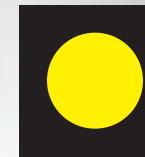


BY LOUISE T. GUINTHER
PHOTOGRAPHED
BY CORAL VON ZUMWALT
AT LA OPERA
GROOMING
BY KATE LOFTIS
FOR LA OPERA



the VARGAS standard



PERA SINGERS OFTEN TALK about staying true to themselves, but rarely does an artist live out that philosophy as sincerely as has Ramón Vargas, whose career has been a shining example of integrity, balance and youthful promise wholly fulfilled.

I caught up with him last spring, when he was in town to collect a well-deserved OPERA NEWS Award. A conversation with Vargas is always a delight. The Mexican tenor is engaging and cheerful, with a vast store of reminiscences to share in his articulate but idiosyncratic English. He embellishes them with amusingly characterful voices and a twinkle in his eye, but they often lead back to the same serious themes that have informed his lifelong approach to his art.

"You know what told me Maestro Muti the first time that I sang with him? He's in the old school of conductors, that go to say 'Toi-toi-toi' to each singer in the dressing room. They don't do it anymore. Is a mistake, because sometimes for the singer, is really good, if he says, 'Toi-toi-toi—remember, you have to watch me on this attack, so we're together!' First time at La Scala, Muti says, 'Vargas!'" Here Vargas adopts a wonderfully doleful aspect for the persona of Muti, and an equally funny wide-eyed naïveté as his youthful self. "Yes, maestro?" "Remember one thing." Vargas takes a dramatic pause. "The audience is *deaf*. They hear only the highs and

**RAMÓN
VARGAS**
**KEEPS HIS LIFE
AND HIS ART
IN BALANCE.**



the big voices. It was always like that. It's a losing battle," Vargas laughs at the recollection. "I say, 'Oh, okay, maestro.' He says, 'But wait—I want to tell you something. In this theater, nobody is impressed by the voices, because here were singing everybody in the world—the best, and also the worst.' I say, 'Okay.' He says, 'No, but I want to tell you something important, Ramón. Don't try to sing different than you are, because you will have success singing as you are. Don't pretend, because you feel the pressure of the theater, to sing another way, please don't—because they are *deaf* in any case!'"



ARGAS SEEMS ALWAYS TO HAVE trusted his own instincts. Though he admires many colleagues, past and present, he avoids any temptation to emulate them, listening to others only after he has learned a role in his own way. "If I listen to Franco Corelli, I like him, but it doesn't have anything to do with my

vocality," he says. "I hear that he comes in this very spinto way, and I admire him, but is not my nature. I think at the beginning of our career, everybody is imitating somebody else. I liked a lot the expressive quality of Giuseppe Di Stefano, and this emotionality that he puts in the voice. I like it, but then I realize there are other ways to do it. The young Pavarotti imitated a lot Giuseppe Di Stefano—he admitted it—but with his own technique. Do you know his record of *Manon* in Italian with Mirella Freni? It is one of my favorite records forever, because is so strong and so passionate, and with the technique of Luciano but this incredible emotionality of Di Stefano. Was great!"

Vargas is not old-fashioned, but he is more interested in the classic virtues of the lyric art than in flash-in-the-pan novelty for its own sake. "Opera is a strong intellectual creation," he says. "It's made from many components—the source, the librettist, the musicians, the composer. There's years of work in it. It's not something that is so easy. And there are one part of the people that think opera is old-fashioned

From left:
as Gabriele
Adorno in *Simon
Boccanegra* in
Vienna, 2016,
with Maria
Pia Piscitelli
(Amelia); as
Rodolfo in *La
Bohème* at the
Met, 2015

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"THE AUDIENCE WILL RECEIVE WHAT YOU OFFER."

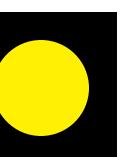
and say, 'We have to make modern.' But the truth is that opera offers us very actual emotions. For example, in Verdi, maybe because he has problems with his own father, always the relationships with the fathers are problematic. The father tries to control the son, and he absolutely believes he is doing the best for the boy, and the boy says, 'No you have to leave me, even if I'm making a mistake.' This is very real—the human being has not changed too much in time. You have to put in balance the intellect and the emotions—not do it so simplistically that it comes too easy, and not make it so intellectual that nobody understands. Some performances you need a manual to understand the opera—'Read before!'"

In an art form with so many variables, Vargas says self-confidence is the key to controlling one's own destiny. "I remember the first time I did, in Buenos Aires, *Favorite*," he recalls. "I arrive, and in the newspaper says, 'Seventeen years ago, Alfredo Kraus did here an incredible Fernand. And [the audience] stopped the show after the aria for nine minutes.' Later, I talked with Kraus, and he says, 'Is not true, Ramón—every six months they put thirty seconds more.'" He laughs. "But at that time, I was really under pressure. *Favorite* is very hard for the tenor. The Italian version finishes with a traditional high C. And after you sing all the evening, this high C is difficult, especially for a voice like me, that doesn't have the easiest highs. I was

so nervous that I couldn't do it during rehearsals. Maestro [Maurizio] Arena says, 'Ramón, you sing so well the other high Cs and the D-flat. What is the problem if you don't do this? It is not written.' Then came the dress rehearsal with public, and I arrive to the end—'Leonora! È mortal!' And I say, 'I do it.' And I made it! After, I did the role many times, and never I had a problem with this high again."

The foundation, of course, is technique. "Technique makes you free to make effects, put more emotions," he says. "If your technique is not working well, you are inside yourself, and you are afraid to express. It's important to be secure, because this makes you free to take risks. If no, all you are thinking is, 'Oh my god, I hope I can finish.'"

Buenos Aires has been on Vargas's mind, because he will be back there next month, for the title role in *Contes d'Hoffmann*. "I am happy to come back to this theater, because I sang only once there, that *Favorite*. It was many years ago, with Dmitri [Hvorostovsky]," he says, with evident nostalgia. "We were very, very young. I met him there first time." Also coming up for the tenor is the title role in LA Opera's *Roberto Devereux*. "Devereux is a great opera," he says. "I love the bel canto! I did in Vienna this production, with Mrs. Gruberova, and I never did again. For the soprano, this opera is crazy—it is very hard. For the tenor also, but all the bel canto is like that—it's very exposed."



NE KEY TO VARGAS'S DRAMATIC persuasiveness—and to his charm, both onstage and off—is the degree of personal connection he feels to his characters. "I am in love with every role I do," he says. "Sometimes

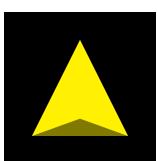
I have to work to find a way to pardon [my character] for what he does. One of the roles I did most in my career is Rodolfo in *Bohème*, but there was a moment I was thinking, 'This is a stupid guy, egoist, totally superficial, that when the lady—this lovely lady that was totally in love with him—most needed him, he left.' But I was slowly making a process to say, 'He was very young, and he was afraid. He didn't know what to do.' I needed time to excuse him."

Vargas seems particularly concerned with finding a way to get the audience fully invested in the magic of opera. "The audience will receive what you offer," he says. "Is like the education you give to your kids. If the kids, when you go out, don't eat well, it's not their fault—it's that you didn't teach them how to do it. This happens a little bit with the audience. Companies choose important people from the theater, who maybe don't know much about opera, and maybe they don't offer anything new, but is an event. We're looking at events, not operas. The danger is that people want to attract the public for superficial



From top: with Riccardo Muti after *Rigoletto* at La Scala, 2000; as Gustavo in *Un Ballo in Maschera* in Vienna, 2018

qualities that are not what opera is really about. For me that is a big problem, because you take a person who is not expert in opera, and they don't understand that in the text it says Cio-Cio-San was fifteen, but [in the casting] that cannot be. Opera was not made to put on television. When they put the power in these people who decide based on how it has to be in the mind's eye, they try to find for the big roles young, young voices who don't have time to mature, and the voices are crashing before they develop the best quality. These days, if you are thirty-five, you are too old!"



UDIENCES, SAYS VARGAS, ARE THE ones who are shortchanged. "With people that sing through the years, you feel you understand the way they present the music. Is exactly like falling in love—you love somebody when you *know* somebody. You cannot love

somebody or something you don't know. Maybe you can *like* this person, but it finishes as easy as it starts. This is the way people fall in love also with artists. Of course, I understand you have to make some kind of [visual] standards in balance with modern expectations, but the most important thing is that you sing well, move well on the stage and show your emotions. The opera, the music is all emotions. Without them, it makes no sense."

Despite these concerns, Vargas's outlook manages to be nostalgic without being regressive; he views the traditions and experiences of his generation not as a cause for handwringing or regret but as a foundation to be passed forward. To that end, he has twin ambitions for his own future. "I would love to teach," he says. "In Vienna, the University has asked me. We are discussing, but of course it's hard, because I am still singing. And also, I would love to write. I am not a writer, but I always write my experiences for myself or my friends. I would love to make a book of fun experiences, of memories. García Márquez, the Colombian writer, when he wrote his memoirs, says, 'I do it now, because when I was a child my grandfather said, 'I want to write very important things, but now I don't remember them any more.'" He laughs. "I think I am one of the last generations of the old school of the opera, how it was from the end of the nineteenth century, when Caruso was born, until now."

Vargas clearly puts plenty of thought into keeping his one life in balance. He still has dream roles—Lohengrin heads the list—but his perspective is broader than his career. "If you put all your efforts into your career, is very dangerous, because it's very rare that the career brings you back all that you put in. You do this because it's your passion, but I saw with some colleagues that they finish the career, and they don't know what to do. I have my own interests. I like to read, I like to walk the cities, I like to keep up with friends. One of the good things of these"—he indicates his cell phone—"is that you can be close to people from afar. I think you have to cultivate your garden, as Shakespeare says, and don't wait that the people bring you flowers." ■

"YOU LOVE SOMEBODY WHEN YOU KNOW SOMEBODY."

ANDREA TAMONI © TEATRO ALLA SCALA (WITH MUTI); © WIENER STAATSSOPER / MICHAEL POEHN (BALLO)

