



George Gagnidze

George Gagnidze: Baritone Back in Business

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

Baritone George Gagnidze returns to stages all over the world, appearing in his celebrated villainous roles. In this interview, Gagnidze shares his strategies for success, his regular practice routine, and how he continues to strive to prove himself.

Despite the prevalence of viral videos and overnight sensations in today's entertainment world, some things still require a longer period of development, and building a wide-ranging reputation in opera is one of them. It generally takes extended study, apprenticeships, regional engagements, and the hope that opportunities from an ever-widening performance sphere will emerge. Becoming known worldwide? For most, that is just a pipe dream.

But that is exactly what baritone George Gagnidze has achieved. Dubbed by *Opera News* as "The Man You Love to Hate" for his portrayal of many of opera's most famous villains, he has appeared all across Europe and the United States. Even with a reach that now spans multiple continents, however, he was not immune to the step-by-step process that success in this field requires.

Born in Tbilisi, Georgia, his initial training occurred at his hometown State Conservatory. He then debuted locally as Renato in *Un ballo in maschera* in 1996 at the Paliashvili State Opera. When he later entered the Concorso Internazionale Voci Verdiane (the International Competition for Verdian Voices) in 2005, the jury—chaired by José Carreras and Katia Ricciarelli—awarded him first prize for his outstanding vocal interpretation. From there, his international star began to rise.

Vienna, Paris, Madrid, London, Verona, Los Angeles, New York City—over the following 15 years, he began appearing at many of the world's most celebrated opera houses, creating signature roles, receiving praise in the press for his passionate performances, and filling his calendar with engagements.

What could possibly get in the way of such high-level operatic globetrotting? A global pandemic. Rigoletto at the San Francisco Opera: canceled. Amonasro, Nabucco, and Scarpia at the Metropolitan Opera: postponed. Iago in Dallas and Mannheim: on hold. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the stages of the world went dark and opera's biggest voices were silenced.

For Gagnidze, however, rest was never an option. Sticking to a routine of vocal exercises and repertoire work, he kept himself in game-day shape even during this unexpected off-season. He used the time to return to a recording project he had started years earlier. He also kept himself immersed in the art as much as possible during the interminable delay.

Eventually, his phone started to ring again. Three performances came up on short notice: Barnaba in *La Gioconda* at the Deutsche Oper Berlin, Germont in *La traviata* at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, and Verdi's *Macbeth* in Las Palmas. Another performance of Germont at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples took place in May 2021.

Gradually, his schedule has started to fill up again. This month, he is back at the Met singing Rigoletto, one of eight roles he has performed at the famed opera house. He also released his debut solo album this past September under the Orfeo label.

In the interview here, Gagnidze discusses how he endured during the pandemic-induced delay in performances. He also pays homage to some of his early mentors and reflects on how the Metropolitan Opera—which once inspired him from across the ocean—now feels like home.

Congratulations on the September release of your debut solo album. How did you choose this repertoire? Are the arias all from roles you have previously performed on stage?

Thank you! This album is very dear to my heart and it makes me so happy that it is finally out! The repertoire was indeed chosen from many of the roles I have sung onstage. It was recorded a bit after the end of my time as an ensemble member of the Weimar Opera House with its excellent orchestra, the Staatskapelle Weimar. Several of the arias are from roles I sang there, such as Rodrigo in *Don Carlo* and the aria from *Don Giovanni*, which is a part that I haven't sung since my time in Weimar.

But I've sung Tonio in *Pagliacci*, Carlo Gerard in *Andrea Chénier*, Germont in *La traviata*, [and the title roles in] *Nabucco* and *Macbeth* all over the world—from the Metropolitan Opera to La Scala, Paris Opera, Teatro Real Madrid, Liceu Barcelona, San Francisco Opera, and the Arena di Verona.



George Gagnidze as Gerard in San Francisco Opera's *Andrea Chénier*, 2016

photo by Cory Weaver

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George Gagnidze as the title role in Teatro alla Scala's *Rigoletto*, 2012



Out of all the arias from the album, there are only two roles I haven't sung on stage: Wolfram in *Tannhäuser* and Conte di Luna in *Il trovatore*, which I very much hope to debut in the future.

Do you do anything differently in your preparation, interpretation, or approach when recording works than you do when singing a live performance?

The technique always remains the same, of course, so I don't really change my way of singing. [However, because] it's more intimate, it's even more important than usual to take good care of the dynamics and expression through the words. In a recording, the audience obviously doesn't see us. We can only tell the stories of the pieces through the words and through colors in the voice.

Was all of the recording finished before the onset of the pandemic?

It was actually recorded some years ago, in 2012. The recording was on hold since we were planning to record other pieces, like *Rigoletto*, but then we never found the time for it due to my busy schedule. The long hold due to the pandemic allowed me to listen to it again. I decided it should be released in spite of those additional pieces I would have loved to record.

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George Gagnidze
as Giorgio
Germont in Gran
Teatre del Liceu's
La traviata, 2020

photo by Antoni Bofill



George Gagnidze
as the title
role in Arena
Di Verona's
Nabucco, 2017

photo by Ennevi/Fondazione

Rigoletto is my signature role, for example, so at first I didn't want it to be released without at least one aria from that opera. But then, after listening to the album again, I thought that the program was already rich and diverse. I will just record Rigoletto for my next album!

What was your first performance that was canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic?

The first performance was actually *Tosca* at the Metropolitan Opera with Anna Netrebko. We were supposed to open on March 26, 2020. I was already in New York rehearsing when it became clear that the shows couldn't take place. I was lucky to have been able to catch one of the last planes back home.

What were your initial thoughts when the cancelations started coming in? Did you think it would be a brief hiatus or were you already thinking it would be more long term?

I first didn't expect that it would take so long, even though it was obvious that the situation was very serious. Many of us just couldn't imagine theatres and concert halls being closed for so many months, because it just had never happened before. I was lucky to have had the chance to perform in September 2020 at the Deutsche Oper Berlin as Barnaba in concert performances of *La Gioconda*. But, sadly, many colleagues ended up without any work for almost two years.

Have all of your canceled performances been rescheduled?

Not all of them, but many. Fortunately, my schedule is very busy from this year on.

How did you keep yourself motivated to keep your voice in shape during that time? Did you feel you were still able to grow as an artist with so much time off from performing?

For me, exercising, working on my voice, and learning new repertoire have always been part of my daily routine. Somehow, that didn't change during the pandemic, even without any performances on the horizon. I'm very happy I was able to find the motivation for this, since otherwise it would have been very tough to return to the stage.

I had three last-minute "jump-ins" since March 2020: in September 2020 as Barnaba in *La Gioconda*, in December 2020 as Germont in *La traviata* at the Liceu in Barcelona, and in July 2021 as Verdi's *Macbeth* in Las Palmas.

Additionally, I sang at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, also as Germont, in May 2021.

And while I guess it is difficult to sing any role if one hasn't exercised for weeks, singing a huge part like *Macbeth* is probably impossible. The daily singing really paid off, since I could perform all of these roles without problems, even without having stood on a stage for weeks or months.

Members of the press have praised your performances as both "powerful" and "elegant" and say that you sing with a "commanding presence" but also with "grace and polish." These comments indicate a wide range of skills. Which of these skills come more naturally to you and which require more honing and developing?

I think that my voice has a certain power by nature. Stage presence, [however,] is a feature that is not easy to learn. Most artists who have it are born with it, in my opinion. Having a big voice, more work has to be spent polishing it. This is what I have worked on more than on other things.

Are there certain types of comments or observations about your performances that you are particularly happy to receive?

It makes me particularly happy if people are moved or touched by a performance and leave the theater or concert hall enriched with emotions. Those are the most fulfilling comments I can receive after a show.



George Gagnidze as Iago in Opera National de Paris's *Otello*, 2019

photo by Charles Duprat



George Gagnidze in the title role of the Metropolitan Opera's *Rigoletto*, 2015

photo by Richard Termine and The Metropolitan Opera

Your website lists 30 roles in your repertoire, with an additional seven roles listed as “in preparation.” How do you decide what new roles to take on? Do they come from outside requests or do you decide for yourself which roles you would like to pursue?

Some come from outside requests and others I decide myself if I would like to pursue. During the pandemic, I had another look into the German dramatic repertoire. During my time as an ensemble member in Germany, I performed the title role of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* and Jochanaan in *Salome*. I would love to take on more Wagner and Strauss roles, like Telramund in *Lohengrin*, Amfortas in *Parsifal*, or Barak in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.

You have made quite a career on signature roles, many of which you've already mentioned. How do you keep those roles fresh and interesting for your audiences and also for you as a performer?

Every production—even every performance—is different. If a production is new to me, there are always new aspects that influence my interpretation and give me new insights. This even happens if repeating a production with different colleagues or a different conductor. And even in a run with the same colleagues and the same conductor, every performance is different because every day is different for all of us. The energy coming from the audience also plays a certain role during a performance.

That's one of the many wonderful things about this job—no performance is the same. That always keeps things fresh, even after having sung more than 100 performances of a role, like I have with *Rigoletto*. For me, as an artist, it is important to find new aspects of the roles, both vocally and with interpretation. I'm always trying to get better and to improve, so it's never boring.

In 2008, you performed Scarpia at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall. Now, 14 years later, you are singing Scarpia in New York City once again, this time at the Metropolitan Opera. What do you bring

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to a role like Scarpia now that differs from how you performed the role in 2008?

Oh, I think my Scarpia nowadays is quite different from the one I sang in 2008. That was one of my first Scarpias. I'm lucky to have had the opportunity to deepen my interpretation with great conductors and stage directors since then. In 2008, it was Lorin Maazel who conducted. That was followed by the new Luc Bondy staging [of *Tosca*] at the Metropolitan Opera. I learned so much from these artists and think that my Scarpia is much more complex today than it was back then.

From a merely vocal standpoint, having developed my technique further and further, it has become an easier sing. The role never posed problems for me, but it is a tough one to sing. It's a long role with heavy orchestration and a very different tessitura in the first act than in the second act. It all comes much easier now than 14 years ago.

Prior to that production of *Tosca* in 2008, Maestro Maazel had hired you as Paolo in *Simon Boccanegra* in Valencia in 2006 and as Germont at La Scala in 2007. Would you say Maazel was one of the more important early champions of your singing?

Maestro Maazel was extremely important for my career. I can say that thanks to him my international career at the top opera houses started. The United States debut at

the Avery Fisher Hall we have been talking about was so important because [Met General Manager] Peter Gelb heard me in that concert and hired me for *Rigoletto* the following year and as Scarpia when the singer who was originally scheduled had to withdraw. The Met has since become my most important theater. Since my debut, I have sung there every season—more than 100 performances.

But, back to Lorin Maazel. As you said, it was the maestro who recommended me to sing Germont in *La traviata* for my La Scala debut with him. Same for Valencia, where I also sang the title role of *Simon Boccanegra* in the alternative cast. I am very thankful for his trust in a relatively young singer like me at that time. He knew my voice very well, was always friendly, and taught me so much about music, phrasing, mezza voce singing, and so many other things.

Can you talk a bit about some of your other influential mentors and the lessons you learned from them?

My most important early mentor was my singing teacher. I was lucky that I found the right teacher for me right from the beginning, when I was 18 years old. The most important lesson he taught me was how to breathe correctly. He never got tired of explaining how

the breathing system works, with great exercises I am still using today and which I'm passing on to my own students.

For me, the most important thing for a singer is to know how to breathe correctly. It's the basis for everything. It's like for competitive swimmers: if they don't know how to breathe correctly, they can't really swim. If a singer doesn't know how to breathe, they can't sing in a correct and healthy way. In my opinion, breathing is 70% or 80% of everything.

Do you feel like your career progressed on a fairly steady path—one engagement leading to the next—or was it not so simple as that? Were there times when you wondered whether or not you could make a sustainable living as a singer?

As a singer, you always have to prove yourself, and it's never easy. It's true that I met the right people at the right time, such as Lorin Maazel. But even if you are lucky, this job requires you to continue to work hard and to study.

I come from a very small country, which doesn't have the same huge opera tradition as other countries. Maybe for that reason, I always had the feeling that I needed to prove myself to an even bigger extent.

In a previous interview, you discussed seeing a televised performance of the Metropolitan Opera when you were a teenager, with Luciano Pavarotti and Kathleen Battle in *L'elisir d'amore*. You say that performance inspired you to study singing and to pursue opera. Were you reminded of that early moment in your life when you made your Metropolitan Opera debut in 2009? What was it like to perform on the same stage where the performance that first inspired you to become an opera singer took place?

Making my Met debut felt surreal. I was so excited and happy about it that I couldn't sleep for more than one night before. Having had the opportunity to sing there in more than 100 performances in almost 10 roles since my debut is amazing. It's a great honor for me to have been invited so frequently to the Met.

And, to be honest, even though singing at the Met feels like being at home—I love the audience, the staff, the hall with its excellent acoustics—it always feels a bit like I felt singing there for the first time. When I stand on that stage in front of thousands of people...it's a feeling I missed so much over the last two years. I can't say how happy I am to be back!

Brian Manternach, DM, is an assistant professor at the University of Utah Department of Theatre and a research associate at the Utah Center for Vocology. He is an associate editor of the Journal of Singing and his research, reviews, articles, and essays have appeared in numerous voice-related publications.

brianmanternach.com

drbrianmanternach.blogspot.com

bmantern@gmail.com



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