

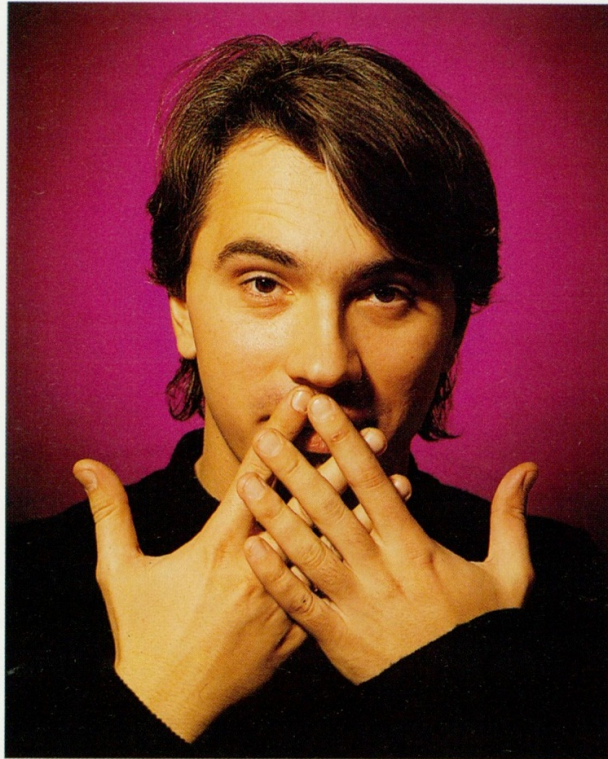
ASSORTMENT OF VOICES

JOHAN STEANE turns now to the **BARITONE**, lyric and dramatic, or – as he prefers to term it – light and, this month, dark

By name, and often by nature, the baritone is opera's heavy-man. The 'tone' in his name speaks for itself; the 'bari' part, Greek in origin (and in Italian accentuated on the second syllable, 'baritono'), means 'weighty, heavy', as in 'barycentric' ('of, or pertaining to, the centre of gravity') and 'baric' ('of, or pertaining to, weight esp. that of the air cf. "barometer"). Here endeth the first lesson.

The second should perhaps start with the observation that the name is not 'mezzo-tenore'. We normally think of the mezzo-soprano and baritone as being much the same thing but for the small difference of sex. Names and dates suggest otherwise. The mezzo-soprano is a species comparatively recent in evolution: the dictionary (*OED*, and probably not the best source of information here but we'll accept it as a guide) gives 1753. The baritone (old spelling 'barytone' still preferred) goes back to 1609. That also is modern compared with 'treble' (1440), 'tenor' (1475) and 'bass' (1450). Out of these dates could be constructed a history of European civilization. Treble, tenor and bass are parts in medieval choral writing. Mezzo-soprano, and indeed soprano itself (the dictionary cites 1730 for use in English), exists only after the emergence of women as professional artistic performers. The baritone is an invention of the Renaissance and coincides very closely with the birth of opera: he is, one might conclude, a dramatic necessity rather than a musical one.

But, granted opera's need for a 'heavy' voice, it might still be a question why the voice that we know today as the baritone (without thinking specially of its heaviness) should have been that voice. After all, tenors can be the noisiest creatures, and



Destined for great heights – Dmitri Hvorostovsky

basses are not normally lightweights. I'm not sure that Act I of *La bohème* doesn't suggest an answer to this. There are on stage, till shortly before Mimi's entrance, four men (for a while five, with Benoit), of whom one is a tenor, one a bass, and two (three with Benoit) are baritones. In a good many performances I have been surprised to find that the tenor carries comparatively little weight. On records it's different; there the tenor often seems to be the most prominent. But on stage with famous tenors such as Björling (admittedly not a well man), Di Stefano, Bergonzi and Domingo (but not Pavarotti, whose timbre has focused attention), the voice one expected to dominate has not done so, and has sometimes even seemed small by comparison with his less celebrated colleagues. Nor has the bass, the Colline, normally come through with deep sonority. No, the big sound – and there has been plenty of it, and there needs to be to compete

with the orchestration – has seemed to come predominantly from the baritones, the Marcel and Schaunard.

And that, one might object, may possibly demonstrate something, but it doesn't explain it. I can only hazard a guess, along these lines. The normal male singing voice (amateur, untrained but not unpractised) produces its fullest, most resonant tone in the area of middle A upwards to D. The bass will descend, solid and powerful, and probably arrive at another particularly resonant area around the low A. The tenor will rise and ring out on the high G or even top A. But the tenor's high notes... if he is wise (and musical), he will cover (he won't make the sound a newspaper seller, football supporter or rock vocalist will produce at that pitch); and if he is to guard the tenor quality of his upper range he must, in general, forgo something of that rounder, deeper fullness in the mid-

dle notes. Similarly the bass knows, by instinct and experience, that the low notes will tend to lose something of their deep bass quality (or even become foggy and unreliable) if he lets himself go too often and too freely in what, for him, is the upper part of the voice. It is the baritone's special province, then, to have those 'central' resonance-notes (the middle A to D) as the very heart of his territory and to be able to strengthen what nature has made strong in the first place. Perhaps one should say that for the professional baritone the area is almost immediately extended; even so, with many fine and famous singers (Gobbi, for instance) the greatest resonance is heard in the theatre not on the high notes, but on the D and E flat. With his depth of timbre added to such fullness and power, the baritone lives up to his name: a man of weighty sound.

The epitome here is Titta Ruffo. He has been dead these many years, and the mighty voice was silent many years before that, but his name is still heard wherever the great voices are being discussed. His was the one voice that worried Caruso when up against his own. A 'once-in-a-lifetime experience' Rosa Ponselle called it, and she made it clear that it was the beauty, subtlety, and expressiveness of the singing, not simply its power, that made him unmatched among baritones. 'The idol of the public' is such a cliché that we shrug our shoulders and pass on, but in his best years it seems to have been the sober (and heady) truth. Walter Legge heard him in London in the 1920s and was so impressed that for the rest of his life (as Beecham's assistant at Covent Garden and as impresario and producer for EMI) he went about looking for someone who might at least resemble Ruffo in kind, if not match him in degree, but in vain. 'Manly, broad, sympathetic, of unsurpassed richness', Legge wrote, remembering a Queen's Hall concert in 1922; 'of gigantic proportions' and 'of pure baritone timbre' he added, describing the voice that can be heard on records. 'The legendary' is for >

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