



Paolo Carignani, a Conductor and a Philosopher

Natasha Lardera (December 02, 2015)

Milanese conductor Paolo Carignani, guest of honor of the third Adventure in Italian Opera with Fred Plotkin, one of America's foremost experts on opera, enthralled the audience at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò. At the moment the maestro is in New York City at the Metropolitan where he will be conducting all of the Puccini operas in the calendar: Turandot, Tosca, La Bohème and Madama Butterfly. He took some time to talk shop in a compelling conversation that revealed his philosophy on how to be happy and harmonious.

"Try to cross the street in the middle of an intersection with incoming traffic. If with your eyes you are able to stop the driver coming towards you, then you are a conductor. If you don't succeed, then you aren't." This truth disguised as a joke was told to the enthralled audience of Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò by Milanese conductor Paolo Carignani, guest of honor of the third Adventure in Italian Opera with Fred Plotkin.

As always, Plotkin, one of America's foremost experts on opera (Italian food and much more), has hosted a compelling night of opera that featured clips of some of Carignani's past performances followed by the maestro's comments and anecdotes. Carignani, who has graduated in organ, piano and composition at Milan's Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory, has worked in Italy's major opera houses and theaters yet, most of all the maestro has been invited to play abroad. He has worked at the Staatsoper of Vienna and of München, at the Deutsche Oper and Staatsoper Berlin, at the Met in New York, at the War Memorial in San Francisco, in Tokyo, in Zurich, in Paris at the Bastille, at the Gran Teatro del Liceu in Barcelona, at Covent Garden in London, in Amsterdam at the Glyndebourne Festival, Hamburg, Oslo... and the list continues.

From 1999 to 2008 Carignani was Generalmusikdirektor at the Alte Oper in Frankfurt and musical director of the Frankfurter Museumsorchester. "After having worked in opera houses like La Scala and the Met where the pressure to be perfect is incredibly high," Carignani explained, "During my years in Frankfurt I had more freedom to make some artistic choices, I had more room to experiment and therefore even for errors. Artistic freedom is vital to any artist, it's the liberty one has to produce art to his/her own insight, and that was a full time joy, and job, for me. It was not just showing up for a concert," he joked, "It consisted on auditions, finding the singers, the musicians, the music. It was all day, every day. Now things are different... I just show up."

At the moment Carignani is in New York City at the Metropolitan where he will be conducting all of the Puccini operas in the calendar: Turandot, Tosca, La Bohème and Madama Butterfly. In answering Plotkin's questions, the maestro gave the audience further insight into the conductor's role and his approach to music. "Music comes first," he explained, "When I look at a piece I look at the music and focus on that. The narrative will follow. I don't really care about who composed the music, I don't care about her personal life, experiences or else, I just look at the music and what I give to it does not depend on who wrote it. Conducting is giving and receiving energy, between you and the



musicians, but also between you and the audience. You are in the middle yet together you all experience a real adventure.”

Carignani is “ widely admired for his incisive performances and ability to make familiar repertory sound fresh and relevant,” Stefano Albertini of Casa Italiana has said, and indeed conductors not only choose the works to be performed and study them, but they are responsible for making certain adjustments regarding tempo, articulation, or phrasing to the scores, thus giving them their interpretation and vision. Carignani explained how he uses the right hand to give the tempo and the left to signal entrances, adding that a baton is not really necessary. “A conductor can guide the musicians with his eyes (and that takes us back to the joke mentioned at the beginning of this article), with his shoulders, with a finger or even a pencil. What's important is that he/she is able to communicate and attract the eyes and minds of all musicians in front of him.” Carignani uses a baton, a baton made by his father.

Through the videos selected by Plotkin the audience at Casa Italiana was able to observe that at the beginning of his career Carignani moved much more, his movements were big and grandiose in order to catch attention and appear imposing. Now his movements are much smaller and fluid, a lot can be said with a little. And a secret that makes Carignani move the way he does is swimming. “In order to do a good job on that podium I have to be happy,” he explained, “endorphins make people happy and movement produces endorphins. Swimming makes me happy and also gives me fluid movements. At this moment of my life I could not live without sports. And if it were possible we all, the orchestra and I, should go swimming, or hiking, together. It would improve our communication and make us all happier.”

“A conductor and a philosopher,” Plotkin concluded.

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