

Election Music, Maestro, Please!

Judith Harris (February 13, 2013)



Sanremo Festival is changing along with time. With the national general elections only days away the festival for the first time and in a particular fashion addresses the politics of the nation.



ROME

Guess what: way back when, I co-anchored Sanremo Festival broadcasts on RAI International Radio for two years in a row, and a thrilling experience it was - not least because during one of those festivals none other than Luciano Pavarotti headed the committee of judges. Besides seeing the gracious Pavarotti in action in support of young pop singers, what was especially moving was to speak at Festival intervals with Italians tuning in from remote places. Speaking from India, one woman told us that, while at home in Italy, she'd been indifferent to the Festival, but that hearing it from far away made her feel back home and homesick as well.

This Sanremo season is the 63rd for Europe's oldest music festival, and pits against each other fourteen well-known performers plus eight newcomers (and well I remember the challenge of interviewing one of these newcomers, who happened to be a shy girl of fifteen). Its five nights of competition are co-anchored by perky performer Luciana Littizzetto and expert TV host Fabrizio Fazio. The competition kicked off Tuesday evening with comedienne Littizzetto arriving in a horse-drawn carriage and then a musical homage to Giuseppe Verdi and, for that matter, to Italy, with patriotic music from the beloved Nabucco. The first-night audience peaked at almost 59% and well over 17 million viewers. Among the guests this week: Andrea Bocelli, Antony, Asaf Avidan, Gaetano Veloso, Daniel Harding, Felix Baumgartner, Lutz Forster, Roberto Baggio and Toto Cutugno.

The fact that Littizzetto, who is cute and comely but not a bathing beauty, was chosen has attracted attention in itself. "At last we don't have to have only showgirls," crowed one female observer. "Times are changing!" Indeed they are, and with it the Festival. This was the first time the Festival has had to deal so overtly with current politics, in a bitterly personalized campaign such as has never been seen before. Through a political fluke, national general elections are only days away, a fact that Crozza, a satirist hired for Sanremo to be just that, could hardly ignore. And even Littizzetto, not to mention the musical event itself, was upstaged by politics when comic Maurizio Crozza bounced down the stairs looking and then sounding exactly like former Premier Silvio Berlusconi.

In performing on the stage at the Ariston Theater, Crozza faced the same problems any other commentator, comic or otherwise, faces at RAI: he had to be careful to play fair with all the political candidates. And so, trying to ignore a chorus of boo's interrupting his in fact innocuous sketch about Berlusconi, whose face lifts and hair transplant lend themselves to comedy, Crozza then gave equal time to mocking the other candidates, from acting Premier Mario Monti (aka "Rigor Montis") and the dull Pier Luigi Bersani to the over-excited Beppe Grillo.

A few acid commentators suggested that the claque booing Crozza for imitating Berlusconi had been pre-organized, which is not impossible. As for savvy Berlusconi himself, he chose to play the good sport and today offered to perform at the Festival, bringing his own song. At the same time, as he said on a TV talk show Wednesday morning, "The Festival is a boomerang for the left. I've already criticized the fact that Sanremo is being held just at this time." And then Crozza too was upstaged the first night by the evergreen and ever popular Toto Cotugno, singing Mimmo Modugno's beloved "Volare" with, in the background, the world-famous Russian national chorus.

In the end, the music was not the only thing taking flight. So did politics, which suddenly bounced up in the air with no one yet knowing the final destination. The abdication of Pope Benedict XVI has literally stolen the show, and the shock news produced a near blackout of political comment. Indeed, pundits here are trying to guess which of the leading candidates - in order of presumed popularity Bersani, Berlusconi, Grillo, Monti - would suffer most from being bypassed in the headlines in favor of news from the Vatican as Italy, and the rest of the world, turns its attention to the breath-taking and literally historical proceedings across the Tiber, to use the Italian phrase for the Vatican City.

And from there comes news on the ground. Hotel reservations in Rome bounced up by 10% overnight, with the faithful planning last-minute pilgrimages to Rome to see the pontiff before he leaves the scene. Souvenir sellers report a brisk trade in Benedict-related souvenirs, such as book marks; previously, they say, they sold almost exclusively souvenirs and photographs of John Paul II.

What this means, taken together, is that secular Italy has transferred to Sanremo for the week while



the faithful of Italy are looking elsewhere, far from politics - at least for now.

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