

From Law to the Opera!

an interview by Beatriz Luna Gijón

At the beginning of August there was an excellent concert held in the Nieves church in Torrox by a bass baritone accompanied by piano, who sang arias from various well known operas.

Salvador Fernández, born in Torrox 30 years ago, is one of those "rare birds" that you can only occasionally find in these small Spanish villages. After finishing secondary school, Salvador continued studying law at the University of Granada until he heard María Callas for the first time singing opera on a tape. From then on, he began co-ordinating his studies of Law with his recently found vocation by attending lessons at the Conservatorio de Música de Granada and self-teaching at home.

That was during his last year at university and two years more that he spent putting up oppositions to become a judge. He then had to face the fact that he did not want to be a lawyer he wanted to be an opera singer!

"What did your parents say when you told them you wouldn't be a lawyer at all?", asked 'INSIGHT'.

"It was a very hard time for us. Nobody could understand that I was rejecting a socially prestigious career to become a mere singer. Especially when I came from a family which had no contacts with the world of music. They knew, and they were right, that there are many people around in this world and in order to succeed, it is essential not only to be a good singer but to have contacts and, let's say, to have good marketing in order to sell yourself".

However, Salvador managed to carry on studying at the Conservatory of Granada where he got a scholarship to go to Vienna and attend a course with a prestigious professor.

"I soon realised how poor my musical training in Spain had been. In three years at the Conservatory I had had as many as four different teachers, each with his own opinion regarding how to work with my voice. When you are taught a theoretical subject as Civil law, for instance, it is irrelevant how many teachers you have. The information is there in a book and it's exactly the same for everybody. But when you are learning to use your voice as your instrument, finding out your own resonance, your pace of breathing, concentration and

continuity are essential, you shouldn't have a new teacher to begin again every two months. So, going to Vienna was a landmark in my life. I could go to the theatre almost every day and listen to very important singers who are well known all over the world. Thus, you realise that they are not always perfect and they have their ups and downs as everybody. That, as well as taking part in auditions and competitions reinforced my self esteem and made me feel more confident.

My teachers had advised me to sing as a high pitched baritone but I changed to a bass baritone so that I'm singing in a lower tessitura nowadays. But the stages are the best school I have had. And there is no teacher who can teach you what you learn at a concert when you have to sing a whole hour without tiring your voice and making sure that all the notes, the highest and the lowest can be heard. Or singing at an opera where you have to sing with some other singers, to play a role and to follow the orchestra at the same time".

- What about your repertoire? Which composers are your favourite?

I feel comfortable singing Mozart, Rossini, Bellini and Verdi, who is my favourite, though not the easiest. Rossini is 'healthy', you can keep singing Rossini's music for an hour and won't feel tired. Regarding Mozart, I'm not as fond of him. His lyrics are sometimes a bit stupid and it's difficult to sing them well. Verdi obliges you to create a tension, a dramatic effect. Last year I sang 4 of Verdi's arias at a theatre near Vienna and I was very happy with the results".

One may think that this good looking young man has everything in his favour to succeed as an opera singer, but he is a bit sceptical instead. "I lost 6 or 7 years which were essential to begin in this world", he says. "Nevertheless, lower voices need more time to reach their plenitude and that's something that directors know well".

Salvador is spending his life as a professional musician but he also works as a teacher of Spanish and has been recently offered a course on the history of music in the 'Instituto Cervantes of Vienna'. "This is a world where you are not properly paid for the work you do", he says. And we, singers, have studied and worked a lot to sing well, we have invested a lot of time and money in our training so that the least you can expect is to be considered as any other workers".

His last work was in a zarzuela (or operetta, Spanish musical comedy) "El Barberillo de Lavapiés" which was staged in Vienna and Salvador was chosen in an audition amongst 200 competitors. He also worked in the opera in Italy where he learned to speak Italian. In Spain, he sang in Santiago de Compostela, Jerez, Madrid and every year he sings in Malaga in May. "At the moment I'm trying to go to as many auditions as possible, even in Spain, and I started to send my curriculum to the agencies in Madrid and Barcelona".

Recently he has been chosen amongst hundreds of candidates to compete in the prestigious contest named after 'José Carreras' in Pamplona. This is a world-wide contest that includes only 60 participants from all over the world and is a sort of show window for them. The jury is integrated by directors of European theatres and the prizes consist of scholarships and grants. "I think the prizes are not as relevant as the fact of being heard by those directors who can think of you any time in the future", he says.



Salvador Fernández, right acknowledges the generous applause from his home town.

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