

Andrei Bondarenko: opera star from Ukraine ready for Marriage of Figaro

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The news out of Ukraine has been bleak recently: unstable government, a crashing economy, the annexation of Crimea, civilian deaths in the proxy war with Russia. But Andrei Bondarenko has something positive to say.

A younger generation of musicians — his generation — is working to keep classical music and opera alive in a country where government funding has dwindled and lack of disposable income has cut audience numbers. Food, he points out, has a higher priority than opera. The state opera theatre is moribund, under the total control, Soviet-style, of the director, who controls all productions and casts all roles. Bondarenko estimates it is 30 or 40 years behind the times — unlike in Russia, where opera and classical music are still well funded and up to date, and where new opera theatres and concert halls are being built.

Most of the young musicians pushing this new wave in Ukraine, and the conductors who fly in and out, work free, out of commitment to the art form.

“In my native town there is a girl, a soprano, who organised a small opera festival, which we have never had,” Bondarenko says with enthusiasm. “It was amazing. She invited singers from Georgia, from Italy, to do Tosca in the open air. And people came.”

Bondarenko is in Sydney to sing the role of the Count in David McVicar’s new production of *The Marriage of Figaro* for Opera Australia. He has been here twice before. In 2011, the year he won the Cardiff Singer of the World competition song prize, he performed in John Malkovich’s equivocally received opera-play *The Giacomo Variations*. And in 2012 he sang in the Sydney Symphony’s concert version of *Ace of Spades*, under Vladimir Ashkenazy.

Count Almaviva has become something of a calling card. He has sung it at the Mariinsky in St Petersburg and at the Teatro Real in Madrid, and has recorded it for Sony Classics. And he is only 28.

He likes McVicar’s approach in Sydney. “Usually directors show the comedy in the acting, but here I feel it is about the relationships between the characters. And that is not a comedy at all.” Instead, class relations and the sexual power imbalance are emphasised.

He equivocates when asked if the role is difficult to sing. “Every role has its difficulties,” he says. But he is very aware of the trend to push young, good-looking singers ahead of their vocal capabilities. Don Giovanni, from Mozart’s towering eponymous opera, is a grail that hovers in the distance for him.

“Not many singers think about that,” he says of the care needed in choosing roles. “I don’t know why, because it’s so simple and everybody talks about it. It’s OK if you just want to sing for 10 years and then do something different. But how many singers want to do that?”

There’s another reason he is not ready for Don Giovanni’s towering persona: life experience. “I need a couple more years to do it,” he says a little ruefully.

Bondarenko was born in Kamianets-Podilskyi, in southwestern Ukraine, in 1987. His father was in the Soviet navy, stationed near Crimea. “KGB!” Bondarenko says in a stage whisper, smiling, and it’s not clear whether he’s joking. His father left the navy when the Soviet Union broke up, and has since done a variety of jobs. His mother studied at a cultural institute, but gave it up for full-time mothering and community work when Andrei came along.

There was little classical music in the house when he was growing up, but his family loved the Ukrainian tradition of folk singing, especially after dinner when friends visited. His grandmother and grandfather had particularly fine voices, he says.

At his primary school, children had to learn an instrument and take classes in dance and painting. “From six years old, when I went to school, I knew I would be a musician,” he says. “I started to play saxophone and then, because of the saxophone, I started to really love jazz and played it.”

His voice broke when he was 13 and it was immediately clear he was a fine baritone. At 16, he enrolled in the national music academy in Kiev and studied there for three years.

He still speaks of his teacher, Valeriy Buimister, with reverence. It was Buimister who gave him his love of opera: “It was his fault,” he says with a grin.

From there, he joined the Mariinsky’s young artists program in St Petersburg, run by Larisa Gergieva, sister of the theatre’s formidable music director and friend of President Vladimir Putin, Valery Gergiev.

“The Mariinsky is like another world,” Bondarenko says. “It’s an amazing school with amazing musicians and I was lucky to be there. But it’s hard.” So was professional work in the Mariinsky Theatre, which he started almost immediately.

“It’s like, six performances per day — three stages, morning, afternoon, evening, five orchestras — so you can imagine how many people there are. It’s like a big factory, though I don’t like to use this word about music. When you have a factory, you don’t have soul in the music.”

He blows off a question about how tough Gergiev really is: “He looks scary, doesn’t he?” he says flippantly.

After six years there, and two years after he began travelling to other theatres, he went freelance. His reputation grew quickly.

“Few people are that gifted — both his musical instincts and his dramatic instincts,” says Opera Australia’s music director Lyndon Terracini, a baritone who worked widely across the world when he was younger, and who cast Bondarenko in the role.

Bondarenko is already feeling the strain of international touring. He has lived out of a suitcase for the past six months and admits it can get lonely. He quotes the French conductor Guillaume Tourniaire, also in Sydney for this production.

“He said we’re so lucky to do this job, because we are like doctors for the soul,” Bondarenko says. “So, of course touring is crazy, but it’s the price we pay for this pleasure.”