JOSEP CARRERAS, THE STORY OF A PREDESTINATION

EVER SINCE HIS DEBUT IN A CHILD'S ROLE AT THE GRAN TEATRE DEL LICEU IN 1957, THE TENOR JOSEP CARRERAS I COLL (BARCELONA, 1946) HAS HAD A CAREER CROWNED WITH SUCCESSES. THROUGHOUT HIS PROFESSIONAL LIFE HE HAS GIVEN TRIUMPHANT PERFORMANCES IN THE MOST IMPORTANT THEATRES IN EVERY PART OF THE WORLD. TODAY, HAVING OVERCOME THE DIFFICULT PERIOD OF A SERIOUS ILLNESS WHICH KEPT HIM OFF THE STAGES, HE IS ONCE AGAIN PERFORMING AS WELL AS EVER, BUT AT THE SAME TIME HE IS DOING AN IMPORTANT JOB AT THE HEAD OF THE "FUNDACIÓ INTERNACIONAL JOSEP CARRERAS", SET UP TO HELP IN THE FIGHT AGAINST LEUKAEMIA, ABOVE ALL IN THE FIELD OF RESEARCH.

JAUME COMELLAS DIRECTOR OF THE "REVISTA MUSICAL CATALANA"

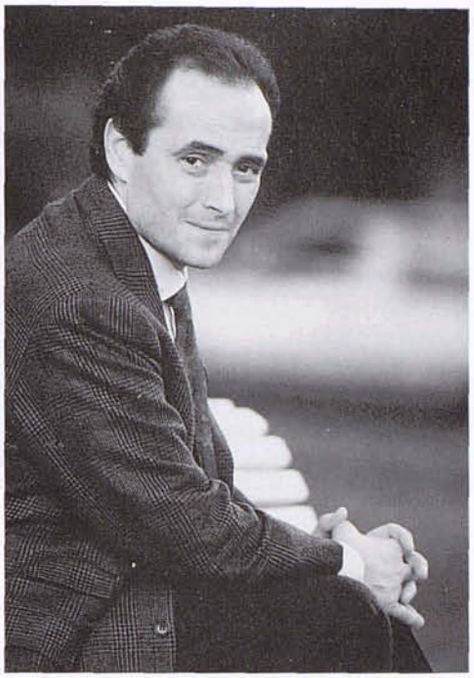
The life-story of the Barcelona tenor Josep Carreras could well be described as a true story of predestination. Very few people have had their destiny as clearly marked as he did from the very start. And very few, also, can look back and see how, from his earliest childhood, the Catalan tenor's far-reaching expectations have been fulfilled with implacable precision.
Not even a cruel twist of fate has been able to alter the course of a well-defined vocation. In fact, it has if anything helped to enrich it and provide new incentives and a new outlook for all those things that are coming together to form a really exciting life-story.
From the child who used to entertain his mother's clients (she was a hairdresser) to the operatic tenor who has had such resounding successes in the best opera houses around the world, the journey travelled is a quite unique one, filled with significant advances, with hurdles easily cleared, leading to positions of artistic privilege and maximum social consideration.
Talking with Josep Carreras is one of those comforting, stimulating pleasures, a rare reward in the journalist's hard, thankless profession. The singer knows how to create a climate of familiarity around him, one that holds off the all too real phantom of the intrinsic superiority of his social role. The enormous weight of his position never matters, and in the most natural and simplest way possible he creates an enormously welcome atmosphere of comfort. If the species that gives rise to "divaism" seems fortunately to be on the verge of extinction, Josep Carreras can be considered one of the best examples of the "anti-divaist" breed.
–Yes, that's absolutely true. My mother ran a hairdresser's and I used to sing for the customers. I was six or seven years old. Obviously, they said I was good because otherwise, of course, I wouldn't have carried on.

This was at the beginning of the fifties, in a street in Sants, one of the towns absorbed by Barcelona during its expansion at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one. After the "O sole mio" or else the "Rosó", a Catalan folksong, which he sang as a child in the hairdresser's, an event took place that seems to have been very important for the singer: his outing to the cinema to see the film *El gran Caruso*, the American version of the biography of the Neapolitan tenor, which made a great impact on the boy from Sants. After that, an image of a utopia was fixed in him for good. It was in this context that something happened which made a very special mark on the Catalan tenor's life. In 1957 Carreras played the part of "Trujaman" in a version of Manuel de Falla's *El retablo de Maese Pedro* at the Gran Teatre del Liceu.
–I was just eleven years old then. I don't know why they picked me for the part rather than someone else. It's always been a mystery to me. All I know is we got a telephone call at home saying that they knew my parents had a boy who sang well and that they'd like to know if I could do it. That's the way things went. I think it might have been because before that I had played a part in one of those famous charity shows on the radio at Christmas and perhaps they noticed that there was a boy who sang reasonably well.

–What was it like for you? Where you aware of the importance it had or could have?
–Although I only had the awareness of an eleven-year-old, I already knew what the Liceu was, because my parents had told me, and apart from that there was my regular experience of getting up on the stage and of the rehearsals with the orchestra that made me aware of what was happening, and I was able to assimilate the importance of the event. And –unconsciously, I repeat– I realised that that was part of my life and that it could be part of my future life too. And so I think that, obviously, one doesn't feel the weight of the responsibility or the tension of when you go on to become a professional, but I realised that it was something outside normal life and, of course, I found it exciting. I enjoyed it enormously.

–Your parents (his father was a municipal policeman) realised that you had a clear vocation and directed your training through the Conservatori Municipal de Música de Barcelona.
–At that time I studied music theory and piano, but with the clear idea of becoming a singer, not an instrumentalist. That therefore formed part of my training for tomorrow.

–Your case isn't like that of other singers, who discover as adults that they have a good voice and suddenly start to study from scratch...
–I had the advantage of a good preparation from an early age. I started voice



training when I was seventeen. First with Jaume Francesc Puig, who I'm very fond of and consider a great professional. Afterwards, though, came the teacher I consider most important, because he really directed my career, and that was Joan Ruaix. He wasn't a professional singing teacher, but he was the person who taught me to sing. He was a dentist and amateur tenor. He was paralysed and had to get about in a wheelchair. He had a great feeling for singing and vocal techniques, and was the person who really helped me most.

–Many great singers have consolidated their training with almost totally unknown names, figures as important as they are anonymous...

–The thing is there isn't a particular university or school where singing is taught. There has to be a close communion between teacher and pupil, because not all forms of teaching or points of view coincide. Each individual is very special and different from every other one. That's why I believe there has to be complete understanding between the teacher's explanation and the pupil's assimilation. Because of this, there's no such thing as a singing teacher. You can't talk about how many people have taken lessons and how many have gone on to become top-class singers. Everybody has their own personality, different vocal conditions, and you can't teach everybody to sing in the same way. There are basic techniques that are universally correct and valid, but after that you have to follow your own instinct, each individual's possibilities and talent, and not try to make everybody sing in the same way. That's why I'm very much against –although I fully respect anyone who wants to do it– the "Master Class". I don't understand how you can take thirty pupils and say to them, "this is the way to sing". It seems like a supermarket. You have to see what kind of voice the singer has, what sort of mentality, what sort of sensitivity, their temperament and cultural level. A lot of factors intervene. I believe in the commonplace that the teacher makes the pupil and the pupil the teacher.

–One of the obstacles that have to be overcome are the competitions. You went in for the one you had closest to hand, the "Francesc Viñas", a Barcelona competition of some prestige, in memory of the Catalan tenor who specialized in Wagner, where you were eliminated at the very beginning.

–Yes, they eliminated me in the first round. When people remind me I always tell them the story about the competition held in the fifties for imitators of Charlie Chaplin. Charlie Chaplin himself went in for it and came fourth. I went in for the Viñas competition because it was held here and it was easy for me to take part. Then I went in for a competition for Verdi singers in Parma, and that time I was given the chance to start my international career, as I was lucky enough to win. That was in 1970.

–What do you mean, "You were lucky enough to win"?

–I say "lucky" because singers don't depend only on talent, but very often on how they're feeling, on whether or not their voice is in good physical condition at the time, on how much of yourself you can give singing alone on a stage with just a piano to accompany you... There are a whole series of factors. I was lucky enough –and forgive this arrogance on my part– to show that they were right... Then I felt that that had been a very important step for me because it gave me the chance to make my Parma debut, in an established theatre.

–Before this first prize, though, you had already performed at the Liceu, when you were twenty-three, and in leading roles, with *Nabucco* and *Lucrecia Borgia*. The path of destiny was marked by milestones set up in strict order and with implacable precision, in what has become a process of union between such frequently opposed factors as exception and naturalness, which is one of the most characteristics features of your career: a natural acceptance, without any kind of traumas, of exceptionality. Neither the moments of euphoria nor the lowest moments have been factors that have even minimally diverted your destiny.

–I would say I'm a balanced person, but obviously there's the problem of nerves. But I thought that if someone wants to devote themselves to this trade they have to know that the great debut has to arrive and that if it does they have to have the luck of feeling well and of everything working out, of the conditions being right. And I had that luck. I've always thought I was very fortunate in my career, because the old story of being in the right place at the right time has, I think, happened very often to me.

–Do you remember the moments before your professional debut at the Liceu?
–Yes. A lot of tension. A lot of tension.

–And after the applause, did you think that what you saw in *El gran Carusso* could come true?
–At that moment I thought it was my first big opportunity, that I had to take advantage of it and that I had to get things right, and of course, there was the excitement and the enthusiasm of that age and that moment. Yes, when you hear the applause, you begin to dream and you think that, step by step, you can get somewhere important in your profession.

–Some characters or moments of particular dramatic tension have caused you emotional problems. Mirella Freni says she can't perform *Madame Butterfly* because she gets overemotional. Not because of technical problems.
–There are three characters which have quite frankly dominated me more than any other. One is Rodolfo in La bohème, *another Don José in* Carmen *and the third Canio in* I pagliacci. *Because they're so intense, when you sing these characters you find that at certain points in the opera yo have to be a little bit cynical with yourself so as to be able to get on top of them, otherwise you could find yourself getting carried away by what they say and feel. You have to see to it that your brain works more than your soul.*

–You didn't spend your apprenticeship in secondary roles.
–I was lucky enough to be able to start with important roles. I had a good apprenticeship at the New York City Opera, between 1970 and 1972, where in just one season I made my debut in eleven different parts. It's New York's second most important opera house. It's at the Lincoln Center, has a good orchestra, a good company, puts on productions of a very high level and you can rehearse well there, so that it's a place where a young singer can go through this apprenticeship that's so useful.

–Until 1974, when the moment came for your great professional take-off.
–That season I sang in San Francisco, at Covent Garden and at the Vienna Opera. And in the 1974-75 season I made my debut at the Scala. To make your professional debut in 1970 and your debut at the Metropolitan in 1974, and in Saltzburg in 1976 with Karajan isn't very common. The thing is that it seems to be a bit easier for tenors than for the other voices, for one thing because it's usually the most important part in the opera, and for another because I think there are less tenors than there are other kinds of voices. I think the tenor has to be –how can I put it?– more charismatic, as though the tenor had to be at a higher level, and certainly we're more in the limelight.

–Hasn't this rapid progress made your head whirl?
–I think that although everything went very quickly it came in stages. I was able to assimilate it well. I started working with the great directors, making records and doing important things. And I can't say it came naturally to me because that would be very arrogant on my part. But I did feel they were logical steps in my career in view of the luck I'd had. That's why I didn't have any problems of psychological stress.

–Your meeting with Herbert von Karajan took place in 1976. I think this was something that had an important influence on you.
–Yes, in the artistic aspect it had a great influence. It was the most important meeting I've ever had. First it was Verdi's Requiem *and then* Don Carlo. *Later,* La bohème, Tosca, Aida *and* Carmen.

–Was it a question of "chemistry" between you?
–More than anything else it's a question of seeing and hearing music in the same way and of his finding a tenor who –let's be honest–, both vocally and physically, for certain types of character, has what he wants. And that musically has the kind of flexibility –and this doesn't mean that this singer is better than any other– which is best suited for what Karajan sees in the characters.

–You've worked with today's great directors. You've mentioned the names of Abbado, Mutti, Levine, Maazel, Kleiber, Colin Davies, Sinnopoli, Bernstein, Chailly...
–There's no problem with any of these directors, because I think one has to put oneself at their service.

–Vienna, Barcelona and London are three cities of particular importance in your artistic career.
–I would add Milan.

–But you *do* have a special following in Vienna.

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–Well, yes... Vienna is a city and Austria a country where music is lived more intensely than anywhere else in the world. So a musician, or a singer, is well thought of in Austria –I'm not saying he's better treated– and can feel more realized as a performer.

–Can being a singer and being a musician ever be two different things? I mean can having a great voice not be enough to make music your career?
–Yes, that can happen. In singing, a lot of factors intervene. There has to be an instrument, of course, and if all the other conditions are all they can be, then there's a better chance of being a great singer. But the instrument isn't the only factor; there are a whole series of innate factors, such as musicality, temperament, the love of singing, discipline, not just on a physical level, but as regards music. Whether or not you have a certain type of personality or attitude on the stage, the ability to get across to people. It's what people call charisma. There have been great voices that haven't been able to develop their potential, and on the other hand there have been other instruments with discreet conditions but a suitable intelligence that have managed to make important careers.

–The interview is taking place on the premises of the Fundació Internacional Josep Carreras, which helps in the fight against leukaemia; an institution which is the fruit of well-known events we remember all too well. In July 1987, a persistent pain in a tooth led to the diagnosis of a serious cancerous illness.
–The fact that the doctor in Paris made a point of seeing me on their National Holiday, the Fourteenth of July, was a sign that it was serious...

–One year later, almost to the day, you were closing a crowded performance on the esplanade of the Arc de Triomf in Barcelona, with the cry, more triumphant than ever, of "Vinceró, vinceró!", from the "Nessun dorma" aria out of Puccini's *Turandot*. Twelve absolutely incredible months had gone by, which were lived with inexpressible intensity. Your recovery, which was scientifically impeccable, was like something supernatural and opened a new chapter in your existence. That emotive recital served as the public presentation of the foundation into which you put so much.
–Would it be true to say that, since then, you've changed, on both a personal and artistic level?
–I think after such a grim period, such a difficult, special period, you change in many ways, or at least in some ways... Even if afterwards some things go back to what they were. Yes, the man has changed and is a bit more mature and some things in life you see very differently. And the artist, who follows a parallel path to the man, also changes, even if only unconsciously. It's not that I see my performances or music in general more profoundly or that I want to get more to the root of things. It's not that, but because the man is a bit more mature and sees things differently, from other points of view, the artist also behaves differently.

–On a purely quantitative level, Carreras has considerably cut down on performances.
–I now give about fifty performances a year, while before I did about eighty. This also allows me, and not just in the physical aspect –the doctors have given me the all-clear–, to do what I want, but even in the mental aspect I now want to get up on the stage without the pressure of having sung the day before yesterday and having to sing the day after tomorrow. I have no need, in any sense. I can afford the luxury of choosing and of taking things a bit easy. This comes across on the artistic level in a more intense type of performance.

–You overcame leukaemia between the Hospital Clínic in Barcelona and Seattle Hospital. It was under these conditions that the idea of an altruistic devotion first came up, through a process of reflection...
–When they took me into the Clínic I thought that if I ever pulled through...

–Excuse me, did you ever think you might not pull through?
–Yes, I certainly did. It was then that I decided to give a concert in aid of the hospital's Haematology Service. But it's not just this hospital that needs help. Medical attendance is always deficient in any hospital in the world –in Switzerland, the United States or Japan, to name three rich countries– and the money's always welcome. Then I thought that one performance wouldn't be enough. And I felt I had a duty to society, because of that incredible surge of affection and support that I got from people. I thought that one of the best ways to pay them back for the affection they'd shown was to set up a foundation to fight against leukaemia. And

that's what motivated me. That was the mental process that led me to the creation of the foundation.

–The foundation's most specific aim is research. Do you feel that's the best contribution you can make?
–It's not what I feel. It's what our scientific committee feels, which includes, amongst others, Professor E. Donall Thomas of Seattle, 1990 Nobel Prize, Dr Ciril Rozmann and Dr Albert Grañena. This is the advice the scientists have given: in the long term it'll be research that will make it possible to beat this disease once and for all.

–The Fundació Josep Carreras at present has a budget of something in the order of one thousand million pesetas a year, and as well as Barcelona, it also has offices in the United States, Switzerland and Austria. How are the funds that make this possible channelled?
–We have several ways of doing it. We give scholarships to scientists from different parts of the world. Being an international foundation we can help scientists everywhere. As well as this, we're involved in a very ambitious project, the REDMO, which is a register of bone-marrow donors not related by family ties. We're responsible for this project in the Mediterranean area.

We ought to explain to readers that REDMO stands for "Registre de Donants de Mèdul·la Òssia no Emparentats" (Unrelated Bone-Marrow Donors Registry). This register, which is based at the foundation, is linked internationally with others that exist all over the world and has been recognized as Spain's only agent for the Unrelated Bone-Marrow Donors Registries Confederation. The possibility of carrying out bone-marrow transplants between unrelated individuals, discovered by Professor Thomas in 1979, opened new hopes for increasing the proportion of definitive cures of leukaemia, which justified the setting up of the register by the Fundació Carreras. At the moment, these registers only exist in the United States, Great Britain and France, and on a lesser scale in other European countries.
–This is a foundation which you set up, but which since then you've never left to itself.
–Yes, it would be true to say it's become part of my life and we do at least a dozen concerts around the world to raise funds for it, which bring us in contributions. I try to collaborate as much as I can; I don't know if I do it very well, but I certainly do it willingly. I try to put all I can into it.
As the interview comes to an end, Josep Carreras remarks that the foundation's offices, where we are talking, will one day, when he's retired from the music world, be the setting for a particularly intense dedication.

Predestined to become a figure of the universal opera of all times, today Josep Carreras's new challenge is that of fulfilling a new destiny which he has set himself, built up day by day, based on a driving principle that repeats itself with absolute conviction.
–It's a bit my way of paying a debt outstanding.

We look forward to seeing the definitive scope, so open and optimistic, of this new predestination. ■