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RUSSELL THOMAS

ROGER PINES

Thomas had been due to sing his first Parsifal in Houston this month



Russell Thomas's singing instantly commands attention with his strikingly individual timbre, instinctive musicality and extraordinary eloquence. Singing truly seems the very core of his being. Indeed, he views it as literally a matter of life and death: 'I sing to save my life. Singing has done that in so many ways. I had a tough childhood, and for me it was therapy. It was what I looked forward to—until my son was born, the *only* thing I had to look forward to. Then I had this other body to be responsible for, and of course, that's something I take very seriously. But music and singing are survival for me, like needing air and water. I don't know how to *be* without being a singer.'

Now entering his mid 40s, the American tenor has built his voice and career astutely, with each new role added at precisely the right time. Thomas maintains a standard of excellence that has made a powerful impact internationally, from the Met and the major houses of Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco to the Deutsche Oper Berlin and the Salzburg Festival. London first heard him at the Barbican in 2007 in John Adams's *A Flowering Tree*—he also recorded the piece with the LSO—and subsequently he made a memorable debut as Gabriele Adorno in *Simon Boccanegra* at the ROH.

An artist with a profound respect for great singing, Thomas has a particularly vivid memory of that *Boccanegra*: 'At rehearsals I'd look up at Ferruccio Furlanetto during our duet and swoon, because the sound coming out of that man's throat was phenomenal.' Flanked on stage by Furlanetto and Thomas Hampson, Thomas didn't simply hold his own; from first note to last it was clear that an important Verdi interpreter had arrived, possessing all the necessary vocal heft as well as the finesse.

Authentic style is vital to Thomas, whose singing of Italian repertoire has been greatly influenced by recordings of Carlo Bergonzi. While he appreciates the heroic qualities of Mario Filippeschi, Mario Del Monaco and Franco Bonisolti, Bergonzi remains the paragon for Thomas. 'His singing is without excess, it's honest, it's clean, and it respects the score. You hear him trying to do every single thing on the page. You don't often find that with singers, especially tenors of Bergonzi's generation.'

Verdi has become central to Thomas's operatic career, with 11 roles to date. He's risen to the varied vocal challenges, whether singing Foresto in *Attila* (Metropolitan

Opera, for Riccardo Muti's company debut), Don Carlo (Deutsche Oper Berlin, Washington National Opera) or Otello (a recent long-awaited portrayal, acclaimed first in an Atlanta concert, later on stage in Toronto, Berlin and Washington). Thomas freely admits that he's still figuring out how to sing 'Di quella pira' confidently in the written key ('I refuse to take it down a half-tone, as so many people do'), but he's enjoyed successes as Manrico in Munich, Cincinnati and Chicago. Both as singer and actor, he's felt particular satisfaction portraying Stiffelio in Frankfurt (the music fitted him perfectly, and the opera's milieu was transplanted to the American Charismatic Church, 'something I know a lot about'), and, surprisingly, Don Alvaro in Frank Castorf's recent controversial *Forza* production in Berlin: 'It was the craziest experience—there were people throwing spaghetti at each other on stage—but it kept me on my toes, with some of my best singing and probably my best dramatic work.'

The tenor could spend his entire career singing Verdi, but he knows he would stagnate artistically without a varied repertoire. His voice—superbly produced, from the warm velvety lower octave to the thrillingly bright, ringing top—is essentially a full lyric that can gain the weight of a spinto when the music requires it. This makes possible a versatility encompassing practically every style available to a tenor, from Mozart to John Adams.

Thomas came to opera by accident. Growing up in Miami, every day he'd come home from school and turn on the radio. One day he found the classical station and heard some amazing singing from Birgit Nilsson and Plácido Domingo in the famous DG recording of Weber's *Oberon*. 'I had no clue what those voices were singing *about*, but they had such power and energy. It was enthralling.' Thomas's very religious grandmother, who raised him, wasn't partial to much secular music, but—in the days

Russell Thomas in Verdi: as Manrico in Munich in 2018, with Jamie Barton as Azucena



before CDs—she did buy him opera tapes. She took him to New York on holiday, where he saw *Carmen*, his first opera, which excited him even more.

Thomas had already done some singing in church, but the die really was cast in his high-school choir. Here was a special voice, one that invariably received high marks in annual evaluations. After hearing him, the noted American mezzo-soprano Joy Davidson asked what he was planning after high school. ‘I said I was going to military college. The application was already done, and with my marks and recommendations, I was a shoo-in.’ But Davidson had another idea: ‘Take some voice lessons with me. Then, when you sing for people, I guarantee you’ll get into every school you apply to and they’ll give you money.’

Davidson’s suggestion changed everything: the budding tenor entered Miami’s renowned New World School for the Arts, where he earned his undergraduate degree as a voice major. During those years Thomas learnt all he could from remarkable mentors: Davidson, who ran the college’s opera programme; the voice teacher David Crawford (hearing Thomas’s already easy upper register, he declared, ‘It’s from God’); and the coach Elaine Rinaldi, who discovered his affinity for languages and created the foundation of what is now an immaculate sense of style.

On stage Thomas needed to relax and enjoy the character he was playing (‘Joy would make me sing in opera workshop and have people make faces at me so I would loosen up’). Even today, Thomas considers the dramatic side of operatic performance an ongoing challenge. He was shy as a child, and ‘maybe I’ve never really come out of my shyness. I’m an introvert at heart. The physicality wasn’t my “ministry”, as I like to say, but I can colour my voice in ways that many other singers don’t take time to figure out. That’s where my strength is—I can act with my voice.’

In seeing how a professional opera company functioned, it helped enormously for Thomas to sing in Florida Grand Opera’s chorus, where he also had his first exposure to major artists. Over several years his development was immeasurably enhanced by participating in some of America’s most distinguished programmes for young singers: those of Opera North (the US company, based in Lebanon, New Hampshire) and the major companies of Tulsa, Seattle, Miami, St Louis and Sarasota.

Thomas in Mozart: (l.) as Tito in Los Angeles, 2019; as Idomeneo at Salzburg, with Paula Murrihy as Idamante and Nicole Chevalier as Elettra, also in 2019r





As Verdi's *Stiffelio* in Frankfurt in 2016

The long journey through young artists' programmes culminated at the Met, where the Lindemann Young Artist Development Program brought Thomas his first contact with James Levine. 'His sitting at the piano playing for me was life-changing. He encouraged me to make my voice serve the music in the deepest way possible. He also let me sing Mozart with my voice, letting it be a fuller Mozart sound. When he played "Dies Bildnis" with me, I sang it so easily! He said, "Release the sound—don't sing for yourself, sing for the public." Simple things like that made a world of difference.' Just three years later, Thomas starred as Tamino at the Met.

The tenor's versatility was put to the test as early as 2007-8: during that season, he mastered the formidable score of *A Flowering Tree* (first in Vienna, prior to the Barbican performance), but he also excelled as Tamino, singing 26 performances with Welsh National Opera. *A Flowering Tree* reunited him with Peter Sellars, who'd previously directed his European debut (Mozart's *Zaide*, Wiener Festwochen, 2005). Sellars's productions of four Adams operas did much to establish Thomas internationally, as did his victory in the 2010 Viñas Competition in Barcelona. Once he signed with the manager Michael Bencheitrit, his career really began to take off.

Today Thomas moves freely from Idomeneo (Salzburg) and Tito (Los Angeles) to Florestan (Cincinnati) and the more macho bel canto heroes (Roberto Devereux in San Francisco, Pollione in four major houses—including Valencia with the miraculous 66-year-old Mariella Devia, 'which was like a vocal masterclass onstage every night'). Add to this gallery other roles as diverse as Loge (New York Philharmonic), Hoffmann (Toronto, Seattle), the Verdi parts already mentioned, and four roles in operas by John Adams, and you have an exceedingly well-rounded and adventurous operatic artist.

Thomas has some still-unfulfilled dream roles, although one of them, Tannhäuser, is on the books for a future season. He longs to sing Peter Grimes (companies should be clamouring to present him in that role). There's much more that would suit his voice



Early Thomas: as Tamino with the Three Ladies (Camilla Roberts, Louise Armit and Joanne Thomas) at Welsh National Opera in 2008

ideally, especially in Slavonic repertoire. It would also be wonderful to hear him in a role from his young-artist days, the Male Chorus in *The Rape of Lucretia*, which would play to all his strengths.

As a concert artist Thomas has made *Das Lied von der Erde* a calling card, in performances under Donald Runnicles, Louis Langrée and Gustavo Dudamel: ‘I understand how to sing that music, and I enjoy it every single time.’ His greatest wish in concert repertoire is to sing *The Dream of Gerontius* (are you listening, British orchestras?). Among his successes in recital has been London’s Rosenblatt series, for which he boldly presented Barber’s *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, generally sung

by sopranos. ‘It’s important for me to do American music in recitals, and *Knoxville* is one of my favourite pieces of music. I thought, “The text is written by a man, and it’s about his own childhood. Why don’t more men sing it?”’

Thomas has risen to the top against difficult odds, for opera has never given black men the prominence they deserve. ‘There’s a lot of work to do. Companies bring black male singers in for *Porgy and Bess* and *Show Boat*, or the rare case of an opera like [Anthony Davis’s] *Amistad* or [Jeanine Tesori’s] *Blue*—they get opportunities that don’t go further than those “black parts”. Everything still depends on white people in white spaces making these decisions. Until that changes, nothing else will change.’

Thomas wishes more young black singers would approach him about mentorship. He knows the voices are there, and he applauds the trailblazing Artists-in-Training Program at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, enabling talented singers to work with opera professionals while still in high school. ‘Every year that I was a young artist in St Louis,’ recalls Thomas, ‘there were kids who’d come up through that programme.’

After the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020 and widespread protests condemning systemic racism, Thomas participated in an online panel, ‘Lift Every Voice’, presented by LA Opera. He and five black colleagues, all with distinguished careers, spoke about the challenges facing black artists in opera. Accessible on YouTube, the panel is essential viewing for the entire international operatic community. ‘We’ve had that kind of discussion all the time, although never publicly until now,’ notes Thomas. ‘But to have a conversation about it isn’t enough. People don’t just need to hear the conversation—the time has come to stop talking and start doing.’

Years ago Thomas didn't notice any lack of black representation at Florida Grand Opera. 'Our music director was Willie Anthony Waters. We had Marvis Martin and Curtis Rayam on stage. When I was in the chorus, Roberta Alexander was singing Donna Elvira. I didn't realize there was an issue until I started travelling. The more performances you attend, the fewer black people you see on stage, and the more you go into those spaces where donors are, the fewer black faces you see. I'm trying as much as possible to be a very public advocate for black people in classical music—especially opera, because that's where I can have influence at this point in my career. I can say, "You're sending a little white girl to ask black donors for their money, and then they attend the performance and see no black faces on stage. They're thinking, 'Who am I giving my money to?'" When change happens from the inside, more black people will be sitting at the table, more black people will come to the theatre, and more black people will be on stage.'

Thomas reiterates the need to diversify opera companies from the ground up. 'I don't see a 30-per-cent black staff working at the Met. What about stagehands? What about people in fundraising and marketing? This doesn't happen. The Met is right across the street from the projects. Why isn't there a programme where people from the projects are invited to dress rehearsals? It's such an easy thing to do. That's the kind of cultivation of relationships that isn't happening enough.'

The tenor currently makes his home in Atlanta, and for very practical reasons: 'It's cheap and there's a great airport! I also live in a community that is very tight. I can leave my house for three months at a time and not worry about people breaking in.' Thomas has kept a fairly low profile during the pandemic, although when we spoke via Zoom, he was planning to perform an at-home recital for LA Opera. His major non-musical interest has always been politics, which means the self-described 'news junkie' has been spending many hours glued to CNN. He also relishes his 'comfort music', especially Nina Simone, Shirley Bassey and a lot of hip-hop: 'That's all just fun for me. It's a world that I can be in and maintain who I am as a human being, without having to think about work.'

Of course, work is never far from Thomas's mind, including his teaching. When offered a three-year contract, he joined the Indiana University music faculty part-time in August 2020. The timing seemed just right for Thomas, who was glad to be sought out as an artist with a thriving stage career: 'Had it been years later, with my having to go asking for the job, that wouldn't have been a favourable position to be in, so I needed to take the opportunity when it came.' In lessons Thomas's priority is 'to focus on stripping away the excess, the "noise", anything you're trying to put into your voice that doesn't do it any good. Let's cultivate a voice that's efficient and works for you.' With Covid, Zoom lessons are the norm, which Thomas knows isn't ideal: 'Some things about the physicality of singing you just can't teach over the internet.'

As for virtually all singers, life has been uncertain for Thomas during the pandemic, with numerous cancelled productions, including his first Parsifal (Houston) and Ernani (San Francisco). 'My next engagement should have been *Carmen* at the Met. Then there's *Forza* again in Berlin. Do I pick up the scores or not?'

Let's hope that opera companies will soon be performing again and Russell Thomas will be back on stage, using his stirring voice and generous spirit to nourish his audience.