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Tomorrow's tenors

By Richard Fairman

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In Act 3 of Bizet's opera, Carmen and her gypsy friends read their fortunes around the campfire. "The cards don't lie," Carmen sings darkly, as every hand predicts that she will die at the hands of her lover. In the improbable world of opera, knowing what fate has in store can come in handy.

For operatic talent scouts looking to the future, the current best bet is to make sure they do not miss the Rosenblatt Recitals at St John's, Smith Square, London. The next event, on Wednesday, will feature tenor Joel Prieto, winner of the first prize in Plácido Domingo's Operalia competition in 2008, and mezzo Sara Hershkowitz, a young American making waves in Europe. There is reason to expect that this recital, like others before it, will provide a glimpse of stars of the future.

In the 10 years since the recitals were founded, they have had an enviable hit rate in spotting voices of promise. For example, the then little-known Peruvian Juan Diego Flórez, who was only the second singer in 2000-01's opening season. Flórez is now the most sought-after *bel canto* tenor in the world, dazzling audiences with his pealing runs of top Cs in Donizetti's *La Fille du régiment* from San Francisco to London (where he returns for a revival of the opera in May).

"I had a feeling he was going to be very big," says series founder Ian Rosenblatt. "We have presented three recitals now with Flórez, who is an ideal artist to work with, and have plans with him in the future."

Other names from the early years who have found success include Marius Brenciu (2001), Juha Uusitalo (2002), Anna Caterina Antonacci (2003) and Vittorio Grigolo (2004), who is about to make his Royal Opera debut in place of Rolando Villazón in Massenet's *Manon*.

Rosenblatt is understandably proud of the series. "If you look at the Royal Opera programme this season," he says, "you will find 12 Rosenblatt alumni making their Covent Garden debuts. It amuses me when I see all the fuss about this hot new tenor Grigolo – he sang for me six years ago."

Another notable hit, he says, was tenor Stephen Costello. "I gave him a recital based on a DVD sent to me of performances he had given as a student at the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia. Our recital was his first professional engagement, and within a year he was singing at the opening night of the season at the Metropolitan Opera, New York. We also gave an opportunity to his wife, soprano Ailyn Pérez. You should have heard her recital. It was truly exceptional. Her mother could have written the reviews."

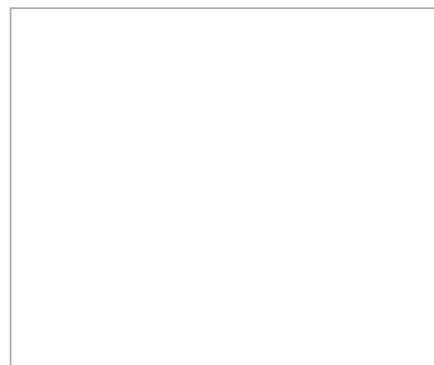
This is all a long way from his main occupation, the City law firm of Rosenblatt Solicitors, shortlisted last year for an **FT Innovative Lawyers Award**. "In 2000, when the law firm was 10 years old, I felt we could justify the sponsorship," Rosenblatt says. "The series doesn't make any money, but I am sole financier of it, which means we are free to do our own thing."

There are times when the collaboration of music and the law has proved an advantage. When leading baritone Erwin Schrott cancelled his planned recital twice over, he found that picking an argument with a law firm was not a good idea. "Although he never did sing the recital, he paid a compensatory amount to charity, with good grace in the end," Rosenblatt says.

In every way it is Rosenblatt's enthusiasm that has fired the series. "I was brought up in a musical household where singing was treated like football – a competition to see who can sing higher or louder or sweeter than anybody else."

The big question is how he has been able to choose so many young winners. Rosenblatt says that in the early days he relied heavily on the advice and unrivalled address book of Helga Schmidt, formerly of the Royal Opera, now director of the Palau de les Arts in Valencia, Spain. "But I really only trust my own ears. My wife and I were in Bologna about seven years ago, where we heard the tenor Giuseppe Filianoti, whose career was just beginning, and in the interval I was on the phone asking if we could get him."

The two young singers on Wednesday know there are big expectations. Prieto, who has relatively little experience as a recitalist, is making his first appearance in the UK; Hershkowitz, building on a successful spell at the Salzburg Festival Young Singers programme last year, will be giving her first recital in Europe. Will they also rise to fame and fortune? Perhaps it is time for Carmen to deal her cards again and tell us the future.



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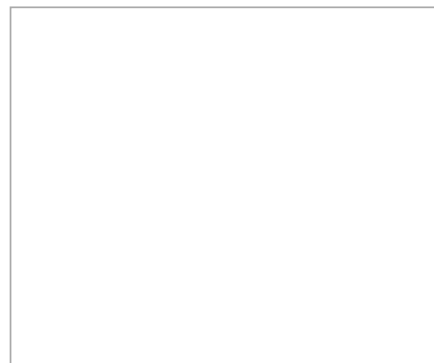
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Recital no 6, 17 March at St John's, Smith Square, London. www.sjss.org.uk

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