
Vittorio Grigolo interview for Manon

If anyone can boast a genuine claim to being Pavarotti's heir, it's Vittorio Grigolo. Rupert Christiansen meets the tenor.

Published: 5:50PM BST 09 Jun 2010

Claiming someone as Pavarotti's heir may seem like the weariest of journalistic clichés, but if anyone can boast a genuine claim to the title, it must be 33-year-old Vittorio Grigolo - not least because the great man marked him out himself.

When Grigolo was a boy soprano in the Sistine Chapel choir he was assigned to sing the Shepherd in *Tosca*, alongside Pavarotti as Cavaradossi. After the performance, Pavarotti admiringly signed Grigolo's

autograph book "A Vittorio Primo" = 'to Vittorio the First'. Grigolo has always interpreted this as Pavarotti's prophecy that Grigolo was destined to be the next tenor champ.



Vittorio Grigolo Photo: REX FEATURES

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Grigolo isn't blushing modest as he tells this story: in the familiar Italian manner, he's not reluctant to expatiate on his merits and triumphs, but the trumpet-blowing is done with great good humour and he's irresistibly likeable. Radiating boundless ambition and sharp intelligence, he expresses himself forcefully in excellent English as he announces halfway through rehearsals for his London operatic debut that "this is the most beautiful experience of my career so far.'

He appreciates the management at Covent Garden, where 'everything works so smoothly - not like La Scala, where there's whispering the whole time in corners and you never know what's really going on.'

He reveres Laurent Pelly and Antonio Pappano, the director and conductor of the new production of

Massenet's Manon in which he will be appearing.

He adores his co-star, the enchanting Russian soprano Anna Netrebko, whom he'd never met before – “always smiling, always spontaneous. She knows that work must be fun. And our voices really do blend.”

He also loves the role of des Grieux, which he will be singing for the first time. “This music is just right for me, and I understand the guy, too. When you are in love like he is, you don't care whether a woman is good or bad. But he's scared of the strength of his feelings and tries to put his emotions on a leash. That's an interesting thing to act.”

Grigolo feels that the elegant French repertory rather than the red-blooded Italian repertory is going to be his focus. He's recently enjoyed great success as Offenbach's Hoffmann and Gounod's Faust, and he has plans to sing the leads in Gounod's Roméo et Juliette and Massenet's Werther – “and perhaps in about five years' time José in Carmen.”

By taking this direction, he's modelling himself on Alfredo Kraus rather than Pavarotti - a good portent, inasmuch as Kraus went on singing beautifully into his sixties. But Grigolo is also like Pavarotti in that he has broken into the mass market, becoming a huge star in the miked-up world of Valentine's Day romantic balladry. His album of covers *In the Hands of Love* rose to Number 6 in the pop charts here, and in the US and Australia he was a wow on the celebrity talent show *Dancing with the Stars*. In Italy, where he sang Tony in a famous production of *West Side Story*, he fills stadiums with adoring women and has his own television specials.

He has no embarrassment about what he calls “popera” rather than “crossover”. To him, it's all just music, “the music that people of my own age relate to”, and he admits that he “fell in love with the mike” when he first got his hands round it. “Singing with a mike isn't good or bad. It's just a different technique.”

But at this point in his career, he wants to focus more on the opera house. He makes his debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York next season, and his first album contracted to Sony will contain only Verdi and Puccini, sung au naturel. He isn't daft, and he wants to do the thing properly.

He comes, after all, like Beniamino Gigli, from the Sistine Chapel choir, where he spent four years singing Carissimi and Palestrina and learning “how to project music away from yourself towards the audience”. His promise at 18 was considered so intense, he explains, that he was the first person in Italy to be let off his National Service, “after a big fight with lawyers.

Now all the footballers do it, too.”

Standing in for a sick Carreras in a new opera called *Romanza* by Sergio Rendine “gave me the confidence I needed.

After that, I knew I could be number one.”

Away from music, he lives in the tax haven of Zurich with his beautiful Persian-born wife, and takes his recreation in *Top Gear* style, custom-building his own car on the base of a Porsche engine and indulging in “anything to do with speed”.

“I like the edge of danger,” he says: one just hopes he doesn't end up in a nasty crash.

Manon opens at the [Royal Opera House \(http://www.roh.org.uk\)](http://www.roh.org.uk), London WC2 (020 7304 4000) on June 22

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