

# INTERVIEW WITH THIRD-TIME GRAMMY NOMINEE CONSTANTINE ORBELIAN

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**Sona Hamalian**, Yerevan, 18 December 2018

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### ***Dmitri Hvorostovsky and Constantine Orbelian at Concert***

Released by Delos Music in November 2017, the nominated recording, *Verdi: Rigoletto*, was conducted by Maestro Orbelian and features the late Russian baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky in the title role, American soprano Nadine Sierra, Italian tenor Francesco Demuro, the Kaunas City Symphony Orchestra, and the Men of the Kaunas State Choir. The recording was produced by Vilius Keras and Aleksandra Keriene.

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This is Orbelian's third Grammy nomination. In 2014, he was nominated for conducting a recording of Rossini's virtuoso arias, performed by American tenor Lawrence Brownlee with the Kaunas City Symphony Orchestra. Orbelian received his second Grammy nomination in 2017, for his recording of composer Georgy Sviridov's "Russia Cast Adrift," featuring Dmitri Hvorostovsky and the State Symphony Orchestra of St. Petersburg.

This interview was conducted in Yerevan, where Maestro Constantine Orbelian leads the Yerevan Opera House as its Artistic and General Director.

**Q – Out of the literally thousands of recordings released in 2018, your recording of "Rigoletto"**

**was among those outstanding works that were selected to receive a Grammy nomination. This must be an extraordinary honor, especially considering that you are now the recipient of no less than three Grammy nominations. You are also the only Armenian musician and conductor nominated for the prestigious award this year, and the only one to have been nominated three times. “Rigoletto” is widely regarded as a revolutionary opera – par for the course, it should be said, since you’ve always been known for taking on trailblazing works. What are some of “Rigoletto”’s distinct qualities that appeal to you most?**

A – First of all, I love opera and love Verdi. What appealed to me most is Dmitri Hvorostovsky's incredible interpretation of the title role. I had heard him perform “Rigoletto” in London and at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, and I was at his very first “Rigoletto” in Moscow, at the Novaya Opera Theater, in 2000. Dmitri was one of the GREAT voices and GREAT interpreters of the music of Verdi. He infused the role with so much pain and heartache that one immediately bonded with the poor hunchbacked court jester. His performances became legend and brought a new dimension to his “usual” onstage presence of either a prince or a duke or a king. During my 20 years of collaboration with Dmitri Hvorostovsky, I had heard him perform most of the great Verdi roles, whether at the Metropolitan Opera House, Royal Opera House in London, Paris Opera, or Vienna State Opera, not to mention the San Francisco, Chicago, and Los Angeles operas. One of his signature roles was Simon Boccanegra, and after five or six years of him performing that opera around the world, we decided to record it, in 2012. We had a stellar cast including the great Italian soprano Barbara Frittoli, and superstar Russian Bass Ildar Abdrazakov, and the superb Italian tenor Stefano Secco. The recording was met with great critical acclaim in the press and became a new benchmark for that particular opera. After Dmitri's tragic diagnosis of brain cancer, in June 2015, he told me he *must* do two things before he couldn't sing any longer: he *must* record “Rigoletto” and an extraordinary vocal cycle by Russian composer Georgy Sviridov. So I began planning to do both recordings in the summer of 2016. We first recorded the “Rigoletto” in Kaunas, and then flew to St. Petersburg to record the Sviridov CD.

Dmitri was a true musical and vocal genius. He respected his art and expected total dedication to the work at hand. Having said that, he was extremely easy to work with and was the ideal colleague. He respected his colleagues and helped shape their interpretations to make a “whole” and total vision of the opera. Since there can never be “too many ears” at a recording session, we had our great friend and musical colleague John Fisher from the Metropolitan Opera with us at the recording sessions, preparing us before each session. He had worked with Dmitri for many years, and has the most invaluable experience in being the musical consultant and coordinator in some of the most important opera recordings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – including ours!

**Q – The recording of *Verdi: Rigoletto* also stands apart with an extremely high level of artistry manifested by soloists including Nadine Sierra and Francesco Demuro, as well as Lithuania's Kaunas City Symphony Orchestra and the Men of the Kaunas State Choir. How would you**

## **characterize your experience collaborating with such musicians?**

A – Nadine Sierra is a true rising star and has one of the most beautiful, glorious, and lovely voices in the world today. Besides being a true and dedicated artist, she is a lovely person and has a great sense of humor, which makes these grueling (long and difficult) recording sessions fly by with ease. Dmitri had performed “Rigoletto” with Nadine in Naples a couple of years before we made our recording. Francesco Demuro is a true Duke... He has a beautiful voice, a great personality, and was very charismatic in the role. Francesco is a well-known folk singer (and of course a great opera singer) in Sardinia, so the famous aria “La Donna mobile” came out with a particular youthful buoyancy and mood. He’s a star at the Met and other opera houses.

## **Q – Two thousand eighteen was one of the most prolific years in the history of the Yerevan Opera House. Under your direction, the iconic institution presented performances of several landmark operatic productions, both in Armenia and abroad, garnering critical and popular acclaim. Do you believe that the Yerevan Opera House has what it takes to be in the vanguard of world opera?**

A – You're right. 2018 was an incredible year for the Yerevan Opera and Ballet Theater.

Since my becoming the General Director in August 2017, I've been working very hard on bringing something which would be very meaningful to the Yerevan Opera. Doing something in the short term is of course very difficult, so when I heard that our star tenor Liparit Avetisyan had won the prestigious Golden Mask Award (Russia's highest theatrical honor) for his portrayal of Le Chevalier des Grieux in Massenet's opera “Manon,” I spoke with Andrejs Zagars, the director of that particular production. It was produced by the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theater in Moscow. Subsequently I brought the entire production to Yerevan to honor and highlight the success of our wonderful tenor, and also to show Yerevan audiences a completely new type of opera production. It was a *huge* undertaking, and, I must say, a huge success. I won't go into the details of transporting four 13-meter truckloads of sets and costumes from Moscow to Armenia and bringing 15 people from the Stanislavsky Theater to help and teach our stage crew exactly how to work the sets and scenery and the lighting. The Moscow team also had the arduous job of making sure the 300 costumes all fit, and all of the details (including wigs, shoes, costume, and jewelry) of the production were taken into account. I do believe that it's important for our performers to have the opportunity to work with internationally-famous, world-class directors, lighting designers, and coaches. I had the great fortune of being able to bring the excellent coach Axel Everaert from Belgium, the superb French-language coach Serine Lyuba Tatevosyan, and director Irina Lychagina from Moscow to work along Andrejs Zagars in putting this “Manon” together. It happened that our opening night, on October 10, coincided with the opening of the Francophone summit in Yerevan, and the entire delegation came to the gala performance. I invited American conductor Christopher Ocasek to conduct the opera, as he had been working on “Manon” during a production at the San Francisco Opera the previous fall and was highly recommended and did a superb job.

Earlier in the season, in July 2018, we took Khachaturian's trademark ballet "Gayane" to the Bolshoi, along with our incredible sets, designed by the incredible Minas Avetisyan, and costumes, designed by Rubina Hovhannisyana. This was the *first* time in history that the Yerevan Ballet performed on the historic stage of the Bolshoi Theater. The sold-out event was something that all of us who were there will remember for a very long time. Our star dancers Ruben Muradyan, Syuzi Pirumyan, and Meri Hovhannisyana, as well as our young star Razmik Marukyan "brought the house down," so to speak, and were met with screaming stomping ovations. They were even forced to do "Sabre Dance" as an encore!

Then we received an invitation to open the season at the glorious new Dubai Opera House at the beginning of September, with three performances of our new production of "Carmen," directed by our very talented Naire Stepanyan and with costumes by Kristina Avetisyan; and also 3 performances our new production of "The Magic Flute," produced by the extraordinary Italian opera director Paolo Micciche and costumes by the renowned Alberto Spiazzi. All of the performances were sold out and our singers and both productions were met with great enthusiasm by the audience. Then, all 200 of us performed the *first* staged opera productions in the history of Kuwait, at the brand-new Kuwait Opera House, located within the compound of the Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad Cultural Center, in Kuwait City – another unforgettable experience.

Our season of "firsts" culminated with our glorious production of Karen Khachaturian's "Cippolino" Ballet. I purchased the sets and costumes that were produced by the great artist Valery Leventhal from the Bolshoi Theater, had everything transported to Yerevan, and invited the famous choreographer Genrikh Mayorov to come to Armenia and stage the ballet.

So, yes, it has been a very important and ambitious season for us in Yerevan, and, of course, I absolutely believe that our beloved Yerevan Opera House does have what it takes to be at the forefront of world opera.

**Q – What will be some of the highlights of the Yerevan Opera House's 2019 program?**

A – 2019 will also bring some surprises. So we'll wait and see what the New Year brings. Hopefully we will be able to have a new production of Tigranian's "Anush," in honor of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the illustrious author Hovhannes Tumanyan, as well as many other projects which are coming up.

