

# Ludovic Tézier, Marina Rebeka and Francesco Meli on Simon Boccanegra

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Recorded at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples in October 2024, Prima Classic's new account of Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* sees Latvian soprano Marina Rebeka (who owns the label) delivering what *Gramophone* recently described as 'one of her finest performances on record' as the Doge's estranged daughter Amelia, with French baritone Ludovic Tézier on impeccable form as her beleaguered father.

The morning after their opening night in *Nabucco* (also at the Teatro San Carlo) last month, Marina and Ludovic joined us with colleague Francesco Meli to share some personal insights about their roles, their thoughts on live recording, some of the singers and conductors who have inspired them in this music – and why there are 'ghosts everywhere' in the Neapolitan opera house...



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### Verdi: *Simon Boccanegra*

Ludovic Tézier (*Simon Boccanegra*), Marina Rebeka (*Amelia*), Francesco Meli (*Gabriele Adorno*), Michele Pertusi (*Fiesco*), Mattia Olivieri (*Paolo*), Andrea Pellegrini (*Pietro*) Orchestra e Coro del Teatro di San Carlo di Napoli, Michele Spotti

## Tell me a little about your respective histories with your roles in this opera...

**FM:** Gabriele Adorno is a magnificent character, a romantic hero who changes his political views the moment he realises he was wrong. As a Genoese myself, I am proud to sing of my ancestors' deeds. Vocally, it's an immensely satisfying role because it contains all the beauty that Verdi demanded from a tenor: romanticism, vigour, virility, *canto a fior di labbra*, and stormy dramatic power.

**LT:** It took me quite a long time to get to Simon: I wouldn't say I'm an overly cautious person, but I do try to be wise about the roles I accept. When I was asked to do a concert performance in Monte Carlo a few years ago it seemed like a good opportunity to try it out. It was obvious that the role was good to me, and I knew that I could do it in a full production: I made my stage debut as Simon in Paris, wonderfully directed by Calixto Bieito.

Since then I've sung it at least once a year, and to me it's a very special role because for once I'm not playing the bad guy! I do a lot of Scarpias, and I like to put a bit of Simon spice into him – Scarpia is a psychopath, which means that he can switch from sounding vicious to sounding angelic within two seconds. That's why he's so terrifying. I even bring some of Simon's colours into Iago, who is one of the darkest characters in all opera – I think there's a strange connection between Rigoletto, Luna, Simon and Iago, even if they seem very different on the surface.

**MR:** My first experience with Amelia wasn't quite so premeditated: I had three days to prepare for my debut, rehearsing directly on stage at the Wiener Staatsoper with no orchestra!

**FM:** I was singing Adorno in that production, and I remember Marina's performance with awe! She and I have known each other for nearly twenty years: we sang Rossini together during her debut at the Rossini Opera Festival, and we share a very special connection. Performing this Simone alongside her is an immense joy.

**MR:** Despite the short notice it did go pretty well, and I went on to sing it in Salzburg for a new production conducted by Valery Gergiev (which is available on DVD). It's not a role that I was ever desperate to perform, but it's been a nice stepping-stone to other Verdi heroines: I'm much happier with Abigaille, and I think I'm done with Amelia now...

**LT:** I hope not, because that duet is tremendous and I love doing it with you! Hopefully I can persuade you to do a staged production with me one day...

### **What sort of dramatic challenges does the opera present?**

**MR:** The story is very complex – the first time I heard it I couldn't figure out what the hell was going on! You have this Prologue which takes place twenty-five years before the opera proper, where the young Simon is having a love-affair with a woman called Maria; they have a secret daughter who's also called Maria (but later known as Amelia!) and is adopted by her grandfather who doesn't know she's his granddaughter...It's a complete *opera pazzino* [crazy opera], but from that great duet where father and daughter recognise each other it all comes together: the political drama and the family story are completely interwoven.

That Recognition Scene is heartbreaking because they're so overjoyed to have found each other but have to keep their relationship secret because the political situation is so volatile: they know that Simon's enemies aren't above kidnapping or hurting Amelia in order to manipulate him. Inevitably someone has to die in the end, like in most Verdi operas...in *Boccanegra* it's Ludo and in *Nabucco* it's me, so after last night we're even!



**LT:** Marina is right that it's quite hard to follow the logic of the libretto on its own terms, and I was lucky enough to do my first staged production with a director who found a way to embrace that: Calixto Bieito framed the whole piece as a nightmare, which makes sense because a nightmare has no structure. There are so many near-misses and loose ends in the plot, just like there are in a bad dream...It all comes together in the final scene when they're both singing this gorgeous concertato – I have that damned music playing in my head all night after a show!

It's also interesting because of the imperfection of the father-daughter relationship: that's a near-constant theme with Verdi, but

in *Boccanegra* it becomes the emotional heart of the opera. I have two daughters and a son, and it speaks to me very much as a father. Of course we also see Verdi exploring that dynamic through Abigaille/*Nabucco* and *Rigoletto*/*Gilda*, but I also feel it with Germont and Violetta in *Traviata*: at some moments Germont's thinking 'Wow, she's a hell of a woman – I wish I could have such a daughter', and I think Violetta feels the same kinship. They're both decisive, faithful people, and in their different ways they're committed to doing things for others: they might not be blood relations, but they share the same emotional DNA.

**MR:** Prima recordings usually involve a new critical edition or some other musicological elements, but this is just...good singing! We had these performances scheduled in Naples, and the opera house kindly agreed to my suggestion that we might record the rehearsals and performances. The cost of recording a complete opera in the studio is astronomical now, so I'm very grateful to them for giving us the go-ahead.

But it was important to me that we wouldn't just put out a live recording: we captured two shows and lots of rehearsals, so we had plenty of material to build from. In a live performance you can forgive small blips, but the microphones catch tiny things that you wouldn't necessarily hear in the hall. Editing can be a nightmare, especially with ensembles!

**LT:** Because everyone's under such financial pressure these days we often have to record opera live if we do it at all, but now we have the technology to make it work. That wasn't the case thirty years ago – if you listen to live recordings from the 1990s the sound wasn't very exciting, but now we can combine the highest audio quality with the electricity of a live performance. I think it's so important to present opera as a live genre, because so many people still think it's a museum piece – like we're displaying the Mona Lisa to you and handling it gently because it's so fragile! I genuinely believe this new approach is the future of opera recordings: it's all come about because of money, but at the end of the day it's not such a bad outcome.

**FM:** Yes, live music is so intense and alive. A live recording is undoubtedly a magnificent opportunity to capture the pathos of a performance; it's something that simply cannot happen in a studio.

### *The Teatro di San Carlo has a long and venerable history – how does it feel to perform and record there?*

**LT:** That place is an experience in itself. You don't even need us there on stage to feel its magic – just step into that theatre and it resonates in your soul, not in your ears. If it has that effect on a casual visitor, imagine what it's like for us as singers and passionate opera-lovers. It's more than an historical venue: there are ghosts everywhere, and you can't hide from them! I sang *Un ballo in maschera* there last autumn, and it was incredible to think that the opera was created on that same stage. It wasn't just an evening at the opera: it was somehow a revival, and that's a strange and wonderful feeling.

**MR:** There's a small room next to the stage where we kept all our recording equipment, and that was where Donizetti sat and listened to the premiere of *Lucia di Lammermoor*!

**Speaking of ghosts, how much do you all engage with the legacies of your predecessors on record and/or on stage?**

**MR:** I prepare my roles scene by scene, and I never stick to one recording: I listen to everybody, then I let it all sit while my brain and soul crystallise this element or that. The next step is to go back to the score, and very often I spot something on the page which nobody actually does on recordings! Once I've figured out all of that, I start getting the music into my body and voice...then I leave it to rest for a while, and only *then* is it mine!

**FM:** I would also add real-life colleagues into the mix! I've been fortunate enough to sing this role with many great artists: Leo Nucci, Luca Salsi, Thomas Hampson, Plácido Domingo, Carlos Álvarez, Barbara Frittoli, and Ferruccio Furlanetto. I must say that each of them has left me with something that I now carry within my own Gabriele Adorno.

**LT:** My process has been the same since the very beginning. At the start of my career someone asked me how I prepared my roles, and I said that I spent a lot of time listening to old singers...the second question was 'But aren't you afraid that you'll end up imitating them?' And I said 'No, I'm not afraid to imitate Piero Cappuccilli - is it really so bad if I end up sounding like that?!'.



Joking apart, none of us can imitate those legends - but we can be inspired by their phrasing or colouring and use that as the foundation for our own interpretations.

For *Simon Boccanegra* you have many impeccable versions to consider, especially the famous production conducted by Claudio Abbado with Cappuccilli, Mirella Freni and Nicolai Ghiaurov, and staged by Giorgio Strehler. We all know that Abbado was an incredible conductor, and this opera was one of the finest things he ever did. All those beautiful singers thrown on stage under such a baton: it's just the apex of what this artform can achieve.

But now and again you come across a far less famous recording of a work that stays with you: you listen for a bit and think 'OK, this is fairly average', but then thirty seconds are just brilliant and you don't know why...Sometimes you can absorb very interesting things from singers who aren't the best of the best: it's precisely *because* they aren't the best of the best that they find another way to approach a note or phrase.

As Marina says, you put it all in the grinder and just sit with it...then you give it back, infused with your own emotions and experiences. I'm not trying to evade your question: the bottom line is that it's very interesting to listen to others but at the end of the day you have to find your own way with a role, and you can only do that by bringing your unique self to the table.

**MR:** And once you've done all that work, it keeps changing every time you perform it! Maybe you read a review, or maybe something happens in your life offstage and suddenly you find something completely different in a certain scene or phrase.

**LT:** Duets in opera are a bit like a tennis match - I've seen Nadal play Federer so many times, but it was never the same. With something like the Recognition Scene in *Boccanegra* I'm responding to the energy my partner puts into their serve, and that affects the dynamic of the whole scene/match. All of that evaporates as soon as the curtain falls, and we have to build it from scratch each night. That's why recording live sessions (as we've done here) is so interesting, because for once it's captured forever. It's weird, but I like it!