

New York. Talking with "Il Maestro". Riccardo Muti reveals Attila at the Met

Julian Sachs (February 21, 2010)



Interview. The great Italian conductor has been in New York since early February working on a new production of Verdi's early opera *Attila*, and will remain in town through mid-March performing almost every night between the Metropolitan Opera House and Avery Fisher Hall with the New York Philharmonic

Of all the leading Italian artists abroad, no one is less in need of an introduction than Riccardo Muti, whose reputation as one of the greatest interpreters in the world has preceded him throughout his long, illustrious career. That career continues to grow today, as the Maestro embarks on two new adventures: assuming the position of Music Director of the [Chicago Symphony Orchestra](#) [2](beginning in the 2010-2011 season), and his long-awaited [Metropolitan Oper](#) [3]a debut, on Tuesday, February 23, conducting Verdi's *Attila*, never performed before in the most important opera house of America.



We had the opportunity to attend many of the Attila rehearsals and to observe the Maestro at work for the first time with a new orchestra and chorus (for him), juggling with a cast of opera stars and dealing with a brand new production that would have left Verdi feeling perplexed at the very least. Through all of this, Muti held the reins strongly in his grip and won everyone over to his side in the name of music and, most importantly, of Verdi himself. The Maestro was also able to carve a quarter of an hour from his intense work schedule to answer a few questions about the opera and his upcoming appearances in New York.

What made you choose Attila for your Met debut?

After having been invited many times to conduct at the Met, I finally decided to accept, but I suggested that I would conduct something that had never been performed here, perhaps something by Verdi. I was told that Attila had never been done here, and we happened to have Ildar Abdrazakov available, who is an extraordinary Attila.

Early Verdi is often performed as if it were band music, aggressive and vulgar. My mission as a conductor who has dealt with this composer for many years is to contribute to a noble vision of early Verdi. I want to underline the nobility of the musical phrases and Verdi's adherence to the words, which is almost as extraordinary as Mozart's.

Attila is a very important opera for Italy, since it was first performed in Venice at the Teatro La Fenice in 1846, when the Northeastern part of the country was under Austrian rule. Even more than Nabucco, Attila was an opera aimed at helping Italy in its struggle against the Austrian oppressors. In this sense the opera had a tremendous success, bringing the public's patriotic blood to a boil. In the Prologue, when Ezio – the Roman general – sings to Attila "You shall have the Universe, but leave Italy to me", the performance had to stop because the public reacted by shouting "Leave Italy to us! Leave Italy to us!", and that was one of the sparks that led to the revolution of 1848.

Technically the opera is very difficult, especially for the singers, and it is far from being rustic or uncouth. It contains many extraordinary refinements in the orchestration, such as in Odabella's aria Oh! Nel fuggente nuvolo in Act I, where he creates a quintet with the soprano, the English horn, the flute, the harp and the cello.

It's a piece of chamber music inserted by Verdi also to evoke a certain natural atmosphere. It's an evocation of nature, because music doesn't describe, it evokes. Not even symphonic poems such as Respighi's Pines of Rome are descriptive. So Verdi was already creating the kinds of atmospheres that he would develop in his following operas, as in his early Macbeth in 1847.

One of the reasons why Attila isn't performed as much as it should be is that the roles are extremely difficult to sing. Casting Attila means finding a great bass for Attila, a great baritone for Ezio, a great soprano for Odabella and a great tenor for Foresto – and of course an orchestra that can understand the composer's intentions and not sound rustic when it should sound noble. This is what I've been working on these days, and the orchestra and chorus have reacted positively with great participation and dedication. Therefore I hope that at least musically the opera may be a contribution to the Verdi Case, which is still an open case.

As I said in 2001, "Verdi is the author of the future," because Verdi interpretation has yet to be defined. After the era of Toscanini and other great conductors of that generation, in the 1950s and '60s these operas mostly began ending up in the singers' domain, being readjusted according to their own needs and requests, provoking the loss of the concept of a relationship between drama and music that is essential in Verdi.

Since the opera contains such a clear message of pre-Independence Wars patriotism, how can such a message be taken in by an American public?

I believe that this message makes perfect sense even today. We are still in a world of oppressed and



oppressors, and in Verdi's Attila, Attila is the oppressor and Ezio represents those who must defend Rome and the whole of Italy and stop these hordes who are invading the whole world, even the Universe. So today, more than ever, I think anyone can relate to the relationship between oppressor and oppressed.

Almost twenty years ago you conducted this opera at [La Scala](#) [4] in Milan with Samuel Ramey in the title role. Today he appears again in the minor role of Pope Leo I. How do you feel about this?

I'm very moved by this, because Samuel Ramey was a great Attila with me and we also made the recording together, but the two of us have worked together many times beginning with Le Nozze di Figaro in 1981. He sang many important concerts with me, Verdi's Requiem, Haydn's Creation, and also sang Don Carlos, Mefistofele, Don Giovanni and Leporello, so I remained very attached to him and am very grateful to him for so many terrific interpretations. I offered him this part, which he accepted right away and with great generosity.

To work with him again after so many years marks a long journey of mine, from the old Attila to this new, young one today. It somewhat represents my history as an interpreter and also as a believer in a certain kind of singing based upon concepts that are unfortunately fading away today.

We hear you are making a brief trip to Chicago the day after the opening of Attila to announce your first season as Music Director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

It's true, but I will be coming right back for more Attila performances and also for three programs with the New York Philharmonic. For me this is a very intense period filled with responsibilities, and I hope I will fulfill everyone's expectations and desires.

Riccardo Muti's upcoming performances in New York City

Verdi Attila
Metropolitan Opera House
OPENING NIGHT
Tuesday, February 23, 8:00PM

Saturday, February 27, 8:00PM
Wednesday, March 3, 8:00PM
Saturday, March 6, 1:00PM
Tuesday, March 9, 8:00PM
Friday, March 12, 8:00PM
Monday, March 15, 8:00PM

Brahms Piano Concerto N.1 and Hindemith Symphony in E-flat
with the [New York Philharmonic](#) [5]
[Avery Fisher Hall](#) [6]
Piano: András Schiff
Thursday, March 4, 7:30PM
Friday, March 5, 8:00PM
Monday, March 8, 7:30PM

Beethoven Violin Concerto and Franck Symphony in D minor
with the New York Philharmonic
Avery Fisher Hall
Violin: Vadim Repin
Wednesday, March 10, 7:30PM
Thursday, March 11, 7:30PM
Saturday, March 13, 8:00PM



Boccherini Cello Concerto in D, G.479, Mozart Symphony No. 34 and Schubert Symphony No. 4
with the New York Philharmonic
Avery Fisher Hall
Cello: Carter Brey
Wednesday, April 14, 7:30PM
Thursday, April 15, 7:30PM
Friday, April 16, 8:00PM
Saturday, April 17, 8:00PM

On Friday, February 26, at 5:30pm, a symposium about Verdi's *Attila* will be held at NYU's [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [7]. Organized by the Casa together with the [American Institute for Verdi Studies](#) [8], the [Fales Library and Special Collections](#) [9], and the [Music Department at NYU](#) [10], it will be moderated by Roberta Montemorra Marvin of the [University of Iowa](#) [11] and will feature illustrious speakers such as Philip Gossett of the [University of Chicago](#) [12] and "[La Sapienza](#)" [13] in Rome, Francesco Izzo of the [University of Southampton](#) [14] and American Institute for Verdi studies, David Lawton of the University of Iowa, and Helen M. Greenwald of the [New England Conservatory](#) [15], who curated the score edition which the Maestro will be using at the Met.

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