



## Double Duty

Conductor Bertrand de Billy tells Alexandra Day about balancing the melodies of *Faust* and the melodrama of *La Gioconda*.

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### Why isn't *La Gioconda* performed more often, at the Met and elsewhere?

It's an opera that hasn't been done in a long time because you need the world's best singers. You need six completely incredible performers. We have a really great team, and we're all on the same wavelength. *Gioconda* was one of the Met's flagship operas for years, thanks to Milanov, and it was performed all the time. It was performed then like *Bohème* now. The orchestra knew it by heart, everyone knew it by heart. But now *Gioconda* is much less known. In Europe, too.

### So what happened?

In my opinion, we didn't have the singers we needed for a while. You need a constellation of singers. *Gioconda* isn't necessarily the kind of opera where you say, "Ah, I absolutely want to do *Gioconda* for the music." It's really an opera where you need great singers. I think you have to have them, but it's not easy. Here we have them. And it's because of that that I've come to do it here.

### Is it all about the six principals, then?

It's a chorus's opera too—very much so—and that's why it's fantastic here at the Met. I adore this chorus. We've worked together for a long time, and they're so quick, so generous on stage. They sing marvelously.

### How would you describe *La Gioconda* for someone who hasn't heard it before?

It's an Italian opera, but one that's also a bit of French grand opera, with the grand ballet for the orchestra, "The Dance of the Hours," which is a lot of fun. It's bel canto that's somewhere between *Aida* and *Otello*. It's between old Verdi and not quite what we call verismo. And it pulls a bit from all directions, especially from the French grand opera tradition. Often, in operas, the ballets are bad, because the composers didn't even write the ballets themselves. But Ponchielli wrote one of the most beautiful ballets that exists, which Disney used for *Fantasia*, which is why all parents know this dance too. So it's an opera that's really agreeable for the orchestra, because of the ballet, very interesting for the chorus, because of the great choral passages, and for the singers. It's an incredible challenge for all of them.

### And for the public?

In my opinion, it's a work that's very direct, a work that touches, a work with grand romanticism, universal sentiment. It's a confrontation between pure romanticism, an impossible love, politics, and intrigue. There's a bit of everything. The public is on some level hoping for operas like this. It's like *Bohème*. If we stopped doing *Bohème* for 20 years, and then performed it, it would work right away. It's like *Traviata*, *Tosca* – operas that touch – because the music is beautiful, direct. I have a lot of confidence in *Gioconda*.

### You're also conducting *Faust* right now. What it's like working on two operas at the same time?

You have to know both operas really well, that's for sure. And you have to be ready to move from one opera to the next. I'm not too worried about that. I have a very good assistant for *Faust*, who knows exactly what I want to do, and the pianist, who knows exactly what I want to do, and the coach for *Faust*, with whom I did *Roméo et Juliette* last season.

### How do American audiences respond to French repertoire?

The American public loves French repertoire, almost more than in France. It's funny. But that might be because Jimmy Levine has done a lot of it, and he loves the French repertoire. He's even done things that we don't dare do in Vienna [where de Billy is music director of the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra]. Here he's done *Les Dialogues des Carmélites*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*. In Vienna, I will do them, but he's already done them here. So there's a real openness to French opera, but all the same I have a lot of confidence in *Gioconda*. *Faust* and *Gioconda* really aren't so different.

### What's special about performing these works at the Met?

I love this orchestra—we work really well together. The repertoire here is very broad. It goes from Mozart to contemporary music. And the big advantage of this orchestra, aside from the fact that it's one of the two or three best orchestras in the world, is that they approach all repertoire with the same conviction. And that's rare. It's a specialty here. At other opera houses where I work with some great, great, great orchestras, when we play great repertoire by Mozart, Strauss, Wagner, they're [raises his fist,

with brio]. But if I were to arrive to do *Gioconda*, it would be... [cringes]. So-called bel canto—there they don't like it. They do it, but not with a lot of conviction. Here, whether you were doing *Gioconda*, *Faust*, *Tristan und Isolde*, or *Madama Butterfly*, it would be with the same level of engagement, the same enthusiasm. That's the house specialty.

### **Speaking of specialties, you're best known here for your work in French repertoire. Is that a reputation you embrace?**

That's a bit of a problem, actually. Because it's true that in the U.S., you're quickly pigeonholed. It's part of my role as a French conductor to do French and Italian repertoire, to defend it here—even though I don't really need to do this, because Jimmy also does it really well, and loves it. But it's true that afterwards, it's very hard to break out. In Europe, I've managed. I love doing French repertoire, but I'd also like to do other things.

### **How much—if at all—do you adapt your conducting style for each production?**

You don't conduct an opera the same way with different singers. If you have a voice that's lighter, heavier, more generous, etc., you do things differently. As for the tempi, there's a story that Daniel Barenboim told me: When you go on a trip, do you first buy a suitcase, and then decide where you're going and with whom? No, you decide where you're going and with whom, then you buy a suitcase. Otherwise the suitcase will be too big, and everything will get mixed together, or the suitcase will be too small, and you won't have enough room. Tempo—it's the same. You won't have the same tempo with a Borodina as you would with someone with a smaller voice. So it's just a matter of knowing people, and then finding a common style. It's like a mayonnaise; everything has to take little by little. You have to show up with a concept, with a conviction, and then adapt to the singers you have, the hall, the mood, everything.

### **So with these two operas filling your head all day, what kind of music do you listen to at night?**

Jazz. [He laughs.] A lot of jazz. Yes, I really like it. When I did the Wagner tetralogy, I conducted each opera ten times—so 40 operas over two years—and every time I had an opera that was finishing, I would arrive home at 2 in the morning, and I listened to Gregorian chants. To cleanse. Not that it's dirty. But you have to take complete extremes. From *Götterdämmerung* to Tallis Scholars or something like that. Ça change!

Cafeteria Chat: Listen to conductor Bertrand de Billy-in his native French-in the Met cafeteria during a break in rehearsals.

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