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MIGHTY MUTI

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the legendary
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Two Masters, One Passion

Maestro Muti takes Verdi to new heights

by Tiffany Parks

This year opera lovers around the world celebrate the 200th birthday of Giuseppe Verdi. Here in Italy, Verdi is more than simply a great composer; he also wrote the soundtrack of the Risorgimento, the 55-year-long struggle for Italian unification and independence. To commemorate his bicentenary, legendary Maestro Riccardo Muti will conduct three Verdi works at the Rome Opera this season, including I Due Foscari, on this month. We sat down with Maestro Muti, Honorary Conductor for Life at the Rome Opera and the world's leading Verdi interpreter, to get to know the extraordinary conductor and hear his thoughts on Verdi and the future of the Rome Opera.

Who is Verdi to you? Do you consider him a musician or a national hero?

Verdi is one of the greatest pillars of operatic music. He represents the soul, not just of Italy, but of all humanity. People in every corner of the world, from Australia to America, Canada, or Africa, can find elements in Verdi's music that speak to their very heart and soul. In this sense, he is one of the most universal composers in the history of music. As a national hero, Verdi was a man who, through his music and his ideals of democracy, freedom, and equality, helped to ignite the hearts of Italian revolutionaries during the Risorgimento, undoubtedly contributing to the unification of Italy.

Historically, opera in Rome has developed less rapidly than in other Italian cities, such as Milan and Venice. Since you have come to the helm of the Rome Opera, however, it has begun receiving wider acclaim, for example, the extraordinary triumph of this season's opener, Simon Boccanegra. What is your plan for bringing Rome to the highest possible level of operatic greatness?

It's important to note that Rome has had great opera houses, such as the Apollo, the Valle and the existing Teatro Argentina, which predate the current Teatro Costanzi, and also that Verdi

had a strong and active relationship with Rome. Rome's present opera house may have a shorter history than Italy's historic theaters, like La Fenice or La Scala, but the Teatro Costanzi has a history of many important conductors as well as premieres, such as *Tosca* and *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Then followed a period of decline, during which it attracted less public attention. It is now experiencing a strong revival because the orchestra, chorus, and technicians have enthusiastically reattained past levels of brilliance, although it has been an uphill battle. Of course, the credit does not go to only one person; it is all about teamwork. Everyone is contributing; for example the orchestra has been performing symphonic concerts with major conductors, doing some excellent work. All this raises the level of the company and gives the public new faith in the quality of the opera house, and the most important thing is that the public see the theater as a house of culture, art, and music. Once that happens, progress becomes easier.

When one thinks of Verdi, titles like *Aida*, *Rigoletto*, and *La Traviata* come to mind. Why did you choose *I Due Foscari*, a lesser-known Verdi opera, for the program celebrating his bicentenary?

Every opera requires very specific types of singers. For a cast of *Aida*, you really must find an extraordinary *Aida*. I did a record-

I Due Foscari

Maestro Muti comes to the podium of the Rome Opera this month, leading a cast of exceptional singers in Verdi's poignant and rarely performed work, *I Due Foscari*. The opera, based on a play by Lord Byron, is enriched by the fantastical scenography of Werner Herzog, a director known for his innovation and originality, both on stage and in film. Set in the dangerous court of the Doge in 15th-century Venice, the opera tells the story of duty, sacrifice and a wrongly accused man. Originally rejected by La Fenice for its criticism of the Republic of Venice, it premiered in Rome instead in 1844.



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ing of *Aida* in the '70s with a cast that included Montserrat Caballé, Fiorenza Cossotto, Plácido Domingo, Piero Cappuccilli, and Nicolaj Ghiaurov. Today it's hard to find a group of singers at that level. This doesn't mean that we should give up, but we must find singers who can perform such difficult, popular, and famous roles, not at a good, but at an excellent level. Of course, all of Verdi's operas are difficult to sing. I thought I would open the season with *Simon Boccanegra*, featuring the doges of Genoa, and follow it with *I Due Foscari* and the doges of Venice, as they reflect two very different, but equally important sides of Verdi.

No tourist would come to Rome without visiting the Sistine Chapel or the Colosseum. Would you suggest a tourist also attend an Italian opera, perhaps by Verdi, to get a complete picture of Italian culture and history?

In recent years, opera has enjoyed an increasingly positive reputation at the international level. Yet, when tourists come to Rome, a city thousands of years old, it's natural that the ancient sites and museums will immediately grasp their attention. But if people come to learn of the history of Rome's opera house—for example, that it hosted the premiere of Puccini's *Tosca*, one of the most performed operas of all time and known to music lovers around the world—more tourists will visit our theater. However, I am confident that, little by little, this will occur.

In light of heavy cuts to cultural funding in Italy, as well as the economic crisis in general, is there a risk that opera—an integral part of Italian culture—is becoming increasingly a privilege reserved for the elite?

People were asking that even when I was a child. Of course, the arts have always been of greater interest to those who have the financial resources to attend universities or academies, and so in that sense there is a cultural elite. The solution then would be a cultural education that begins in primary school, in which all children, regardless of their financial situation, would have the privilege to learn about one of the most important and foundational pillars of our history and our country, namely, music. Italy's contribution to music is centuries old, and an understanding of it is essential to create a society in which classical music is available to everyone. Otherwise, it's inevitable that this privilege will become reserved for a few devoted fans and those who have the financial means to attend the opera. It's a matter of education, which is the duty of the state.

After conducting orchestras across the world, do you notice any particular or curious differences between the audiences of different countries?

All audiences in the world are different from one another, because the audience is the soul of the country; its way of reacting is the expression of its history. For example, a Spanish audience, confronted with high-quality artistry, can be truly explosive in its applause and enthusiasm, but this does not necessarily signify a greater understanding of the music. Another example: at London's Royal Festival Hall, at Vienna's Musikverein or at the Grosses Festspielhaus in Salzburg, the attention of the audience is very intense, and even though, of course, the applause afterwards can often be deafening, this type of audience demonstrates a much more controlled listening, whereas the reactions of Latin audiences tend to be more emotional. One of the most extraordinary is the Japanese audience, which has an attention to the point of absolute silence—it often seems to us orchestra directors that there is no one in the hall, so concentrated is the attention of the listeners, although afterwards they are capable of great enthusiasm. Above all it must be said that the Asian audience, in recent years, has made enormous progress in its appreciation of Western musical culture.

Marvelous Muti

Maestro Riccardo Muti is one of Italy's national treasures and widely recognized as one of the world's greatest conductors. He has led the prestigious orchestras of Vienna, Berlin, London, New York, Philadelphia, and, of course, Chicago, where he presently holds the position of Music Director. After a long tenure at Milan's La Scala, Maestro Muti came to the helm of the Rome Opera in 2011, when he was invited to become Honorary Conductor for Life, a position he accepted with great enthusiasm. Visit www.riccardomutimusic.com to learn more about his brilliant career and upcoming events.



WHERE readers would like to know, what kind of non-classical music does Maestro Muti listen to?

I have three children, so when they were young I listened to many different genres of music at home, although I didn't have the time to really study them. I remember that when I was a kid I adored the Platters, and now, when my five-year-old grandson is in the car, he always asks to hear their hit, *Only You*. They were amazing. Over the years, I've been struck by other singers, for example the Beatles were a brilliant group. I've always been fascinated by voices like Céline Dion and the late Whitney Houston, although less for the content of their music than for the beauty of their voices.