

# Conquistador

The first week of October was an exciting one in New York, even by Big Apple standards. Attractions ran the gamut from opening night at the Met to the visit of Pope John Paul II to the Yankees' first playoff games in fourteen years. Honorary New Yorker Plácido Domingo was in the thick of all three events. His trademark *Otello* opened the local opera season that Monday, to standing ovations and predictably triumphant reviews. The tenor spent the following evening in the mayor's box at Yankee Stadium, undaunted by the autumn chill, staying to the end of a ballgame that went long into the night. After another *Otello* on Thursday, he wound up the week with a fervent rendition of "Panis Angelicus" at the papal mass in Central Park.

Arriving straight from that historic occasion, Domingo is relaxed and voluble as he apologizes for squeezing this interview in on a Saturday. He seems revitalized rather than exhausted by his action-packed week, chatting enthusiastically about nonoperatic activities.

"I've sung for the pope before, but in New York everything has such a dimension, you know?" he marvels. "The public, the people — everything! I think the pope brought a sort of spirituality, a feeling of peace, which this country certainly needs." And the baseball game? "That was some home run O'Neill hit the other day," he remarks, switching gears. "The Yankees have a great team!"

The eclectic enthusiasms and boundless energy that drew Domingo to all three of New York's big events last fall have also been the guiding forces behind his spectacular and unusual career. It would not be too far-fetched to see him as an operatic Alexander the Great, ever on the lookout for new worlds to conquer. Having established

himself early as the leading lyric-dramatic tenor of his generation, Domingo began branching out into more adventurous repertory. When his first *Otellos* failed to inflict the universally predicted damage to his vocal cords, he launched a carefully considered foray into heldentenor territory, balancing his heavier ventures with such unexpected roles as Mozart's Idomeneo and Rossini's Figaro (on a DG recording). At fifty-five, he has built a staggering list of more than 100 roles in five languages, ranging from bel canto to verismo, Weber to Wagner. In the past two seasons alone, he has unveiled six new roles — the kind of frenetic repertory growth most singers endure only by necessity at the start of their careers.

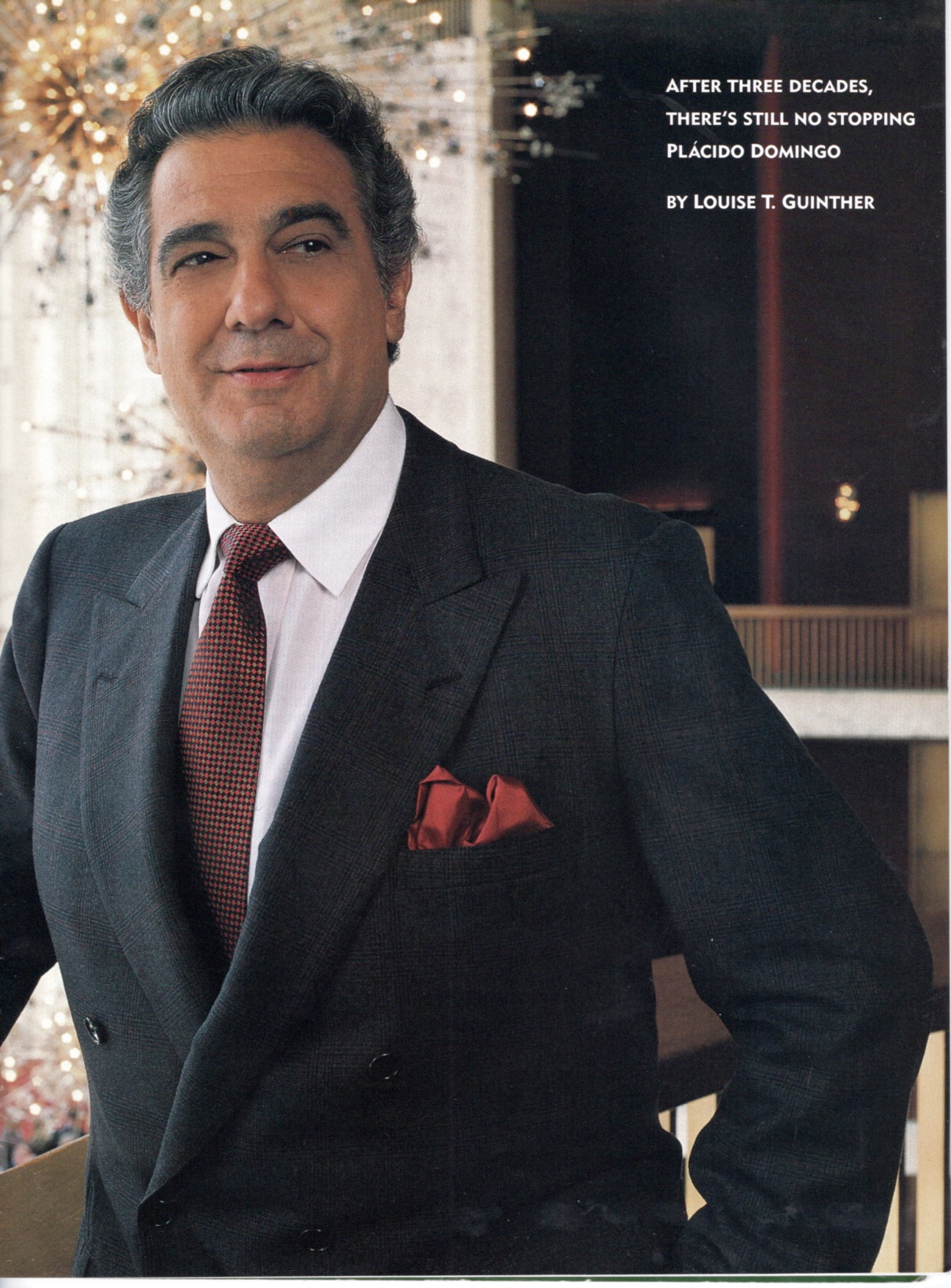
Domingo is half-amused, half-exasperated by constant warnings of impending burnout. "I really appreciate it when people worry, because I think it is out of love. But if somebody loves my voice, they should know that the first one that loves it is myself. On the other hand," he acknowledges, "I take certain risks, because I have been singing for so many years that I know what is best for me. Everybody carries the weight according with their shoulders, and I think I have pretty broad shoulders."

Domingo has remained so long at the top of his profession that he has witnessed the inevitable waxing and waning of critical enthusiasm. Some years ago, it became fashionable



ABOVE: WITH  
VERONICA VILLARROEL  
IN MANUEL PENELLA'S  
EL GATO MONTÉS  
AT L.A. MUSIC CENTER OPERA



A portrait of Plácido Domingo, a middle-aged man with graying hair, wearing a dark gray double-breasted suit, a white shirt, and a red patterned tie. He is standing in front of a large, ornate chandelier with many lights. The background is dark, and the lighting is soft, highlighting his face and suit.

AFTER THREE DECADES,  
THERE'S STILL NO STOPPING  
PLÁCIDO DOMINGO

BY LOUISE T. GUINER





among jaded reviewers to shrug off his accomplishments; the current trend is to pay homage to his endurance. "It is somewhat of a miracle that the voice not only remains unravaged but sounds at its highest bloom," wrote Bernard Holland in *The New York Times* two seasons ago.

As far as Domingo is concerned, this vaunted vocal resurgence is largely a figment of the collective critical imagination. "What can I tell you?" he shrugs. "Certainly one year you can be better than another, or one particular evening when the reviewer comes, maybe it's not as good. But I think if I am where I am, it's because of the steadiness of my career. It's funny how many letters I've received lately saying, 'Plácido, finally in the last two years the New York press is discovering you!'"

All the emphasis on Domingo's longevity tends to detract from his essential strengths. Though his plangent tone and ringing top are assets in themselves, his artistry does not depend solely on the beauty of his voice. He has seduced a generation of opera-lovers with performances that combine powerful, committed acting, intelligent, thoughtful musicianship and innate warmth and passion. And he has applied these gifts with equal devotion across the broadest imaginable spectrum of musical styles. "I think one of the most challenging things is to be able to change the style," he says. "And you cannot ask me exactly what you have to do. It just has to happen. Whether you are singing Mozart or Verdi or Wagner, the [audience] has to be convinced."

"You have only one voice," he explains, "but you have to change, first of all, the color. Then you are able to have a fantastic palette, and to move accordingly with

whatever instrument is accompanying you, trying to melt with that instrument in a way, and to work with the text, with the feeling of the piece." Anyone who has followed Domingo's career will have heard what he is talking about in the heroic muscularity of Manrico's "Di quella pira," the sweet tenderness of Roméo's "Nuit d'Hyménée," the edgy desperation of Luigi's "Hai ben ragione," the dark brooding of Siegmund's "Friedmund darf ich nicht heissen," the almost inhuman hollowness of Otello's "Dio mi potevi." Domingo's timbre can vary so dramatically with the emotion he is expressing that it's sometimes hard to believe one is hearing the same singer.

The tenor observes that his artistic philosophy is not for everyone. "There are voices that are so absolutely natural that it doesn't matter whether they color or not," he says. "Certain singers can just open their mouths and they don't do anything, but they move you just by the beauty of the sound. I don't know if I have a voice like that or not, but I feel I need to put everything I can behind every word."

Domingo's chameleonlike ability to adapt his voice to a role's musical and emotional requirements is matched by his willingness, as an actor, to subordinate his own personality to the characters he plays. He has not cultivated the kind of overpowering personal image that would render him instantly recognizable in any guise. Despite his superstar status, Domingo is never playing Domingo — there are no self-indulgent quirks to remind the audience who is singing. His idea of dramatic commitment is to lose himself in a role, which may explain why his reputation grew more slowly than that of his sometime rival, Luciano Pavarotti.

Another Domingo hallmark, regardless of what repertory he's singing, is his sensitivity to phrasing. "Sometimes in Wagner there's a tendency, because one is thinking of a 'heldentenor,' to try to make it very powerful. But I don't think power is so important as a real feeling for the musical line. For the parts I've done onstage — *Lohegrin*, *Parsifal* and *Siegmund* — I think I have a big advantage in coming from the Italian repertory. Sometimes you hear Siegmunds or Parsifals who have done a lot of Tannhäusers, Tristans and Siegfrieds, so then the voice really suffers, and it's difficult for them to sing with the lyricism the part requires.

"Of course you have to make the difference between the Italian and the German — the long vowels and the short vowels,

the triple consonants in German — but you still have to keep that sense of line. You can't sing in a choppy way. I think part of the success of my *Parsifal* and *Siegfried* is that I sing them with *Italian* feeling, according to the *German* style."

This year at the Met, Domingo returns to a role he hasn't sung in nearly twenty years, Don Alvaro in *La Forza del Destino*. "I think besides *Otello*, the three most difficult operas that Verdi wrote for the tenor are *Forza*, *Vespri Siciliani* and probably *Ballo*, in a different way. When people talk about bel canto, you think Bellini or whoever. But certain parts by Verdi — Alvaro, Arrigo in *Vespri Siciliani*, Stiffelio, Ernani — could be considered king-size bel canto. You have to be able to sing some of the most difficult music ever written and still, as much as you can, keep the beauty and the line and observe all the dynamics."

Domingo's versatility as a singer is only the beginning of his quest for artistic fulfillment. Some years ago he launched a second career as a conductor, an interest first piqued during his student days and rekindled by a recording entitled *Domingo Conducts Milnes*, *Milnes Conducts Domingo*, intended as a publicity stunt. Domingo never had the luxury of testing his wings in low-pressure provincial venues. As a result, his conducting career has been subjected to intense media scrutiny.

"For me, conducting is a difficult thing, because it's strange for the public and even for the critic to accept," he confesses. "Sometimes I don't get good reviews even as a singer, and of course it's always worse when I conduct. I have heard from other performers who conduct that the critics tend to be harsher with them, too. But I don't care. My satisfaction comes from the musicians in the orchestra, the singers, the public, and if the theater asks me back."

Most of Domingo's conducting work of late has been with the Vienna State Opera, Los Angeles Music Center Opera and the Met. "The orchestra of the Met is — and this is something Jimmy [Levine] has brought about — one of the most beautiful opera orchestras in the world. They really know how to play with the singers. Sometimes you might even commit yourself early, but Ray [Gniewek, the concert master] will see that the singer is not ready, so the players will wait. And that's not a matter of being undisciplined to the conductor, but they are aware. You can feel it. You learn that more and more, so you have to give a certain flexibility and trust.



## ARTS PROGRAMS ARE MADE POSSIBLE TENORS CONCERTS."

"In Los Angeles we have a wonderful orchestra. Many of the musicians play the most difficult music — film music, and so on. But because they don't have the experience in opera, they come to play with such a beautiful disposition, and even though they are an extraordinary orchestra, I think I can teach more to an orchestra like this than I can at the Met."

In his 1983 autobiography, *My First Forty Years*, Domingo acknowledged the temptation to "sing along with everyone," but he has since conquered that inclination. "I really don't think as a singer when I am conducting — and I don't think as a conductor when I am singing, either. I never feel when I am in the pit, 'God, I wish I was up there right now,' or when I'm singing, 'I wish I was down there.' I honestly have the feeling that at the moment that's what I love to do."

Domingo recently has plunged into the administrative side of opera as well. Attracted in part by the huge Hispanic population in Los Angeles, he accepted a position as artistic consultant to L.A. Music Center Opera when the company was just getting started in 1984. He has been largely responsible for its success, lending it prestige through regular appearances as both singer and conductor, in addition to his behind-the-scenes duties, which include involvement in all repertoire and casting decisions. His latest undertaking is the artistic directorship of Washington Opera, beginning this coming July.

Domingo traces his interest in running a theater back to his childhood impressions of his parents' traveling zarzuela company. "When I was little, I saw my parents doing all these things. From the beginning, I was able to understand that everybody is important in the theater. I have always been fascinated by the problems of finding the right cast and planning ahead.

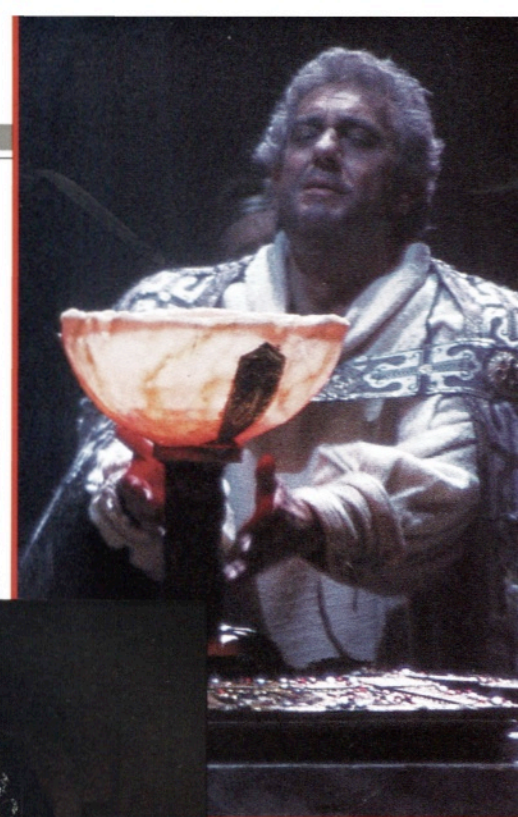
"Mind you, every day I appreciate more the people who do it well, because I see now how difficult it is. I can't tell you how many ideals and dream casts you have in your head, and when you start to try to put them into practice, you find that people aren't free. God help me that at least half of what I have in mind can come true," he says with a wry laugh. "Sometimes a quarter would even be good."

Domingo is active in the search for new talent, not only as an artistic director but as the sponsor of Operalia, a worldwide singing competition established in 1993. "I'm really completely involved in it," he says. "It's not only the prizes, which are very handsome economically, but I am

also careful to follow the careers of these singers, to find possibilities for them immediately — not only for the winners, sometimes even for semifinalists. Many finalists and semifinalists are already under contract with theaters because of the competition. I try to keep in touch periodically with everybody, so it's not just 'Here's the prize and goodbye.' It also can be wonderful for me," he notes, "because many of these new talents can come to the opera companies in Washington and Los Angeles."

Among Domingo's goals as impresario is the proliferation of the repertoire of his native Spain and of Latin America, where he grew up. "I would like to bring zarzuela and other little-known Spanish works to Washington," he says. "I have the possibility, with the two opera houses there — the big one and the small one. In Los Angeles I have been able to offer it more and more." There and elsewhere, Domingo has used his drawing power to introduce audiences to such rarities as Manuel Penella's *El Gato Montés* (an L.A. production, televised over PBS) and *Il Guarany*, by the Brazilian Carlo Gomez (at Bonn Opera), both risky ventures made financially viable only by the tenor's box-office appeal.

Domingo has managed, for the most part, to cash in on his commercial potential without provoking the scorn of the conservative music establishment. His numerous crossover recordings, ranging from duets with John Denver to *The Broadway I Love*, have not compromised his reputation as a serious, dedicated musician. Not that there haven't been murmurings about specific projects, in particular the Three Tenors phenomenon. In the January 6 OPERA NEWS "Notebook," baritone Thomas Hampson voiced familiar doubts that such mass-appeal events actually increase the audience for opera. Domingo disagrees. If he seems less inclined than in the past to defend the intrinsic artistic merit of his pop ventures, he continues to proclaim their value as a cultural bridge. "The other day at the performance of *Otello*, two ladies came backstage and said, 'Mr. Domingo,



IN SAN FRANCISCO OPERA'S *HÉRODIADÉ* (OPPOSITE); SINGING WAGNER WITHOUT SACRIFICING VOCAL SHEEN IN THE MET'S *PARSIFAL* (ABOVE); AS GIAN CARLO MENOTTI'S *GOYA* AT WASHINGTON OPERA, 1986-87 (LEFT)

we really discovered opera because of the Three Tenors concert in Los Angeles," he asserts.

Domingo, ordinarily the consummate diplomat, bristles at the snobbery of high-brow colleagues. "My answer to whoever cares," he says emphatically — "to whoever is too purist, thinking that one shouldn't do such things — is I wonder if they know how many programs Channel 13 is able to show because of the money raised by the Three Tenors concerts. How many artists are there that have criticized the Three Tenors concerts, whose performances have been broadcast only because Channel 13 has the economic possibility to do it?

"My mind is completely at ease," he continues. "I have my conscience clear, because I sing so much opera the whole year. Of course concerts give you more money, but as long as I do *Parsifal* in Bayreuth and a new production of *Walküre* in Vienna, and I open the Met with *Otello* and La Scala with *Walküre*, and I have a new production of *I Masnadieri* in Covent Garden, I don't care what people say. I know I'm dedicating my career to opera, and I don't betray what I'm doing."

Domingo's future plans are as grand and daunting as his past achievements. "One

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**DOMINGO**, continued from page 11

dream I have," he remarks, "is to sing or record every Verdi role. I'm missing about seven or eight. I'd love at least to record every tenor aria Verdi wrote, if I can't accomplish all the complete operas."

Domingo seems bent on filling in what few spaces remain in his artistic profile. Future generations may well remember him as an artist who could and did do everything. "I'm singing two new roles that I think are pillars of a certain kind of repertory — Peter Grimes and [Gherman in] *The Queen of Spades*, which is really the Otello of the Russian repertory. I will do other new parts, perhaps — I'm doing *Le Prophète* also — but I think those two will really cover everything.

"I wish, I wish, I could do Tristan," he adds wistfully, "but every day it seems more difficult. I was supposed to do it next year in Vienna, but I delayed it. I will definitely record it. My next step will be to do the second act in a concert, then I'll record the opera, and then I'll make my decision if I really should sing it on the stage."

Perhaps because of his offstage endeavors, Domingo appears entirely unfazed by the prospect of retirement from singing. Though the mere thought may strike fear into the hearts of opera-lovers, Domingo does not join in the general lamentation over the dearth of young star tenors to fill his shoes. "I don't think that there are not great tenors. There *are* great tenors," he insists. "Richard Leech, Richard Margison, Michael Sylvester — certainly Neil Shicoff — José Cura, Roberto Alagna, Marcello Giordani, Giuseppe Sabbatini, Vincenzo La Scola — these are really great tenors. But sometimes the public gets confused between great singers and great personalities. And it is the public that makes the personalities. You are not born a star. You start out as a singer, and then the public says, 'I choose *this* one.'"

"I've conducted Margison and Sylvester in *Butterfly*, and they sang beautifully. But it's one thing to sing, and another thing when the public decides, 'This is somebody we want to see. It doesn't matter what he's doing. I will go to his performances, I will follow him, I will buy his records.' You present what you have. It's for the public to decide."

In Domingo's case, the decision was unanimous and lasting. His love affair with the New York audience is a source of particular pride; he'll soon sing his 400th performance at the Met.

Domingo seems genuinely content with every facet of his career. "I don't really regret anything I've done, artistically or musically," he says. "I think everything has helped me — even the mistakes. I would do it over exactly the same way." □

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