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Adventures in Italian Opera: in conversation with Fred Plotkin and Marco Armiliato



Honoring Mario Fratti. Reception and cocktail hour at the Columbus Citizens Foundation.



Documentary film screening: "La Faccia della Terra", followed by a performance by Vinicio Capossela.

ARTS & CULTURE

Classical New York. Italian Notes in the City

JULIAN SACHS (February 28, 2010)



A Scene from the Upcoming Production of "La Traviata"

Our second immersion in what's Italian in the New York classical music scene. The Met announces its new season while Muti debuts with Verdi's *Attila*. The DiCapo Opera Theatre presents a new work, while March promises plenty of Italian repertoire

On February 22 the **Metropolitan Opera's** General Manager Peter Gelb and Music Director James Levine held a press conference to announce the program for the 2010-2011 season. The main highlight for the season will be the first half of a new Wagner Ring cycle directed by Robert Lepage, but we, of course, are more interested in Italian programs and performers. To begin with, of the seven new productions for next season, two are of Verdi operas (*Don Carlo* and *La Traviata*) and one is the Met premiere of Rossini's *Le Comte Ory*, which will be directed by Bartlett Sher and will star Juan Diego Flórez, Joyce DiDonato and Diana Damrau. The *Don Carlo* production has already been done in England, as it is a co-production with the **Royal Opera House, Covent Garden**, and the **Norwegian National Opera and Ballet**. Roberto Alagna will be singing the title role. The production of *La Traviata* by Willy Decker was originally produced at the **Salzburg Festival** and will be conducted by Gianandrea Noseda.

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The new season will also feature reprises of Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* with Fabio Luisi conducting, Rossini's *Armida* under the baton of Riccardo Frizza, Puccini/Zeffirelli's *La Bohème* conducted by Roberto Rizzi Brignoli, Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* and *Lucia di Lamermoor*, Verdi's *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore* and *Simon Boccanegra*, Puccini's *Tosca* and, for its 100th anniversary, *La Fanciulla del West*, with Deborah Voigt and Marcello Giordani, conducted by Nicola Luisotti.

But let's not forget that the 2009-2010 season is far from being over. First of all, February offered us an acclaimed reprise of Laurent Pelly's production of Donizetti's *La Fille du Régiment*, once again with its original star, **Juan Diego Flórez**, whipping out high Cs as easily as the composer put them in the score, never imagining that someone would actually try to sing them *di petto* one day. **Diana Damrau** was fantastic in the title role that had been **Natalie Dessay's** two years before. Marco Armiliato, in the pit, kept everything (and anything) together, including a slowed-down Argentinian song, *La Cancion del Arbol del Olvido*, sung by the legendary soprano Kiri Te Kanawa in the otherwise spoken role of the Duchess of Krakenthorp.



A scene from the upcoming production of Don Carlo

While Bartlett Sher's production of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* is revived again at the other end of the season (the first performances took place in October and November 2009), what has caught the most attention from the media is the first Metropolitan Opera production of Verdi's 1846 opera *Attila*, featuring the Met debut of **Riccardo Muti**. We had the honor of asking him a few questions about the opera and he told us how happy he was with the orchestra and chorus. After the opening night on February 23, we can now say how happy we are with them, as well.



IN THIS SECTION

Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The "Muti Era" Begins

NATALIA NEBEL



Classical New York. Italian Notes in the City

JULIAN SACHS



An Artist on a Pilgrimage to the "Lourdes of Rock Music". Interview with Edoardo Bennato

MARIA RITA LATTO



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Sono un artista in pellegrinaggio nella "Lourdes del Rock". Intervista ad Edoardo Bennato. Presto a New York
MARIA RITA LATTO

Una storia italiana. Tra caffè e creatività
ALESSANDRA GRANDI



Miss Italia nel Mondo. New York sceglie le sue bellezze italo-americane
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"Salonico 1943". Un capitolo di storia da ricordare
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Opening night was greeted with standing ovations for the Maestro and the performers, while Pierre Audi's production and Miuccia Prada's costumes were met with a strong round of booing.

Attila is a fierce, direct opera, not psychologically complex. Verdi had an objective when he wrote it: to stir up the northern Italian patriotic feelings that at the time were muffled by the Austrian occupiers. And it worked! It's an opera that clearly depicts good and bad, noble and barbaric, through its libretto and music. But all of this can be easily lost if the chorus is turned into an abstract group of observers; if the fierce, dynamic characters are locked up in port-holes 20 feet above the stage; and everyone is dressed in futuristic Star-Trek-like garb. How beautiful it is to know that you can close your eyes and immediately be handed Verdi's compass, whose four cardinal points – the superb interpretations by Ildar Abdrazakov in the title role, **Violeta Urmana** as Odabella, **Giovanni Meoni** as Ezio and **Ramón Vargas** as Foresto – are so clearly pointed out by the expert needle of Maestro Muti and his deep understanding of the road he is traveling, that you cannot possibly be lost or confused.



Madama Butterfly at the New York City Opera



Lawrence Brownlee as Count Almaviva in Il Barbiere di Siviglia

Just five years after Verdi composed *Attila*, a baby named Edgardo Mortara was born into a Jewish family in Bologna. Having been secretly baptized by his Catholic nurse, at age six he was abducted by the Papal police and brought up in Rome in close contact with Pope Pius IX; he later became a priest. This abduction, which was legal according to Vatican policies of the time, turned into an international case which saw the Church's view opposed by leaders, followers and allies of Italy's *Risorgimento*, all of whom took an interest in this example of the Pope's abuse of power. Even after the reunification of Italy, Mortara never returned to his family or to Judaism, but remained a priest for the rest of his days. He died in Nazi-occupied Belgium in 1940 and, according to the Nuremberg Laws, would have been considered a Jew and arrested, had he lived any longer.

On February 25, 2010, the Dicapo Opera Theatre presented the world premiere of its first commissioned opera, *Il Caso Mortara*, by young Italian composer Francesco Cilluffo. The plot is based upon the life of Edgardo Mortara. This was a remarkable event for many reasons – first of all, because it highlighted the seriousness and determination of this small but enterprising opera company, led by its charismatic Italian-American General Director Michael Capasso, who also directed this new production. Secondly, it was important for Italian opera, since this is the first commission of an Italian opera by an American opera company since the Metropolitan Opera commissioned Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* exactly 100 years ago.



These two factors are reason enough to go and check out *Il Caso Mortara*, but there's more to it than that. Cilluffo has composed a very interesting score that follows the dramatic events closely, underlining the emotional and political struggles of its main characters. The valiant little orchestra, conducted by Pacien Mazzagatti, struggled as well, but rose to the occasion as best it could in dealing with a new score written in an untraditional idiom. It was clear that the opera could be quite powerful and moving if supported by a larger and more compact ensemble.



Il Caso Mortara at the Dicapo Opera Theatre

The singers, on the other hand, delivered very well in the small but acoustically pleasant 200-seat auditorium. Romanian mezzo-soprano Iulia Merca conquered the stage with beautiful singing and convincing acting in the role of Edgardo's mother, Marianna. The libretto, written in conventional conversational Italian, lacked poetical depth or refinement, leaving everything in the hands of the music, the clever stage direction of Capasso and the simple but effective set designs by John Farrell. It was a perfect example of how opera can work if the staging is kept simple. Big opera companies should take a look at these smaller productions, every so often, and remember how important it is to cast away, occasionally, whatever is irrelevant to the artistic purpose, because excess may end up obstructing a performance instead of helping it.

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Riccardo Muti is not one to take days off when he's in town, so on practically every night that he won't be conducting *Attila* at the Met, he will be at **Avery Fisher Hall** with the **New York Philharmonic**, conducting two sets of concerts - one featuring Hungarian pianist (but Florentine resident) András Schiff in Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 1 (also on the program, Hindemith's Symphonies in E-flat), and the other featuring violinist Vadim Repin in Beethoven's Violin Concerto (also on the program, Franck's Symphony in D minor).