



JOSEP CARRERAS

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The adjective *international* falls short when it comes to defining the art of the Catalan tenor Josep Carreras. Not through any inaccuracy, so much as because it fails to say enough. It is true that his voice is admired regardless of borders or differing cultures and mentalities. But this is due to the singer's extraordinary ability to be *intranational*, to make the most varied audiences, from Barcelona to London, from Milan to Vienna and New York, relate to his music as though it were a part of themselves. In this respect, it is highly significant that Leonard Bernstein should have chosen him and no-one else to play the part of Tony in his latest version of *West Side Story*, Tony being the only character in the opera who is genuinely American, without any Hispanic blood.

Carreras was born in the busy district of Sants, in Barcelona, in December 1946, into a family of modest means, with no musical antecedents, but who showed that stability and sensitivity so necessary for the encouragement of its members' natural tendencies, whether artistic or otherwise. He has often said that his great love of opera stems from the day when, at the age of six, he was taken by his father to see the film *El gran Caruso*, featuring Mario Lanza. At that moment he decided he wanted to be an opera singer. Even if we take this as being part of the personal mythology that every artist tends to create, the fact is that the tenor has included songs from the film in many recitals, as an *a posteri-*

ori acknowledgement of the influence it had on his career.

The first time he set foot in the Liceu, the Barcelona opera house where he started his career, was as a spectator, two years after his inspiration at the cinema. Once again in the company of his father, he saw, from the fifth floor of the gallery, *Aida* performed by none other than Renata Tebaldi. Less than three years later, the young Carreras was back at the Liceu, but this time in what was to become his natural place: the stage. Indeed, José Iturbi had chosen him to play the part of Trujumán in Manuel de Falla's *El retablo de maese Pedro*.

But years of study still had to pass—both his general education followed by specialization in chemistry, and his singing lessons—before the brilliant start of his adult career, in the 70-71 season. This is where the other great Catalan opera star, Montserrat Caballé, comes in. Caballé, who helped Carreras from the beginning, appeared with him at the Liceu in December 1970, in a memorable *Lucrezia Borgia*. The following year, encouraged by the success, Carreras went in for the Verdi de Busseto competition, taking first prize, and was given the opportunity to perform in Parma, in the role of Riccardo in *Un ballo in maschera*. His performance immediately attracted the attention of all the Italian impresarios.

The rest is a stream of highly acclaimed appearances in the most important opera houses of the world. Still in 1971, once again with Montserrat Caballé, he opened in London in a concert version of

Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda*. The following year, he made his American debut, in *Madame Butterfly*, at the New York City Opera; in 1974, in the role of Cavardossi, from *Tosca*, he made his debut both at the New York Metropolitan and at the Milan Scala, and at the same time, he became a regular performer at Covent Garden, in the principal roles of *La Traviata*, *L'elisir d'amore* and *La bohème*.

An important landmark in an already important career was the invitation the tenor received from Herbert von Karajan to participate in a new production of *Don Carlo*, at the 1976 Salzburg festival. From that moment, the singer and the director have collaborated closely and produced splendid results, both live and recorded: *Aida*, *Tosca*, *Carmen*, Verdi's *Requiem* and others. Other well known directors who have worked with Josep Carreras are Claudio Abbado, Riccardo Muti, Giuseppe Sinopoli, Carlo Maria Giulini, Lorin Maazel and Colin Davis among others, without forgetting the already mentioned Bernstein.

But Carreras's real greatness lies in the fact that, in spite of so much success, he has never been affected by the dangers of stardom. His humanity, ever present in his interpretations, has been and is his greatest quality, precisely because it is the basis of his exquisite rendering of the text, whatever the language, and the natural vocal and scenic elegance of his characters, skills which have been pointed out over and over again by the most respected international critics. ■