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ROLANDO, VILLAZÓN

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R.

Roll up, roll up...

For Rolando!

Back from the brink of vocal catastrophe after career-saving surgery, Rolando Villazón made a triumphant return to the international stage this summer. Jessica Duchon talks to the charismatic Mexican tenor about his transformational fight for recovery, his future plans and discovering his inner clown.

I'm wondering which of two doors is Rolando Villazón's, when one of them flies open and out leaps the mop of dark curls, the piercing gaze, the great warm grin: 'Ha! You didn't know which it was!' It's a circus entrance for a great performer who oozes expressiveness, charisma and passion, carrying us along on a roller-coaster journey – and that's just at home in Paris, being interviewed.

The Mexican tenor's story is familiar. After he won three prizes in Plácido Domingo's Operalia competition in 1999, stardom followed, sealed with a legendary debut in *Les contes d'Hoffmann* at Covent Garden. Recording contracts arrived; a much-hyped singing duo with Anna Netrebko plastered their images across the world. Then – disaster.

Cracked notes. Difficulties with dynamic control. What was going on? Had he sung too much? Sung the wrong music? Been pushed too hard? Theories were everywhere; false starts abounded; critics declared his career dead and buried.

But he's back. After a cautious return in 2010, Villazón appeared in the title role of *Werther* at Covent Garden in spring

“ I decided: even if this is the end, it's been great. I've sung everywhere with the best colleagues. ”

2011. The standing ovation at the final performance continued long after the house lights went on.

Less familiar than the tale is its detail – let alone its fact. The truth is that you do not have to be a singer to develop a cyst inside your vocal cord. Villazón says that his doctor's explanation of the condition was that 'The cyst was congenital, and not caused by anything I did or didn't do. You don't get a cyst in your finger because you write too much...'

'There is a lot of ignorance about what singers have in their throat,' he adds. 'If people knew how many singers have

As Werther at Covent Garden. Photo by Catherine Ashmore



had operations, how common and how unproblematic it is to take a node out of your vocal cords, you'd be surprised.' His case, though, was anything but common or unproblematic. 'My doctor told me this is the most difficult thing that can happen to a throat apart from cancer.'

He consulted 15 doctors, he says, before finding a doctor in Paris, Dr Leca, who was willing to risk operating. 'One doctor in New York said, "You're singing at the Met? I can't understand how you can speak".'

The operation entailed cutting the cord open and removing a tripartite, peanut-shaped cyst from within. Had the tissue failed to heal

correctly afterwards, Villazón could have lost his voice entirely. 'I decided: even if this is the end, it's been great. I've sung everywhere with the best colleagues – crazy things, boyhood dreams like singing with Domingo, working with Daniel Barenboim, all this happened to me. That's amazing! All I asked was that even if the career was over, I would be able just to sing, because ever since I was 11 years old I have sung all day long, doing the dishes or singing lullabies to my kids. Singing is a way of expressing myself – I would have found it very difficult to be without that.'

For ten days he stayed silent, trying not to cough or sneeze. 'I can't believe



As Nemorino at Vienna State Opera. Photo courtesy of Wiener Staatsoper / Axel Zeininger

I made it! It took two months to speak correctly, working with a therapist – it's like starting to walk again. Then when I tried to sing, I had three notes. It took me another two months to have a whole scale. Two-and-a-half months later I tried to sing "Caro mio ben", and it was horrible. My coach was really patient – he said, "Two months ago you had only three notes, so keep going..." Total recovery took eight months.'

Harder still, though, was the comeback. 'I have never been so afraid in my life,' Villazón admits. 'I decided: OK, if I feel like this, I will give myself until summer 2011 and if it doesn't change, I do something else.'

Werther at Covent Garden was a landmark. When I attended on opening night, Villazón certainly looked nervous; it was difficult to tell whether his tendency to turn away sheepishly from the audience at key moments was part of the show or a sign of his state of mind (apparently it didn't happen in subsequent performances as his confidence grew). But the voice was there in droves, and what a joy it was to hear it!

His triumph, he says, would not have been the same without Antonio Pappano, the ROH's music director. 'No conductor understands the singing voice like Tony'

Pappano worked with him in detail, first inviting him for a private trial session, then advising and supporting from first to last. 'The final performance was one of the most exciting evenings I have ever experienced. When we were bowing, I said to Tony: "See what we'd have missed if I'd sung like s*** at that first meeting?"'

But Villazón is not one to sit around doing nothing. Seeing clear months stretching ahead while he recovered, he decided to write a novel. 'I wanted to be a writer until I was 12,' he says, 'but then, the voice took over... The story has nothing to do with opera – it's about a clown.' His front room



Rolando Villazón as Red Noses Clowndoctors' 'Dr Rollo' Photo courtesy of rotenaseninternational.com

“ Being a clown is the most wonderful, extraordinary thing. You go out there and the world changes. ”

is heaving with books; by the end of the afternoon the coffee table is piled high with them, texts on clowning uppermost. At one point he zips off to another room, and comes back wearing a red nose.

He used clown imagery, too, in his own production at the Opéra de Lyon of *Werther* last winter. His directorial debut, it drew reviews of every extreme. Meanwhile, he works whenever possible with a clown charity, Red Noses Clowndoctors, performing on wards in children's hospitals in Germany and Austria. 'I am "Dr Rollo"; he declares. 'Being a clown is the most wonderful, extraordinary thing. You go out there and the world changes. The clown figure laughs at structures and rules. He transforms, because he's in a world he doesn't understand.

'It's always true: you're in a world where you don't understand what is happening – politically, socially, spiritually – or indeed to your voice. You don't know what's going on ... but the clown always wins. You know why? Because he doesn't quit. He stays. Why doesn't he leave? He will be with a piano that's falling apart. But he will end up turning that piano into a boat

and paddling off in it! They always win. They never die. They resurrect.'

Villazón's own resurrection inevitably had ups and downs – being a mentor on the TV series *Popstar To Operastar* was perhaps a mixed blessing. Again, Villazón transforms the experience into something wholly positive. 'I have learned so much doing this programme, and enjoyed it a lot. Now I am presenting a series, *Stars of Tomorrow*, on German and French TV, with brilliant young classical musicians playing live,' he says. 'That would never have happened without *Popstar To Operastar*. I did *What Makes a Great Tenor?* for the BBC, which had fantastic ratings. And *Stars of Tomorrow* will be taken up in other countries too.'

This season he's singing Hoffmann in Offenbach's opera again and Nemorino in *L'elisir d'amore* around Europe; he's also planning his next project as director, which will be *L'elisir* – 'It's going to be very, very funny,' he says, though for now he's keeping his powder dry regarding details. In downtime, he loves 'doing nothing'. 'Getting lost in the streets of Paris, sitting in a café and writing something, going to the cinema with my wife. I give myself more time now'

ROLANDO VILLAZÓN'S DIARY

October 31; November 4, 9, 12, 21, 25; July 19, 23

+ Bavarian State Opera;
Les contes d'Hoffmann / title role

November 18

+ Théâtre des Champs-Élysées;
'Grandes Voix' 20th Anniversary Concert

November 11, 14, 17

+ Opernhaus Zürich;
L'elisir d'amore / Nemorino

February 18, 21

+ Vienna State Opera;
L'elisir d'amore / Nemorino

March 2, 8, 15

+ Staatsoper unter den Linden;
L'elisir d'amore / Nemorino

May 5, 9, 12, 17

+ Opernhaus Zürich;
Il re pastore / Alessandro

May 28, 31; June 3

+ Baden-Baden Festival;
L'elisir d'amore / Nemorino / director

July 19, 23

+ Munich Festival;
Les contes d'Hoffmann / title role

What lies ahead? Mozart. He is in love with Mozart. It will mean using the lighter, simpler colours in his voice that will probably suit him more than the dark, angst-ridden punishment that Puccini metes out to his tenors. 'I've never fallen in love with a composer this way before. Best of all, the ensembles. I want to sing Ferrando in *Così fan tutte*, which is all about ensembles.' Having already sung Don Ottavio and Alessandro in *Il re pastore*, he's planning roles in *Clemenza di Tito* and *Idomeneo*, *Lucio Silla*, plus Tamino in *The Magic Flute*, he says, grabbing a volume of Mozart's letters from the shelf: 'Who was Mozart? This is all we have! There is one Mozart for you, another for me, but who was he? Who am I? Are we ourselves in the eyes of others or as we see ourselves? I sing, therefore I am? No, I am much more than a voice.'

And eventually, philosopher, clown and resurrected tenor, sends me back into the Paris sunshine, equipped with a red foam nose. **ON**

ACD release of *Werther* from Covent Garden is currently under discussion with Deutsche Grammophon.