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Self-taught, going for baroque

The bowing of
Stefano Montanari
is divine, writes
Harriet
Cunningham.Man in black: Stefano Montanari.
Photo: Ben Pushton

W

hen Stefano Montanari was young he hated baroque music. It was

always Bach, Handel and endless bad performances of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. He played the piano and dreamed of playing the trumpet. Two things changed his mind: the gift of a violin from his uncle and hearing the Accademia Bizantina, an early music ensemble based in Ravenna, Italy.

"It was so strange, so interesting, very different. And I discovered it was my music. It was the beginning of my life," he said.

Twenty-five years later, Montanari is Italy's leading baroque violinist. He is the principal first violin of the band that first inspired him, Accademia Bizantina, and directs

his own ensemble, L'Estro vagante. He is in demand as a guest conductor and soloist and his recording last year, *O Soltide* (with countertenor Andreas Scholl), was nominated for a Grammy. He alsoconducts opera, most recently Mozart's *The Magic Flute* with Lyon Opera. And he is in Sydney. He is dressed in a black T-shirt, black jeans and biker boots, wears several chunky rings and a leather wristband, with spikes. You half expect to see a packet of smokes tucked into his T-shirt sleeve. It is hard to imagine him as a world expert in 17th- and 18th-century violin music. But Montanari is charmingly blasé about his work.

"It's my job," he said. "It's not so strange. It's just a different language and with it we can speak about you and me. Whether you play Mozart or 19th-century music

-Brahms, Schubert - it's the same. It's just a different language. La musica internazionale."

Montanari does not play a Stradivarius. "Come on! Too expensive." His violin is a Hendrik Jacobsz made in Amsterdam in 1680 that used to belong to the French poet Alfred de Musset.

In an area of classical music that is almost cluttered with scholarship, he describes himself as an autodidact, teaching himself baroque violin technique while working as an orchestral player in Milan.

"I didn't have any money to study overseas. And I love to do everything myself," he said.

His approach has obviously been successful because he is now in demand as a teacher and has been commissioned to write a book on baroque violin technique.

Montanari makes his Australian debut as guest director of the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra, leading the orchestra and performing concertos by Verrachi, Geminiani and others in Sydney and Melbourne.

He has only been in the country for two days but he has begun rehearsals and Bianca Porcheddu, violinist and Brandenburg regular, is already a big fan. "His bowing is so divine," she said. "There's so much for us to learn."

Montanari grimaces at the compliment and threatens to pour coffee over Porcheddu's head. And with that it is time to go and play music.

Stefano Montanari and the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra perform "Celebrazione!" at City Recital Hall, July 17, 19, 20, 24 and 26.

It's not over until the roly-poly man plays it for laughs

Elissa Blake

The role of Don Pasquale requires an opera singer of a certain stature. A big, blustery bachelor, the Don is a man of wide girth and deep pockets. Less kind observers might say he is a bit of a fatty. But no matter how you describe the fithlar character of Donizetti's comedy, Opera Australia has the perfect man for the part.

"Don Pasquale is meant to be a roly-poly," said Conal Coad, with a hearty laugh. "I certainly don't need to have any padding. Nature and a happy menu has taken care of that."

Known as "the best Bottom in the business" for his riotous star turn in Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer**Night's Dream*, Coad is a distinguished bass who loves comic roles. His Bottom and Don Pasquale have charmed audiences in opera houses around the world. So, too, hisLeporello, the complaining lackey of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and Dr Dulcamara, an itinerant quack of Donizetti's *Leisli d'Amore*."These characters suit me," he said. "I like comedy and I love acting. The way I look just makes it easier. The downside is I'd love to sing King Philip in *Don Carlo* one day, but if you looked at me you'd say he's broken-hearted but he's going to the fridge at night to cheer himself up."Roger Hodgman's new production of *Don Pasquale* for Opera Aus-tralia is inspired by the breezy Italian street scenes in the Audrey Hepburn film *Roman Holiday*. "I can assure you, I am no Gregory Peck," Coad quipped.

The plot is pure farce. Don Pasquale decides to marry and produce an heir in order to disinherit his lazy nephew. He does not bargain for his intended, the young widow Norina (sung by Rachelle Durkin), causing mayhem.

"She is so appalling, I spend the rest of the opera trying to get

rid of her," Coad said. "The thing about comedy is you must play it for truth. If you play it thinking, 'Ho, ho, look how funny I am,' then it will fall on its face. That is guaranteed."

One of the highlights of the opera is a "patter duet".

requiring Coad and baritone Samuel Dundas to sing a rapid-fire tongue-twister as they plot against the bride. "It's funny and it's fast, and it's tricky because you have to get your lips and tongue around it all," Coad said.

Conal Coad.
Photo: Dallas KiliponenInspired by local playwright Natalia Savvides' research into the experiences of women in colonial-era asylums, *The Light Box* is a quirky, non-linear piece unlike anything else on stage in Sydney at the moment.On a set bounded by the suspended silhouettes of birds (which are winched to floor level from time to time), *The Light Box* opens with Ethel (Hannah Barlow) temporarily silencing the brazenly talkative Annie (Stephanie King) by stabbing her through the hand with a spoon. From there, Savvides takes us on a surreal journey hinging on Ethel's treatment in an institution watched over by a faltering doctor, The Man Made of Spoons (Tom Christophersen, in deep disguise). It's here that a tentative relationship develops between Ethel and a hospital cleaner (Dean Mason), which uncomfortably straddles the romantic and exploitative.

A time-shifting subplot allows us to observe another unhappy woman, Lesley - Ethel's mother - abandon her emotionally remote husband for a suave toucan while on a cruise through the Panama Canal.

The Light Box is an obscure work for sure. But its difficulty is offset by warmth and humour, which draws us in to the predicaments of its characters at the same time we're trying to figure out their relationships to each other and to reality. Immersive design (Dylan Tonkin, with sound by Nate Edmondson and lights by Benjamin Brockman) some subtly persuasive performances, and director James Dalton's careful crafting of the experience make for an involving 70 minutes."The duet is like a synchronised dive with the conductor. If one of us gets the start wrong, the other can't slow down or speed up. We need to be in a swan dive together." Coad is in constant demand. He will appear in Opera Australia's *Albert Herring* (opening next month) before heading to Europe where he spends half the year. "It gets easier being a bass as you get older," he said, keeping his actual age to himself. "Your voice generally improves and you grow into all the best roles as fathers and priests and gentlemen. The bass repertoire is mostly older men."Opera Australia's *Don Pasquale* opens on Thursday night.