

# What's On

High note

Cezary's Picks

## Male tenor stars

### 'Opera Oscar' honors the forgotten maestro Hasse

**Cezary Owerkowicz**  
Special to the Arab Times

I know that stars are not only females. Last time I was so excited by three excellent female singers that I skipped the male winners. However, also because of the female interest and taste, today I would want to make up on what I missed out.

More than that The Best Male Singer is an American tenor with Italian name and visage (handsome, I think?) Charles Castronovo, 44 years old, born of the Sicilian father and Ecuadorian mother living in Queens, New York, grew in Southern California. In Fullerton he studied classical singing and he was picked from the University choir by the chorus master of Los Angeles Opera to sing in his choir.

Castronovo soon settled in LA Opera as a resident artist. Even with this success he never stopped developing his voice and position. In the summer of 1998 he participated in the prestigious project of the San Francisco Opera and later the Metropolitan Opera Lindemann Young Artists Development Program. For singers of The MET Opera the sky is the limit. After this experience he made several debuts in such operatic works of Mozart (Don Giovanni, Magic Flute, Così fan tutte), Donizetti (Don Pasquale), or Verdi (Falstaff, La traviata) and so on.



Owerkowicz

#### Career

As a result he enlarged his existence from operatic Olympus to Royal Opera Covent Garden, Berlin, Vienna, Salzburg, San Francisco or Santa Fe, somehow returning to his 'native' Los Angeles. In 2008/09 he made a debut in the Washington National Opera and soon performed as a partner of Anna Netrebko but next year with legendary Placido Domingo in the world and European premieres of new opera, 'Il postino' by Daniel Catan, in Los Angeles and Paris.

His operatic career is running smooth if not excellent. However, it will develop after the awards of Opera Oscar but as a tribute for native roots and/or taste of world public opinion, he recently prepared projects including performances of traditional Neapolitan songs with a small ensemble of guitar, accordion, percussion and bass. I would imagine the success of live concerts as well as of the album resulting from his tour. There was popular verse from Neapolitan songs: 'to see Naples and die; I would prefer to listen to Naples tunes and - be alive. Happy!

Other prestigious and my favorite Opera Oscar went also to a man, tenor singer, but quite old. Additionally it has also something common with Naples. There, this winner spends many happy years. This year we celebrate 320 anniversary of his birth. It is The Award for Rediscovered Opera Work and the beneficiary is Johann Adolph Hasse (1699-1783), the most famous German composer of Italian opera of the past centuries. The exact award was for his opera 'Artaserse', rediscovered and presented by Pinchgut Opera, Chamber Opera Company in Sydney, Australia.

#### Debut

Hasse comes from family of three generations of musicians, attached to church organs and choirs in Bergedorf, near Hamburg. As an outstanding young tenor singer from the church choir he went in 1718 to Hamburg Opera.

A year later he obtained a singer's post at the court of Brunswick where he composed and presented his first ever opera 'Antioco'. (He sang himself in the production.) After successful debut as a composer he got permission (maybe also sort of scholarship - sponsors were sometimes very good hearted) he left Germany for Italy, Naples, where he spent his time studying (but not only) for nearly six or seven years. 'Not only' because after success of his new work, 'Antonio and Cleopatra' earned him many commissions from Naples' opera houses as well as studies under acknowledged Maestro, Alessandro Scarlatti.

The popularity of Hasse in Naples increased outstandingly and for several years his workload kept him extremely busy. Except for Naples he visited Venetian Carnival in 1730 where was presented his opera 'Astaserse' with famous Italian tenor star, Farielli. Hasse Opera and he won such an acclaim and popularity that King Philip V of Spain ordered him to perform every night through decades two

of the most popular arias from 'Astaserse'. Can you imagine how such information worked for composer's position among the contemporaries? NB. That opera is the reason for the 'Opera Oscar' Award and my article.

In the same year (1730), Hasse married the famous Italian Opera soprano, Faustina Bordoni. Except that the most important (in my opinion) event he had been active in Vienna at the court of Habsburg and finally was appointed a 'Kapellmeister' at the Dresden court. The entrance at the court of well-known musicians' couple was with premiere of Hasse's opera 'Cleofide' with Faustina in the leading role and Johann Sebastian Bach himself in the audience. Bach's son, Carl Philip Emanuel claimed both the composers became good friends around that time.

High popularity forced the composer in the next few years to direct the premieres of his operas in Turin, Rome, and Venetia and, of course, Naples. He worked also in Poland because The King August Strong was The Ruler of both - Saxony and The Kingdom of Poland. The monarch passed away in 1733, and mourning at the court permitted Hasse to go on long absence from his Kapellmeister duties. During the next trip to Italy he composed 'on the way' his next five operas of the total of 120 - Yes one hundred and twenty operas he composed during his life. Unbelievable, isn't it?

At that period came back to the stage 'Astaserse': he revised it once again to add attractive arias for his wife Faustina (in original version there was no soprano at all!). She preferred his opera seria, because singing opera buffo ruined her voice. 'Astaserse' was performed with Faustina in Bayreuth because of the marriage of Brandenburg-Bayreuth Princess Elisabeth. Also the Prussian King, Frederick the Great, lover of music and devoted (and talented!) flute player during visit in Dresden met the composer. The meeting resulted in series of Hasse's flute Sonatas and concertos written for the music monarch. Also he commissioned special opera 'Arminio' from the composer and soon presented it on his court.

In 1764 Hasse was invited to Vienna for the coronation of the Emperor Joseph II, marked by a performance of his 'Festa teatrale Egeria'. There also Maestro Hasse attending the performance of the 15 years old prodigy, Mozart's opera, 'Ascanio in Alba' and have made prophetic remarks: "This boy will cause us all to be forgotten". Such words came from the acknowledged European Opera Maestro being among the pick of professional and social position.

#### Composing

Hasse in his senility settled in Venice, teaching and composing sacred works. His muse, Faustina passed away there in 1781 and the composer himself two years later in 1783. After decades of unimaginable fame he was completely forgotten and ignored until F.S. Kandler paid for his gravestone in Venice, where he was buried and authored a biography. But still he wasn't present on the Opera stage.

Nowadays there is a trend of somehow 'archeological' researches at the libraries and demand for something original (difficult to say 'new'), discovered again. The result of such trend is 'Opera Oscar' Award for Rediscovered Work; and this year was the moment for Old Forgotten Maestro Hasse.

'Artaserse' libretto was written by Hasse's best friend, renowned librettists Pietro Metastasio. It is a story which starts with killing ('criminal?'), exploring the relationships between the characters in terms of their feelings, but also themes of class and power, about love and duty, one of the most significant sources of conflict, and plot, in Baroque opera.

The funny information at the end: For Metastasio's libretto operas were composed 90 (ninety) by different composers, among them Leonardo Vinci. However, The Winner again became The Old Maestro Johann Adolph Hasse and again after centuries, after his previous glory. Unknown, unpredictable are the ways to glory.

**Editor's Note:** Cezary Owerkowicz is the chairman of the Kuwait Chamber of Philharmonia and talented pianist. He regularly organizes concerts by well-known musicians for the benefit of music lovers and to widen the knowledge of music in Kuwait. His email address is: cowerkowicz@yahoo.com and cowerkowicz@hotmail.com



Kuwait Towers soaring in a sky filled with clouds. (Mohammad Alhadhood - KUNA)

## Pioneers of Kuwait

### An epitome of old Kuwaiti spirit

# Isa Al Qatami, an intrepid mariner

This is an article on Isa Abul Wahab Al Qatami, an intellectual, poet, author and an intrepid mariner of the old days.

- Editor

By Lidia Qattan

Special to the Arab Times

Isa Al Qatami was no ordinary mariner of the old days sailing ships in Kuwait, it is said of him that he had the mind and spirit of a true intellectual, the prowess of the adventurer and the soul of a poet.

In his book "Al Nokheda" (The Skippers) Dr Yaqub Yousef Al Haggy portrays him as the true epitome of the old Kuwaiti spirit that made the country prosperous and renown in the Gulf area and beyond long before the oil.

Isa Al Qatami comes from a renowned family of trader and sea-fairer whose roots stem from the original settlers, those intrepid people who left Nejd after a severe drought hit the area of Al Aflaj, in Saudi Arabia and on an odyssey that lasted over fifty years they eventually settled in 1717 on the shore of what became known "Al Kuwait".

Isa Al Qatami was born in 1870, he was only one year old when he lost his father, but in those days of large families the little ones had plenty of adults around who gave them love and comfort and that enhanced their sense of security, and inculcated in them important social traits that prepared them for life.

#### Education

In such family surrounding the little orphan grew up healthy minded and emotionally mature from an early age.

His schooling began and ended with the Qatateeb which were private institutions that taught the principles of Arabic language, mathematics and memorizing some Quranic verses.

Isa completed his education when he was nine years old; from thence he entered a new phase in life.

The sea and sea-faring had been nurturing his dreams since early childhood, his immediate family and uncles were all skippers and merchants, so it was not unusual for a child of his age to be aboard of a sailing ship with the purpose of learning the art of navigation.

His first trip aboard a sailing ship was with his uncle Zanian Al Ganim; for two years he sailed with him along the traditional trade route to India and to Aden. During that time he learned the art of navigation, which included reading nautical charts and calculate the position of the ship at sea.

Those early days at sea were an opening eye experience, his mingling with sailors and with people of different nationalities widened his mental horizon and tempered his spirit.

The Kuwait sailors of those days were like family, among them the little boy was absorbing the special wisdom, the endurance and good-spirit for which the Kuwaitis had become famous in the Gulf.

#### Poetry

Though most of them were illiterate they all shared an enthusiasm for poetry; indeed it was not unusual to find among them a poet of some merit; the Arabs have become famous for their poetical gift.

Those early sea-faring aboard the ship of his uncle and his contact with peoples of many countries flared Isa's enthusiasm for poetry and for learning local dialects, many of which he mastered.

Incidentally this predilection for idioms eventually affected his poetry; because, when he began to compose verses it was in Arabic slang "Al Nabati" and "Zahriyat". This was due mainly to his scant knowledge of Arabic grammar

and because composing in dialect came natural to him.

After two years of sailing aboard the ship of his uncle, Zanian Al Ganim, Isa had become fairly acquainted with the art of sea-faring, but his ambition

was to become a top mariner; so for the next three years he sailed with his other uncle, Ibrahim Al Ganim to learn all he could from him.

He was a fourteen years old teenager when he became a recognized "Mua'llem" (Master), and for the next two years he got a job aboard the "Bagla" (ocean-sailing ship) of Ahmed Naser, there he was in charge of reading the nautical charts and calculating the position of the ship at sea.

While sailing to India, to Aden, to the East African coast and to the shore of Malabar Isa was keen in noting down every detail in the way: the geography and topography of every port, sea-currents and winds movement and comparing his first-hand knowledge with the writing of previous mariners.

After three years he spent with Ahmed Naser, Isa felt confident to take over the family business as the skipper of his own ship, "Al Hesani



Isa Al Qatami

"(The Horse), transporting goods and passengers and engaging in commerce as his people had done for generations.

Besides being conspicuous as a skillful skipper, Isa became famous for his poetry, his cheerful disposition, his quick wits and good humor, this combined with his nautical skill and intrepid spirit made him the most sought after young mariner of his days.

Isa loved good company and admired people with broad ideas, all his friends were among the most renowned intellectuals and poets of his days, among them was the historian, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Rshied whom he cherished for his modern ideas and uncompromising spirit, especially when dealing with recalcitrant religious fanatics trying to stand in the way of reforms.

He loved and admired the blind poet-philosopher, Shaker Shebeeb and was keen to ease his burden providing for his needs.

His admiration for the great man sometime made him conscious of his shortcoming in pure Arabic poetry; he expressed his regret in many of his Zahriyat. However in his own medium he was truly gifted, he could cheerfully compose in scores of dialects indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula, to Mesopotamia and to other nations with which he came in contact. Unfortunately many of his Zahriyat and Nabati poetry were lost to posterity.

#### Famous

Besides writing poetry Isa wrote several books, "Dalil Al Mohtar fi Elm Al Behar" (Guide to the special knowledge of the sea) is by far the most famous.

Being based on research and first-hand knowledge the book, published in 1924, was a very useful manual to have aboard a sailing ship.

Indeed many Kuwaiti mariners

never sailed without one, because, besides giving detailed geographic and topographic descriptions of the coast-line, it gave detail information of marine currents and winds movement.

The book also included practical instruction on how to calculate the ship's position at sea according to longitude and latitude and how to use charts and nautical instruments; it also included friendly advices on how to deal with people and how to behave in order to be successful among strangers.

Another important book, though more exclusive, was written on behalf of pearl-divers and pear-merchants in the Gulf; "Al Mokhtasar Al Khas lil-Mosafer, wa al Tawash, wa al Gous" (Special briefing for travelers, pearl-merchants and pearl-divers) published in 1925.

Other books of relative importance are: "Oman Wa Al Jebel Al Akhtar" (Oman and the green mountain) in which he discloses the economic, social and political condition of the Sultanate at his time.

His knowledge of dialects led him to write "Kitab Al-Ahajat" (the Book of Dialects), this can be of great interest to scholars.

Broad-minded and of cheerful disposition Isa Al Qatami was a man well loved and respected by everyone who knew him. As his friend Shaker Al Shebeeb and the intellectual Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Rshied, he was a man with modern ideas.

He held that learning for men as well as for women was a necessity in the development of a dynamic society; hence he fought against the superstition that regarded women inferior to men, so he championed women's education.

"The mother 'He uses to say' has the greatest influence on her offspring, therefore she should be educated for the good of society as a whole."

Like many of his intellectual friends he was against religious fanatics who were insisting that education was wasted on women, deeming women's place was in the home, and so, their job did not require special schooling.

In 1927 Isa Al Qatami left Kuwait, to spend the rest of days in Masqat, Oman, where he died in 1929.

His legacy was carried on by one of his sons, Abdul Wahab Isa Al Qatami, who became one of the most renowned skippers of his day, till after the Second World War the sailing-ship industry in the Gulf faded away with the implementation of new means of transportation.