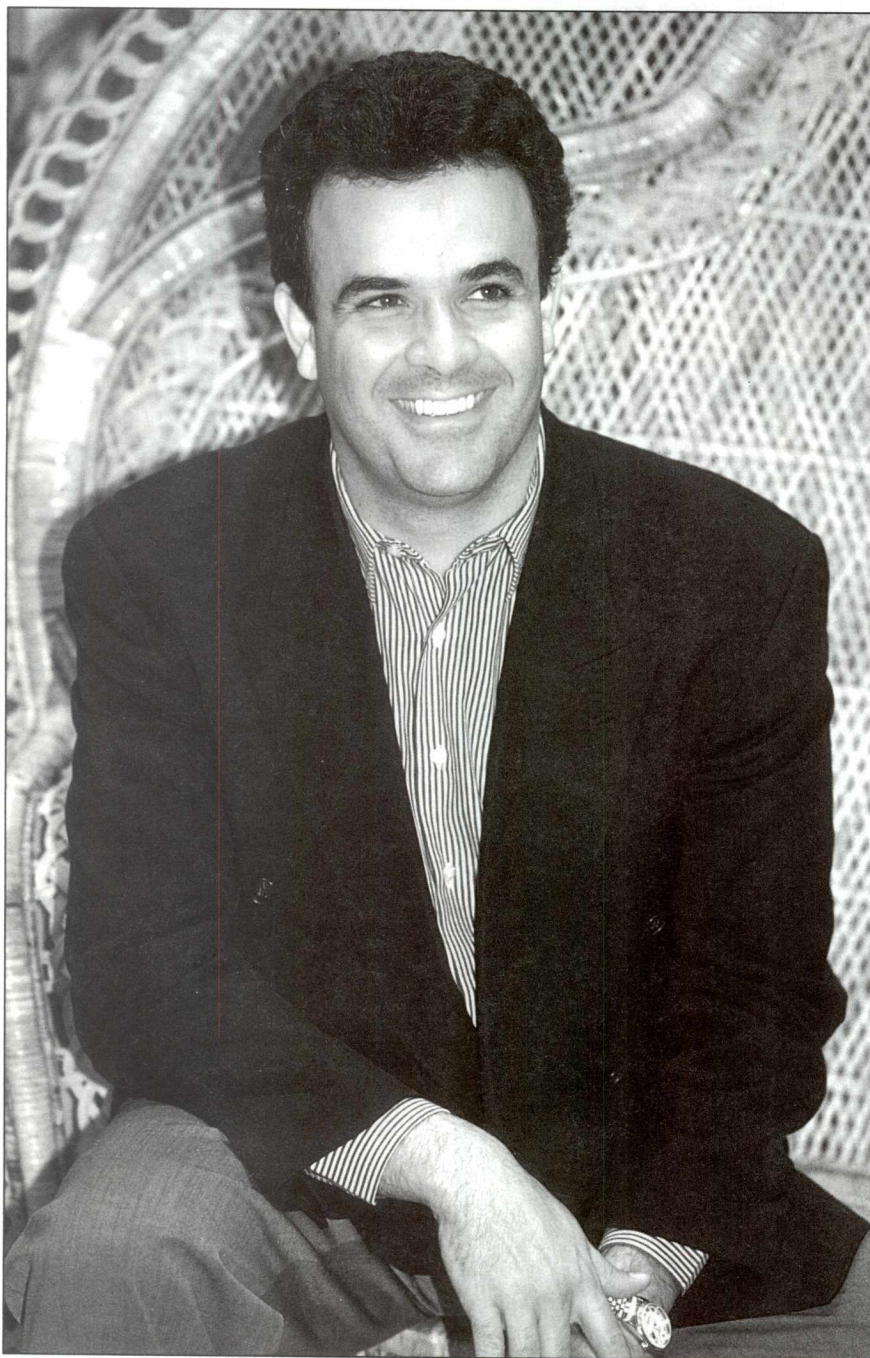


Fernando de la Mora, a prophet in his own land



Elsa Escamilla

Fernando de la Mora, 34, plays leading roles in operas throughout the world.

He was named Fernando in honor of his uncle Fernando Romo, bishop of Torreón, and given the middle name Alfonso, after his great-uncle, also a member of the clergy. Thus did Fernando Alfonso de la Mora's father—who died five days before the tenor's birth—express the wish that his son would be a man of the cloth. Yet Fernando Alfonso's calling turned out to be a different one: given the gift of a beautiful voice, at the age of 34 he plays leading roles in performances at opera houses throughout the world.

● *Gabriela Rábago Palafox*: How would you describe your voice?

■ *Fernando de la Mora*: I am a natural and clear lyric tenor. My voice is exactly in between light and *spinto*. If I didn't take care of myself and became careless about my voice, I think I could become a strong *spinto* lyric tenor in a matter of four or five years. But if I maintain my voice at a high level, I will continue to be a lyric tenor for at least a dozen years.

● *GRP*: Is there a choice between conserving one's natural voice and converting it into that of a *spinto* lyric tenor by forcing it to sing roles it's not suited for?

■ *FM*: Absolutely. And it's dangerous to opt for the *spinto*, because over time one's voice becomes more opaque. In Italian the word *spinto* is derived from the verb "to push." It's very easy to push one's voice since, in fact, one uses it by pushing air outward. But the technique of singing which I consider most appropriate consists of "floating the sound."

● **GRP:** Would you say that is the most intelligent way to sing?

■ **FM:** Yes. Singing also means using your brain constantly. You have to think about what you're doing. Only rarely should you give free rein to emotion when singing. You have to analyze what the song is, what the emotion is, in order to put it on a conscious level and repeat it technically. This means that singing must be cerebral, with very little heart and a lot of brain. When I say "with little heart," I mean that the heart must be allowed to intervene only at specific times which the brain has chosen.

● **GRP:** Then how do you get the audience to hear such enormous feeling in your performances?

■ **FM:** It's very difficult for me, especially when singing Mexican music, to break the ties of the heart and measure the feelings out, as a resource which must be applied with care so as not to damage the throat. The majority of popular singers destroy their voices very quickly. The voice deteriorates. In Mexico, the color of these extremely beautiful voices runs out, is quickly spent. Joaquín Pardavé said that the voice is like a very fine crystal goblet. And the better the voice is, the more this goblet is filled with gold dust. Each time you make your voice hoarse, every time you force it, you are using up that gold. And every time you exercise and educate your voice, you add a little bit

of gold, which means beauty, sweetness, feeling and much more. Far from dulling feeling, study enlarges it, since your voice has more to choose from. Your instrument becomes more flexible, sweeter, stronger, more muscular to a certain degree. The vocal cords become more muscular through study. They can become a tireless athlete or a weak athlete, a "tired old lady" without the strength to move. And, for an opera singer, the voice must be able to respond when you want it to: it has to jump sixty feet in the air if called upon to do so.

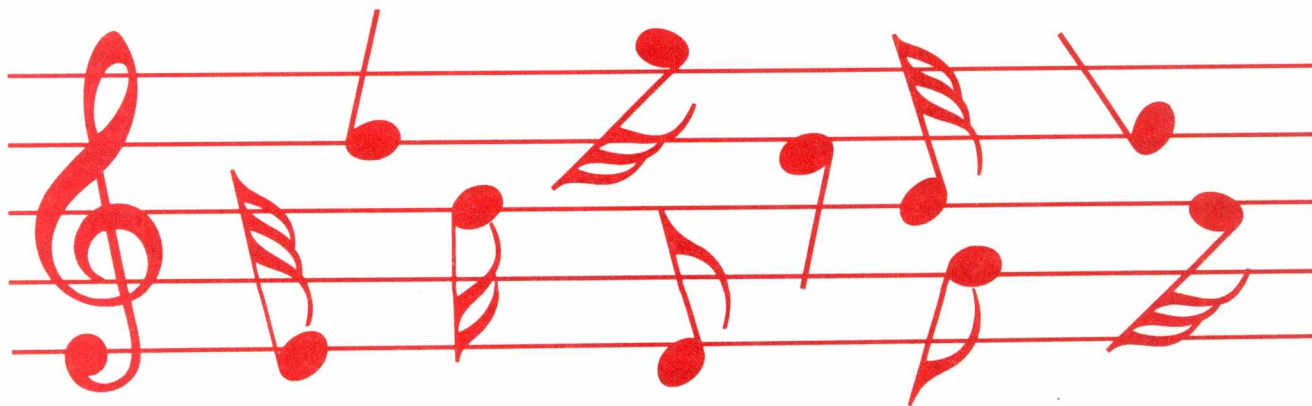
Plácido Domingo is a great example of what I've been saying about correct singing technique. He's a tenor who has been singing since he was 15 or 16 years old. He educated his voice when he was 19, and when he was 20 he was already singing small roles in opera houses. At 21 he performed in Israel. At 22 or 23 he debuted in New York. At 26 he made his Metropolitan debut. He's 50 years old now and has a marvelous voice which is more beautiful than ever. He sings better than he did ten or fifteen years ago and, while a singer's artistic life does not go beyond the age of 70, Plácido seems like he'll be in form when he reaches seventy.

● **GRP:** In the career of every outstanding tenor there is a crucial moment marking the passage from being one of many good singers to being an opera star. When was your crucial moment?

■ **FM:** A singer stands out if their voice has a special quality. In the world of opera there are many singers, but the Latin color—which many Mexican singers in particular have—makes the voice different. This is the case with tenors like Flavio Becerra (who has the most beautiful voice in Mexico, in my opinion), Ignacio Clapés, Miguel Angel Cortés, Ramón Arturo Vargas, Octavio Arévalo and Ricardo Sánchez, as well as many Spaniards who have become world-famous. Plácido and Carreras are examples of this.

The singer must also have a good, healthy voice which gives him security. That's one of the marvelous things about Plácido Domingo and Pavarotti: whenever they sing, they sing well. It's very unusual for them not to be one hundred percent. And that makes the difference between being a good singer and an outstanding one. To a certain degree that was the case with me. I've been stable as a singer, although I've had my slip-ups like anybody else. On a number of occasions I've had throat infections that made it difficult for me to fulfill contracts. I've also gone through periods when my voice has lost its bearings, when I wasn't one hundred percent and had to intensify my studies in order to resolve the problem, and that went on day after day.

At the beginning of my career I sang very little. I "marked time" too





Elsa Escamilla.

"Singing also means using your brain constantly."

much. In other words, I sang with a soft voice, supposedly so I wouldn't get tired. Now it's the other way around: the more I sing, the healthier my voice is. It's like everything in life: the more you use something in an appropriate way, the better it functions.

● **GRP:** Some say —perhaps as an excuse— that having a big belly makes it easier to support the diaphragm and sing better.

■ **FM:** That's not true. At this point, the skinniest opera singer can have as much volume as the fattest one. In the opera, dramas are what's most commonly performed. And dramas often have to do with cheating, as in *Clowns*, *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Il tabarro*, the various versions of *Manon Lescaut*.... The story has to do with a woman cheating on her husband or lover and leaving him for a more attractive man. In *Clowns*, Neda leaves the old owner of the circus for a handsome young man. And what happens when the new beau is a little piggy who moves slowly and is ugly to boot? Nobody believes that the woman is going to leave the really handsome tenor (who might be Plácido Domingo) for this person. The audience isn't so ready to make that kind of concession.

● **GRP:** How do you conquer stage fright?

■ **FM:** Feeling nervous about singing can be a completely positive thing. It can make you direct an enormous amount of positive energy at the audience. Now, what can also happen is that your nerves can wreck your life; they can cause such tension that your throat closes up and you lose your voice—you just fall apart. Every opera singer has to deal with nerves; the question is how you handle it. Backstage, Plácido Domingo is like a brave bull. He talks and jokes around with everybody, and there's nothing he likes more than for you to tell him "*In bocca lupo!*" ("in the mouth of the wolf") backstage. Personally, there are some things that make me nervous in a negative way. It bothers me when people come to talk to me in my dressing room before I'm ready. I love it when people say "*mucha mierda!*" ("lots of crap") to me before a performance, since in our milieu this is a way of expressing best wishes. In Germany it's "*toi, toi, toi!*" ("lots of luck"), and I already mentioned what they say in Italy. In the United States it's "break a leg!" In France it's "*merde!*" If anybody wishes you good luck, anywhere in the world, you have

to throw salt over your shoulder to get rid of the bad luck.

● **GRP:** Is it a privilege to have a good voice?

■ **FM:** Of course. But at the same time we singers are unfortunate, because our instrument is in constant use. You eat, breathe, swallow, salivate, all in the same place that you sing.... You don't have a case at home that you can keep your instrument in. A singer's throat is very susceptible to illness. The most important thing in singing is to have a positive outlook, because a singer is very exposed to sickness, to weakness, to bad vibes, to everything. It's very unlikely that somebody will get sick if they handle metaphysics in the right way and have a positive attitude. Bad vibes won't get to you if you're in favor of everything: of yourself, your loved ones, any living thing around you. That way you attract money, success, work, friends, everything.

● **GRP:** Why have you made recordings of Mexican songs that are more or less folk music?

■ **FM:** First of all because I love Mexican music. Something which has been frustrating for me is that I never met María Greever, Jorge del Moral or Agustín Lara. To me they were glorious people. I would put María Greever side by side with Tamayo, Orozco, any illustrious Mexican. Can you imagine what she must have felt in order to compose *Promise me?* Or what Jorge del Moral felt when he wrote *Don't deny that you loved me?* And Agustín Lara when he composed *Granada?* That is Spain's most famous song, thanks to the feeling a Mexican gave to it.

● **GRP:** Do you include Mexican music in the concerts you give in other countries?

■ **FM:** Always. I do it as a rule. I want to show that fine Mexican music holds its own with the finest music of the world ✕

Gabriela Rábago Palafox
Staff Writer.