Giacomo Puccini

La Rondine

Conductor
Ion Marin

Production
Nicolas Joël

Staged by
Stephen Barlow

Set designer
Ezio Frigerio

Costume designer
Franca Squarciapino

Lighting designer
Duane Schuler

General manager
Peter Gelb

Music director
James Levine

Principal conductor
Fabio Luisi

La Rondine is a co-production of Théâtre du Capitole, Toulouse and Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

Commedia Lirica in three acts
Libretto by Giuseppe Adami, after A. M. Willner and Heinz Reichert

Friday, January 11, 2013, 7:30–9:55 pm

First time this season

The production of La Rondine was made possible by a generous gift from The Sybil B. Harrington Endowment Fund
The Metropolitan Opera
2012–13 Season

The 29th Metropolitan Opera performance of
Giacomo Puccini’s
La Rondine

Conductor
Ion Marin

IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE

Yvette
Monica Yunus

Bianca
Janinah Burnett DEBUT

Prunier
Marius Brenciu

Magda
Kristine Opolais DEBUT

Lisette
Anna Christy

Suzy
Margaret Thompson

Rambaldo
Dwayne Croft**

Gobin
Keith Jameson

Péridault
Edward Parks**

Crébillon
Evan Hughes** DEBUT

Ruggero
Giuseppe Filianoti

Adolf
Daniel Clark Smith

Georgette
Stephanie Chigas

Gabriella
Sara Stewart

Lolette
Christina Thomson Anderson

Rabonnier
Jason Hendrix

A Singer
Lei Xu*

A Butler
Roger Andrews

PIANO SOLO
Steven Eldredge

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Friday, January 11, 2013, 7:30–9:55 pm
Yamaha is the official piano of the Metropolitan Opera.

Latecomers will not be admitted during the performance.

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Chorus Master Donald Palumbo
Musical Preparation Dennis Giaque, Steven Eldredge, Gareth Morrell, and Carol Isaac
Stage Band Conductor Jeffrey Goldberg
Assistant Stage Directors Peter McClintock and Tomer Zvulun
Prompter Carol Isaac
Italian Coach Hemdi Kfir
Met Titles Christopher Bergen
Wigs executed by Metropolitan Opera Wig Department

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DONIZETTI

Maria Stuarda

DEC 31, JAN 4, 8, 12, 15, 19 mat, 23, 26
Joyce DiDonato takes on the virtuosic bel canto role of the doomed Mary, Queen of Scots, and Elza van den Heever debuts as Elizabeth I in director David McVicar’s Met premiere production.

PUCCINI

La Rondine

JAN 11, 14, 18, 22, 26 mat
Acclaimed Latvian soprano Kristine Opolais makes her highly anticipated Met debut in the title role of this heartfelt romance, opposite tenor Giuseppe Filianoti.

PUCCINI

Turandot

JAN 7, 10
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VERDI

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Synopsis

Paris and the Riviera in the 1920s

Act I
Magda’s house in Paris, late afternoon

Pause

Act II
The Bullier dance hall, later that evening

Intermission (AT APPROXIMATELY 8:50 PM)

Act III
A hotel on the Riviera, several months later

Act I
Magda, mistress of the rich banker Rambaldo, is serving tea to her friends as the poet Prunier lectures Yvette, Bianca, and Suzy about the latest Parisian fashion for sentimental love. No one except Magda takes him seriously. Prunier starts to tell a story he has written about a girl, Doretta, who rejects the love of a king. When he says he has been unable to finish it, Magda improvises an ending to Doretta’s dream for him by making up a second verse about how the girl rejects riches for the love of a student. She thinks about her own flirtations and recalls an encounter with a young man at Bullier’s dance hall. Rambaldo says he knows what love means and gives Magda a pearl necklace, which she accepts without changing her opinion that love has nothing to do with wealth. Prunier offers to read Magda’s palm and predicts that she will go south in pursuit of romance and happiness—just like “la rondine,” the swallow.

Ruggero, a newcomer to Paris, is excited to be in the city. Rambaldo asks the others where Ruggero should spend his first night in Paris. They decide on Bullier’s dance hall, and before sending Ruggero on his way, Magda’s maid Lisette and the other women flirt with the handsome young man. When the guests depart, Magda impulsively decides to go to Bullier as well, and rushes off to change into a simpler dress. Lisette sneaks in dressed in Magda’s clothes and is intercepted by Prunier, who furtively flirts with her. They leave together. Magda emerges for an adventure at Bullier’s, her mind full of Prunier’s prophesy and Doretta’s dream.
Act II

Bullier’s is alive with a noisy crowd of students, flower girls, artists, soldiers, and aristocrats. Ruggero sits alone at a table. When Magda enters, she is immediately surrounded by a group of students, but says she already has a date and joins Ruggero, who doesn’t recognize her. She introduces herself as Paulette. When she teases him about his probable love affairs, he replies that should he ever love a woman, it would be forever. While they talk and dance, they both realize that they have fallen in love with each other. When Lisette arrives with Prunier, she is startled by the sight of Magda, but Prunier, understanding the situation, convinces her that it is someone else with a chance resemblance. Suddenly Rambaldo appears, and Prunier asks Lisette to keep Ruggero out of sight. Magda rejects Prunier’s pleas to escape, and Rambaldo confronts her, demanding an explanation. She replies that she has found true love and is going to leave him. As the waiters clear the now-empty dance hall, Ruggero returns and comforts Magda. They leave together to start a new life.

Act III

Magda and Ruggero have been living in a hotel on the Riviera, but their money is running out. Ruggero says he has written to his mother for her consent to their marriage and paints an idyllic picture of his family’s home in the country. Magda is dismayed that her lover doesn’t know anything of her past. After he has left, Prunier and Lisette arrive, quarreling: he has been trying to make her a singer but her debut was a disaster. Magda tells Lisette she would be glad to take her into service once more. Prunier, who can’t imagine Magda continuing her fantasy life, delivers a message from Rambaldo: he is ready to welcome her back on any terms. Prunier leaves as Ruggero returns with a letter from his mother. She is delighted that her son has found a good and virtuous bride who will be worthy of his children. Unable to keep silent any longer, Magda tells a stunned Ruggero that she is “contaminated.” She can be his mistress but never his wife. He protests and begs Magda not to leave him. Magda, heartbroken, slowly makes her way out of his life.
Premiere: Grand Théâtre, Monte Carlo, 1917
This elegant romance is the least-known work of the mature Giacomo Puccini. The story concerns a kept woman who defies convention to chase a dream of romantic love with an earnest, if naïve, young man. She is the swallow, or “rondine,” of the title, a bird who flies toward the sun. The central relationship unfolds in colorful locales in Paris and the south of France, all evoked with superb musical details. Puccini was originally approached for this project by Viennese producers who wanted an operetta. This idea was quickly abandoned, but the original conception had an effect on the finished product, with its abundance of waltzes, romantic vision of Paris, and lightness of tone. History worked against La Rondine’s success, however: Italy and Austria became enemies during World War I, precluding a Vienna premiere, and the opera quietly opened in neutral Monte Carlo, never finding a permanent place in the repertoire. That loss is scandalous, since La Rondine, judged on its own merits rather than compared to other operas with similar themes, is a fascinating work.

The Creators
Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) was immensely popular in his own lifetime, and his works remain staples in the repertory of most of the world’s opera companies. His operas are celebrated for their mastery of detail, sensitivity to everyday subjects, copious melody, and economy of expression. Giuseppe Adami (1878–1946) provided Puccini with the libretto for La Rondine and would later work with him on Il Tabarro and Turandot. He also edited Puccini’s letters for publication after the composer’s death and was noted for his work in the theater and as a film director. The outline of La Rondine was provided by the Viennese author, journalist, and composer Alfred Maria Willner (1859–1929) and his collaborator Heinz Reichert (1877–1940), who wrote operetta librettos for several of the most popular composers of the day, including Franz Lehár.

The Setting
Each of the three acts of La Rondine evokes a different aspect of French life, as well as a different take on the nature of love. Act I is set in the title character’s elegant salon, where she is a fashionable woman kept by a wealthy man. Poets and other free spirits engage in witty banter. Act II is set in the raucous Bal Bullier, a famous Latin Quarter dance hall popular with students, the working
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poor, the adventurous middle class, and tourists. The third act is set outside Nice on the French Riviera. Puccini originally imagined the setting to be in the time of the Second Empire (circa 1860), although the milieu he depicted is not specific to any single historical moment. The current production places the action in the 1920s.

**The Music**

The score of *La Rondine* is sophisticated and economical. One of its most striking features is the use of ambient sounds, a touch Puccini had always excelled in as a master of the verismo genre. Off-stage bells sound in Act III; the second act ends with a woman on the street singing a warning against faith in love; and a lead character plays the piano on stage in the very first scene, which becomes the introduction to the opera’s most famous aria, “Chi il bel sogno di Doretta.” *La Rondine* flows with the sort of melody that could only come from Puccini, including the dreamy dance sequences in Act II and the ensemble in the same scene, “Bevo al tuo fresco sorriso,” which can make a valid claim to being the single most gorgeous tune this composer ever produced.

**La Rondine at the Met**

*La Rondine* had its United States premiere at the Met in 1928, in a beautiful production designed by Joseph Urban. The Spanish diva Lucrezia Bori and Italian tenor Beniamino Gigli headed the cast. The piece was reasonably successful, but the precarious financial situation of the Depression years made it a risky proposition. Bori sang the lead in all 15 performances over the course of the initial run and the two following seasons, and chose it as part of her farewell performances at the Met in 1936. George Balanchine choreographed the dances for the 1936 performances. The opera then disappeared from the Met until the debut of the current production on December 31, 2008, with Marco Armiliato conducting a cast including Angela Gheorghiu and Roberto Alagna as Magda and Ruggero.
You would hardly think that Giacomo Puccini, of all the great opera composers, needs a recognition booster. Yet the programming of opera companies around the world for the 150th anniversary of his birth—which was celebrated on December 22, 2008—brought reminders that there was in fact fresh room for discovery, above all when the topic is La Rondine.

Puccini had already attained towering international fame by the time he created La Rondine, but the opera failed to catch on and fell into semi-obscurity within a few decades. With this production by Nicolas Joël, La Rondine returned to the Met for the first time since Lucrezia Bori chose to play “the swallow” of the title for her career swan song in 1936. It was the legendary Spanish soprano (and reputed descendent of the notorious Borgia clan) who had introduced the role to the Met stage in 1928 during the opera’s U.S. premiere, which occurred four years after Puccini’s death. Audiences in London had to wait until 1974 for the first professional staging there.

La Rondine is not only the most neglected opera of Puccini’s maturity; it’s also the most misunderstood. The confusion begins with the issue of genre. Even today, casual references to La Rondine as an “operetta” abound, mistaking the gentle touch that is its signature for a frothy attempt at what would have been for Puccini the equivalent of “crossover.” In fact, the journey toward La Rondine did involve a stop in the world of Viennese operetta, but that was not Puccini’s final destination.

A long search for a new project followed completion of La Fanciulla del West (which had its world premiere at the Met in 1910). Literature or contemporary theater were the sources that typically grabbed Puccini’s attention as potential for operatic treatment. But for several years after Fanciulla, the composer flitted restlessly over a motley assortment of possibilities. These ranged from the novel Lorna Doone to Oscar Wilde’s unfinished A Florentine Tragedy (later turned into an opera by Alexander Zemlinsky, Schoenberg’s teacher) and even a bizarrely imagistic, decadent dramatization of the Children’s Crusade by the controversial poet Gabriele d’Annunzio.

During his search, Puccini did settle on a gritty, tragic new play that he would eventually transform into Il Tabarro, the first panel of Il Trittico. At the same time, however, he began to express an interest in lighter fare: “I have a desire to laugh and to make other people laugh,” he wrote to one of his confidantes. While he was in Vienna in 1913 for the local premiere of Fanciulla, an unlikely opportunity arrived in the form of an invitation by the director of one of the city’s leading theaters for operetta, a genre then in its “silver age” as represented by the enormously popular works of Franz Lehár. The princely sum attached to the commission may have made it an undertaking Puccini couldn’t refuse, but that hardly justifies the dismissively holier-than-thou insinuations by some critics that his attraction to the new project was merely financial.

Indeed, the composer immediately expressed frustration with the notion of writing a conventional operetta—separated into numbers and with spoken
dialogue—when he received the first sketch proposed by Alfred Maria Willner, a librettist for Lehár. Puccini complained about “the usual slipshod, banal operetta” with its lack of character study and “dramatic interest” and, in an often-quoted statement, concluded that “an operetta is something I shall never do; a comic opera, yes, see Rosenkavalier, only more entertaining and more organic.” Willner paired up with a colleague, Heinz Reichert, to concoct another scenario drawing on patterns familiar from both grand opera and operetta and revolving around the figure of a beautiful courtesan who attempts to take flight from her gilded cage to pursue romantic bliss.

For his part, Puccini turned to a new collaborator, Giuseppe Adami—a generation younger than the composer—who would also furnish the librettos for Il Tabarro and Turandot. Adami not only translated the German libretto but reshaped and adapted significant details in response to Puccini’s demands. Composition stretched over two years, while Puccini worked simultaneously on Il Tabarro. The third act in particular—by consensus the opera’s most problematic—proved to be a stumbling block.

Meanwhile, the First World War introduced new complications, with Italy entering the conflict as part of the alliance against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. La Rondine’s premiere was given in neutral territory on March 27, 1917, at the Grand Théâtre in Monte Carlo (whose visionary director, Raoul Gunsbourg, was the first to stage La Damnation de Faust as an opera). Puccini remained unsatisfied and produced two more rewrites; the pivotal differences involved the opera’s ending. The first of these was geared toward the belated Viennese premiere in 1920. The second introduced a melodramatic, verismo denouement in which Magda, instead of choosing to leave Ruggero, is angrily abandoned by her lover. But Puccini’s original intuitions for the ending, as in the standard version used in the Met’s production, are arguably far more satisfying—certainly for 21st-century audiences. As Michele Girardi observes in his excellent study, Puccini: His International Art, “Magda is a modern woman who does not want the same end as other Puccini heroines, from whom she is very different.”

It was in fact La Rondine’s differences from Puccini’s other work—above all its femininity—that made earlier audiences hesitant. “The element of tragedy,” wrote Time magazine of the original Met production in 1928, “is missing from the soft, curving arias and duets.” Yet from our perspective, La Rondine emerges as a fascinating hybrid, both in its emotional negotiations and in its musical palette. Commentators like to refer to the scenario as a kind of tepid rewrite of La Traviata, but it’s precisely the tension between the idealized love of romantic opera and a more tempered, realistic view that generates Puccini’s unique brand of sophisticated melancholy in La Rondine. Thus even the echoes of La Bohème (also frequently noted, with the second act as a conflation of Mimi and Rodolfo’s love duet and the bustling Café Momus) acquire a tone of gently ironic self-parody—as if the composer is looking back on the irretrievable illusions of his own artistic past.
The opera’s framing devices subtly shape this fundamental tension. Puccini opens with a tone of worldly, frivolous conversation. But the very song with which the poet Prunier (in part a lampooning of the eccentric d’Annunzio) sets out mockingly to illustrate the power of “sentimental love” soon becomes its vehicle. Just as swiftly as the score slips from a chattily prosaic mood into dreamy rhapsody, Magda is drawn into her memory of unfulfilled love.

Much of La Rondine is about the role-playing Magda so eagerly undertakes to enjoy a temporary escape from the realistic compromises of her life with the wealthy (and extraordinarily gentlemanly) sugar daddy Rambaldo. She does this through an idyllic but ultimately unsustainable vision of romantic love, recalled in Act I and then dreamily acted out in the rest of the opera until she snaps out of the illusion in Act III. Magda completes Prunier’s song and then sets out to complete the love story from which she fled in her youth. La Rondine’s bittersweet irony is that she must flee again: only in its incompleteness—Magda’s memory of the happiness she might have had with Ruggero—can the story remain vital. Even the sigh-like motif we hear within the opera’s first minute, associated with Magda’s elusive vision of love, has a fragmentary character, like the hint of a waltz wafted on the breeze.

Dance elements—particularly in the sequences of Act II—flavor much of the score, although La Rondine’s single loveliest melody (the basis of the quartet ensemble at the Bullier dance hall) began as a simple lullaby the composer wrote to words of his nephew. But along with the warmth and directness of his melodic imagination, Puccini gives wide rein to his orchestral imagination. Prickling dissonances announce the entry of the provincial newcomer Ruggero, while the simple pentatonic tune of the singer near the end of Act II is doubled by piccolo to produce an eerie whistling effect. The comic counterpoint of the affair between Lisette and Prunier, so crucial to the third act, includes a brilliantly demented, paranoid depiction of the catcalls and boos left echoing in Lisette’s head after her stage fiasco.

Such details are second nature to Puccini’s musical-theatrical savvy. Much of the music in Act III is recycled from earlier in the opera, as if to emphasize that the lovers are living on borrowed time, their love an égoïsme à deux in a kind of suspended animation. And in the tolling bells, as Julian Budden remarks, we hear “the death-knell of the lovers’ idyll.” Yet unlike his famous tragic heroines, Puccini provides a soft landing for his swallow: all three acts, quite unusually, end with a muted touch, the last including a delicately floated A-flat from Magda (with perhaps a hint of the Marschallin’s resigned “Ja, ja”). Having specialized in operas about love experienced to the breaking point, in La Rondine Puccini leaves us with its delicate, indelible perfume.

—Thomas May
The Cast

Ion Marin
CONDUCTOR (BUCHAREST, ROMANIA)

This Season  La Rondine at the Met and concerts with the French Radio Philharmonic, Czech Philharmonic, and St. Petersburg Philharmonic.

Met Appearances  Semiramide (debut, 1992), Ariadne auf Naxos, and Die Zauberflöte.

Career Highlights  Soon after leaving Romania in 1986 he became resident conductor of the Vienna State Opera where he has led a wide range of repertoire. He has also conducted new productions at La Scala, the Deutsche Oper Berlin, Munich’s Bavarian State Opera, San Francisco Opera, Madrid’s Teatro Real, and Venice’s La Fenice. In 1998 he inaugurated Milan’s Nuovo Piccolo Teatro with Giorgio Strehler’s production of Così fan tutte. Also active on the concert stage, he regularly appears with orchestras including the Berliner Philharmoniker, Leipzig Gewandhaus, London Symphony, Staatskapelle Dresden, and Philharmonia London, among others. His discography includes over 40 titles, and he is the recipient of three Grammy nominations, France’s Diapason d’Or, and the German Recording Critics Prize.

Anna Christy
SOPRANO (PASADENA, CALIFORNIA)

This Season  Lisette in La Rondine at the Met, Cleopatra in Handel’s Giulio Cesare at English National Opera, the title role of Lucia di Lammermoor in Toronto, and Emily Webb in Ned Rorem’s Our Town with Central City Opera.


Career Highlights  Recent performances include Zerbinetta in Ariadne auf Naxos and Olympia with Lyric Opera of Chicago, Morgana in Handel’s Alcina in Bordeaux, Tytania in Britten’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream with Lyric Opera of Chicago and English National Opera, and Kitty in Menotti’s The Last Savage with Santa Fe Opera. She has also sung Blondchen in Die Entführung aus dem Serail at the San Francisco Opera, Oscar in Un Ballo in Maschera at the Paris Opera and Covent Garden, Cunegonde in Bernstein’s Candide at La Scala and Paris’s Châtelet, Lisette with the San Francisco Opera, and Bianca in Rossini’s Bianca e Falliero with Washington Concert Opera.
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Kristine Opolais
SOPRANO (RIGA, LATVIA)

THIS SEASON  Magda in La Rondine for her debut at the Met, Mimi in La Bohème at the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin and Vienna State Opera, the title role of Tosca at Covent Garden, and the title role of Jenůfa in Zurich.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS  Recent performances include the title role of Rusalka at Munich’s Bavarian State Opera, Cio-Cio-San in Madama Butterfly at Covent Garden, Nedda in Pagliacci at La Scala, Tatiana in Eugene Onegin in Valencia, Lisa in The Queen of Spades with the Latvian National Opera, and Polina in Prokofiev’s The Gambler at La Scala, Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, and in Lyon. Concert engagements include appearances at the Salzburg Festival and Tonhalle Zurich, and with Copenhagen’s Royal Danish Orchestra, Cologne’s WDR Symphony Orchestra, and City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.

Marius Brenciu
TENOR (BRASOV, ROMANIA)

THIS SEASON  Prunier in La Rondine at the Met.

MET APPEARANCES  Prunier (debut 2008).

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS  Rodolfo in La Bohème for his 2008 United States debut with the San Francisco Opera, Gabriele Adorno in Simon Boccanegra in Hamburg, Alfredo in La Traviata with the Deutsche Oper Berlin and Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, Macduff in Macbeth at the Edinburgh Festival and in Amsterdam, Count Almaviva in Il Barbiere di Siviglia in Lyon and Lisbon, and Prunier at Paris’s Châtelet and in Toulouse. He has also sung Lenski in Eugene Onegin with the Israeli Opera, Welsh National Opera, and in Lyon, Tokyo, and Lisbon, Nemorino in L’Elisir d’Amore in Berlin and Tel Aviv, and the title role of Idomeneo at the Paris Opera. On the concert stage he has appeared with the Berliner Philharmoniker, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Orchestre National de Lyon, and Israel Philharmonic. He was the 2001 winner of the Cardiff “Singer of the World” contest.
The Cast CONTINUED

Dwayne Croft
BARITONE (COOPERSTOWN, NEW YORK)

THIS SEASON  Ping in Turandot, Escamillo in Carmen, Coroebus in Les Troyens, Rambaldo in La Rondine, and Donner in Das Rheingold at the Met, Sharpless in Madama Butterfly with Pittsburgh Opera, and Walt Whitman in the world premiere of Theodore Morrison’s Oscar at Santa Fe Opera.

MET APPEARANCES  More than 450 performances of 33 roles, including Sharpless, Nick Carraway in the world premiere of John Harbison’s The Great Gatsby, Silvio in Pagliacci, Marcello in La Bohème, Fiorello (debut, 1990) and Figaro in Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Count Almaviva in Le Nozze di Figaro, Billy Budd, Pelléas in Pelléas et Mélisande, and Guglielmo in Così fan tutte.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS  Recent performances include Dr. Malatesta in Don Pasquale with Washington National Opera, Jack Rance in La Fanciulla del West with the Finnish National Opera, and Harold Hill in Meredith Willson’s The Music Man at Glimmerglass Opera. He has also sung Germont in La Traviata with the San Francisco Opera, Marcello with the Dallas Opera, Escamillo with the Cincinnati Opera, Count Almaviva and Figaro with the Vienna State Opera, Eugene Onegin and Sharpless at the Paris Opera, and Jaufre Rudel in the world premiere of Saariaho’s L’Amour de Loin and Count Almaviva at the Salzburg Festival.

Giuseppe Filianoti
TENOR (REGGIO CALABRIA, ITALY)

THIS SEASON  Tito in La Clemenza di Tito and Ruggero in La Rondine at the Met, the Duke in Rigoletto at Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Aix-en-Provence Festival, and the title role of Les Contes d’Hoffmann at Munich’s Bavarian State Opera.


CAREER HIGHLIGHTS  Nemorino at Covent Garden, the Vienna State Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and Los Angeles Opera, des Grieux in Manon at the Paris Opera, Rodolfo in La Bohème and the title role of Faust in Hamburg, Edgardo with the San Francisco Opera, Faust at the Deutsche Oper Berlin, and Alfredo in La Traviata at the Vienna State Opera and in Madrid, Barcelona, Zurich, and Tokyo. He has also sung Tito in Turin, Werther in Rome, Don Ottavio in Don Giovanni in Florence and Toulouse, and Ruggero at Paris’s Châtelet. He is a frequent guest at La Scala where he has performed in Don Carlo, Don Giovanni, Falstaff, Gianni Schicchi, Rigoletto, Lucrezia Borgia, and Moïse et Pharaon.