

# The OPERA NEWS Awards: Joseph Calleja

His career may be opera's best argument for doing things the old-fashioned way.

April 1, 2016

Volume: 80

Issue: 10



Calleja's Edgardo in a 2011 Met Lucia exemplified his bel canto sensibility



tenor's ultra-romantic Rodolfo in a 2014 Met Bohème

**AAUDITORY ECSTASY** is a rare commodity. Those moments in the theater when a vocal performance suspends us in time are the glimpses of the divine that keep us coming back. Joseph Calleja is profligate with such moments, regularly rousing his fans to euphoria.

Listening to Calleja's rich, juicy middle register, one revels in its consistent beauty of tone; as it rises into the passaggio and beyond, it grows ever more sublime, acquiring a tender, passionate throb of emotion that provides an exquisite sensual thrill. Calleja's voice doesn't pierce through the orchestra or float over it; it seems to fill the air from all sides and wrap itself around the listener like a cloak of silk velvet—warm and luxuriously plush, yet graceful and flexible.

If descriptions of the Calleja effect tend to wax somewhat purple, it's understandable. Opera-lovers (yes, critics too) wait and yearn for the kind of golden-age tenorial glory whose sheer sound can bring tears to their eyes. Though he is known as “the Maltese tenor,” Calleja is Italian on his mother's side, and he sounds exactly the way an Italian Romantic tenor is supposed to sound. That may seem like generic praise, but it isn't: no other voice today—indeed, precious few in recent decades—so ideally represents the combination of honeyed lyricism and aching poignancy, ringing conviction and penetrating squillo needed to give the great arias of Donizetti, Verdi and Puccini their full depth and dimension.

Calleja's career may well be opera's best argument for doing things the old-fashioned way. His first teacher, Maltese tenor Paul Asciak, emphasized patience, ordering his pupil not to sing for the first eight months, assigning him classic recordings to immerse him in the proper style, and starting him with sixteenth-century arias as they worked to produce the seamless quality that is now one of Calleja's most striking hallmarks.

Paradoxically, this measured approach worked so well that Calleja was ready for a debut in Malta at age nineteen and had made a triumphant bow at Covent Garden by the time he was twenty-five. Many “singing actors” nowadays pride themselves on not being afraid to make an ugly sound in service of the drama. Calleja has instead recaptured the bel canto principle that an infinite variety of expression can be encompassed through beautiful sounds alone. He knows the art of coloring his tone with the ideal shades of dark and light to illuminate the text; of producing subtle shifts in dynamics that convey the emotional subtext better than any number of gasps, sighs or strained and nasal bleedings; of shaping a phrase to maximize the tension in the line so that the audience's heart beats—and sometimes races—right along with the character's.

Technique aside, there is nothing old-fashioned about Calleja's career; this twenty-first-century tenor is determined to bring his art to as many nontraditional audiences as he can reach. “Some people think that to go to an opera you need a PhD,” he told *The Guardian*. “No! All you need is a good pair of ears and a heart that's beating in the right rhythm.” His own heart is clearly in the right place; he has used his success to help the vulnerable in his home country as co-creator of the BOV Joseph Calleja Foundation, which funds arts programs for young people and supports nascent musicians.

Notwithstanding his rapid rise, Calleja is clearly in it for the long haul. “The voice is a fine Bordeaux,” he says. “It needs time and maturity.” Calleja's is one vintage sound opera-lovers can count on swooning over for years to come. —*Louise T. Guinther*

Send feedback to [OPERA NEWS](#).