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Carlo Rizzi

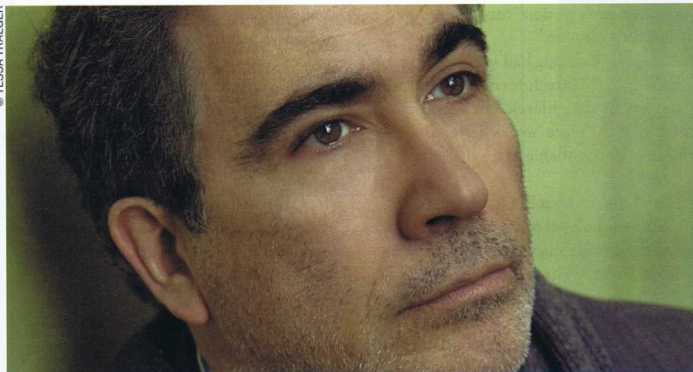
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RECORDING NEWS FROM THE STUDIOS BY PHILLIP SOMMERICH

Words in music

Carlo Rizzi champions bel canto in two new recordings



▲ 'You need to do things which are not written': Carlo Rizzi

Carlo Rizzi is happy to admit that bel canto is a hard sell to opera newbies. 'The vast majority of bel canto operas are about singing and often the stories are quite silly. There is a discrepancy between what most operagoers are looking for, which is a complete experience to be had through the eyes rather than the ears, and bel canto.

'When you have a *Falstaff* or a *Peter Grimes* that is fine, but when you get an opera which is a series of arias, that is more challenging for people coming to opera for the first time.'

Rizzi is doing his bit to ensure audiences are won over to the art form. He conducts the Hallé in two albums of arias – titled *Écho* and *Espoir* and featuring, respectively, soprano Joyce El-Khoury (in an impressively assured recording debut) and tenor Michael Spyrès singing arias made famous on the 19th-century French stage by Julie Dorus-Gras and Gilbert Duprez. Rizzi also opens the Metropolitan Opera season with Sir David McVicar's new production of *Norma*, to be relayed to UK cinemas on 7 October.

The recordings are also a new sales pitch for bel canto by Opera Rara, returning to artist-led albums of arias after years of focusing on complete operas. Henry Little, who became chief executive two years ago, says the move was more by accident than intent. His plan to record Gounod's *Le Médecin malgré lui* was scrapped after he decided that its 45 minutes of

spoken dialogue written by Molière could not be cut, but rendered the work unsuitable for an audio recording. With orchestral sessions booked, he turned to musicologist Roger Parker to curate the two recital programmes; the resulting series of spectacular arias may introduce a new audience to bel canto via streaming playlists.

Rizzi's love of bel canto was nurtured as a student in Milan and has mellowed over decades of conducting operas around the world. Unlike later works, these operas were usually written with particular singers – often their mistresses – in mind, rather than the storyline. *Norma* is an exception, he says, because McVicar is a director 'who starts with

what the music says, which in this kind of music is the only way forward. With *Norma* we have one of the most interesting plots with not just the usual trio, but social issues and a priestess, Roman soldiers and children'.

But Rizzi, who occupies the international chair in conducting at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama, says it is not just about beautiful voices. 'One danger is that the singer becomes just a vehicle for the voice, which diminishes bel canto. Of course you need a beautiful voice but think of the work you have to do on the pronunciation, the pacing of the recitatives. This is what bel canto is: the words in music. Also, you need to do things which are not written, not just what is written, that is the essence of this kind of opera, and it is difficult.'

Nor is bel canto an easy outing for orchestra and conductor, he says emphatically. 'If you don't become one entity between orchestra, conductor and singer, then it is not bel canto.'

After 30 years' experience conducting bel canto, Rizzi found some surprises in the material for the recordings. He cites Halévy's use of leitmotif in *Guido et Genèvre* and the richness of invention in Donizetti's *La Favorite*.

December is a month with many Rs in it, as Rizzi conducts Respighi, Rossini and Rachmaninov for three Hallé Concerts Society dates.

www.carlorizzi.com
www.opera-rara.com

