

OPERA PREVIEW

# THE TENOR OF THE TIMES

**IL TROVATORE** by Giuseppe Verdi, directed by Charles Roubaud, with Ramón Vargas, Elza van den Heever, Russell Braun and Elena Manistina. Presented by the Canadian Opera Company at the Four Seasons Centre (145 Queen West). Opens September 29 and runs in rep to October 31. See [coc.ca](http://coc.ca) for performances. \$12-\$325. 416-363-8231.

Most opera singers wouldn't dare quote Enrico Caruso a few minutes into an interview. But Mexican tenor Ramón Vargas has earned the right, his gorgeous lyrical voice regularly drawing comparisons to greats like Caruso, Beniamino Gigli and Luciano Pavarotti.

"Caruso says the tenor voice develops at around 35 and changes until 45," says Vargas in his Four Seasons Centre dressing room before a rehearsal. "Then for another decade or so, the voice is at its best. I think I'm in the middle of this stage. I feel good. I have the experience and the capacity. It's a really good time for me."

Lucky opera-goers will get a chance to witness that later this month when he takes on the demanding role of Manrico in the Canadian Opera Company's *Il Trovatore*. The sturdy Italian warhorse features some of the most recognizable tunes in the canon, including the Anvil

Chorus (google it – you'll recognize it), the haunting *Miserere* and, for Manrico, the rousing *Di Quella Pira*, with its series of treacherous high notes.

How does he approach that particular aria?

"It's like if you have to do a 10-metre high dive," he says, laughing. "You're there. You have to do it. You hope you do it well."

*Trovatore* is known as much for its ridiculous plot as its string of melodies. To begin with, Azucena, Manrico's mom, has raised him as her own in an elaborate vengeance scheme after she accidentally killed her own child.

"She's an ill person," says Vargas simply. "Back then, there wasn't any psychiatry – Freud wasn't around. But she would have made a perfect case study."

What he admires about Manrico, a poet and singer who gives the opera its title, is his loyalty.

"He's totally a victim of his mother's vengeance, but he loves her even though she's crazy and violent. And you know what? Even today, we see kids continuing to love their abusive parents. All the characters in *Trovatore* are people you might meet on the street."

Vargas has sung opposite some of the best-known sopranos of our time, but he refuses to name his favourite.

"I hesitate to name any because I'm sure I'll forget some," he says, "but I love Angela (Gheorghiu), Anna (Netrebko), Renée (Fleming). It's a privilege to sing with such great artists."

When I ask him about the prevalence of opera broadcasts, with the emphasis placed on a singer's look instead of sound, he's philosophical.

"That's our world," he says. "Today there's so much emphasis on image. Before, people used to watch through their ears, and now they hear through their eyes. That's dangerous."

He sees a direct correlation between this and the massive popularity of the Three Tenors a couple decades ago.

"After that, record companies started to find people who looked better and better," he says. "It didn't matter how they sang. The artists may have had talent, but they weren't allowed to develop and mature."

He returns to Caruso's statement about the evolving voice.

"At 45 your voice becomes your best, but a lot of these new artists won't even make it there because they're finished by that time."

**BY GLENN SUMI**

[glenns@nowtoronto.com](mailto:glenns@nowtoronto.com)  
[twitter.com/glennsumi](https://twitter.com/glennsumi)

 **more online**  
Interview clips at [nowtoronto.com](http://nowtoronto.com)

