

What Is a Voice For?

By Joanna Black

Arturo Chacón-Cruz has sung on some of the world's great stages. This November he comes home to Miami to sing the role Luciano Pavarotti sang here sixty-one years ago, and to make the case for a human voice with nothing standing between it and you.

The first thing Arturo Chacón-Cruz ever learned about the human voice, he learned around midnight, standing outside a house in Sonora, Mexico, with a guitar in his hands, waiting to see whether a light would come on.

He was fourteen, and already a local specialist in the serenata, the old Mexican ritual in which a hopeful young man sings his intentions up at a woman's window in the dark. If the suitor could not sing, and a remarkable number could not, Chacón-Cruz sang for him. He did hundreds. If the light went on, she might come outside, offer a kiss, accept a proposal. If it stayed off, the courtship was usually over. His success rate, he told me, was about seventy-five percent. He was quick to add that the verdict was almost never about the singing, which is the most gracious thing I have ever heard anyone say about his own numbers. I work for an opera company. A good part of my job is explaining that opera is not what people think it is: not a museum, not a dress code, not a punchline. I have rarely made the case as well as that light in the window. A voice can do something to another person. It can get a woman out of bed at midnight. Now and then, it can change a life.

"I'm just going to sing with love," he told me, three decades and a great many stages later.

My first instinct was to write that down and quietly not use it. It sounds like something embroidered on a pillow. It isn't, not the way he means it. In a profession built on auditions, critics, and the nightly possibility that the body will betray the artist living inside it, he has arrived at a philosophy that is almost aggressively simple. Do the work. Then stop thinking about yourself.

The Work Before the Applause

Opera was not the plan. In the Sonora of his childhood it turned up on Sunday television, formal and far away. He was seventeen when his mother suggested voice lessons, mostly because the mariachi bands kept him out until three in the morning and she wanted him to acquire some discipline. He went to the first lesson intending never to go back. He loved it. He was studying engineering at the time, and when his teacher asked him to give singing six months, engineering lost.

What followed he calls "a series of no-brainers."

A scholarship to a Mexico City workshop staffed partly by Metropolitan Opera faculty. A stage shared with Plácido Domingo while he was still very young. Boston University, then the young artist studios at Houston Grand Opera and San Francisco Opera. And in 2005, first prize at Domingo's Operalia competition, which led to roughly twenty contracts.

Told like that, it sounds inevitable, and that is exactly the version he distrusts. The years disappear. The rejections disappear. Luck starts to resemble destiny. We see the photograph from the stage, not the Tuesday afternoon in the practice room. "Youth is seeing the results and not the preparation," he said. "We need to show the work. And then the results."

As a young man he bought one-way tickets to his auditions, on the reasoning that there was no point paying for the trip home. Most of us, and I include myself, book the return. But confidence without preparation is fantasy, and that is the lesson he presses on young singers, including the artists in Florida Grand Opera's studio program he will work with this season. Practice every day, learn the words, learn the style, and love the craft so much "that you find it offensive not to know it perfectly."

His Met debut came in his forties, later than for many colleagues, in one of the most punishing roles in the tenor repertoire. He had had twenty-four years to get ready. He says he was not nervous at all.

The Question from the Back Seat

His son was not quite four. They were sitting in Miami traffic on the way to collect a passport before a job in Italy, and the boy looked miserable in the back seat. Chacón-Cruz apologized for the errand and promised ice cream.

"Dad, what are we here for?"

He started explaining the passport again. "No, Dad. What are we here for in the world?"

He remembers looking over at his wife, who looked back at him as if to say: *he asked you*.

"We're here to love," he told his son. "We're here to give love and to receive love."
The boy seemed satisfied. His father was not finished with it. He was moving into heavier repertoire and facing a run of major debuts, and the private accounting of critics and casting directors was eating at him.
His son's question offered a way out of the arithmetic. He had done the work. He knew the music, and if he lost a word there was a prompter three feet away. So, he would warm up, and then he would stop worrying. "My only worry is to sing directly from my soul to the audience and give love," he said.
The stage fright receded. He says it has not come back. The idea reached past the footlights, too. "If a colleague is not being so nice," he said, "they're having a bad day. Just give some love to the colleagues, too."
It sounds like the kind of thing people say in interviews about art. Then he mentions the letters. In twenty-six years of singing, ten or eleven have reached him from strangers who had been at the lowest point of their lives, had considered ending them, had heard him sing, and had not. He does not tell this as a triumph. He tells it as a job description. "I feel so humbled and so responsible to keep doing it," he said.

The Pavarotti Connection

This November he returns to Miami, the city he has made his home, to sing Edgardo in Florida Grand Opera's 85th-anniversary *Lucia di Lammermoor*. It is the role a young Luciano Pavarotti sang here in 1965, opposite Joan Sutherland, stepping in for a tenor who had fallen ill. It was Pavarotti's American debut. Sutherland took him to Australia. The Met called. The rest is famous, and it began here.
For a company turning eighty-five, that makes *Lucia* more than programming. Institutions, like people, are always deciding what to remember. I have spent enough hours in this company's archive, among the scrapbooks and the yellowing clippings, to know how easily a night like that can shrink into trivia. Before Pavarotti became Pavarotti, Miami was already part of the story.
For Chacón-Cruz, the connection runs closer than the billing. Domingo has been his mentor, so close, he says, that "I call him Dad, he calls me son." Pavarotti reaches him by a different road, through his own teacher.
Two decades ago, Chacón-Cruz studied Edgardo with the Mexican tenor Ramón Vargas, who had worked on technique with Pavarotti himself, and who made his own New York debut in 1992 by stepping in when Pavarotti withdrew from *Lucia di Lammermoor*. One tenor covers for another in Miami; a generation later, his student covers for him in New York; a generation after that, the student's student comes to Miami to sing the role where it started.
"There's all these connections," he said.
He keeps returning to an old New York interview in which Pavarotti was asked the secret of his singing. The answer, as Chacón-Cruz remembers it, was essentially this: *I sing like a child*. He believes almost everyone misunderstood it. People went off to study the Vienna Boys' Choir. In Mexico, he says, they started studying the boys' choir at the Basílica de Guadalupe. They had it backward.
"He sings with the innocence of a child," Chacón-Cruz said. "He sings purely."
Under the formidable technique, he argues, is something almost defenseless. Even Pavarotti's Edgardo is pure. Pure when he is jealous. Pure when he is furious with Enrico, or with Lucia. "There is no adult judging in the background," he said. Then, without quite meaning to, he walked it all the way back to that sidewalk in Sonora. "That is his version of singing with love."
You do not inherit the voice. You inherit the question of what to do with your own.

Coming Home

He first sang Edgardo nearly twenty years ago. The score has not changed. He has. Edgardo can easily flatten into a handsome archetype in a cape, and Chacón-Cruz sees more. "He's romantic, he gets jealous, he gets disillusioned with life, and then he's compassionate in the end," he said. "To be able to do it now, again, with the maturity I have, not only vocally, but also mentally. I have lived so much that I can act the part." And this time there will be friends in the house, some of whom have never seen an opera at all. That delights him, and it sets him off on a defense of an art form he thinks the culture routinely gets wrong. In the movies, the villain listens to Wagner and the insufferable intellectual has season tickets.

He cannot work out who benefits from that joke. As someone whose job involves selling those season tickets, neither can I. He thinks we have confused difficulty with exclusion. Opera begins somewhere very primitive: breath moving through a body. No amplification. Bone, muscle, air.

> "The world is going to less feeling," he said. Opera moves the other way. "We need to dig deeper."

Outside the Niche

Rather than complain, he has spent years going out to find the audience where it already is.

A writer at *GQ* México who loved opera interviewed him three times, then told him he had been named the magazine's Man of the Year. What pleases him is not the honor but the circulation: pages on an opera singer in front of readers who had never bought a ticket. He loves racing, and has sung "God Bless America" at the Indianapolis 500 and, this August, at the Freedom 250 Grand Prix in Washington, on national television in the country's two hundred and fiftieth year. He is organizing a series of concerts in memory of Pope Francis with the Pope Francis Memorial Foundation, and last year met Pope Leo XIV, an encounter he calls "an immensely spiritual and fulfilling experience." He cooks. He still plays guitar. His favorite evening is a bohemian one with friends, gathered for no reason but each other, which is more or less what he thinks an opera house is for.

And He Makes Tequila

The brand is called El Tenor, which is either the least subtle name in the category or exactly the right one. It began with a technical problem: a tenor cannot keep singing on something that burns. He gave his maestro tequilero three conditions. Keep it authentic, keep it one hundred percent agave, and stop scorching the instrument. The result is three expressions: Blanco, Cristalino Añejo, and Extra Añejo, all carrying the vanilla and caramel of the agave and, he insists, no heat. He has been told that people in tequila do not say *smooth*. He says it anyway.

The other motive is less commercial. Mexico, he says, has spent years being described to the world as a source of bad things, when what he knows of it is family, music, food, and, yes, tequila. He would rather set a table than argue the point.

A magazine, a racetrack, a bottle, an opera house. It is the same move every time. A man who believes his art form's problem is access rather than merit will keep building doors and waiting to see who walks through.

The Human Instrument

For its 85th Anniversary Season, Florida Grand Opera is opening its own vault: photographs, costumes, recordings, eight and a half decades of evidence. But the most interesting thing an opera company owns is the one thing you cannot put behind glass. Sixty-one years after a young Italian tenor sang Edgardo in Miami, a Mexican-born tenor who calls Miami home will step into the same role, carrying mariachi serenades, Domingo, Vargas, the Met, a question from the back seat of a car, and two more decades of life than he had the first time he sang it. The lineage is not imitation. It is transmission.

We have spent years sanding the friction off human experience. Voices can be corrected, images perfected, and machines grow steadily better at imitating the things people make. Opera offers a body standing on a stage. A person takes a breath, and without a microphone, that breath crosses a theater and lands in the chest of a stranger in the back row. Once the note is sung, there is no edit. I keep coming back to the light in the window. A boy of fourteen on a dark street in Sonora, singing someone else's feelings up toward a house and waiting. He did not know yet that he was learning a profession. He was learning what a voice is for. To give love, he would tell his son years later. And to receive it. After all the great stages and famous names, he has not found a more complicated answer. I have stopped looking for one myself.

Come hear it for yourself. Arturo Chacón-Cruz sings Edgardo in *Lucia di Lammermoor* this November, as part of Florida Grand Opera's 85th Anniversary Season. Tickets are at fgo.org. Bring someone who has never been.

el Tenor

TEQUILA



"As a young man discovering my voice, I won a mariachi singing competition. The prize was a bottle of tequila, but the true reward was a dream—to one day share the true beauty and spirit of Mexico with the world.

That dream carried me from Sonora to the world's greatest opera stages. Yet wherever music took me, I never forgot where I came from.

El Tenor is the realization of that dream, a tribute to Mexico's rich heritage, the artistry of exceptional tequila, and the unforgettable moments that bring us together.

¡Salud!"

Arturo Chacón-Cruz

Tenor and Founder of El Tenor Tequila

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