

Opera's superstar: Why Juan Diego Flórez is the heir to Pavarotti

Juan Diego Flórez came late to classical music, preferring instead pop and Elvis Presley. Following appearances at La Scala and Covent Garden, he was anointed as the new Pavarotti, but Jessica Duchon discovers that the world's favourite tenor is his own man

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When Juan Diego Flórez got married in the Basilica Cathedral, Lima, back in 2008, the astounding scenes could have been welcoming royalty. Vast crowds crammed into the piazza, the cathedral doors were left open so that everyone could see, and the event was broadcast live on TV. The fuss over this religious service, which followed the couple's civil ceremony in 2007, Flórez says, was the cardinal's idea: "He told us: 'This is not your wedding; it's the wedding of the whole country!'" Flórez is not royalty, even if he is a contender for the hypothetical crown of Luciano Pavarotti as the world's favourite tenor. But in his native Peru, he's a national emblem.

This month we can see why. He's in London with a recital tonight at the Barbican (long sold out) and on 17 May he opens at Covent Garden in Laurent Pelly's acclaimed production of *La Fille du Régiment* by Donizetti, the opera that contains nine high Cs that have often blasted Flórez into the headlines.

As a singer he is blessed with a rather unusual mix of qualities. His voice is several notches higher than the average tenor, untinged with the "baritonal" timbre that can be heard in, for example, the voices of Jonas Kaufmann or Plácido Domingo. Add a shining, open, "forward" tone and astounding technical security that enables him to swan with apparent ease around the coloratura curlicues of delicate bel canto arias; the effect is like listening to the world's best violinist performing on an exceptional Stradivarius. Plus, he has film-star looks, with a slender, muscular physique – he's a keen sportsman – and dark eyes that could melt any heart as rapidly as his voice can. When that wedding took place, female fans wept the world over.

Flórez and his wife, Julia Trappe, now divide their time between homes in Pesaro and Vienna, but travel together to his operatic commitments worldwide. Julia, who was born in Germany and grew up in Australia, was studying singing in Vienna when the pair first met, but now devotes herself to being Mrs Flórez. She's no relation, by the way, of the family Von Trappe, though the sound of music is no doubt all-pervasive in their household.

I caught up with Flórez in Madrid last week, where he was singing in Bellini's *I Puritani* – never mind top Cs, this opera pushes its tenor up to a stratospheric D. Now 37, he seems pragmatic and self-contained, arriving a cool 45 minutes late for our interview. Dressed in plain black shirt and trousers, he is reticent at first, but as he relaxes that voice becomes almost as expressive speaking as it is when singing. Though there's no false modesty about him, neither is he remotely complacent about his gifts, or the responsibility that goes with being possibly the most famous Peruvian on earth.

"Sometimes at my performances I see Peruvian flags in the audience," he says. "I've never seen, when an Italian sings, people with Italian flags. But with Peru it's different: because there are not many famous people, they really celebrate the ones they have. This has been happening more recently, because now they believe and they have hope. Some people might hate someone who is successful, but in Peru they love it! It makes them feel they can be successful too. That's a good state of mind for a country that wants to come out of poverty."

Florez has now set himself the task of making positive changes to Peru's musical life, drawing on the example of *El Sistema*, the dynamic music education scheme in Venezuela that has spawned international imitation thanks to the rapturous reception for its flagship Simon Bolívar Youth Orchestra and conductor Gustavo Dudamel. "I have created a foundation that will help to create and promote different schools and orchestras," says Flórez. "We have kind of a little *Sistema* already, so we can take that and enlarge it. And I hope that with my image I can incentivise private companies and the state to help.

"In Peru, there is no theatre that produces an annual opera season," he continues, "and though there is one orchestra in Lima, it's always struggling to survive. We shouldn't have just one orchestra, we should have 15, we should have 50! And you should start to build this from the children. With El Sistema, you can create orchestras everywhere; then they can decide whether they want to become professional musicians. The aim is not only to create musicians, but to create people."

"I hope that eventually we will have beautiful orchestras, opera seasons, ballet and everything that comes from that. Now we are rebuilding our Municipal Theatre. And in 2012 we will have a concert in Machu Picchu where we will show the world what we can do."

As a youngster, Flórez discovered what he could do almost by accident. He grew up in Lima, where his father, Rubé Flórez, was a well-known Peruvian folk singer and his mother managed a pub that presented live music; the teenaged Juan Diego would sometimes provide this, singing a variety of popular songs from Elvis onwards. Drawn to music from the start, but unaware of classical music per se, he started guitar lessons at 11 and began to learn solfège (music theory) aged 14. "I started to write my own songs," he says. "But always this was pop-oriented. I entered the National Conservatory in Lima when I was 17, and there I started to discover classical music."

What was it that turned him on to it? "I don't know," Flórez says, laughing. "I didn't have a background in it, I'd never heard classical music before. But it doesn't matter: you just have to be introduced to it and if you like it, then you like it. It's as if it's inside you already."

"I wasn't thinking, 'I want to be a tenor'," he goes on, "but I loved music for its own sake, classical music in general." To become more involved in this new passion, he joined Peru's National Choir, singing the choral works of Bach and Mozart. "I found I could sing, so that's what I did – just because I could. After that I began to develop my voice."

It was then, too, that he listened for the first time to recordings of Pavarotti and Alfredo Kraus. "And I thought: 'Wow, this is incredible!'. They became my two examples of what I wanted to be." Pavarotti's voice was a totally different type from Flórez's – a heavy Italian *lyrico* (a term that indicates a large voice) while Kraus was a closer match, a *leggiero* (light) tenor. "Alfredo Kraus I love for his elegance," says Flórez. "Pavarotti's a great example of the joy of singing, the joy of sound – his tone is as beautiful as the sun."

Flórez, though, was only at the conservatory for three years, "and I didn't have the chance to learn what opera was really about". He won a scholarship that enabled him to go to Philadelphia to study at the select Curtis Institute of Music, which threw him in at the deep end. "They gave me a bunch of operas to sing, and I was like, 'Shit, I don't know any opera!' I was 20 years old and I had to sing an opera by Bellini. That was the first time I started to get into that world."

Studies with Marilyn Horne and Ernesto Palacio followed; the latter, also a Peruvian *leggiero* tenor, became his chief mentor and influence. Then, aged 23, Flórez experienced his "big break". He stood in at short notice for the tenor Bruce Ford in Rossini's opera *Matilde di Shabran* at the Rossini Festival in Pesaro, the composer's birthplace. Such was the deluge of praise that, in rapid succession, there followed countless offers, vital debuts at La Scala Milan and Covent Garden and a recording contract with Decca.

It was a startling trajectory for the boy from Peru who until seven years before had scarcely heard a note of classical music. But it's proof that the human voice transcends presumed boundaries. "I find all kinds of people waiting after shows to ask me for autographs," says Flórez. "The other day there was someone who was covered in tattoos. He probably goes to heavy metal, but he also likes opera; one thing does not exclude the other. And in Vienna, two Australian surfers, very blond and tanned, came along and asked me to sign their bellies!"

Bellini, Donizetti and Rossini, the leading composers of the *bel canto* operatic style that flourished in Italy in the first half of the 19th century, form the core of Flórez's repertoire. But given the comparisons that are constantly made, rightly or not, between him and Pavarotti, whose repertoire included the big dramatic roles of Puccini and Verdi, is this rather niche area enough to sustain Flórez and his starry reputation?

It certainly is, he says; for it's the care with which he has stuck to the appropriate repertoire for his voice that has ensured his standing today. "I always do one new opera a year," he points out, "and this is surely enough for a singer, because you have to take care of the voice, you can't do too many new roles at the same time. You have to sing your repertoire, then add one new opera. This suits me because I'm always doing something new; my repertoire is big and you just have to be careful to choose the right thing." That caution is vital; many singers in the past have suffered vocal damage by tackling roles that do not suit their voice types and in some cases they have never recovered.

Maintaining vocal health, he says, means maintaining physical health. "Sleeping well is the main thing. And eating well; I'm vegetarian, which works for me. I do sports – I play tennis, sometimes I play soccer." Like football, singing is an intensive physical activity: "The fact that I'm 37 and my voice hasn't changed much is, I think, a positive thing, because the voice is at its best from 25 to 35. This is the prime; after that, it starts going down. It's the same for footballers, who don't play any more after they are 35. We sing with our muscles. So if you're 37 to 40 and you still have the qualities, characteristics and high notes that you had when you were 30, it means you're doing a good job. It means you're going to sing your repertoire for a long time, which is great because this is the repertoire that made you famous and that the public love. They don't want to hear me sing whatever else; they want to hear me sing *bel canto*."

Besides, he's not short of suitable roles. "Two years ago, I did Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* and that was great, so it's not only the 19th-century repertoire but also the 18th century, with Bach and Mozart; and I will sing *Linda di Chamonix* by Donizetti and *The Pearl Fishers* by Bizet. I don't think I will get bored! And there are recitals, where you can sing whatever you want."

In his recital tonight at the Barbican, his programme includes songs by Rossini and Cimarosa, a selection of zarzuela (Spanish operetta) numbers, and arias by Boieldieu and Massenet. "A Barbican recital has become a sort of tradition for me," he says. "This is the third time, though this concert is with piano, not orchestra. A recital

with piano is something very intimate, something very close to the audience – you need to create a relationship. You get to do one piece after another, which is difficult; but you also get to show everything about yourself."

Meanwhile, opera fans are waiting with excitement for the imminent revival of *La Fille du Régiment* at Covent Garden. A comic masterpiece by Donizetti, it features hugely challenging leading roles and a story that is frankly nuts. But Laurent Pelly's production has hit the jackpot; it's been taken up by opera houses across the globe from Paris to San Francisco. Covent Garden's revival reunites Flórez with the brilliant French soprano Natalie Dessay as the heroine, Marie, and Alessandro Corbelli, Italian comic baritone par excellence; they are the dream-team that made a fabulous production into an iconic one.

Flórez's role involves two famous arias, the first featuring those nine high Cs, which audiences traditionally go crazy over. But when he dared to encore the aria at La Scala, Milan, in 2007, he hadn't bargained for the consequences. Controversy exploded as it can only at this most traditional of opera houses in a country where opera is serious news.

He'd encored the aria at the Met in New York and in Barcelona – "People applaud for five minutes, and you just have to," he explains. But La Scala was different: "It was a strange situation because no one had done an encore of anything there for 74 years." The conductor Arturo Toscanini put a ban on encores at La Scala in 1933, after Feodor Chaliapin sang one without his approval; nobody had attempted it since. Flórez is all wide-eyed innocence: "I didn't know that. I did the encore and the next day it was all over *The New York Times*, *Le Figaro*, everywhere, and I thought, 'What's going on?'"

That encore probably won't happen in London, he says – the audiences here usually apply a certain British restraint. Never mind; the opera is thrilling enough already. Few productions have captured the public's imagination so strongly; indeed, Florez says he's now sung this one so much that he will give the role a rest after its next revival in Paris. How does he account for its success? "It tells the story," he says simply. "Laurent Pelly has taken the story seriously and made it work by portraying Marie as a complete tomboy."

Marie, the apparently orphaned heroine, has been raised by a regiment of soldiers – and Pelly has her act accordingly. Her aunt then attempts to turn her into a lady, with hilarious consequences. The production is sassy and modern, extra sparkle added via contemporary dialogue. Flórez is all in favour of that. "People love modern productions. I love modern productions, I prefer modern. But you have to tell the story, not tell another story, which only confuses people." Perhaps he's encountered the obscurantist concepts of "producers' opera" a few times too often.

It was as Tonio with his top Cs that Pavarotti first shot to fame in the 1960s. But given that they are so unlike, does Flórez not object to the ubiquitous Pavarotti comparison? "I don't mind, because I loved him," he declares. Besides, he received Pavarotti's personal endorsement. When asked on television whom he considered the greatest new talent, Pavarotti responded with Flórez's name.

"I've seen the video of that incident," Flórez says, "and for me it's strange because it's such a different voice, yet he appreciated what I did. But this business of 'the new Pavarotti' – well, they were saying that even earlier, but they have said it of everyone! It's only like saying 'the new big thing'. But every opera singer is completely different. You can sometimes find a tenor who sounds like another tenor, but very rarely. And it's better that you are different."

Sure enough, it is that individual personality, the voice's unique recognisability, that enables a tenor like Flórez to make such a powerful impression on so many listeners. "If you're like a mix between, say, José Carreras and someone else – that doesn't work," he declares. "No. You are yourself." He's not the new Pavarotti, then. He's the first and only Flórez. And we all love him for that.

Juan Diego Flórez sings at the Barbican tonight (returns only) (020 7638 8891); La Fille du Régiment opens at the Royal Opera House on 17 May (020 7304 4000)

Pretenders to the Pavarotti crown

Jonas Kaufmann (41)

Glorious German romantic tenor, equally strong in Italian and French repertoire. Dark timbre with powerful upper register; consummate actor; matchless attention to text; heart-throb looks. He's got everything. Top roles include Wagner's Lohengrin, Don José in Bizet's 'Carmen', Cavaradossi in Puccini's 'Tosca'. Latest recording: Schubert's 'Die Schöne Müllerin' (Decca).

Rolando Villazón (38)

Passionate, all-giving performer from Mexico. After meteoric start and glamorous singing partnership with soprano Anna Netrebko, he ran into vocal trouble; career interrupted twice, 2007 and 2009, with surgery for cyst on vocal cord. Now back and recently took part as judge/mentor on ITV's 'Popstar to Operastar'. Some consider that this damaged his reputation.

Piotr Beczala (43)

Versatile star from Poland, whose voice made magic in Covent Garden's 'La Bohème' last Christmas. Strong, sensitive tone with a core of great beauty; currently working with major opera houses, conductors and directors in repertoire from Mozart to Tchaikovsky, Verdi to Lehár. Recording of 'La Traviata' (Faro Classics) nominated for a Grammy in 2008.

Joseph Calleja (32)

Born in Malta, has been hailed by 'The New York Times' as "the real thing, a tenor who naturally combines plaintive sound with burnished intensity". Crosses easily from Donizetti's bel canto operas to Rodolfo in Puccini's 'La Bohème'. Will star with Plácido Domingo in Simon Boccanegra at ROH and Proms this summer.