



# JOYFUL NOISE

← **JAVIER CAMARENA** revels in sharing his gift for singing.

*By Louise T. Guinther Portraits by Dario Acosta*

# I

**HIS VOICE IS SPECTACULAR**, his musicianship exquisite, his personality electric. And then there are the impeccable technique and the abundance of seemingly infallible high Cs. What more could an opera fan want?

I am referring, of course, to Javier Camarena, the dynamic Mexican tenor whose feats of aerial derring-do have earned him regular encores at the Metropolitan Opera, where he returns this season as Ramiro in *La Cenerentola*. But these jaw-dropping technical displays are only the icing on a particularly rich and satisfying cake.

The bel cantist's art is often thought of as a principally vocal endeavor, but Camarena approaches opera as the *gesamtkunstwerk* it was meant to be, a choice that gives his characterizations in works both *buffa* and *seria* a striking depth and humanity.

"Above any other instruments, we have words to give a specific message to the audience," he says. "You can listen to the harp-flute concerto by Mozart, or his grand partita, and it will make you feel something, because it's beautiful music, and you get in this kind of profound meditation. But it's not saying, 'This is for you to be happy,' or 'This is a moment for tragedy.' In singing, you have the chance of giving a more direct message. For me, this part is really important. It's always this discussion about what is more important, text or music, music or text. I think both are complementary. The people who wrote opera knew what they wanted to say through the music with the words—and most of all in bel canto. It's part of how you are committed to the score, because actually everything, *everything* is written there. When the composer is asking you to sing *piano*, why? What did he want to express with this crescendo? Why is he cutting this note, so I have to sing this staccato?





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In the Met's *Barbiere*, above, as Almaviva to Pretty Yende's Rosina and Maurizio Muraro's Bartolo; as Tonio in *La Fille du Régiment* at the Met, far right



Everything has a meaning. And it's your duty to study this as faithfully as possible and be very close to the original idea of the composer."

**CAMARENA TOOK** a sideways route into singing. "The musical background we had was popular music," he recalls of his childhood in Xalapa, Veracruz. "Do you remember ABBA? Or my uncles used to listen to Bee Gees. I remember my grandfather listening to Charleston music. There was no classical music per se, but back then we had good singers, like Pedro Infante or Jorge Negrete or Pedro Vargas—these big *charro cantores*. In the U.S., you know it as mariachi. They were very beautiful voices and beautiful songs. Since I was fifteen years old, I was always in something that had to do with music—the church choir, then rock bands, then wedding singer."

Camarena was nineteen and studying to be an engineer in electrical mechanics when he decided to switch courses and pursue his musical dream. "I used to write the songs for mass for my church," he says. "It was not classical music, sacred music as Mozart—no. It was a band—drums and electrical bass and electrical guitar. My idea of studying piano or guitar was to do better songs." But he was past the conservatory's cut-off age to start studying those instruments. "So I went for singing, only because that was the sure way for me to study music," he says. "But then, I was trapped in opera when my Italian professor assigned us to watch a

video of *Turandot*, with Plácido Domingo and Éva Marton, and I was fascinated about everything—the staging and the music—and everything in that moment had sense. From that moment on, I became as passionate and obsessed as any other opera fan, and I just wanted to learn as much as possible."

Camarena was not one of those natural talents for whom high notes and coloratura came easily. "It was a *looong* process in learning the technique, in discovering the sound of my voice," he says. "I began to study in 1995. When I first said, 'Okay, this sounds actually nice, maybe I can consider the idea of becoming a professional singer,' it was 2001!" In 2004, a win in the Carlo Morelli competition led to his debut as Tonio in *La Fille du Régiment* at Mexico City's Palacio de Bellas Artes, and he was on his way. By the time he arrived on the world's top stages, audiences heard an instrument of rare beauty and flexibility founded on a rock-solid technique. Today, it's hard to imagine Camarena as anything but the confident, ebullient, near-flawless singer he has become.

The Camarena magic consists of a voice vibrant with passion, whose timbre encompasses sweetness and bite, delicacy and focused power, wielded by an artist who fully understands the true purpose of coloratura as a tool to build character and intensify emotion. "You can find it in a much more wide way in Bellini or Donizetti in terms of the placement of the voice, because it gives you this chance of going more generous in every sense with the voice. But in Rossini, it's this excitement, more visceral. The emotions are more explosive—like fireworks, you know? But it's always expressing something. That's why I

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like so much Ramiro as a role. It was with him that I discovered that with Rossini every single emotion is translated in some sort of coloratura. As we have this very special tool, I try to squeeze it and take, for example, all the flavors that the word 'love' can have.

"If you remember, when Ramiro says, 'Hope and fear, these two things are fighting inside me,' he does this." Camarena demonstrates pulsating, rapid-fire runs. "You can find examples of this kind of excitement in all of Rossini, and it's always going to be linked to an emotion—happiness, sadness, excitement, anger, fear. That's what makes very interesting the Rossini repertoire. It's not coloratura for being virtuoso. It's not 'Okay, I'm going to put more notes for showing off the singer.' It's a way of writing music that corresponds to a way of communicating emotions."

Camarena's rendition of Ramiro's "Sì, ritrovarla io giuro" aptly encapsulates everything that is cherishable about this multifaceted, supremely communicative artist. From the feisty, forceful, almost arrogant declamation of the opening pledge to find his beloved Angelina, through the ineffably tender romance of their imagined reunion, to the frantic, halting desperation of "Noi voleremo, domanderemo," he captures every emotional vacillation of a man accustomed to being in command but thrust into a state of helplessly besotted confusion.

"I like the roles that are not just one color—monochrome," he says. "I like to find different ways to express different situations and reactions. Ramiro is a prince—he's always elegant, and whether he's

mad, happy, whatever, he will behave as a prince—but he has temperament as well. Very well measured, but he shows this in many points during the opera, and I love that."

**HE TENOR IS PARTICULARLY** looking forward to bringing the role back to the Met. "It's my top favorite theater in the world," he says. "I love to sing there. The acoustic sensation is amazing—it's like a surround sensation in my head. I can feel the voice traveling, and I can feel it in the distance and coming back." Though Camarena is a fan of the Met's HD transmissions, which he calls "amazing, with the backstage and the interviews," he notes that the live experience is "the only real way of living the opera. It's the same thing with [soccer]," he says. "You can enjoy the game in your living room, watching TV, but the emotion of being in the field, participating in this collective hysteria—if you are near to the field, you can smell the grass and the hot dogs, and all this is part of the show. You can watch the Met broadcasts, but being at the theater is like being at the field. It doesn't matter where you are—close to the orchestra or in the very back seats. It's even more impressive when you are far away, because you have to think about 'This is an orchestra with sixty musicians, and this one single guy that you see like this small thing over there, you can listen to him singing through the whole space above the orchestra—it is something completely different, with





As Arturo in  
*I Puritani* at the  
Paris Opera,  
with Gemma  
Ní Bhriain  
(Enrichetta),  
2019



As Edgardo  
in *Lucia di  
Lammermoor* in  
Madrid, 2018

all the harmonic vibrations from the orchestra, or from the singer, that is very clear to your ear. The only way you can [determine] the quality of a singer is going to the theater.”

**F**OR A SINGER OF SUCH massive popular appeal, Camarena has done surprisingly little recording. His most recent disc, *Contrabandista*, was his first solo studio effort. “Cecilia Bartoli suggested the figure of Manuel García. She knew what an important figure he was in the opera world, and as a musical and cultural ambassador from European opera in America and in Mexico. That was a little bit the link for me in this project. He brought all this music to my country, so he was very important as a singer, a promoter, an impresario, a businessman.”

Camarena confesses that he finds the studio process daunting. “The first one I did was *La Sonnambula*, with Cecilia Bartoli and Juan Diego Flórez,” he says. “I sang the Notaro, and even just two lines, it was like, ‘Oh, my God, this is terrifying!’ When I sing in a theater, the people can see me, and I can express all the things I want, not only with my voice but the whole body and with my face. Trying to project all these things with a recording is something I find quite challenging. And the second thing is I know this is going to be for the history, and the pressure I put on myself, that it has to be as perfect as possible, it overwhelms me. But I am gaining trust, so I hope the next project is going to be easier.”

Camarena, whose offstage pursuits include

cooking, watching movies and playing video games with his fifteen-year-old daughter and ten-year-old son, cherishes his family time, as well as what he calls “the time for me,” when he can work on new roles. “In the next five years, I’m going to be more into the French repertoire. I already have in my calendar a *Roméo et Juliette*, a *Lakmé*, *Manon* from Massenet—and then I will try to find also the chance to sing in *Faust*. And when I arrive at this *Manon*, it will depend how I feel singing it if I go to Werther as well.” He names Rodolfo as his “top dream role nowadays, considering my vocal possibilities. But this will be a project in long-term.”

A conversation with Camarena makes it clear that what makes him special as an artist is not only what’s in his throat but what’s in his heart. “I really believe I am blessed by having the chance in this life of doing what I’m doing,” he says. “It can be maybe an egoistic point of view, but I do this because it’s something that makes *me* happy, and it’s beautiful to know that this gift I have of singing also makes happy many, many people. As I think many other of my colleagues [would agree], it is a blessing, but it is also a responsibility, and I think we all go on the stage with all the courage that you need, but also with the *hope* that something you have been working on so hard will be rewarded with applause, or with tears, or with joy, or with laughter, because at the end this gift is not for taking it for yourself and taking it home. It’s a gift for sharing, and I love this, and I take it with the biggest responsibility that implies. And people can be certain that I will always, always—every single night—I will always try to do my best to make them happy.” ■

SÉBASTIEN MATHÉ/OPÉRA NATIONAL DE PARIS (PURITANI); JAVIER DEL REAL (LUCIA)

