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AFRICAN
STYLE

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OF ST PETERSBURG



PLUS Gourmet Voyager A Taste of Thailand • Artists of Australia

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As tributes poured in to Luciano Pavarotti in September there was one question on everyone's lips: who would fill the void left by this uniquely charismatic and immensely loved opera singer? The great Italian tenor had achieved the rare feat of winning the love of the general public as well as the respect of the critics. Could opera ever be the same again?

One man who might be the answer to that question is 33-year-old British tenor Alfie Boe. Astonishingly, only ten years ago this singer with a disarming smile was working as a mechanic in an English fishing town, where a music mogul client heard him singing along to the radio beneath a jacked-up car. Since then, Boe has built up a CV that any young opera singer would be proud of. He studied at London's Royal College of Music and went on to perform in Baz Luhrman's *La Bohème* on Broadway (for which he won a Tony Award), and with leading opera companies including London's Royal Opera, the Scottish Opera, Brussels' La Monnaie and Strasbourg's Opéra National du Rhin, and has sung solos at the Proms. Last month he sang for his supper—cooked for him by Raymond Blanc after headlining a festival at the iconic chef's Le Manoir Aux Quat'Saisons restaurant in rural England.

And it's not just his singing that impresses. Boe's cheeky personality and charming looks have made him a popular chat show guest, and his face has already graced the pages of countless international magazines and newspapers. Indeed, an article in the *Telegraph* recently named him among five likely "heirs to Pavarotti's popularity crown".

Boe recently released his third CD—a collection of Italian arias and folk songs called *La Passione*—after his first two rode high in the classical charts. The first track is "Caruso"—an Italian folk song by Lucio Dalla dedicated to Italian tenor Enrico Caruso and brought to life in the 1990s by Pavarotti. "I thought it was ideal to open the album," says Boe. "Caruso is a beautiful song. I first heard it sung by Pavarotti: Caruso was one of the greatest influences in his life and Pavarotti was in turn a great influence in mine. For me, Pavarotti is the Caruso of our time."

Earlier this year Boe stayed at the Hotel Caruso in Ravello, a small but beautifully formed Orient-Express hotel perched on cliffs high above Italy's Amalfi Coast, while visiting the region to film a video.


"It was an incredible place," he says. "My first experience of the Caruso was when I walked into the hotel lobby across a marble floor with marble pillars, and straight through to the back of the hotel and its magnificent view of the Amalfi Coast. Beautiful sky, beautiful sea—it was a gorgeous day, and I just thought, this is an amazing place."

Boe was filmed in various settings, including the celebrated Terrace of Infinity at Villa Cimbrone and beneath the evocative arches of Villa Rufulo. "Everybody was so kind," he says. "The people are wonderful and the food's fantastic. I just love the feeling you get from Italy. We



A PASSION FOR ITALY

English tenor Alfie Boe chose Hotel Caruso in Ravello as the location for the video accompanying *La Passione*, his new CD of Neapolitan songs. This rising star tells Femke Colborne what drew him to record the music of Italy's south.

A full-page photograph of Alfie Boe. He is a man with dark hair, smiling broadly, wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved button-down shirt. He is leaning against a stone wall on a cliffside. The background shows a vast, scenic view of the Amalfi Coast, with steep mountains and the sea under a bright sky. The lighting is bright and natural, suggesting a sunny day.

Alfie Boe's enthusiasm is infectious as he stands in front of the breathtaking view from Ravello down the Amalfi Coast.



Clockwise from above, Boe framed in the Hotel Caruso's beautiful arched balcony; the entrance to the hotel, through which you can see the sea, immediately enchanted the tenor; the unforgettable chef, Mamma Agata: Boe sang arias while he learned local recipes in her kitchen.



called in to a number of people's houses while we were there and I especially remember one lady—Mamma Agata—who has a farm on the edge of Ravello, overlooking the sea, where she runs her own restaurant and cooking school. She served us homemade limoncello and wine, and fresh lemonade; then she took me into the kitchen and started me cooking. She was just plying me with food—and I had to eat everything put in front of me. Afterwards, I felt like I'd put on several pounds."

Although Boe is studying Italian, he has learnt a lot through his music: "When I sing in Italian it's very different from speaking—it's so poetic. I've been caught out in the past—when I first started learning the language I tried to speak it the way that I sing and everyone just laughed."

Boe was at music college when he developed his passion for Italian music. Keen for him to develop his voice and expand his knowledge, his teachers suggested that he explore the Neapolitan repertoire. "It has been very close to my heart since I was young," he says. "I've wanted to record an album of these songs for years—it was the first idea I had when I started looking for a record deal. Now I've finally made it."

Visiting the Ravello region for the first time helped to bring that music to life: "The area tells so much of the story. The music that I sing says a lot about the Italians' way of life—their culture, their family, their friends, their loves, their lost loves, their mountains, their seas—everything. It's storytelling—and the language is so beautiful: it lends itself to the music."

Boe's first album, released in 2006, was a collection of opera favourites. His second release, *Onward*, of uplifting, largely sacred arias, won rave reviews. One critic noted: "There's something so refreshingly intelligent about Boe's approach—and so humanely honest about his choices. It has everything to do with the sheer creamy openness of Boe's voice, a sound that has some of the elasticity and excitement of a Juan Diego Flórez but the subtle English colour of an Ian Bostridge and the same attention to word-painting."

Boe's live performances have impressed, too: the UK's *Observer* newspaper described him as "a stunning discovery who could be the best tenor of his generation", and a review of English National Opera's *Kismet* singled him out in an otherwise poorly received production, speaking of his "elegant light tenor stealing the honours as the Caliph".

Considering his vocal talent alone, the comparisons to Pavarotti may not be too far fetched. For an opera singer he is young, and his career is gathering pace—he has roles at the English National Opera and Royal Opera secured for next year. He plans to focus on increasing his international profile in the New Year, taking in Ireland and mainland Europe.

But there is another reason to mention Boe in the same breath as the late, great Italian. It's easy to see why he was snapped up by the music industry: he has enough charm to sink a ship (and certainly one full of women of a certain age). It has even been suggested that his success is due more to his marketability than to his talent, but he brushes aside any suggestion that his public image speaks more loudly than his voice: "It's part of the job. My talent is one thing it but marketing is another and we have to be honest about that." It's a refreshingly unpretentious approach.

Boe often speaks of his desire to introduce classical music to people who might find it intimidating. He generally dresses in casual clothes and refrains from using obscure words when talking about music, instead letting his genuine enthusiasm shine through. "Music is universal, everybody can have a passion for it, no matter what sort of style or repertoire it is."

Having grown up in a small town in northern England in a family of nine children, Boe is perhaps an unlikely ambassador for classical music. He did not

have the luxuries of many of his colleagues at music college and sometimes fell on hard times—he even spent a couple of nights sleeping on a bench in London's Hyde Park. But perhaps that's what makes him such a good candidate for introducing classical music to new audiences.

"Things are going to change," he says. "I think we are starting to get through to the wider audience that I want to reach. The music I sing started off belonging to the people—and it still does." □

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

To discover more about *La Passione*, to order a copy of the CD and to watch the stunning accompanying video, filmed at Hotel Caruso in Ravello, please visit: www.alfie-boe.com. For more information on Hotel Caruso, and the summer Ravello Music Festival, please call: +39 018 526 7890, visit www.orient-express.com or turn to page 117.