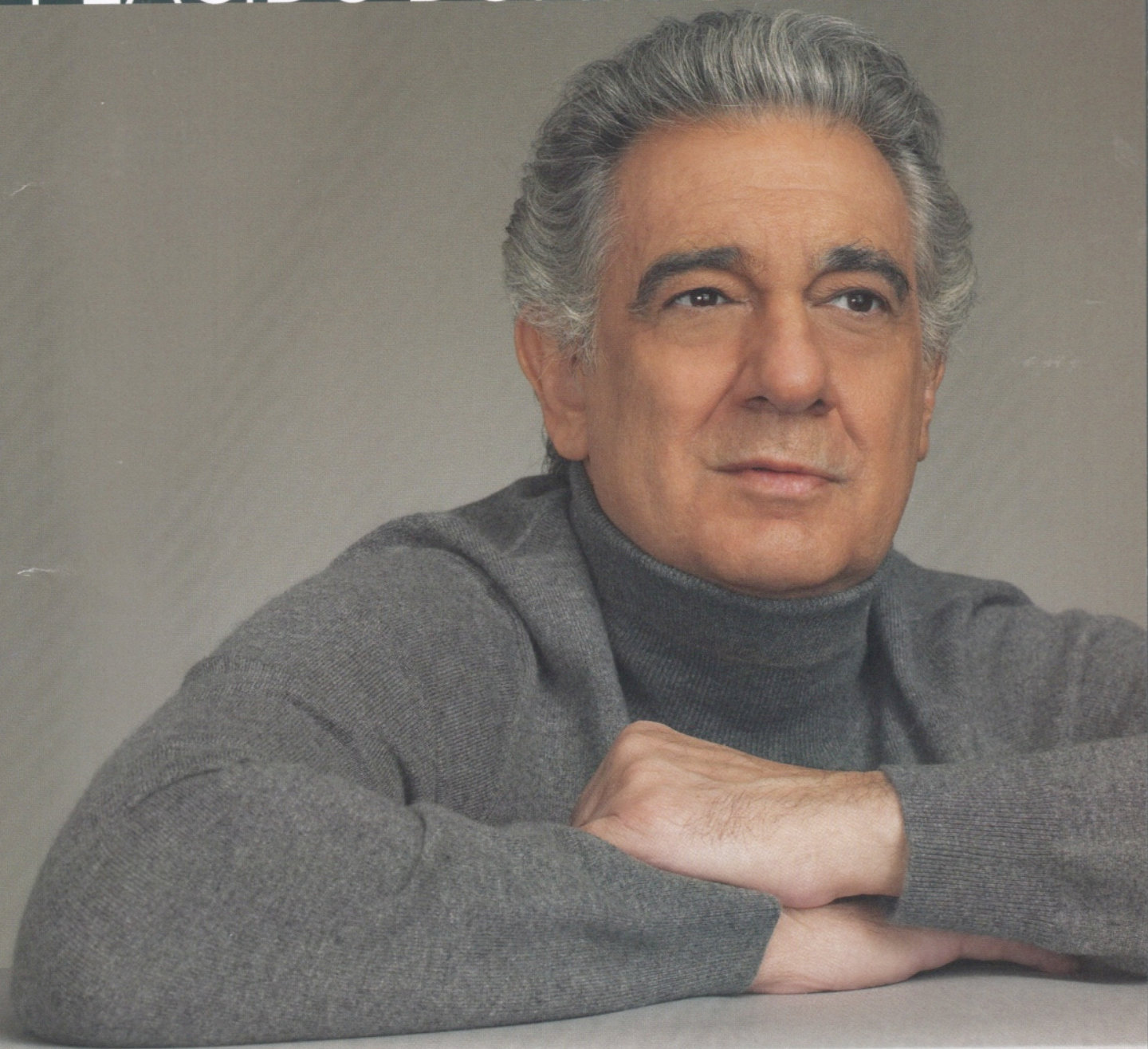


PLÁCIDO DOMINGO





It would be hard to imagine the past four decades of opera without the towering figure of Plácido Domingo. By the time I first fell under his spell, in my early teens, via the Met's telecast of *Luisa Miller* in 1979, a generation of opera-lovers had already been seduced, not only by his smoldering sex-appeal and richly romantic sound — a voice of liquid beauty, myriad colors and rock-solid power — but by his unfettered dramatic commitment and the depth of musical understanding he brought to a repertory of stunning diversity. Perhaps even more captivating than the sound itself is his natural feel for the ebb and flow of a phrase, a gift for shaping an expressive line that transcends mere rhythm and becomes poetry. When he sings, one hears music, never a series of notes, and the sound resonates as thrillingly in the soul as in the ears.

As an actor, he has always eschewed stereotypical tenor mannerisms, allowing his own persona to be submerged in the service of character, words and music. He inhabits his roles with a slow-burning intensity that finds its way to the surface not through fussy artifice but through a musical passion that is instinctive and spontaneous, yet informed by probing intelligence and committed study.

I will never forget my first taste of Domingo's artistry in the flesh. Primed by a freshman year at college spent mainly in the music library, delving into his recordings, I should have looked forward to this consummation with unalloyed delight. Instead, I found myself beset by a gnawing suspicion that no live performance could live up to the superhuman expectations raised by those carefully engineered studio products. Surely no one was really as wonderful as Domingo seemed to me — there had to be some trick. But by the end of the evening, a riveting *Tosca* with Eva Marton, Domingo had erased all doubt. Wearing his heart on his ultra-romantic puffy sleeve, he electrified the house with a performance that was heart-warming in its tenderness, searing in its righteous anger, galvanizing in its heroic power and melting in its passionate ardor. That first quasi-miraculous experience proved to be no fluke: he has since wrung my heart again and again in roles as diverse as Ramerrez and Otello, Idomeneo and Le Cid, Samson and Cyrano.

Domingo's gifts as a performer alone would suffice to ensure his place in history, but his contributions don't end with his legacy as a tenor: spurred on by boundless artistic curiosity, he has carved out a multi-

faceted career that has taken him from the stage to the podium to the front office. In the early 1970s, he took up the baton, pursuing his early dream of being a conductor. In 1984, when Los Angeles Opera approached Domingo to lend his charisma to the fledgling troupe as artistic consultant, he embraced the challenge. The company has bloomed into a major player under his guidance. In 1996, Washington Opera invited him to become its artistic director; again, the tireless Domingo said yes. (He is now general director of both companies.)

Domingo has often seemed to triumph through sheer desire and force of will. A singer who, by his own admission, had to struggle for every high note became the most heralded tenor of his generation. An untested conductor with minimal training dared to hone his craft on the job in some of the world's most high-profile venues. A fully booked performer took up the managerial reins, running not one but two major companies on separate coasts without relinquishing the punishing schedule of his other two careers. "Everybody carries the weight according with their shoulders," he told me in 1995, "and I think I have broad shoulders to carry." Perhaps the key to his success is the ancient maxim: Know thyself.

Throughout it all, Domingo has earned and maintained a reputation as a true statesman: a model of scrupulous professionalism, a trusted, respected and beloved colleague and a man of warmth, grace, wit and charm. Now, in the forty-sixth year of his singing career, his zest for life and art remains undiminished. This season's packed calendar includes conducting *Vespri Siciliani* and singing a triple-bill for Washington National Opera; performances of *Parsifal* in Los Angeles and Munich; conducting engagements in Montreal and Vienna; and a full Met schedule that takes him from podium (*Rigoletto*) to center stage (as Samson and Cyrano) to Tokyo, for the company tour of *Walküre*.

Domingo has made a lasting mark everywhere his extraordinary career has taken him, but in the end, what I will remember most is the enduring power and beauty of that voice. Now somewhat limited in range and perhaps a touch less infinite in breath, it remains a sound whose majesty can inspire awe, whose edge of metal can produce a visceral thrill, whose tender lyricism can call forth tears and whose caressing sweetness, ever young, can seduce the hardest heart.

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