

HEART AND SOUL

Hawaiian baritone Quinn Kelsey returns to perform one of his signature Verdi roles

“What makes Quinn Kelsey’s Verdi singing so compelling is not just the size of his voice or the finish of his technique, although both are impressive. It’s his heart,” gushed *Opera News* magazine. “Most baritones snarl their way through Rigoletto’s ‘Cortigiani.’ ... When Kelsey sings the aria, you hear the pain behind the anger; the man’s vulnerability is evident in every phrase. It is a much more human presentation of Rigoletto’s character—and a much more satisfying one.”

San Francisco Opera Music Director Nicola Luisotti, who has collaborated frequently with Kelsey, concurs. “His portrait of Rigoletto draws a tender and angry father with such an incredible, gorgeous voice,” said Luisotti. “I can easily say that he represents today one of the best baritones in the world.”

A native of Honolulu (his father is of European descent and his mother’s family is half-Hawaiian and half-Filipino), Kelsey quickly ascended up the ranks of the Merola Opera Program (2002) and Lyric Opera of Chicago’s Ryan Center for American Artists (2003–06). At 39, he is at the top of his game and one of the few singers of Hawaiian ancestry to have risen to prominence in the opera world.

You come from a musical family. Is that where your voice comes from? As you look back at your career, what do you believe were the crucial turning points?

I’ve been terribly blessed. After high school I didn’t know anything about music conservatories. So I just decided to stay home and register at the local university, University of Hawaii at Manoa. It was one of the smartest things I could have done; I don’t know whether I’d have the same opportunities if I had gone away. I was hired as a soloist at a really great church, Central Union Church in Honolulu, where my folks and sister are soloists now. The quick frequency of different music built up my musicianship skills, and then I was one of the first young singers in the musical community accepted into the Hawaii Opera Theatre’s Orvis Opera Studio. Among the guests who were brought to work with us were Mark Morash [director of musical studies at the San Francisco Opera Center], Richard Pearlman [then-director of the Lyric Opera of Chicago’s apprenticeship program], Marilyn Horne, and Denyce Graves.

The timing couldn’t have been more perfect. It just built my path from the end of college through the years of study at the Chautauqua Institution, here at Merola, and then off to Chicago. As I did one, the next opportunity came along.

In his most recent appearance at San Francisco Opera in 2014, baritone Quinn Kelsey sang the role of Giorgio Germont in La Traviata, opposite soprano Ailyn Pérez as Violetta.



KEN HOWARD



KRISTEN LOKEN

You've said that your Hawaiian heritage and culture are very important to you. How have they influenced your musical life?

Over the years, I've noticed that classical singing is something relatively easily accessed by people of Polynesian or Pacific Island background because of the fact that all these cultures in the Pacific Islands have a strong oral tradition. It allows the individual to merge with the training, concepts, and the techniques in some ways more easily than for some of their counterparts who are not of their culture. The classical music community in Honolulu is pretty small, so you know everybody: the young singers, teachers, and where the vocal studios are around town. I remember there was one studio in one of the community colleges, and the teacher turned out this semi-constant group of singers of whom the majority was of Pacific Island background. They seemed to pick it up rather quickly, excel, and build on it.

There are a number of singers who've come out of Hawaii that never made careers for themselves, but there was no doubt they had the raw materials to pursue classical singing if they chose. The other side of Pacific Island culture is this strong idea of family, and so that makes it so difficult to leave, as one ultimately needs to do to advance into an opera career. It was hard for me.

Yet it seems that you've made that transition relatively smoothly, particularly as a Verdi baritone. Does it ever feel confining to be identified as a certain kind of singer?

To be labeled a Verdi baritone I actually take it as a huge honor, because I know how specific a voice has to be in order to be considered one. There is a certain shape that sets it apart from a lyric baritone because of the way Verdi wrote that voice in his operas; it has a kind of different weight to it. The more Verdi roles that I began to take on, the more I realized that yes, they're all built for me. They're not totally the same, but I can sing them all in a way that doesn't overtax me. And so if nothing else, I look forward to the one I've haven't done yet: Simon Boccanegra, Macbeth, Iago in *Otello*, Ford in *Falstaff*.

That's not to say, I won't be doing anything else. I really enjoy singing French repertoire, and I do a good amount of German lieder. I think it's healthy to start over in a different direction from what you're used to. In a way, it's like giving yourself a tune-up, to apply a different language or style of singing to your vocal mechanism and challenge it. Right now, it's mostly Verdi and bel canto. Hopefully, there's no reason why I can't do Russian repertoire or Wagner and Strauss.

Rigoletto has become one of your signature roles. He's also one of Verdi's most complicated—and Shakespearean—creations. How do you get into this tragic character?

He definitely stacks his professional life on top of his personal life, and they affect one another to a very extreme degree. On the one hand, Rigoletto is this scalding character who makes his living



Quinn Kelsey as Ezio in the Company's 2012 production of Verdi's *Attila*.

verbally attacking everyone in the court. This is his job; this is why the Duke loves him. But he goes after all these people to such a very harsh degree, he's loading up all of the negativity to come crashing down on himself later, and his whole world falls apart.

Whenever I do this role—this is my eighth or ninth production—I always give enough space and consideration of other interpretations. I don't know that I'll ever be able to say 100 percent that I have it figured out. There always should be wiggle room for new ideas

and things that I haven't thought.

You're also here this summer to perform in Merola's 60th anniversary concert. As an alumnus, what was Merola like for you?

It was such a wonderful next progression from where I had come. Merola was the entire summer of being allowed to just focus on training and development, and everything one could do to prepare for a career and hone your craft with a huge handful of master classes and coaching opportunities.

Any significant memories from that time?

Right after I finished Merola, it was the last year of the Western Opera Theater tour, 29 performances of Schaunard in *La Bohème*, a western and eastern U.S. tour. We went from a conventional stage to a ten-by-ten-foot portable stage. I don't think that you could have a hotter group of singers than that group, because of all the spaces we had to conform to. By the end, we could have done it in a bathtub. Later, in 2003, I did a production of *Bohème* and everyone showed up with their music scores. It was so burned to my memory, I could hum everyone else's parts. I had it so baked in my mind.

What have you learned that you would like to pass on to young singers?

It's not an easy business. There's a lot more to it than just getting on the stage, putting on the makeup and fancy costume, and making the pretty noise that everyone claps for. Most people only see the bright, positive side of things. It turns out that singers have a hard time trying to have a personal life. You don't have the support system that people who work in the office five times a week do. It can also be very exhausting besides actually learning the music, going to rehearsals and singing. There's packing up and leaving home and unpacking in a strange place, dealing with language barriers, work visas, and taxes... so many different variables.

So all in all, what it comes down to, in my opinion, is how badly do you want it? And if you do want it badly enough, what is it going to take to get to a place in a career to where you want to be? Those are the questions that you have to answer. It's not easy at all, but if you want it badly enough, at the right times the results and payoffs can be very fulfilling. 🌸