

Sean Panikkar a young tenor of Sri Lankan heritage emerges in U.S. opera scene

Daya Gamage – US Bureau Asian Tribune compilation from opera news

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Sean Panikkar, who turns twenty-eight this month, has a most-likely-to-succeed quality that comes across even in a brief telephone interview. He is a study in perfectly balanced poise, respectfulness and savvy — the kind that the music profession tends to smile on. "I just never had a problem getting work," he says, without a whiff of arrogance, as he recalls his progress from San Francisco Opera's Merola program to the Pittsburgh Opera Center to the SFO Adler Fellowship to his current status as a tenor-to-watch. This month, he sings Cassio in the *Otello* that will open Dallas's brand-new Winspear Opera House.

A recent graduate of the San Francisco Opera Adler Fellowship, Sean Panikkar quickly is becoming known for his "surpassing musicality and passion, commanding self-confidence and gorgeous expression." The American tenor of Sri Lankan heritage made his Metropolitan Opera debut last season as Edmondo in *Manon Lescaut*, conducted by James Levine, and his European operatic debut as Gomatz in Mozart's *Zaïde* at the Aix-en-Provence Festival in a production directed by Peter Sellars and conducted by Louis Langrée.

His grandfather left South India at young age to later become a well known mathematics/science teacher in a leading school in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Proud of his Brahmin heritage Mr. Panikkar was a devout Hindu until his demise few years ago.

Now his grandson Sean is making his mark in the United States.

Sean Panikkar's voice is sizable and securely placed. In competitions he is often heard in spinto repertory (he sang a compelling "Ah, la paterna mano" in the finals of this year's George London Foundation Awards Competition, taking home a \$10,000 prize), but he also possesses an

appealing lyric quality that may save him from being pushed along as fast as some of his contemporaries seem doomed to be. "I hope that I'm always a work in progress," he says. "I've seen famous singers who got off track technically because they decided they didn't need a teacher anymore."

Panikkar's own teachers include his first, Li-Ping Liu, back in Bloomsburg, Pennsyl-



vania, where he grew up. He had a daily lesson with her when he was finished with sports practice. "I was into Billy Joel," he remembers. "I got to my first voice lesson, and I'm singing 'We Didn't Start the Fire,' and she's making me do it as an opera singer. I thought, this isn't going to work. But this teacher put so much time into me." He wound up a double major in music and engineering at the University of Michigan. Panikkar is fascinated by the ways in which colleagues navigate the music business. "So many people who are so much better than me are having such a hard time doing it," he says. "You see these singers who are fantastic and not doing anything, and you see singers who are just O.K. working everywhere. I live in Michigan now, and there are so many people out of work, and I'm getting paid to get onstage in a costume and sing.

"In opera administration, people rise up so quickly that you never see it coming. I've tried to treat everyone I meet with

respect. I want to put my best foot forward, and you do that by being prepared and knowing your stuff."

During the 2008/09 season, the tenor returned to the stage of the Metropolitan Opera as Arturo in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, conducted by Marco Armiliato, and made his debut at the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis as Count Almaviva in a new production of *The Ghosts of Versailles*. Other engagements include a return to Pittsburgh Opera as Jim Casey in Ricky Ian Gordon's *The Grapes of Wrath*, a return performance at Opera Colorado as Nadir in *Les pêcheurs de perles*, and performances of Narraboth in *Salome* with Vancouver Opera. Highlights of recent seasons include Tybalt in *Roméo et Juliette* at the Metropolitan Opera under the baton of Plácido Domingo, Alfredo in *La traviata* at Arizona Opera, and, at San Francisco Opera, performances in *The Queen of Spades*, *Le pauvre matelot*, *The Maid of Orleans*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *Fidelio*, *Norma*, and *Die Zauberflöte*.

On the concert stage Panikkar has performed Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* with the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra, Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (in the chamber arrangement by Arnold Schoenberg) with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra at the Ojai Festival, and *Die Zauberflöte* with Leonard Slatkin at the Hollywood Bowl. He also joined Esa-Pekka Salonen, Peter Sellars, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic for *The Tristan Project* in Los Angeles and at Lincoln Center.

Panikkar was a Metropolitan Opera National Council Pittsburgh District winner and a Great Lakes Regional Finalist (Encouragement Award winner). He has been honored by the George London Foundation with the 2007 Robert Jacobson Memorial Award and a 2009 George London Award. He is a former member of the Pittsburgh Opera Center, Central City Opera Studio Artist program, and Seagle Music Colony. He holds Master's and Bachelor's degrees in Voice Performance from the University of Michigan.