

ROBERTO FRONTALI

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Frontali is due to sing *Macbeth* in Philadelphia next month



Last December, the Roman baritone Roberto Frontali further consolidated his 33-year association with Opera di Roma by playing Guy de Montfort in the season-opening production of *Les Vêpres siciliennes*, conducted by Daniele Gatti. At 61 (he had celebrated his birthday on November 11) he was the oldest of the principal singers—not inappropriately for someone playing the father of John Osborn’s Henri—and also the one whose vocal phrasing, facial expression and gestures were most intelligently integrated to psychologically penetrating effect: a depth of understanding that was confirmed by the close-ups in the televised broadcast on March 5 this year. In Verdi’s 20th opera the leading baritone is aided by the fact that Montfort is the most coherently developed character in a drama of uncomfortably shifting perspectives. And although some of Frontali’s predecessors in the role may have sung more suavely, none that are known to me have exposed so painfully the inner life of this all-powerful governor of Sicily who realizes how empty his existence had become before discovering the identity of his long-lost son.

As has increasingly been the case with this singer in recent years, one had the impression that the performance was the cumulative result of a lifetime’s experience on and off stage, including of course the other 18 Verdi roles he had already played and his 2004 Palermo debut as Monforte in the Italian version of the opera. One could argue that all mature singers have the advantage of being able to draw from a deep well of experience as a source of heightened emotional responses, yet that source is as often as not neglected in favour of a reassuring routine and a cautious husbanding of energies. The lower-pitched male voices are, however, at an advantage in that many of the characters assigned to them are themselves mature in age and sufficiently stratified to justify a tireless probing of their psyche. One of the reasons why Frontali’s stature as an interpreter has achieved insufficient critical recognition is that the two most prominent Italian baritones of an earlier generation, Renato Bruson and Leo Nucci, were until relatively recently (the former retired in 2013, the latter in 2019) still playing roles in the same repertoire with undimmed interpretative insight and theatrical charisma. The former possessed a voice of denser, more velvety texture than Frontali’s and proved equally searching in his interpretations, while the latter resembled Frontali in the ease of his top register, which was exhibited, however, with a histrionic gusto that (combined with a willingness to concede encores) enabled him to establish a singularly direct rapport with the audience.

Although Frontali shares with Bruson a rigorous purity of line in the introspective roles that are so congenial to both of them, his voice production is closer to Nucci's in that the timbre and volume are as much a product of technique as of inborn resources. He maintains a high placement not just in the upper octave but throughout a quite exceptional range that goes from E below the staff to B flat above it. This placement of tone 'in the mask' (which makes the register break imperceptible) can most easily be heard in his pronunciation of the vowel 'o', which sometimes sounds, at full volume, as if it is blended with an 'a' to prevent the voice from slipping back into the throat—an expedient that lends a hint of artifice to his (otherwise exemplary) Italian diction, which he has exploited to insinuating effect when dealing with dissemblers such as Donizetti's Alfonso IX, Verdi's Iago and Puccini's Scarpia. And the tone quality itself, while lacking the sensual caress and burnished roundness of his justly lamented contemporary Dmitri Hvorostovsky, has remained free from the blurring of focus (in the upper octave) and nasal inflections that afflicted Bruson and Nucci's singing respectively in the latter half of their careers.

The first time I heard Frontali in a major role, Filippo Visconti in Bellini's *Beatrice di Tenda* (his Scala debut) in 1993, I was so struck by the startling projection of the voice that I felt impelled to go backstage and ask him about it. I discovered then that—though he was soft-spoken and undemonstrative in manner—his speaking voice was as perfectly placed as his singing voice. He referred on that occasion to the Roman School of singing, which traditionally favoured the incisive, ringing sound that was epitomized in the 20th century by the tenor Giacomo Lauri-Volpi, himself a proud pupil of the eminent 19th-century baritone Antonio Cotogni. When we spoke again over lunch the day after his third performance as Montfort, he reminded me that while he was studying in 1980 with the former tenor Tommaso Frascati at the conservatory in Rome ('They offered only two hours of singing lessons a week, while a vocal student who is just beginning needs to study every day'), he started attending simultaneously the private school of Renato Guelfi, an ardent disciple of Lauri-Volpi's. 'It was an excellent school. The pupils would spend the whole day there. Every so often you would sing, then you would listen to others: a good way of understanding a variety of vocal defects and how to address them. In a certain sense Guelfi considered all his pupils tenors: he only reluctantly conceded that I was a baritone! But this meant that he immediately brought my upper register into focus. This made it possible for me to sing Figaro in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* right from the beginning of my career. After a year of studying with him, I left the conservatory because I found Guelfi's teaching more useful. My basic timbre was an inborn gift, but Guelfi helped me find the exact focal point of resonance, between the eyes, that enabled me to project the voice clearly without any intrusive vibrato.'

It was Frontali's friends, rather than his family, who had introduced him to opera. One of them organized performances of opera choruses in which he took part, while another knew all about the great singers and encouraged him to buy recordings. 'The first one was *Rigoletto* with Sherrill Milnes, Luciano Pavarotti and Joan Sutherland: I sang along with all three of them.' His voice began to attract serious attention when he joined the Coro Saraceni at the university in Rome. While singing the polyphonic repertoire he gained a basic musical training and he was soon encouraged to enrol at the conservatory while continuing his studies in economics.

Once he had taken his degree and trained his voice Frontali made rapid progress in his career. After winning the Spoleto competition in 1986 (at the age of 27), he was asked that same year to perform a minor role in *The Saint of Bleeker Street* at the Spoleto Festival in a production directed by Menotti himself. And just a few months later he found himself



Frontali in Verdi: (l. to r.) as Simon Boccanegra in Bologna, Falstaff in Los Angeles and Iago at Macerata

playing the King of France alongside Montserrat Caballé in Spontini's *Agnese di Hohenstaufen* at the Opera di Roma (where he had already gained experience singing for half a season in the chorus). 'When I rehearsed a duet with Caballé for the first time, her voice was so overwhelming in its refinement and beauty that I missed my own entrance.' Other early roles in the same house included Valentin in *Faust* with Carol Vaness and Alain Vanzo (1988) and Albert in *Werther* with Alfredo Kraus (1990). 'With Kraus, as with Caballé, voice production took priority over emotional engagement, as was evident when observing him close-up on stage. The singing he produced, however, was quite magnetic and I remember how effortlessly he sang when he came to the first rehearsal directly from the airport. His technique involved extreme focus on facial resonance and before the performances I heard him vocalize using nasal tones, but on stage his voice was much broader in sound. Every instrument is different: some singers need to lend their voices more point because the sound is too spread, while others need to broaden a sound that is too narrowly focused.'

To get an idea of the splendid balance Frontali achieved in his own emission early in his career it is sufficient to watch the video of Donizetti's *Roberto Devereux* led by Gianandrea Gavazzeni in Bologna in 1992 (accessible on YouTube, like the other live performances commented on here). In Nottingham's Act 1 *scena e cavatina* the voice has a genuine ring to it as it rises above the stave, while never sacrificing the continuity of the legato line. The warmth of his tone, which is modulated with ease, reinforces the pathos of the words, and the impact of the singing is further heightened by the historical plausibility of this production by Piero Zuffi, who rightly allows the baritone to occupy the front of the stage when revealing the character's most intimate feelings. The musical form of the *larghetto*, 'Forse in quel cor sensibile', is given extra clarity by the gestures that accompany the vocal phrasing: Frontali the actor makes music as unerringly as Frontali the singer. (He is planning a return to Donizetti in January 2021: *Belisario* at the Theater an der Wien.)

A similar bel canto poise can be heard in Opera Rara's 2002 recording of *Devereux* and in the Arthaus DVD of a Maazel-led *Traviata* at La Scala in 2007. Germont was one of Frontali's first Verdi roles—he sang it a number of times in Milan under Riccardo Muti—and his 'Di Provenza' displays his voice at its mellowest, his technique at its most imaginatively responsive (witness the sustained *mezza voce* in the second verse). Although this is one of the arias he has performed most often, he lends fresh communicative urgency to every word, as is conveyed—through his voice and eyes—in the subtly differentiated repeat of 'Dio mi guidò' at the end of the first verse. An audio recording of Frontali's *Pagliacci* Prologue in Turin in 2017 shows a similar understanding of the secret life that lies within every great melody. Here the voice is darker and weightier, the breath spans are formidable, the traditional added A flat and G are released with a tonal splendour that few baritones today can match, and the low C is as firmly grounded as the top notes (it was as Tonio—and Mascagni's Alfio—that he made his most recent appearance at Covent Garden, in 2018).

Frontali has always considered himself a *cantante-attore* (a term that emphasizes the centrality of the voice better than the approximate translation 'singing actor'). 'I learnt a lot about stagecraft when singing Danilo in an Italian version of *Die lustige Witwe* in Trieste in 1988 under the direction of Gino Landi, who helped free me from any stiffness on stage. Equally fundamental was the experience of performing alongside Raina Kabaivanska, a compelling actress, in *Roberto Devereux*, *Manon*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Madama Butterfly* and even *Capriccio* (in Italian).'

The role that best displayed Frontali's acting skills in the first 15 years of his career was Figaro. After making his debut in Rossini's *melodramma buffo* in Genoa in 1989, he went on during the next decade to perform it in Pesaro (it was one of four operas he sang at the Rossini Opera Festival), Vienna, New York, London, Tokyo and Milan. He was also chosen by Claudio Abbado for a production in Ferrara in 1995. 'Abbado had a natural empathy with the singers, creating a great rapport between stage and pit. He didn't do many piano rehearsals because he knew he had the best cast available. Rather he encouraged us to enjoy ourselves onstage, telling me to play an occasional trick on the keyboard player to keep things theatrically spontaneous.' In the 1990s Frontali really was the best Figaro available, and the fact that five labels made studio recordings of Rossini's opera in that decade without calling on his services perhaps goes some way towards explaining their declining sales in the years that followed. His totally energized identification with the part is all the more impressive when one discovers that the offstage Frontali is quiet, pensive and something of an introvert, entirely unlike Rossini's cynical, loquacious, attention-grabbing and omnipresent Figaro. His qualities in the role are well illustrated in a video of the 1998 Tokyo production, where he performs with insouciance and charm, delivering the florid music with panache, revealing a sure sense of comic timing in his interaction and proving as eloquent in his reading of Rosina's note to Almaviva as he is in advertising the barber's bravura in 'Largo al factotum'.

In the years that followed Frontali met new challenges with an ever-increasing capacity for feeling. In a video extract from the ball scene in *Yevgeny Onegin* (Florence, 2000) we can clearly read on his face and hear in his voice that Onegin is undergoing a transformation that will change his life forever. Frontali's main focus in that decade was the Verdi repertoire, with *Rigoletto*, in some ways the most challenging of the composer's baritone parts, eventually taking the place of Figaro as his most performed role. His most significant video recording of that period, however, presents him in a part that Verdi himself considered 'as tiring as *Rigoletto*, but a thousand times more difficult': Simon Boccanegra. Giorgio

Gallione's 2007 staging in Bologna (released by Arthaus) shows Frontali responding wholeheartedly to the complexity of Verdi's most spiritually enlightened hero. The monologue in the Council Chamber, though impressively declaimed, cannot match the sweeping magnificence of the performance by Piero Cappuccilli with Abbado in 1978 (a telecast from La Scala), but the more intimate scenes of Boccanegra's reunion with his daughter and his reconciliation with Fiesco convey a profundity, and delicacy, of feeling that are a tribute to Frontali's own humanity, further highlighted when Boccanegra shows his all-transcending readiness for the death that awaits him at the end of the opera.

In the past decade, with its increasing emphasis on dramatic roles, Frontali has died more often on stage as Scarpia than as Boccanegra: an equally striking death in its very different way, as a 2015 telecast from the Opera di Roma (featuring sets and costumes designed for the premiere in 1900) demonstrates. Initially, he recalls, 'opera houses were reluctant to cast me as blatantly evil characters because I myself am a fairly benign human being. But I've always believed that the



Frontali (top) as Rigoletto at the Met in 2009; (middle) as Macbeth, with Adina Aaron as Lady Macbeth, at the Theater an der Wien in 2016; (bottom) as Scarpia in Guangzhou, 2011

negativity of Scarpia and Iago can more easily be brought out by someone who is not negative himself. It is the same with Falstaff (a role that I love and will be singing again in December in Brussels): if you always give the part to a fat singer, he will play himself, whereas a thin singer has to use his imagination to discover what it feels like to be fat. Scarpia is a symbol of evil, but it is a subtle form of evil. Every word he utters has a precise meaning, and often a double meaning.'

The high placement employed by Frontali makes it easy for him to produce the snarling tone and ironical inflections that the Puccini role requires, and his scrupulous attention to the score (a discipline that was reinforced during his collaboration with Riccardo Muti in the 1990s) helps him create a frighteningly detailed portrayal of a radically corrupt man. His Iago (seen on a 2014 video from Naples) is even more nuanced and imaginative in detail: the expressive palette of his voice has never seemed richer. The psychological intimacy of the ensign's dialogues with Otello is respected, but the evil is plain for the audience to see, even though the Moor is blind to it.

Frontali's favourite role among those added to his repertoire recently is Gérard in *Andrea Chénier*. 'I grew up in the 1970s when young people in Italy were challenging authority of all kinds. I studied economics at university because I was seeking tools with which to transform the world I lived in. But then I discovered singing and realized that through singing I could transform myself. The role of this disillusioned revolutionary is one I can identify with easily. In Vienna I performed it in Otto Schenk's historic production, and although he was nearing 90 he took the trouble to come along to all the rehearsals.'

Frontali is one of the very few singers left who have played prominent roles in major houses since the '80s while continuing to set the highest of standards—standards that are

Frontali as Rossini's Figaro



not easy to maintain in the current cultural climate. 'Today commercial considerations are paramount and ticket sales are much more of a priority for Italian houses than they used to be. Productions sometimes overlap in their programming and singers' rehearsals are concentrated in a shorter time-span. They are consequently more fatiguing, especially since the final rehearsals are often open to audiences, and it seems unfair to save one's voice by simply marking. Today one of a singer's "duties" is to try to make a director's ideas work however illogical they may be, and this effort at mediation absorbs a lot of energy. The costume is very important for an interpreter because it helps you to become the character you are playing, but today a baritone often finds himself wearing a military uniform, whether it is appropriate or not.' Frontali is also sceptical about the use of sophisticated cinematic effects on the operatic stage: 'This is not what opera is about.' Directors he has enjoyed working



Frontali in Rome last winter, as Montfort in *'Les Vêpres siciliennes'* with John Osborn (Henri) and Roberta Mantegna (Hélène)

with include Hugo De Ana, Jonathan Miller, Graham Vick ('before his ego got out of control') and, more recently, Damiano Michieletto, who devised an ingenious production of Puccini's *Trittico* in which Frontali sang both Michele and Gianni Schicchi.

Among conductors he singles out the late Gianfranco Masini, who led his very first *Faust* in Rome and 'was outstanding in the repertory I specialized in in my early years. He really loved voices, did a lot of piano rehearsals and could help you overcome the difficulties of any role.' More recently he has come to cherish his collaboration with Daniele Gatti. 'In this phase of his career he really leaves a mark when he works with you on a score. I played Golaud in *Pelléas et Mélisande* for him at the Maggio Musicale in 2015: an exhausting but deeply satisfying experience. And the Montfort I have been singing in this production derives in a certain sense from the *Rigoletto* we did together in Rome last season. He asked me then to sing the score as written without the traditional top notes, in order to achieve a greater degree of harmonic cohesion, with *Rigoletto* remaining strongly anchored to the key of C major. Those added notes are of course highly effective and I wouldn't normally eliminate them without strong justification, but the result in that case was a particularly atmospheric performance that lent a new dimension to my conception of the character, which is vital for a singer who wishes to avoid routine. And a similarly introspective approach has worked well for us in *Les Vêpres siciliennes*. It is things like this that give you extra energy as a performer and a desire to carry on with your career.'