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A model tenor

Once a Simon Cowell protégé, Vittorio Grigolo makes a convincing classical contender, just don't call him a 'crossover'

Hugh Canning

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There are two Vittorio Grigolos. Until recently, the more familiar of the pair was the baby-faced crossover star — briefly, very briefly, a member of Simon Cowell's operatic boyband sensation, Il Divo — who released a part-popular, part-classical album, *In the Hands of Love* (including a duet with our own maestra of the microphone, Katherine Jenkins) in the mid-2000s. It sold enough copies to reach No 1 in the UK classical charts, but the meanies on the Classical Advisory Panel disallowed it, as more than 40% of the content was judged too popular. At the time, Grigolo looked like a pretender to the crown of the poperatic crooner Andrea Bocelli. Now, only five years later, he has conquered La Scala, Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera, New York — arguably the three most prestigious lyric theatres in the world — and Vittorio II has been relaunched as a legit, unamplified opera star with his new, purely classical album, *The Italian Tenor*. (Note the definite article: record-company hype, of course, but surveying the competition among his compatriots, not that far from the truth.)

When we meet, at the Landmark Hotel, on Marylebone Road, during a flying promotional visit to London, Grigolo winces at my mention of the dread word “crossover”. “I don't like it,” he protests. “I actually call it ‘popera’. I introduced this word myself, because I thought it was important to distinguish myself from crossover artists who you don't normally see perform in the theatre. Crossover is about doing big concerts with amplification, but ‘popera’ means you can do this kind of concert, but perform real opera in the opera house.”

It soon becomes clear that Grigolo's two manifestations are in fact parallel careers, and that, to my great surprise, classical opera came first. Perhaps I should have realised when I first encountered him live, four years ago, at La Scala, in the supporting but very noticeable role of Rinuccio, the youthful male love interest in Puccini's Florentine comedy *Gianni Schicchi*.

I was expecting a thinnish voice, but Grigolo's attractive, bright lyric tenor delivered

Rinuccio's thrilling little paean to Florence with oodles of charm and considerable Italianate ping. It was central casting — he has film-star looks and charisma to spare — and I've never seen the role better done in the theatre.

Grigolo explains how he was sidetracked into popera. “It was always my intention to become an opera singer, but I wanted to step with the times and be in the groove of my own generation, to try to communicate with them in a different language. From the culture of my family background, I always loved opera and classical, but I also opened my ears to pop music and I wanted to communicate to the largest audience possible. If you have a beautiful diamond, you don’t put it in your pocket — you want to show it, you wanna let it shine.”

In fact, he got his first (popular) record contract having made his Scala debut in the tenor solo of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, conducted by the theatre’s then supremo, Riccardo Muti. At 22, he says he was the youngest tenor to sing at La Scala, but his operatic debut was nine years earlier, when, as one of the *voci bianche* (literally, white voices) of the Sistine Chapel Choir, he sang the shepherd boy in Puccini’s *Tosca* alongside the Mario of Luciano Pavarotti.

Obviously precocious, he earned the nickname *Il Pavarottino* (Little Pavarotti), but nowadays prefers to play this down. His PR minders give strict instructions that he must not be called “the new Pavarotti”.

They are right, of course. His voice is lighter, brighter in colour — there’s something almost Beckhamesque about his high-pitched speaking voice. And, from the heavier numbers on the album — Manrico’s *Di quella pira*, from Verdi’s *Il trovatore*, Des Grieux’s *Donna non vidi mai*, from Puccini’s *Manon Lescaut* — I don’t hear the darker tones that would presage an easy transition to some of Pavarotti’s more dramatic parts. In fact, the album is both a *conspectus* and a *prospectus*.



“My
new

At 33, Vittorio Grigolo has become a lyric-tenor sensation (Rex Features)

classical album is a business card, showing how Vittorio started, how Vittorio is singing today and how Vittorio may be in the future. I start with Nemorino’s *Una furtiva lagrima*, Fernando’s *Spirto gentil* — something cantabile and *bel canto* — then I move to the *lirico* repertoire, which requires the nuances of the lighter things, but also some power in the recitatives. The other arias are from heavier roles that I might do. I can sing the notes of Manrico’s *Di quella pira*, of course, but it doesn’t mean I can sing *Il trovatore* tomorrow. If Vittorio sings Manrico today, he won’t be able to go back to Rodolfo [in Puccini’s *La bohème*], [Massenet’s] *Manon* and [Gounod’s] *Faust*.”

His use of the third person when talking about himself may strike an alarmingly self-absorbed note, but it would be unfair to describe Grigolo as narcissistic. Certainly, his Royal Opera debut — as Massenet's *Des Grieux*, opposite the *Manon* of Anna Netrebko, in June — suggested a committed and generous colleague. He admits having enjoyed working with her a lot, but he clearly has quite a high opinion of himself. If he lost his voice tomorrow, he could probably make a fortune on the Milan catwalks, for a year or two at least, so he has plenty to be pleased about.

Even at only 33 — he is married to an Iranian academic, who spends most of her time in Los Angeles — he seems aware of the passage of time. Two of the first roles to win him international acclaim were Bernstein's *Candide* and *Tony* in *West Side Story*, both for the Scala company. “Well, why not? I can dance, I can move, I am light on my feet. We did the original choreography of Jerome Robbins in *West Side Story*. I'd love to do it again, but I'm past it now. It's fine when you're 23, 24, 25.”

He still radiates the youthful exuberance and enthusiasm that immediately endeared him to Covent Garden audiences at the *Manon* premiere, the biggest lyric-tenor sensation at the house since Rolando Villazon's debut there as *Hoffmann* in 2004.

We don't mention the Mexican tenor — scheduled to make his next comeback here, after vocal troubles, as Massenet's *Werther* in April — but his series of crises evidently lurks at the back of Grigolo's mind.

“My teacher gave me some good advice after my Scala debut — perform small roles in big houses and big roles in small houses. I sang small roles in Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims*, Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, the bridegroom in *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

But, in between, I also tried out bigger roles in smaller towns — *Nemorino* in Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, *Almaviva* in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Narciso* in *Il turco in Italia*. It's important to know the past to know your future better. That's what I do. I study the history of Vittorio and my mistakes, so that I can get better. It's important to learn from them, but I wouldn't be able to sing the way I sing without those mistakes, without experience of life.”

Grigolo is learning to be cautious. He has cancelled a contract for *Pollione*, in Bellini's *Norma*, at the Zurich Opera House because the role calls for a darker voice than his, and, in this opera, the tenor role is a sideshow for the two sopranos. But he is looking forward to returning to Covent Garden, first as *Faust* next season, then later as *Rodolfo* (in which he has just triumphed at the Met).

If Vittorio isn't *Luciano II*, he has certainly learnt from and emulated the great Modenese tenor's instinctive, poetic feeling for his own language and a love of the sound of words. “When I was young and went to the opera,” he says, “I couldn't understand nothing. I'd say to Mamma, ‘What is he singing? What is she singing?’ I don't think you can be a great opera singer without making people understand you. *Luciano* was perfect, absolutely perfect.”

The greatest pleasure to be had from Grigolo's “Italian tenor” is his native savour of the texts. Whatever the future of his voice, the “classical” Vittorio is an artist, through and through.