!'

The couple laugh, and Armiliato demurs, 'You identify with her impulsiveness, perhaps?' Dessì shoots him a withering look then bats her eyelashes and kittenishly asks, 'What are you trying to imply?' This leads to a discussion on Tosca's tempestuousness. 'Let's just say that she's "exuberant",' Dessì says with a wry smile. ►

'We didn't realise there was a strong chemistry between us until we sang together.'





'I understand Tosca's jealousy: I'm not as extreme as her – but if I discover that he's cheating, I'll kill him!'



▲ Tosca realises Mario is dead following the execution scene in *Tosca*: 'Fabio lay so still that my heart started beating out of control'


◀ In Mario Cavaradossi, meanwhile, 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 – "even if it costs me my life, I'll save you".'

Intense onstage chemistry can sometimes overwhelm the couple, especially for Dessì during the interrogation and torture of Cavaradossi by the sinister Chief of Police, Scarpia, in Act II of *Tosca*. '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 the production called for Armiliato to be bound by cords during the execution scene. 'When he was shot, he slumped over so realistically and lay so still that my heart started beating out of control,' said 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 execution scene: in 1995 at the Macerata Opera Festival, Armiliato suffered a leg fracture after he was accidentally shot by a malfunctioning blank bullet from a pistol. 'Thanks to that incident, Fabio really knows how to pull off getting shot and dying!' jokes Dessì. 'He's really effective – he totally goes down!'

After *Tosca*, they'll close the summer with a master class. 'It's so important to lend our experience to students in their formative years, not only with respect to vocal technique but on how to make good choices with the right onstage partner,' said Armiliato.

'One has to look backwards before looking forwards.' If the next chapter features the pair singing together in Massenet's *Werther* and Cherubini's *Médée* (as they hinted), then the future cannot come soon enough. 

The Puccini Festival in Torre Del Lago takes place from 24 July to 30 August 2015. Performances of *Tosca* are on 24, 31 July and 15, 21, 30 August.  
[www.puccinifestival.it](http://www.puccinifestival.it)

▼ Passion on stage and off: as Tosca and Cavaradossi at the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa



MARCELLO ORSELLI