

Adventures in Italian Opera. Interview with Fred Plotkin

Julian Sachs (February 17, 2010)



"Opera continues to be the great live performing art form and we continue to have great performers. I think that the quality and education of singers is better than ever, while what may be missing today is the personal culture of each singer. I think we can improve opera by restoring that sense of culture to audiences, singers and especially stage directors." Mr. Plotkin is the host of the series "Adventures in Italian Opera", held at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò at NYU.

Fred Plotkin is a very well-known New Yorker because of his expertise in his favorite topics, namely opera, classical music, gastronomy, wine and anything related to Italy. He is the author of nine books and is about to publish an update of his popular Italy for the Gourmet Traveler [Kyle Books, 2010]. He is the host of a series of conversations with worldwide opera stars held at [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [2] at NYU called Adventures in Italian Opera which began a few years ago and has gained a



large following among New Yorkers. We had the opportunity to meet up with him in our headquarters, located at the [John D. Calandra Italian-American Institute](#) [3], and ask him a few questions about the upcoming events and his views on classical music today.

How did your passion for Italian music, food and culture in general develop?

The [New York Times](#) [4] once wrote about me: “Fred is a New Yorker but has the soul of an Italian”. I have always felt very connected to Italy culturally, spiritually, gastronomically and musically and I get a sense that half of my life is complete when I’m in New York and the other half of my life is complete when I’m in Italy. I hear people all the time talk about how they innately knew something about themselves such as that they wanted to be an actor, or what their sexual preference was, or that they couldn’t live in New York and that they had to live in the country.

I always knew that I had this very deep connection to Italy. My first interest was to study everything Venetian. To me Venice was the other New York, having 118 islands just as New York does. Also, in 1964, when I was eight years old, we had the world’s fair here, and for the 400th anniversary of Michelangelo’s death they sent the Vatican Pietà to New York. I went to see it countless times and my father said “If you want to see more works by Michelangelo, they’re on ceilings, on walls, they’re attached to things so you must go there to see them”. So already by the age of eight my whole focus was about getting to Italy. So I read everything I could, studied the language and culture, and liked the food in my neighborhood which was Italian-American food. Everything that was Italian I went after. I can’t remember a time when Italy wasn’t the other half of my life.

Adventures in Italian Opera at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, NYU is one of the most followed series of talks among the Italian-American community and New York opera lovers. How did it start and what are the upcoming events going to be?

Stefano Albertini, the Director of Casa Italiana, had me come in a few years ago to do a program about Verdi and food, two of my favorite topics. And I explored for them how food inspires creativity and how creativity folds over in to food. Afterwards Stefano said “you seem very comfortable talking about opera” and I said “why don’t I interview someone and we’ll see whether we can make an interesting conversation”.

And the excellent Italian conductor Gianandrea Noseda was in New York and I did a conversation with him and we figured it was time to create a series of conversations with great figures involved with Italian opera. And thus was born in 2007 Adventures in Italian Opera and every year I program four or five artists to come in and talk. They might be Americans, Italians, or from elsewhere. The important thing is the connection to Italian opera.

The first event on February 18 features the wonderful, talented, beautiful and dramatically courageous soprano [Catherine Malfitano](#) [5], who is a New Yorker and I believe the first New Yorker I’ve had in. She’s also the first Italian-American I’ve had in. She’s had a glorious career at the [Met](#) [6] and in Europe, appearing in a world-wide live transmission of Tosca as Tosca that was done in Rome in the actual settings and times in which the opera is set. At dawn she jumped off the top of the Castel Sant’Angelo in to a net. Jumping off the top of a castle in Rome is not done lightly.

On March 4 we’ll have **Marco Armiliato**, the conductor from Genoa who basically has become the main stay of the Italian wing of the Metropolitan Opera. This year he’s doing works by Donizetti, Puccini and Verdi. So I’d like to talk to the Maestro about the different styles and how to conduct and communicate with musicians, whether on stage or in the orchestra pit, what he wants from them and how to obtain it.

Then on April 13, the night after Armida opens at the Met, we’ll have [Lawrence Brownlee](#) [7], a young tenor who is making quite a name for himself in the Rossini repertory. This year he’ll be the Count Almaviva in Il Barbiere di Siviglia and then he’ll be one of the leading tenor roles in Armida.



Lastly, watch out for May 10 or 11. I can't announce it yet, but I'm negotiating with two great artists from Italy who will be in town briefly and if they appear that will be quite a night.

Are you awaiting the Met's new production of Verdi's Attila?

First of all when one day I die and have a tomb stone there will be a quotation from Attila on my tomb stone. "You can keep the Universe, but let Italy be mine". This is a very exciting event. The opera has never been done at the Met and it includes the long overdue Met debut of [Maestro Riccardo Muti](#) [8]. It has a huge design team and I'm just hopeful that the design won't overwhelm the story. I really would like the story, the Verdi passion to come through, because that's the most important thing. It will certainly be in the orchestra pit. I'm going to Attila three times so that I can watch the progress of the orchestra first with Muti and then with Armiliato. So I will get to hear how they sound with a conductor they know in music they would have done with Muti. So that's a big one. That's not to miss.

Design teams overwhelming the story seems to be a common problem, today. How do you feel about the debate between new productions and traditional ones?

I don't want to say that traditional is the word we want to use. I don't use it. Because traditional implies conservative and I'm not artistically conservative at all. But what I believe in is classical. And what that means is understanding the intentions and the ideas of the librettist and the composer. How you do that is by reading the libretto, and the culture and history behind the libretto, you read the music, you listen to the music and you play the music, because the messages that Verdi or Rossini or Donizetti or anyone else give us come out of the music.

The words are just the launching pad for the composer's inspiration. But the real information is in the music, which is why I'm not a big fan of titles in operas, because people limit themselves to the meaning of the words and that's really only about 10% of what an opera is. For example this famous Tosca that opened at the Met in September, which the New Yorker labeled a fiasco. It was not a fiasco. The Zeffirelli production that came before it was visually stupendous but it was dramatically dull.

I think what the Met wanted to do was have a more dramatic Tosca, by having a new cast and focusing on the drama, but the problem was that I felt they didn't have the courage of their convictions. To me that was a conservative production with boring scenery. The production was tame with a few provocative things. But this is New York, you can see that stuff on the street corner. So to see it inside the opera house didn't offend me, what offended me was that they really didn't see it through to its completion.

By contrast the Carmen that many people saw was a magnificent rendering of that opera because they did the work. I want to point out that this is a city with forty opera companies. No other city has in the world has that many and new ones pop up all the time.

What do you think is the state of opera, today?

I think that opera is always in a state of crisis and if we accept that then we don't have to worry about it any more, and I would point out that there's a great deal of artistic creation going on. There will always be great singers. The difference is that opera may not occupy the central place in the culture that it did a hundred years ago. To me the change came when movies arrived. That's when opera was supplanted. But opera continues to be the great live performing art form and we continue to have great performers.

I think that the quality and education of singers is better than ever, while what may be missing today is the personal culture of each singer. You don't expect a singer to grow up in an environment where he or she would know about history, visual arts, literature. I know singers who were born in the West of the US in rural areas, and yet they're magnificent singers who acquire the culture. I think we can improve opera by restoring that sense of culture to audiences, singers and especially stage directors. Many of them don't have a clue. And I think that's where the problem is. If you have a stage director who can't read music and who doesn't know the language of the opera he's directing, all he can do



is create a concept. A concept is really a place to hide when you don't do the hard work of studying the culture of an opera. You can take one opera – let's say *Rigoletto* by Verdi – and spend a lifetime just on the culture of that opera, regarding the Ducal palace in Mantova, the visual arts of that time, the sexual life of that time, the food of that time, all of which could go in to a production of *Rigoletto*, and that takes time. There may not be as many tenors as you would like, but I would argue that there may not be as many famous tenors. There are always great tenors that come along. In our time we have seen many great mezzo sopranos. [Domingo](#) [9] who is still flourishing at 69 was just amazing as Boccanegra at the Met. The first night was one of the five top opera performances I've ever seen and I've been to thousands. So the fact that things can still happen and that I can still get this visceral thrill means that opera is very healthy.

How about in Italy? Is the classical music scene any different from over here?

I follow it and I'm part of a huge Facebook community in Italy. I think I have at least 1500 Italian "friends". Facebook has been fascinating in Italy because in a nation that unfortunately has the television networks controlled by one individual, where the printed media are in the hands of very few, Facebook has become the form for free expression. There has been a certain amount of censorship there too and it's awful, but no one has censored opera, yet. There's a group in Italy on Facebook that are working to restore and save the lyric theaters of Italy.

I have wondered why in recent years Italy has not produced too many notable singers, but no country in recent years has produced more great conductors. There is just a profusion of young Italian conductors everywhere and they run orchestras in Germany and England, and there must be a reason if Italian conductors have come so far. Yes, there are the two titans, namely Abbado and Muti who fostered a whole generation, and there are other great conductors of an older generation such as Nello Santi and Riccardo Chailly and a few others who have opened the way, but right now we have a flood of Italian conductors and I believe that Italian conductors will be the way to save the theaters of Italy, if they come back. The [Teatro San Carlo](#) [10] in Naples has reopened, and also the [Teatro Petruzzelli](#) [11] in Bari and I'll be going there in July to have a look at it. You see, these are temples and they're beautiful, and Italy is second to none in the creation and preservation of these wonderful places, but they're not empty temples.

They have to be filled with voices and activity. I spend a lot of time in the Marche region, which has more so-called teatri storici than any other region in Italy. Of course you can't run seventy-six theaters in a little region, but I believe that the Marche could point its way to the future with its wonderful cuisine and culture but also by making each town a destination for a theater. Where I live in Camogli in Liguria we have the Teatro Sociale, whose different box holders can't agree on what to do with, and it's been dark for thirty years, now. It was a beautiful theater and now they're talking about knocking it down and building a parking lot. That is a crime. They have to arrest anybody who would do that, because when you destroy that you're destroying culture to build parking. It's the wrong priority.

ADVENTURES IN ITALIAN OPERA

UPCOMING EVENTS

Thursday February 18 - 6:30PM

Conversation with legendary soprano Catherine Malfitano.

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Thursday March 4 - 6:30PM

Conversation with Italian conductor Marco Armiliato, who is conducting works by Verdi, Puccini and Donizetti at the Met during this season.

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Tuesday April 13 - 6:30PM

Conversation with young tenor Lawrence Brownlee, who is singing in Rossini's "*Barbiere di Siviglia*" and "*Armida*".

Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò
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