

Is this man 'the Fourth Tenor'?

Last-minute gig filling in for Pavarotti was big break for Italian singer Licitra

Elena Park, Special to The Chronicle

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(01-26) 04:00 PDT New York -- One of his signature roles may be Don Alvaro in "La Forza del Destino (The Force of Destiny)," but Salvatore Licitra believes as much in hard work as in fate.

Still, the hand of destiny seems to have been at play in this Italian tenor's short but meteoric career. Licitra captured headlines around the world when, on a half-hour's notice, he replaced Luciano Pavarotti in

what was to have been the iconic singer's farewell performance at the Metropolitan Opera on May 11, 2002. Licitra's turn as Cavaradossi in "Tosca" was nothing short of exultant.

Many critics have compared Licitra's rich, dark-hued tenor to the legendary voices of Placido Domingo, Enrico Caruso, Giuseppe di Stefano, Carlo Bergonzi (his much cherished teacher) -- and, of course, Pavarotti, whom he has yet to meet. Bay Area audiences will have the opportunity to evaluate the 34-year-old's vocal gifts next Sunday, when the tenor makes his first trip to the West Coast for a program of opera arias by Verdi and Puccini with the San Francisco Opera Orchestra, conducted by David Agler. The engagement, presented by Cal Performances, will take place at Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall.

When Licitra (pronounced lih-CHEE-truh) burst upon the American scene, he was far from an unknown quantity in his native Italy, where he had already appeared at the famed La Scala with conductor Riccardo Muti in leading roles including Don Alvaro, Cavaradossi and Manrico in *Il Trovatore* (a live recording released last year). He had previously provided John Turturro's singing voice on the film soundtrack for "The Man Who Cried." Last summer, Sony released his first solo recording -- a commercial hit -- imprecisely titled, "Salvatore Licitra: The Debut." A duet recording with tenor Marcelo Alvarez and the City of Prague Philharmonic follows this June.

Despite all of this success, the effusive, good-humored tenor laughs at the notion of his being labeled an overnight sensation. At one time, even his dream to sing in the chorus at La Scala seemed unrealistic. The struggling young singer had entered six vocal competitions -- and lost each one. "During that time," he said, "I could not imagine that it would be possible to become a singer, so I felt very sad because nobody believed in me. The first time I realized that it was possible to change anything in my life was in 1996, when I met Carlo Bergonzi." Before Bergonzi, the only people who had faith in Licitra's vocal promise were members of his family (who had no musical training) and a misguided voice teacher who nearly ruined his voice.

Licitra had studied with this teacher from the age of 19, only to leave her six years later after she suggested that he become a baritone instead. Fortunately, he said his voice suffered no lasting damage because, "I'm like a bull; my voice and my body are very strong." Under her tutelage, he recalled, he had turned into "a delicate man," one preoccupied with always covering his throat, afraid of the cold and the heat, and unable to savor life. To look at the Licitra of today -- a self-assured and fiercely independent man who seems to pursue his passions with relish -- this scenario is nearly impossible to imagine. After severing ties with that teacher, he immediately resumed his favorite pursuits: skiing, playing tennis and riding his motorbike at the racetrack.

Meeting Bergonzi at workshops in Italy brought on a vocal sea change. The Italian master encouraged him to rediscover his natural voice, coached him and eventually, gave him his first big break: the opportunity to sing Riccardo in "Un Ballo in Maschera" in Parma in January, 1998. Engagements in Milan, Verona, Nice, Vienna, Barcelona and Madrid quickly followed. So by the time that fateful night at the Metropolitan Opera arrived, he was prepared.

Despite the media frenzy that surrounded his debut, Licitra said that he was fairly oblivious to the pressure. The expectations were considerable: Some gala patrons had paid \$1,875 a ticket (including dinner) and the house was packed with 4,000 Pavarotti fans hoping to hear their aging idol one last time,

not to mention 3,000 more people gathered outside to hear the live telecast on Lincoln Center Plaza. Both summoned and flown to New York on the previous day, Licitra said he didn't expect to be called upon to sing. When he learned that Pavarotti had withdrawn due to illness, there was no time to be nervous. "I met with (conductor) Jimmy Levine only 15 minutes before," he recalled. "He told me, 'OK, nice to meet you. Don't worry because I will follow you and breathe with you.' "

When the curtain fell, the audience greeted him with a tumultuous

standing ovation, and only then did the significance of the evening set in. "Then I realized, Salvatore, you are very crazy. If you sang wrong on this night, you could have destroyed yourself for all of your life. But I chose the other way. On this magic night, I transformed Pavarotti's audience into Licitra's audience."

Before, during intermissions and after the opera, Licitra said he burned up the phone lines, calling his parents in Milan and his fiancee in Rome -- not a surprise, given his close ties to his family over many years. On a recent trip to New York, he was accompanied by his brother, Fabio, with whom he once owned a small graphics business. And while he did not grow up in a musical family, it was his mother who first spotted his vocal gifts.

During a family summer vacation in Sicily, the 19-year old Licitra heard a Russian song on the radio. While he could only approximate the Russian lyrics, he sang along at full throttle. "My mother heard this -- it was possible to hear my voice a few blocks away. When I came back in my house, my mother asked me, 'Hey, Salvatore, did you meet a crazy man crying in the street?'"

"Mommy, I am the crazy man!," he said.

She replied, "Maybe it is better if you start to study singing, or if you prefer, recover in the hospital."

"I chose the first one," he said with a smile.

From that rather comical beginning on the streets of Sicily, Licitra is now juggling invitations from the "Today" show and "The Late Show With David Letterman" with offers to appear at the most prestigious opera houses in the world. In June, he returns to the Vienna State Opera, where he will sing his first Andrea Chenier. Engagements at the Bastille Opera, Covent Garden, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, La Scala and the Metropolitan (where he has long been scheduled to sing during the 2004-05 season) are on his schedule. He plans to add Turandot's

Calaf to his repertoire soon, and, much later, heavier roles such as Samson and Otello.

Licitra seems unfazed by publicity hyping him as "the Fourth Tenor" after Pavarotti, Domingo and Jose Carreras. Despite the frequent comparisons to operatic greats, he says he stays focused on his own path. According to Licitra, life hasn't changed substantially since that fabled New York City night, although he has more opportunities to travel and take plum assignments. "Generally I am happy full time," he said, "because I am a singer and for me, it's the most beautiful job in the world."

And as for that question of fate, Licitra said, "My brother said to me this morning, this is my destiny. Who knows, exactly. Fate is important, but much more important is having good concentration and doing a good job. It's half and half: the fortune and the luck, and the faith."

Salvatore licitra

The tenor performs at 7 p.m. next Sunday at Zellerbach Hall, Bancroft Way and Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley. Tickets: \$36-\$82. Call (510) 642-9988 or go to www.calperfs.berkeley.edu.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2003/01/26/PK104284.DTL>

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