

## GIUSEPPE FILIANOTI

Roger Pines

The tenor returns to the Met this month as Mozart's Tito

Opera-goers internationally know Giuseppe Filianoti above all as Donizetti's comic Nemorino and tragic Edgardo. The tenor brings unexpected qualities to these much-admired portrayals: his Nemorino, although funny, also has a special depth and intensity, while his impetuous Edgardo conveys a deeply affecting sweetness rarely encountered in that character. Add to this a clear, ringing, vividly expressive lyric voice, natural stage presence and the ideal *physique du rôle*.

Filianoti adores both *Lucia* and *Elisir*, but he also craves any chance to explore repertoire beyond what one might typically expect. How many Italian tenors claim Peter Grimes as their dream role? While recognizing the excellence of past interpreters (Pears, Vickers, Heppner and especially Langridge), Filianoti hopes to convince a director to stage the *Grimes* he has in mind. He envisions Britten's opera 'like a James Dean film, where everyone is *bello e maledetto*, with all of fate against them'. Having not yet been afforded the opportunity to portray Grimes, Filianoti admits to anticipating difficulty in persuading companies to cast him in a role not at all associated with Italian tenors. One hopes he will succeed in his quest, as he did in making highly successful role debuts as Tamino (Rome), Flamand (Cagliari) and Tom Rakewell (Palermo).

When we talk in Chicago, Filianoti recalls his youth and the progress of his career with enormous relish. He grew up in Reggio Calabria, the middle child of two administrators for the local post office. Already an enthusiastic singer at the age of three, within a few years he was his Catholic school's leading choir soloist. A rock-band singer as a teenager, he applied to his home town's conservatory simply to make himself a stronger performer in popular music. After producing some impressive high notes at his audition, he was accepted into the singing class. His teacher, the mezzo Anna Vandi (with whom he still studies), gave him 'an opportunity to understand what music is and how to express music in different styles. She was as much a coach as a voice teacher, with a wonderful musicality.'

Vandi pushed her young tenor to enter competitions, which Filianoti usually won. Still, when his parents urged him to broaden his educational background, he enrolled at the University of Messina to study modern literature. After earning university *and* conservatory degrees, he headed to Milan intending to prepare for a career in journalism. Around the same time, however, he participated in masterclasses given by Alfredo Kraus—the turning point of his life.



Following the classes in Milan, Filianoti hoped to study at Kraus's academy near Madrid, but after his wife's death, the legendary tenor declined to teach there that year. Filianoti instead applied to La Scala's academy, where Riccardo Muti was present for his audition. The maestro asked, 'Where do you come from?' 'Calabria.' 'Ah, you are a *terrone* [a man of the earth, also translated as a man of the south] like me!' enthused Muti, a Neapolitan. After Filianoti sang Edgardo's aria, Muti told the academy director Leyla Gencer, 'Questo lo prendete [Take that one]!'

During two years in Milan, Filianoti immersed himself in opera, performing in only one production at the academy (Sarti's *Giulio Sabino*) but understudying numerous roles at La Scala itself. Muti, the company's music director at the time, has remained a crucial mentor ('For me he's the beginning of everything in music'). Up until Kraus's death in 1999, the Spanish tenor, too, continued to play a major role in Filianoti's development. Once the young tenor's career was launched, he'd have lessons in different cities, whenever Kraus was available. One dictum from him made a lasting impact: 'He said to me, "Yes, first you sing technically, but then immediately you have to control your mind, your emotions, to try to put yourself in a good mood to sing". If one's mind feels serene and free, 'you will be free in your voice'.

In 1998 Filianoti made his professional debut, aged just 23. His first agent, Gianna Galli, had arranged for him to audition for the conductor Daniele Gatti, who cast him as Donizetti's Dom Sébastien in Bergamo. What a prospect for an inexperienced tenor—a Duprez role, graced with many a *do di petto*. Filianoti recalls, 'I had no awareness of how difficult it was'. He would reprise it seven years later in concert at Covent Garden, a performance released on CD by Opera Rara.

■ *Filianoti as Macduff in last year's 'Macbeth' at Salzburg*



Filianoti quickly developed a desire to cover the bases in terms of repertoire. Alas, Baroque opera hasn't figured prominently in his activities (the possibility of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* at La Scala with Gardiner never materialized), but Mozart has offered Filianoti some splendid opportunities. Having been captivated by *La clemenza di Tito* when singing it in Turin (Graham Vick's production, which Filianoti adored), the tenor can hardly wait to return to the title role at the Met. Tito, of course, requires impressive coloratura facility, which Filianoti exhibited in *Idomeneo* in Hamburg, performing the full florid version of 'Fuor del mar'. He's proud of having sung Tamino in German; although he doesn't speak the language, he gleefully demonstrates that he still remembers all the dialogue.

Naturally, everyone expects bel canto of an Italian lyric tenor. Comic Rossini is excessively light for Filianoti, who has restricted himself to the dramas—*Tancredi* and *Le Siège de Corinthe* (both in Pesaro), *Moïse et Pharaon* (with Muti, opening La Scala's 2005-6 season). His Donizetti war horses have taken Filianoti everywhere, with five major houses—Chicago, Vienna, Munich, Barcelona and Palermo—presenting him in both roles.

■ *Filianoti's previous Tito: in Graham Vick's Turin production, 2008*



Nemorino is a character he vigorously defends: 'It's easy to do the stupid peasant, but he's *never* stupid! It's not written in the music.' Filianoti is profoundly moved by Edgardo, who 'has *nothing*—his love for Lucia is the only reason he is still alive. Destiny is against him until the end. That makes him interesting.'

To his great credit, Filianoti performs Donizetti's *La Favorite* exclusively in the original French (Las Palmas, Bologna, Genoa). He enjoys not only Fernand's celebrated last-act *romance* 'but also playing this romantic part—to be a priest, then fall in love with a woman and come back to being a priest again'. Filianoti is also looking forward to his first *Roberto Devereux* ('The prison-scene aria is *amazing*'), in a season and house still to be announced. He would consider Bellini's *Pollione* if the conductor truly understood singing: 'Callas was Callas,' the tenor asserts, 'because she had de Sabata, Votto, Gui and Giulini there.'



■ As Tom Rakewell in *Palermo*, 2008, with Carmela Remigio as Anne Trulove

Filianoti has taken on lyric Verdi—the Duke, Alfredo, Fenton—as well as the sterner demands of Don Carlos (Zurich) and Macduff (Salzburg’s 2011 production under Muti). When we spoke, a new Verdi assignment was looming large, *I due Foscari* for Hamburg. Macduff’s aria excepted, Filianoti has yet to feel genuinely transported onstage singing Verdi (‘Maybe I have to wait for *Un ballo in maschera*’). He did have a memorable experience in Palermo in Boito’s *Mefistofele* and was much affected by ‘Giunto sul passo estremo’, Faust’s final aria, ‘when you are alone onstage and your whole life is there’.

French roles hugely attract Filianoti who, when we met, was eagerly anticipating his first *Manon* (Paris). He’s had great successes as Hoffmann, having found food for thought in the productions of Christine Mielitz (Hamburg), Bartlett Sher (the Met) and particularly Robert Carsen (Paris) where ‘the audience, every night, they were crazy!’. In Carsen’s concept the character was a singer, and ‘there were all these connections about the life of the artist. Everything is against this poor man who has to work, suffering and never finding a real love.’

Carsen greatly enjoyed his collaboration with Filianoti: ‘Apart from singing the role so well,’ says the Canadian director, ‘Giuseppe was very moving and touching because he had the desperate quality of Hoffmann, but also the *creative* quality. The prologue and epilogue are a later time in Hoffmann’s life, while the other acts move from the very young and innocent, then romantic, to the degenerate Hoffmann of the *Giulietta* act. Giuseppe was able to make that journey successfully. We worked on it very intensely together—he was terrific. In that very big theatre, the Bastille, his Hoffmann really spoke to everyone very clearly.’ Carsen subsequently drew another memorable portrayal from Filianoti, Don Ottavio in the new *Don Giovanni* that opened La Scala’s 2011-12 season.

Filianoti almost invariably plays romantic heroes, so chemistry with his female partners is crucial. This brings to mind a word frequently heard from him in conversation—‘connection’. Clearly, in every element of his performing he longs to feel

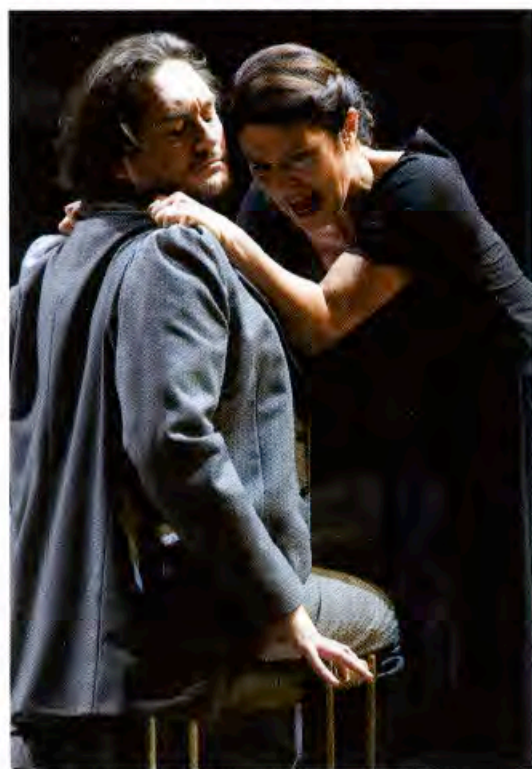
somehow connected, whether to the music, the production or his colleagues. He sensed that connection with the Venezuelan mezzo Nancy Fabiola Herrera, the Charlotte to his first Werther at Las Palmas, whom he mentions with particularly heartfelt appreciation. He's found wonderful rapport, too, with his leading ladies of *La rondine* (Gheorghiu), *Lucia* (Dessay, Ciofi) and *Elisir* (Netrebko, Damrau).

A few special connections onstage with male colleagues have stood out, particularly with Bruson in *Traviata*: 'When you work with him onstage, you have the impression that he *is* your father. It's not only the way he's doing the *Regie* with you—he's just living the role in that moment.' There have also been exciting collaborations with Hampson (*Don Carlos*), Furlanetto (*Mefistofele*) and Kwiecień (*Lucia*).

Being a theatrically adventurous artist, Filianoti embraces any opportunity to be inspired by an imaginative director. In that respect, he was particularly thrilled with the Bayerische Staatsoper's 2009 *Elisir*. The opera debutant David Bösch tailored the production precisely to Filianoti's gifts as an actor. The tenor revelled in playing Nemorino as a cross between Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. In this production the character is 'so cute, so nice, that he uses lipstick to make a big heart on his shirt to show Adina'. During the *romanza* Filianoti heard gasps from the audience—no surprise, since he sang it perched high atop a streetlight. Was he scared? 'No, because I am crazy!'

The tenor sadly cites another *Elisir* that proved less congenial—the Laurent Pelly production (Paris, London). Filianoti was unhappy 'because it was too much to ask the singer to do those movements, that running all over the stage'. Bösch's *Elisir*, Carsen's *Hoffmann*, Vick's *Clemenza* and Hugo de Ana's *Faust* (Rome) have all been special

■ *A talent for tragedy and comedy: (l.) as Cherubini's Giasone, with Anna Caterina Antonacci as Medea, in Turin, 2008; (r.) as Donizetti's Nemorino, with Diana Damrau as Adina, at Covent Garden, 2009*





■ *A tenor reborn: Filianoti's post-cancer return to the stage, as Hoffmann in Hamburg in 2007, with Nino Surguladze as Nicklausse*

highlights in his life as a singing actor, 'when you have this connection with the stage director, and they understand you and trust you and try to create a character with you'.

The typically nomadic existence of a successful international singer brings Filianoti his share of distress—mainly because he constantly misses his young son, Riccardo. Every moment the tenor can spend at his home in Piacenza is precious. 'I'm a very quiet person,' he confesses. 'I love my house, I love my books, I love to have my stuff all around.' He's a voracious reader, especially philosophy, psychology and 'high-level literature—not something very easy just to pass the time'. His interest in theatre includes particular admiration for Pinter: 'Those plays are about the mysterious things in life—I love that.'

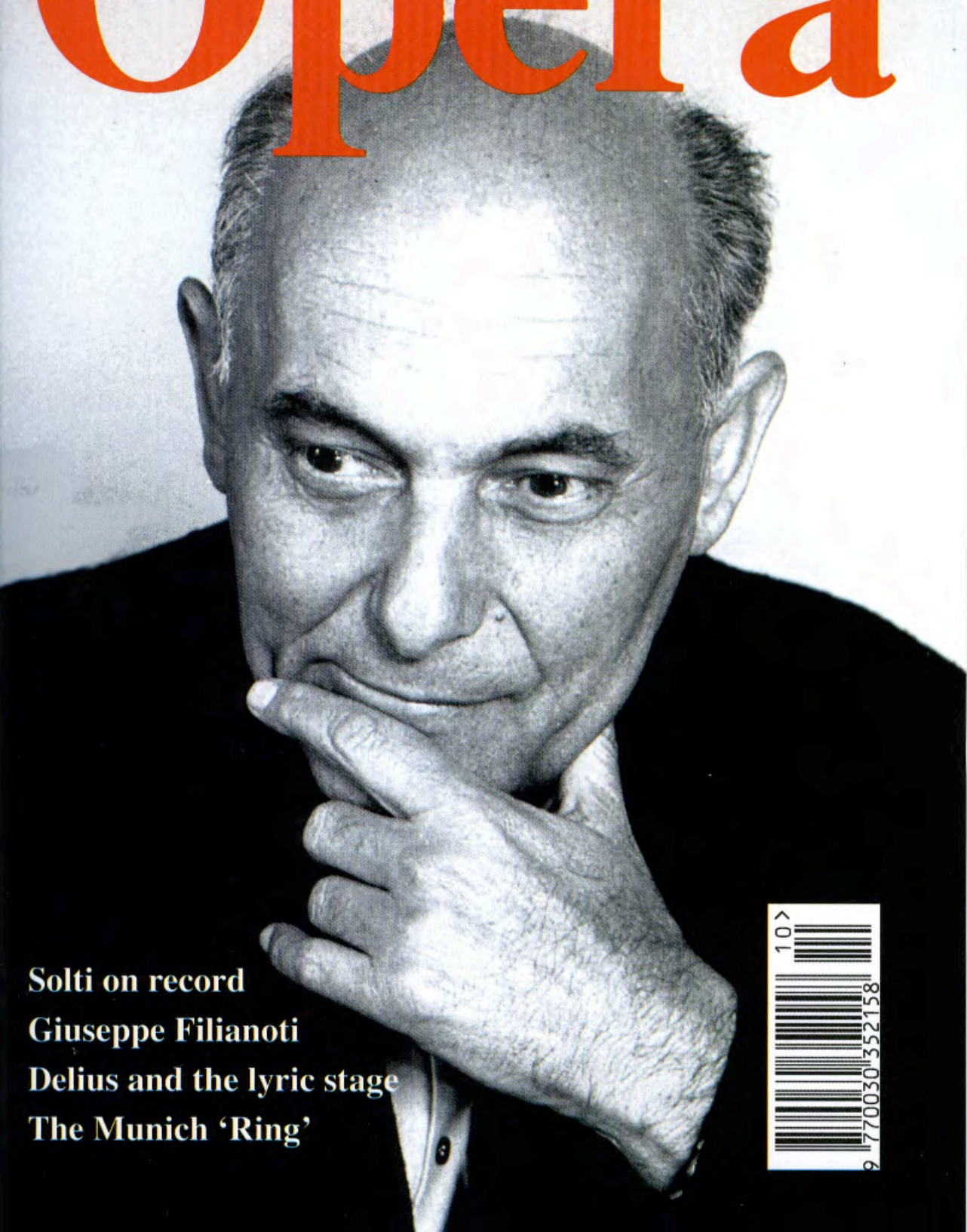
That Filianoti's international career is flourishing today is something of a miracle, considering that he was threatened in 2006 by a harrowing medical crisis. Although his thyroid was functioning satisfactorily, many nodules were discovered around it. During the rehearsal period with Opera Orchestra of New York for one of his favourite operas, *L'Arlesiana*, Filianoti flew to San Francisco for tests with Dr Orlo Clark, a renowned endocrine surgeon. 'The day before my performance in New York he called me personally and said, "Giuseppe, the results are not good. I have to tell you—it's cancer".' Filianoti sang *L'Arlesiana*, then went to Rome for another work he cherishes, *Werther*, before returning to San Francisco for surgery. Feeling that those performances might be his last, he gave everything he had. Reviewing the *Werther* in these pages, Luigi Bellingardi hailed Filianoti for 'obvious intelligence, sensitivity, a sense of theatre, excellent French and care for the text—and in the third and fourth acts he seemed truly in the grip of an obsessive love that could lead only to tragedy'.

During the operation, one of Filianoti's vocal folds was paralysed, the result being that he could speak but not sing. He had no idea what direction he could pursue professionally if singing were no longer possible. No doctor could help and no one believed his voice would return. Simply trusting in himself, he would lock his door to try his voice—the sound reduced family members to tears of dismay. He persisted, working the voice daily, and after six months, though all was not yet ideal, he was able to perform. His first venture was the Hamburg *Hoffmann*, a role debut. When he went onstage, 'it was like I was reborn there'. Full recovery took the better part of two years. If his voice was somewhat less agile than previously, Filianoti felt it had gained in size and strength. Doctors checking him with a laryngoscope were astonished. 'No one knows how to recover from this. I didn't go to my teacher—I did it all myself. There was only me and my voice.'

Filianoti's gratitude for the restoration of his voice is as boundless as his passion for music. 'You cannot do this job for financial reasons,' he declares. 'You have to have something inside. There is a destiny—my life, my experiences show that I was born to do this job.' That doesn't mean he considers the experience of singing onstage beautiful: 'It's stupid to say it's beautiful. It's painful because, first, I am never happy with what I do. Never!' Beyond that, he views his profession as 'a big sacrifice of life, of your mind, of everything. So I don't think it's a positive job.' On the other hand, there come moments onstage 'when the stars are with you, and there is a beautiful connection between your body, the beautiful music you're singing, and your emotions, and that repays you for every bad thing in this job. We are waiting, all artists, for this small connection that sometimes we are actually able to find.'

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