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QUINN KELSEY

Roger Pines

Kelsey sings Rigoletto at Santa Fe Opera this month



An early performance by Quinn Kelsey exemplifies the thrill of witnessing a gifted young artist staking his claim on a career-defining role. The Hawaiian baritone, then a member of Lyric Opera of Chicago's young artists programme, was just entering his mid 20s. Having never previously sung any of Rigoletto's music in public, Kelsey on this occasion offered 'Pari siamo'. He performed it with piano rather than orchestral accompaniment, but the mix of surging power and inward-looking, deeply insightful utterance proved devastating. At every moment one felt present at the birth of a potentially great portrayal. That promise has been memorably fulfilled, as English National Opera audiences learned when Kelsey triumphed there in the role last year.

Kelsey is a Verdi baritone—yes, The Real Thing. His wonderfully rounded voice, with its glorious mahogany-coloured timbre, fills big theatres effortlessly. The sound—guided by firm technique and combined with vivid stage presence—suits all sorts of repertoire, but Verdi roles above all have made Kelsey's name internationally. His rise to prominence was recognized by *Opera News* in 2012 when he was named one of 25 artists poised to make a significant impact in classical music in the coming decade. Another significant acknowledgement of his talent came in February, when he was named the 2015 recipient of one of the most prestigious honours an American singer can receive, the Metropolitan Opera's Beverly Sills Award.

Kelsey cites two role debuts, Germont *père* (Memphis, 2008) and Count di Luna (San Francisco, 2009), as the first performances that gave him a sense of his possibilities as a Verdian. In singing this repertoire, he relishes 'a nobility in Verdi's writing for baritone and a robust quality of characterization, lacking any sense of haste. When Rigoletto comes on stage, he never shuts up, but he still gets room to breathe. You're never squeezing yourself into a space vocally or dramatically, and you can always maintain a majestic demeanour. The character's feelings—even Count di Luna's—show so much heart.'

Along with Kelsey's instinctive elegance of style comes treasurable directness and honesty as an interpreter. Never does the actual vocalism betray even a trace of grandstanding (despite the imposingly large-scale voice), and it profits immeasurably from an unfettered, rock-steady, Pavel Lisitsian-like flow of legato. I recall this not only in opera, but in recital items such as Finzi's 'Fear no more the heat of the sun' and Percy

Grainger's 'Shaller Brown'. Kelsey's performances of those two pieces are definitive and extraordinarily moving.

Mention of Lisitsian brings to mind Kelsey's deep respect for distinguished artists who have preceded him in the profession, some of whom have been his colleagues on stage. One of them, Ferruccio Furlanetto, declared on the website *musicalcriticism.com* in 2012, 'In today's complete lack of Verdian baritones, [Kelsey] represents a hope for this type of voice. From the first day I arrived [in San Francisco for *Attila*, with Kelsey as Ezio], I said to myself, "How beautifully he sings!" His type of vocality has been missing for a long time, basically from the times of Cappuccilli and Bruson. And I've had the chance to sing with both of them, so my ear is well trained! This voice type has a peculiar nobility of timbre. And Kelsey has the right colour, a beautiful technique—all the right qualities.'

One might not expect to find a budding Verdi baritone in Kelsey's birthplace—that mecca for all beachcombers, Honolulu, Hawaii. Are there particular qualities in Kelsey as a performer and human being that relate directly to being Hawaiian? 'I'd like to think that it accounts in some way for my ability to remain calm onstage. Colleagues comment on how I always seem relaxed during a show—nothing seems to faze me. I take pride in that.' And Hawaiians are 'very hospitable—to an extreme sometimes—but loving and caring, always watching out for everyone else. That's just part of our culture.'

Kelsey was born into a family of singers. His mother, classically trained in Hawaii, is well known there as a performer in concerts and recitals. She and Kelsey's sister are church-choir soloists, as is his father, who early on brought him into an *a cappella* men's ensemble. Hawaii Opera Theater (HOT) recruited the group to bolster the priests' chorus in *Aida*—the future Verdian's first appearance on stage, when all of 12 years old.

At that time Kelsey was singing tenor, 'with no clue what proper vocal technique was.

I knew I could hit all the notes and it didn't hurt.' After the voice began to deepen in his mid teens, he continued with the HOT chorus through high school. Solos in a church *Messiah* at 19 earned some attention, leading to the same piece with the Honolulu Symphony. There were roles with HOT's studio programme and at the University of Hawaii ('Vocally I was still trying to figure out who the hell I was at that point'). Once Kelsey's voice had settled into a lyric baritone, HOT cast him as Melot and Yamadori. He graduated at the end of 2002, 'and when I sang Marcello with HOT the following March, it felt like a nice send-off'.

■ Kelsey as Amonasro at Chicago Lyric Opera in 2012, with Hui He as Aida



Kelsey arrived in Chicago in 2003 to join the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists (now the Ryan Opera Center). He'd already participated in prestigious programmes at Chautauqua Institute and San Francisco Opera: 'At Chautauqua [the voice teacher] Marlena Malas corrected every single thing in my singing, stopping me every two seconds. Nobody had ever done that, and it helped me to become more critical later. I knew enough to absorb and not question.'

Following his summer in SFO's Merola programme, Kelsey gained hugely valuable experience singing Marcello with the company's touring ensemble, Western Opera Theater. He can still recite the route: 'We did the west coast, then two weeks off, then they flew us to Pittsburgh and we bussed all the way through Pennsylvania to New York, got up to Rhode Island, crawled down the coast, and ended up in Florida.' By the time the tour concluded, 'we were the hottest *Bohème* ticket anywhere!'. Kelsey came full circle in 2008, returning to SFO to sing Marcello on the main stage. At his Metropolitan Opera debut as Schaunard the previous year, many audience members had wondered why he wasn't singing Marcello; his endearing portrayal finally made it to the Met last season.

A particular joy of Kelsey's tenure in Lyric Opera's programme came from life-changing encounters with several of his heroes—above all Sherrill Milnes, with whom he worked on *Rigoletto*. 'My colleague Christian Van Horn said about my working with Sherrill, "Bringing *Rigoletto* to him is like taking the Bible to God"'. The practical lessons learned from Milnes could be gleaned only from someone with such extensive experience of singing and acting Verdi's misshapen jester: 'He emphasized having a straight line through your body. That equates with good posture, and with *Rigoletto*, as long as you maintain that posture in some way, you still have a healthy "environment" for singing. Sherrill didn't have to share his "trade secrets" with me—who was I? But I

■ Kelsey as *Rigoletto* in Toronto in 2011, with Ekaterina Sadovnikova as *Gilda*



■ Mature and early Verdi: (l.) as Paolo in '*Simon Boccanegra*' in Chicago; (r.) as Attila in San Francisco

recognized what it meant that he decided to bequeath such specific knowledge to me.' Kelsey hopes in the future to do the same himself 'if I discover young Verdi baritones who seem to need that kind of guidance'.

There were three years of supporting roles at Lyric Opera, but Kelsey was also given one lead, the Forester in a student matinee of *The Cunning Little Vixen*. This augured well for the future: he reprised the role with great success in his 'breakout' season, 2008-9, both times under Ozawa in the Laurent Pelly production—first at the Saito Kinen Festival in Japan, then at Florence's Maggio Musicale. The Forester's emotional journey has always affected Kelsey profoundly, and it shows on stage. 'In the final monologue he's much older, reflecting on all that's passed—especially the remorse he feels for this animal that gave him so much trouble earlier in his life before she was killed by a poacher. I'd like to think that the change in emotion speaks to him, showing him, "You're someone else now, you've grown, you've changed. Don't miss this moment. Life is trying to tell you something."'

Kelsey received offers comparatively quickly for dramatic Italian repertoire (*Cav & Pag*, for example), but he was constantly reminded that the time hadn't yet come. 'I didn't get much explanation—people generally just *told* me, "No, you have to wait. You'll understand when you're older!" But they were so right.' When he covered Amonasro while still in the Lyric Opera programme, 'Matthew Epstein [the company's artistic director at the time] attended the cover run-through and heard me. I said to him, "I can do it, but it's still work," and he said, "Of course it is!" It wasn't until five years later that I sang Amonasro on stage.'

That was at the 2009 Bregenz Festival, Kelsey's European debut (he'd previously attracted international attention in the 2005 BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition). By then he was more than ready for Amonasro, which he has repeated in

San Francisco and in Chicago. His Verdian gallery has grown further with role debuts as Paolo in *Simon Boccanegra* (Chicago, reprised under Muti in Rome), Falstaff (Saito Kinen Festival), and Montfort in *Les Vêpres siciliennes* (Frankfurt). Falstaff he considers still to be work-in-progress—he’s putting it aside for now, and is eager to take on Ford—but Montfort could have been written for him, ‘a lovely sing, with no obstacles at all. The Frankfurt production was set in Germany during the 1960s, and since most of the audience was alive then, they immediately understood how the director was using events of that period to mirror the conflict within the opera itself. It was brilliant.’

Rigoletto (which he sang first in Oslo, and has played subsequently in Toronto, in Zurich and at ENO) is currently the cornerstone of Kelsey’s Verdi performances. On stage he is utterly immersed in the character. ‘People say you’ll never truly understand Rigoletto until you have offspring, and they’re right. The closest I can get to it on stage is in protecting my soprano as someone so pure and so dear, putting myself in that mode with her at all times.’ He relishes the chance in Act 2 to ‘build the whole wall up, so to speak, and then, in “Cortigiani”, to take a sledgehammer and knock it all down’. Kelsey was helped in Oslo by a long rehearsal period (‘A lot of what Sherrill told me kicked in’). It set him up nicely for the new production in Zurich, where the three leads were given the freedom ‘to tell the story ourselves. When the director realized how passionate we were about it, she got out of our way and let us do it the way we needed to do it.’

One needs physical stamina for Rigoletto—no problem for Kelsey. He’s stronger than ever, especially after a careful, four-year process resulting in a cumulative weight loss totalling more than 100 pounds. His secret? ‘Know yourself enough to pay close attention to when your body tells you, whether it doesn’t like the way you’re singing, it doesn’t like the way you’re feeding it, or that you need exercise.’ Occasionally, living quarters when on the road can be helpful in that regard: ‘In Frankfurt I was in an elevator-less building. I just about killed myself dragging my luggage up five flights of stairs—there’s your cardio for the day right there!’

When we spoke, Kelsey was still awaiting confirmation of a long-dreamed-of role debut as Posa. He is anticipating *Ernani* in 2017, and figures Iago and Macbeth will follow in five to ten years. He also hopes to sing more Verdi with his wife, the soprano Marjorie Owens, who made her role debut as Aida at the Met in January and is now freelance, following four seasons at Dresden’s Semperoper. Kelsey joined her there for *Il trovatore*, and was disappointed that he wasn’t free to sing *Simon Boccanegra* with her last spring—‘That’s been the story of our life for the past four years!’.

Of course, Kelsey has a life on stage beyond Verdi, with successes including *Thaïs* (at the Edinburgh Festival, with Andrew Davis conducting), *The Pearl Fishers* (ENO) and Sancho Panza to Furlanetto’s Don Quichotte (Toronto): ‘I was *this* close to crying in Quichotte’s death scene. I’m holding him on the ground. There he is—Ferruccio Furlanetto!—singing the final scene for me and no one else, and he’s so close to me that he reaches up and pats me on the cheek.’ Sancho was a genuine change of pace, ‘the sidekick character—I’d never done a role like that before’. Kelsey would love to return to Mozart (the Count and Don Giovanni figured in his young-artist days), and he’s interested in pursuing Wagner—Kurwenal, for example. For a concert in Hawaii, he learned the Senta-Dutchman duet especially for the chance to sing it with his wife.

Non-operatic concerts occupy Kelsey only occasionally, as in his glorious contribution to the San Francisco Symphony’s Mahler 8 (released on CD). His schedule hasn’t left much time for recitals either (the major ones have been at Carnegie Hall’s Weill Hall,



■ Kelsey as Guy de Montfort in Oper Frankfurt’s ‘*Les Vêpres siciliennes*’, with Elza van den Heever as *Hélène*, 2013

Washington’s Kennedy Center and the Cerritos Center in Los Angeles). He hopes to get an unusual recital project off the ground, ‘an all-Hawaiian song cycle. There’s a ton of Hawaiian music that completely fits art-song style, but none of it has written-out piano accompaniments. I’d love to sit down with prominent Hawaiian arrangers and get all the piano parts dictated, so I can then bring the music to an accompanist and perform it.’

For the moment, though, opera is Kelsey’s world. Despite his special associations with Lyric and SFO, and his still-developing relationship with the Met (where he returned for a much-praised *Germont* last winter), most of his work will be Europe-based during the next few seasons. His performances abroad have brought him enormous satisfaction, compensating for huge amounts of time away from home (Chicago) and family (Hawaii). As a fellow singer, his wife commiserates: ‘She understands not just the long rehearsals, but also the stressful travel days getting to the next gig, finding the address for wherever you’re staying, reaching out to the opera company for information—especially in Europe, where you’re often left to the wolves and have to fend for yourself.’

Opera companies desperately need Quinn Kelsey—consequently, it’s gratifying indeed to hear from him that he’s in it for the long haul. Making his way through the challenges of an international career, he finds inspiration in such artists as Furlanetto, Milnes and the baritone he understudied during his Ryan Opera Center years, Mark Delavan, ‘who treated me as a peer and gave me validation. That has a tremendous impact on a young singer who’s in the trenches, just trying to make something of all the information and attention that’s being dumped on him and trying to figure out which way is up. It’s wonderful to have a major artist come along and say, “Yes, you’re going in the right direction.”’