



# Sounds of America

Gramophone's guide to the classical scene in the US and Canada

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## Lawrence Brownlee: the quest for glory

**T**he war of opinion as to who should be ranked among today's alpha tenors wages on mercilessly, but Lawrence Brownlee has found himself preoccupied of late with another battle. That would be the one engaged by Rinaldo, the crusader knight of Rossini's *Armida*, as he struggles between his love for a wily sorceress and the call of duty. The highly acclaimed tenor recently completed his second run in the Met's production of *Armida*, starring alongside Renée Fleming as the eponymous seductress from whose siren charms he eventually breaks free.

The production not only served as the vehicle for Brownlee's role debut as Rinaldo last spring but introduced Rossini's operatic rarity from 1817 to the company.

As the tenor reappears as the heroic knight in the Met's *Armida* by Rossini, **Thomas May** assesses the singer's impact on the operatic world

His interpretation of the heroic Rinaldo has just been released on DVD. The opulent demands Rossini makes of his lead tenor provide a showcase for Brownlee's unique vocal profile, with its singular blend of sweetness and fullness – a quality critics often compare to honey – and lack of stress at the top; his coloratura, with its ease and precision, never sounds mechanical but resonates with charisma.

Speight Jenkins, Seattle Opera's general director, recalls being floored when he first heard Brownlee in person in the late 1990s, in a rehearsal space for the company's Young Artists

programme: "I brought Larry back to my office and told him, 'You can break the world wide open.' It's not just the accuracy, but the beauty of those upper tones. Rarely do you hear the beauty of the high Fs he sang as Arturo in *I puritani* in 2008. You can't even find that on records!"

In a famous and pivotally dramatic trio, *Armida* also requires Brownlee to blend his voice with two other tenors. The effect seems only to accentuate the distinctive timbre, weight and elegance that endow Brownlee's singing with such a recognisable personality. Fleming, who had never sung with him before *Armida*, calls Brownlee

"a miraculous tenor" and singles out his "virtuosic facility combined with a warm, even, rich sound. Add to that extraordinary musicianship and musicality, and he's simply one of the best all-around singers I've worked with."

"Always be prepared," advises Brownlee, now 38, "for when your chance arrives." The motto has served him well, even before his career got an early jolt when he was asked by La Scala to sing Count Almaviva in 2002 (his success in Milan followed only a few months after he made his professional stage debut in the same role at Virginia Opera). The current season has been unfolding as a typical, carefully balanced sequence of new and familiar venues, including company debuts at Paris and Lausanne Opera and Canadian Opera Company.



Given his relatively late discovery of opera in general, it's all the more remarkable that Brownlee has emerged as a main contender within the specialised tenorial enclave of *bel canto*. The singer was born and raised in the rust-belt city of Youngstown, Ohio, his musicality nurtured by the church gospel choir in which his family actively participated. Brownlee recalls being reluctant to solo during Sunday services, but a perceptive teacher recognised the unusual character of his voice and encouraged him to pursue professional training.

Within a few years Brownlee had formed a secure sense of his vocal identity – accompanied by a determination to safeguard its development through savvy role choices, which carefully augment his *bel canto* repertoire. He also exhibits an unfeigned sense of loyalty to mentors and colleagues alike, who in turn describe a kinship between Brownlee's artistic and personal magnetism.

"There are a number of talented people in our field of opera," says Joyce DiDonato, who is frequently cast alongside Brownlee, "but there are a very select few who rise to the top as a world-class singer at the pinnacle of their *fach* while also garnering unanimous admiration and love from their colleagues, as well. Larry is such a rare creature and our musical and personal worlds are much richer for having his presence among us."

Vivica Genaux, who sang Isabella to Brownlee's Paris Lindoro last autumn, refers to the organic quality of his stage presence. "His onstage persona, both vocally and physically, is so honest. You don't feel that you're watching him performing someone else but that he's singing a character who really is Larry."

As for "the doubters" who, Brownlee says, warned early on that he couldn't have a career "because of what they perceived as physical limitations" – that is, as an African-American who is five-and-a-half feet tall – he doesn't reveal the slightest trace of spite.

"I found encouragement in artists like George Shirley, but in the end the most important thing he said to me is that 'everyone has to kick down their own door'. And I think even in the past 10 years our society has become more accepting of multicultural presence through what we see in the media." For Jenkins, what Brownlee has been able to do as a male singer is reminiscent of Leontyne Price's legendary triumph at her Met debut in 1961. "I was there and I remember the sense of electricity. It was clear that she had utterly broken the barrier once and for all for African-American women. Larry is also an artist who can stimulate that kind of excitement."

A month before the *Armida* revival, Brownlee described his desire to try out his latest thoughts about the role, musically and dramatically: "Even though

the singer for whom Rossini originally wrote *Rinaldo* had a different voice from mine, it's like trying on a costume and learning how to fit it to your own strengths as you shape the arc of each piece to give it the most effective phrasing and colouring. At the same time, I want to intensify the dramatic conflict he feels, his torment in choosing between honour and love."

Brownlee, whose amiable demeanour offstage is as genuine as it is infectious, shared these ideas while preparing his latest *Almaviva* for Seattle Opera, which he calls "my artistic home away from home". Though *Barbiere's* Count has become his signature role (it marked his debut not only at La Scala but, in 2007, at the Met as well) the singer finds an inexhaustible wealth of nuances and details with which to continually refine his

interpretation. Peter Kazaras's production for Seattle, which deliciously underlined *Barbiere's* *commedia-dell-arte* underpinnings and role-playing attitudes, brought Brownlee's comic flair into relief.

Yet the comedy yielded to a touching new perspective in the Count's restored final aria, "Cessa di più resistere". Brownlee achieved the memorable feat of making the intricate, florid coloratura sound natural rather than just another extended performance, even while executing it with pinpoint accuracy. It synchronised beautifully with his ideas about the characters' masks finally being set aside.

Brownlee's unbounded curiosity extends to a dedicated study of Rossinian musical tradition. His quest for expressive variability to shape the rhythm and flow of his interpretations includes close collaboration with such Rossini scholars as Philip Gossett and the conductor Alberto Zedda. According to Riccardo Frizza, who conducted the Met's *Armida*, "the voice is perfect for Rossini's operas. Larry can achieve the top very easily, while the lower register is full and rich. This great range allows him to negotiate even the most complicated and serious Rossini roles, where the scope ranges from *leggiere* to *baritenor*."

For all his success, Brownlee himself remains easygoing and decidedly down to earth. The eagerness with which he has been perfecting his Italian is echoed by his devotion to salsa (he dances and has lately taken up DJ-ing to show off his prized collection of rare salsa bands on vinyl) and indeed to sports – including bowling when he relaxes at his Atlanta home with wife Kendra and their newborn son. "The last thing I want to happen," confides Brownlee, "is to become the archetypal divo, with a full-of-himself personality. I try to maintain my identity as a normal guy. Being an opera singer, after all, is what I do, not who I am." ●

## LAWRENCE BROWNLEE: LIVE AND ON DISC

### Recommended Recordings Rossini: *Armida*

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus / Riccardo Frizza  
Decca 001522609

This live recording of the new Met production from last year showcases Brownlee (opposite Renée Fleming) in one of his most challenging Rossini roles (to be reviewed in a future issue).

### Rossini: *Stabat mater*

Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia / Antonio Pappano  
EMI 640529-2

An Editor's Choice selection for the January 2011 issue, this account of Rossini's *Stabat mater* has inspired comparisons between Brownlee and Pavarotti, while Richard Osborne praised the "stylish and sweet-toned" young tenor.

### Simon Mayr: *Medea in Corinto*

Chorus and Orchestra of the Theater St Gallen / David Stern  
OEHMS Classics 933

While his focus remains on the *bel canto* repertoire of Rossini, Brownlee has also shown interest in reviving such rarities

as Mayr's once-popular opera from the early 19th century, as brilliantly captured here.

### Upcoming Live Performances April 23 - May 25

*La Cenerentola* with the Canadian Opera Company, Toronto. Brownlee makes his COC debut as the prince in Rossini's theatrically savvy fairy-tale retelling.

### www.coc.ca May 28

*Elijah* at the Cincinnati May Festival. James Conlon conducts Brownlee (with soprano Julianna Di Giacomo and bass Shenyang) in Mendelssohn's oratorio.

### www.mayfestival.com June and July

*Il barbiere di Siviglia* and *L'italiana in Algeri*. Brownlee rejoins the Deutsche Staatsoper in Berlin to perform his signature role as Almaviva in Ruth Berghaus's production, before heading back to La Scala to sing Lindoro in the iconic Jean-Pierre Ponnelle staging (from June 30).

### www.staatsoper-berlin.de www.teatroallascala.org