Performances What to See This Spring in N.Y.C.



Patrick Carfizzi, a vibrant performer in supporting roles, has grabbed attention in a new production of Verdi's "La Forza del Destino."

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Patrick Carfizzi, a Metropolitan Opera stalwart, is singing the role of Melitone in Verdi's "La Forza del Destino." Ali Cherkis for The New York Times



By Zachary Woolfe

March 27, 2024, 5:04 a.m. ET

Many boxes of pizza had been delivered to the Metropolitan Opera on Sunday afternoon, and were stacked on a table in the hallway between some dressing rooms and the stage.

They were a gift from one of the singers appearing in the matinee performance that day: the bass-baritone Patrick Carfizzi, who is having attention-grabbing success in the modest but meaty role of Fra Melitone in a new production of Verdi's "La Forza del Destino," which concludes its run on Friday.

That performance, remarkably, will be Carfizzi's 459th with the Met. "It's a huge gift to be here as often as I've been here," he said on Sunday as he put on his makeup and costume, and warmed up. "You just keep working. It's step by step by step."

Melitone doesn't appear until the second act. So, as the opera began, Carfizzi was getting ready in a dressing room next to the one he lovingly calls the Charlie Anthony Suite, after its longtime inhabitant, the tenor Charles Anthony, a Met lifer who sang mostly supporting roles in 2,928 performances from 1954 to 2010.



Heath Bryant-Huppert applying Carfizzi's makeup before a performance of "Forza." Ali Cherkis for The New York Times

Carfizzi, who turns 50 next month and is celebrating his 25th anniversary with the

company later this year, has, in the skill and relish he brings to smaller parts, become something of a latter-day Anthony — or Paul Plishka, Bernard Fitch, James Courtney or John Del Carlo. (It was from this group that Carfizzi inherited the morale-building tradition of ordering pizza for the cast and crew.)

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- Outsider Cabaret: Alan Cumming, the 59-yearold actor who revels in doing "weird things all the time," brings his cabaret show about aging to New York.
- At the Met: Oksana Lyniv, who is leading "Turandot" at the Metropolitan Opera, has used her platform to criticize Russia and promote Ukrainian culture.
- 'Tommy' Revival: Pete Townshend is still • working through his childhood trauma and bringing his musical's legacy to a new generation.

He is a consummate comprimario, to use the traditional Italian term: a deeply experienced supporting player, the opera equivalent of a character actor. Audiences may cheer the visiting stars, but it's singers like Carfizzi who allow the Met to function at such a high level, night after night.

"He really represents the heart and soul of the company," said Peter Gelb, the Met's general manager. "He's one of a handful of singers we rely upon because he's a first-rate artist and has a beautiful voice. He's the luxury casting that the Met is capable of."

Even regular operagoers may not immediately recognize Carfizzi's name. But they've almost certainly seen him, again and again, often as the kind of nameless character who offers exposition or piquantly moves scenes forward, like the Speaker in "The Magic Flute," the Mandarin in "Turandot" and the Doctor in "Pelléas et Mélisande."

Lately, Carfizzi has been the Met's favored Sacristan in "Tosca," singing it over 50 times in the past six years. He has appeared frequently as the comically bumbling gardener Antonio in "Le Nozze di Figaro," and in the moderately larger part of Schaunard in "La Bohème." Outside the Met, he has sung even bigger roles, like Leporello in "Don Giovanni," which he performs next month with Boston Baroque.



Carfizzi embracing Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the Met's music director, who is conducting "Forza." Ali Cherkis for The New York Times

"You see Patrick doing a variety of sizes of roles at different theaters," said Michael Heaston, the Met's assistant general manager for artistic affairs. "He embraces every opportunity, regardless of the number of measures of music."

His parts, even if brief, tend to offer ample material for him to dive into. But the grumbling, earthy cleric Melitone in "Forza" is juicier than most, particularly in Mariusz Trelinski's grim new staging for the Met, which takes a character usually played for comic relief and renders him chilly and cruel.

"In the rehearsal room," Carfizzi said, "the instruction was 'strip out the buffo,' which was great."

Instead of the standard amusing kvetchiness when he welcomes the beleaguered Leonora to the monastery where she seeks refuge, Carfizzi's Melitone sneers as he tosses her a thin blanket. A scene in which he distributes food to the poor has been stripped of jolliness, as he barks orders with ominous brutality.

"Melitone, for me, symbolizes the darkest part of the Catholic Church," Trelinski said in an interview. "Not everyone in the church is like that, of course, but he is that xenophobic, racist, divisive side. And for Patrick, who has many times played comic characters, I think this was a metamorphosis for him. He rejected the simply fun and audience-pleasing side to touch something darker."



The final performance of "Forza," on Friday, with be Carfizzi's 459th at the Met. Ali Cherkis for The New York Times

Carfizzi grew up in Newburgh, N.Y., about 60 miles north of New York City. As a boy, he was torn between pursuing pediatrics and jazz. (He dabbled in the euphonium, trombone and tuba.) Then he filled in for a fellow student who got sick before the middle school play, and later replied to a newspaper ad seeking performers for a production of "Man of La Mancha." That settled it: He began to take singing more seriously.

At 16, he visited the Met for a tour. On the stage, his father told him to sing, and he powered out a few notes. "I thought, 'I really love this," he recalled. "'If they'll have me, I'd love to try to do this."

During college, Carfizzi overcame a severe case of Lyme disease, and was hit by a drunken driver in an accident that left him seriously injured. "What kept me sane and kept me going was singing," he said. He auditioned for the Met's young artist program and was rejected, but a few weeks later, the company's administration called and offered him his debut, as Count Ceprano in "Rigoletto" on Christmas Eve in 1999.



In the Met's new "Forza" production, Melitone, a character usually played for comic relief, is rendered chilly and cruel. Ali Cherkis for The New York Times

With a voice that is rich yet focused, and acting that is intelligible and engaging, he made an impression even when his time onstage was limited. "Efficiency becomes

even more important," Carfizzi said of comprimario work. "Clarity is always important in opera, but it's particularly key when you have 10 or 15 minutes max, just in terms of the story line. But it doesn't matter if the role is three lines or three hours; it all requires the same discipline."

When you've spent a long time as a character actor, it can be difficult to make the industry view you as more of a leading man; it's a gradual process. Next season at the Met, Carfizzi will once more sing a run as the Sacristan in "Tosca," but will also give a single performance of something substantial, and new for him with the company: Dr. Bartolo in "The Barber of Seville."

"If you look at Patrick's trajectory over the years, his voice has gotten bigger," Heaston said. "And when someone's voice grows, you start to open up different repertory for him."

Could Wagner's Alberich, once the subject of a genial debate between Carfizzi and his manager, come in the future? Scarpia in "Tosca"? Contemporary operas —

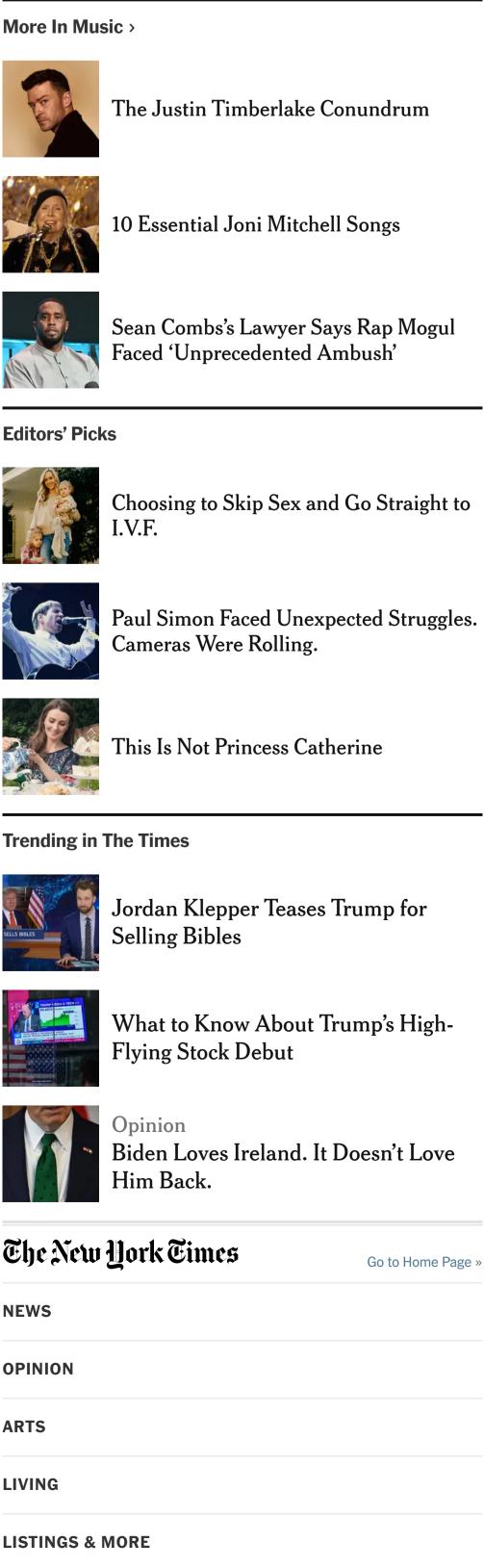
particularly, he hopes, the rare ones with a comic bent? Paul Plishka spent a quartercentury at the Met doing smaller parts before the house cast him as Verdi's Falstaff — a dream role for Carfizzi, too.

"I've gotten more patient with time," he said. "If people see me that way, great. And if they don't, we keep trying. Good health willing, I'm not going anywhere."

Zachary Woolfe is the classical music critic of The Times. More about Zachary Woolfe

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