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Midnight Son

Peter Mattei has quietly managed to become one of the most thrilling singers in the lyric baritone repertory. ADAM WASSERMAN talks to the Swedish star as he sharpens his shears for Figaro in the Met's new *Barbiere*.



Photographed at Munich's Brenner Grill, July 2006, by Johannes Ifkovits

If one is to believe the old wives' tale that the reticence of the Swedish people grows as one travels farther north in

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their mainland, a tête-à-tête by phone with baritone Peter Mattei - who hails from Piteå, nearly on the cusp of the Arctic Circle - should require nothing less than a miracle. One anticipates the quintessential "winter Swede" - taciturn and showing symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder. Whatever the expectation, it's impossible to prepare for hearing any Swede, let alone a singer on the order of Mattei, answer his cell phone with a hearty laugh and the words, "You won't believe this ... but I am at *IKEA* right now!"



As Almaviva in Le Nozze di Figaro at the Met, 2002

(http://www.operanews.org/_uploaded/image/article/metnozzelg11106.jpg)

As Almaviva in Le Nozze di Figaro at the Met, 2002



As Don Giovanni in Stockholm

(http://www.operanews.org/_uploaded/image/article/dongiovlg11106.jpg)

As Don Giovanni in Stockholm

It's near the end of August, and Mattei, who is forty-one, has just returned from an extended vacation with his family at their summer home on the Stockholm Archipelago, his "favorite place on earth." The long respite followed his San Francisco Opera debut in June, where he sang Mozart's Count - something of a signature role. At the time, local critic Joshua Kosman remarked on Mattei's "superbly fluid vocal

swagger." Likewise, when he brought the Count to New York during the last Met season, one marveled at the way he used his duvety baritone to mold the usually thankless character into a contradictory yet wholly real figure: his emblematic moment of remorse during the end of the Act II finale, "Che sbuglio mai presi!" was marked by an affecting sincerity, while in his aria, "Vedrò, mentr'io sospiro," one witnessed the tender rationalizing of a wounded, retiring man through the minute shadings of the text.

The plaudits he earned from those performances must have made for some nice thoughts to take along on his sojourn amid the sailboats and tiny red cottages that dot the islets off the mainland. (Mattei brings an accordion to the Archipelago, he tells me, and plays Swedish waltzes sometimes.) But beneath his surface affability, Mattei does seem to retain some of the reserve typical of his compatriots. During our conversation there are intermittent moments of rumination that reveal, if not exactly an unease in talking about himself, certainly a bemusement at being lauded. One wonders what he thinks during curtain calls. One also imagines that Mattei, raised in a country known for its stoicism and neutrality, hasn't had an easy task of reconciling what he does with the Swedish idea of *Lagom* - an untranslatable concept that roughly means sufficiency, moderation and modesty in one's dealings. But at the moment, what's at the forefront of his mind is shopping for supplies for his children, who head back to school the following

Monday. "The Swedish have a love-hate relationship with IKEA," Mattei tells me in his lightly accented yet fluent English.

Mattei's vocation - the work that allows him to spend time with his family on an idyllic Swedish island, or field interview questions from the mecca of minimalist domesticity - is brandishing a baritone voice of exceptionally polished obsidian, with a remarkable legato and flawless pitch. Its virile timbre has a brass-like projection and an understated vibrato that makes other low voices seem almost rough-hewn by comparison. The repertory in which it's employed always seems adroitly, if perhaps conservatively, chosen.

Among Mattei's small but growing number of core roles are Mozart's Count, Don Giovanni, Eugene Onegin, Marcello and Rossini's Figaro. In a coup for New York audiences, he brings the latter to the Met this month for the company's new Bartlett Sher production of *Barbiere di Siviglia*, alongside Diana Damrau's Rosina and Juan Diego Flórez's Almaviva.

At the time of our chat, Mattei has already had an initial meeting with Sher, whom he knew he would enjoy working with from the moment they met. "I got very good vibrations from him," Mattei says. "When a person comes from some other field and obviously is very good at what he does, I think that the meeting can only bear fruit in one way or another. I mean, of course it can be a terrible disaster also, but whenever you take good people from different branches, I think it shakes things up a little bit."

As for Rossini's Figaro, a role that he last essayed in the summer of 2005 at Aix-en-Provence, Mattei is clearly bent on exploring deeper dramatic impulses than simply considering the habits of a workaday barber or belting out bel canto fireworks. "What I like about him is not so much what he does as what he represents," he says. "He is the free spirit of something I think. He has no master ... here he has only himself. I think he is very *American* in many ways. He is of the philosophy that when you die, there is nothing else, other than a good life that you can take with you. There is no concern with possessions, but if he sees a person who cuts better hair than he does, he would say, 'Can I learn something from you?' He's a lot like a psychotherapist - everybody comes to sit in his chair for one hour and talks about things. Maybe they feel better when they leave."

During our conversation, Mattei makes it clear that one of the advantages to his self-delimited repertory is the opportunity to refine a characterization across several productions. Take the baritone's suave Giovanni, which has likely been the biggest catalyst for the international pricking-up of ears in recent seasons. In addition to well-received performances at Scottish Opera, Aix-en-Provence and Stockholm's Royal Swedish Opera, the role marked his 1999 U.S. opera debut at Cincinnati Opera; he has since gone on to take part in the Met's two most recent productions - the retired Zeffirelli staging, in 2003, and Marthe Keller's in 2004. He sings the role next in January and February at the Paris Opera in a revival of the production originally mounted for him by Austrian filmmaker, Michael Haneke.

Mattei's libertine is preserved on a thrilling Virgin Classics release, documenting his July 1999 performances under the baton of Daniel Harding in Peter Brook's Aix-en-Provence production. The unmistakable vocal highlight of that set - as is true for most Giovannis the baritone sings - is his elegiac rendition of the Act II *canzonetta*, "Deh vieni alla finestra." It's a moment notable for its eerie synthesis of tonal beauty and foreboding quietude.

"He sings it to a maid whom he doesn't want to scare away with a big opera voice," Mattei says. "It's a quiet song that she is probably familiar with and likes. But in the same way, it is much bigger than that. It has a double meaning, you know? He gives everything in every moment, in a way. If it's bad or good, that's for us to judge, but he doesn't care to think about that. But at that moment the song touches *him* as

well - there is no bullshit. It's a little *canzonetta* for the woman, but it is also a little death song for Don Giovanni, a little part of his total collapse. As a singer, you have to try to get away from the beauty of moments like that. It's like singing Mahler - if you think it's too beautiful, you cannot do it well."



As Belcore in Royal Swedish Opera's *Elisir*, 2003
© Mats Bäcker 2006

Born in Luleå, a municipality just north of his current home that receives less than four hours of daily sunlight during the dead of winter, Mattei insists - perhaps a bit too much - that he's never fit the "winter Swede" profile. As early as he can remember, his home was filled with music and a joie de vivre that was atypical in the tiny town of 45,000 on the Gulf of Bothnia. His parents, whom he calls natural performers, were usually the life of the party. His father, a gregarious concrete worker who immigrated to Sweden from Italy in 1958, would play LPs from his native country on the family's gramophone. "Singing was my thing from a very early age, from two years old," says Mattei. "I would sing along with the recordings of Robertino Loretti, a boy soprano from Italy, who sang things like 'O Sole Mio' and the *Schlager* songs [popular sentimental torch songs tinged with melancholy from Northern Europe]. He was my first teacher. I think that I sang these Italian songs for everybody - they were always on my mind."

In addition to giving him his first repertory to churn out to an audience of family and friends, one suspects those vinyls - along with the influence of his father, himself something of an amateur singer - were the source of Mattei's idiomatic Italian. At the other end of the emotional spectrum, Mattei's mother introduced him to Sweden's regional ballad tradition, *skillingtryck*. "They are sad songs with sad stories," he says. "It's the way they would spread the news a long time ago, when there were no newspapers - they would make a long song about a big adventure happening, where somebody always died. This music and the Italian music was mixed in my home. But there was no opera and nothing classic - nothing like that."

Mattei eventually joined the town choir and went to a local music school. It was there that he met his wife, who now works as a music teacher and singing coach. The transition to a formal study of music and voice wasn't easy, he says, noting that despite his choral training he didn't even listen to opera until he was at least eighteen. "I liked Elvis, I liked Tom Jones, I liked Shirley Bassey. These were the voices that

I was listening to." But his bookish side eventually compelled him to enroll at Stockholm's Royal Academy of Music and then at the city's University College of Opera. "I think if you wanted to study, and if you wanted to go to school, you could not have become a pop singer or a *Schlager* singer," he says, "but that [route] would have been a possibility, absolutely." His opera debut came in 1990, when he sang Nardo in Mozart's *La Finta Giardiniera* at the Drottningholm Court Theatre.

Since his student days, Mattei has taken a more self-reliant approach to his vocal health and role preparation. If anything, he says, it's made his voice more distinctive. "I don't like coaching so much. I learn my operas myself, and I go to the opera house. But I have a wonderful old Swedish teacher, Solvig Grippe. I still go to her once a year or so. But of course it's too little. Her intent is to free the voice, and to be honest to how you sound. It is not so much about *looking* for a sound. The sound is not what you *seek*, the sound is the result of what you *have*. It's like if you take wood, you can go and you can make a house, or you can make a little cup, but it is still the essence of wood. I also prefer that she is a woman," he says. "You cannot imitate her sound, you have to imitate the *feeling* of the sound."



As Rossini's Figaro to Camilla Tilling's Rosina in Gothenborg Opera's 2000 *Barbiere*
© Ingmar Jernberg 2006

That Zen-like mentality, along with Mattei's obvious scrupulousness about the roles he chooses - to say nothing of an ingrained yet perceptible concern for modesty, for not doing *too* much - may inhibit him from venturing far out into the repertory. (Though Mattei's Chorèbe in Colin Davis's Grammy-winning *Troyens* is a manicured, if slightly unidiomatic, joy to hear, something like an onstage Pelléas seems unlikely at the moment.) But to hear Mattei tell it, the allure of new vocal opportunities may be getting too great to ignore: on his list of upcoming roles are Billy Budd and Ford. He will also revisit such familiar parts as Wolfram, Onegin and *Don Carlo*'s Rodrigo - which he has thrillingly recorded for Naxos. Next season, Mattei sings what he says will be his last Guglielmo in *Così Fan Tutte* - "It is twenty years too late. You can do Don Alfonso at forty-one, I think, and be good at it" - while the end of the 2008-09 season holds his first Macbeth. Royal Swedish Opera will host both those milestones.

Mattei prefers the comfort of Stockholm's 1,100-seat house for its closeness to his family. He spends three months of each year as a guest artist at the theater he calls his "home opera." He sometimes uses the venue to test roles before taking them to foreign houses, although he admits, "Some of the things that I'm singing [here] I don't want to sing at the Met."

For Meeno Feenstra, Royal Swedish Opera's artistic director, who has worked with the baritone since Feenstra's early days as a casting director for the Glyndebourne Festival, Mattei's circumspection about repertory is simply part of the game of opera in Stockholm.

"We've been dithering whether he should do Don Alfonso, but in my book he is still too vibrant, too young onstage to already do Alfonso. You know what it is?" asks Feenstra. "He sounds and looks extremely sexy onstage. That is who he is, that is what the voice sounds like. There are very few singers who have that. He is of course very popular in Stockholm, because he has this sexiness in the voice and this young boy's attitude onstage, but not in the American way of being popular - I would say, a very sort of Scandinavian type of popular. I'm from Holland, and we are a Protestant country, just as Sweden is. And you can be popular, but you can't be over-popular. That's not decent, that's not what you do. That has to do with the audience, but that as well has to do with the attitude of Peter, who takes his career seriously but doesn't take opera fame really seriously."

The reference to the baritone's purity of purpose, the intent to divorce star-quality singing from stardom, is something that I found Mattei's colleagues echoing frequently. Anna Netrebko, who sang Zerlina to Mattei's 2003 *Giovannis* and Masetta to his 2004 *Marcellos* at the Met, notes the duality: "He is crazy, in a good way, and so funny. We went to a couple of parties, and he just starts playing the piano and singing," she says. "He is also a very spontaneous personality onstage. There is always something different, always something new. You never know what he will do the next moment. But, I think most of all, the voice is really fantastic, really beautiful. I was in the audience for a performance of *Bohème* before the run we sang together, and I was just so impressed by the beauty of the sound."

While operatic fame may not be a draw for Mattei, there certainly are aspects of his career that he's earnest about. "I'm pretty happy where I am," he says. "If I go to work in the States two times a year that is enough. But one finds the reason to work when you have a family, maybe more than before, in a very strange way. There is a reason for the sacrifices, because you're raising a family. You never know really what is the force behind the struggle, but you struggle anyway. For me, I cannot do anything else, this has always been a struggle of life and death, but in another way it has been something that seems very easy. On one side, it's a destiny. But if something goes well, it's just a side effect."

Coming from another singer it might just be self-effacing P.R.-speak. It could be that he's jaded after innumerable conversations with the press, or perhaps he's a tad too intent on subverting the stereotype of the aloof Swede. Or maybe, despite all the performances on international stages, the only audience he needs is in a rustic house on the bay of the Stockholm Archipelago. Just as I start to ask another question, Mattei's young daughter comes running up and begins screaming into the phone. "She's hurt herself," he says, before politely requesting a few moments to comfort her *sotto voce* with some consoling Swedish words, then sending her on her way. At the very least, it's clear that I've already kept him on the phone too long. □

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