

Classical New York 1.0

Julian Sachs (January 29, 2010)



A month of opera reviewed: the new *Carmen* at the Met, Domingo and Verdi, and Zeffirelli's *Turandot*. Plus a look at the upcoming month at Lincoln Center and beyond

This is the first of a monthly series of articles concerning everything Italian and Italian-American in New York's classical music scene. At the end of every month, yours truly will try to summarize and review the events of most interest and at the same time anticipate what will be taking place the following month.

New York – we all know – is one of the “places to be” if you’re interested in classical music, for it offers a dense calendar full of all sorts of events that range over five centuries of repertoire. It is also a magnet for attracting the best performers from around the world. Italy, today, is no longer the center of culture it was a century ago, and – let’s face it – there are fewer and fewer talented instrumentalists from the Bel Paese making their names known around the globe, also because the serious Italian music scene isn’t helped by the various Allevis and Bocellis distracting the country’s

media and feeding off the uneducated but potentially enthusiastic younger generations. But as far as conductors and the world of opera are concerned, Italy still has very much to offer and it does so mainly abroad. And if 'Italy' still means 'Opera', 'Opera' in America means the [Met](#) [2], above all else. No other opera company on earth offers as dense and as illustrious a calendar as the principal theater at [Lincoln Center](#) [3] does. Staging twenty-six productions, including eight entirely new ones, in an eight-month season, is already a feat to begin with, and then you read the names of the performers...

2010 began with a new production of Bizet's *Carmen*, starring [Elīna Garanča](#) [4] in the title role (for the first time at the Met), conducted by [Yannick Nézet-Séguin](#) [5]. At her side, two big names among Italian opera stars, soprano [Barbara Frittoli](#) [6] and French-born Sicilian tenor Roberto Alagna; both, unfortunately, could not but fail in the impossible mission of outshining Garanča, who not only was vocally impeccable but also demonstrated her exceptional acting skills in a role that requires plenty of both. Still, it was possible to see the Italians take the stage alone for the duet "Parle-moi de ma mère!". Spectacular production directed by Richard Eyre, who used everything at his disposal, from dancers to rotating scenery to lighting and smoke effects (we are in front of a cigarette factory, after all), but all with exceptional taste and moderation. Nothing felt overdone, including the tableau vivant at the end with a slaughtered bull on stage (fake, of course).

When it comes to 'spectacular' productions, no one has taken the term as his own mission more than Italian director Franco Zeffirelli. The 2009-10 season revived his celebrated 1988 production of

Puccini's last opera, *Turandot*. Of course the sets and costumes are eye-candy, and they may leave you feeling that you've eaten just a little too much real candy. The singing wasn't on the highest level, with [Maria Guleghina](#) [7] in the title role and [Salvatore Licitra](#) [8] producing the right kind of tone but falling short when the score demanded something extra. All in all, it felt like no one on stage was particularly motivated, except for the minor roles of Ping, Pong and Pang, well sung and acted by Joshua Hopkins, [Eduardo Valdes](#) [9] and **Tony Stevenson**. Hard to judge how well Bernard Fitch sang his role of the Emperor Altoum without moving over to Amsterdam Avenue, a little closer to his position far back on the stage.

But January was mainly "[Plácido Domingo](#) [10] month". The famous tenor, who is also Cavaliere di Gran Croce Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana, was the highlight of two [Giancarlo del Monaco](#) [11] productions of Verdi operas, *Stiffelio* and *Simon Boccanegra*, respectively as conductor and baritone. Domingo had sung the main tenor roles of both operas for the debuts of these productions, but this was the first time he conducted the first and sang the title role of the Doge of Genoa in the second.

Stiffelio was written by Verdi in 1850, the year before *Rigoletto*, and did very badly. So badly, in fact, that Verdi altered it drastically in 1857, adding an act and dating back the plot by a mere six hundred years, changing the title to *Aroldo*. One of the main reasons for its initial flop was the representation of a contemporary Protestant minister and his adulterous wife, a touchy issue in the mid-nineteenth century. The score of *Stiffelio* was lost until the 1960s, and critics now tend to proclaim it the more interesting of the two versions. It still isn't performed on a regular basis – unlike the operas Verdi wrote immediately afterwards (*Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata*), and the Met has had only one production of it, dating back to 1993, which we were able to see in revised form. [José Cura](#) [12] sang the title role that had originally been Domingo's, while *Stiffelio*'s wife, Lina, was sung by soprano Sondra Radvanovsky. To be noted the well sung performance by baritone Andrzej Dobber as Lina's father Stankar.

When one listens to the opera it's quite clear in which direction Verdi was going as a composer, and *Rigoletto* lurks behind every corner, although the orchestration lacks some of the pathos and drama he would master in the works that followed. A perfect example of Verdi's accomplishments in that area is *Simon Boccanegra*, composed for La Fenice in Venice in 1857 but revised in 1881 for La Scala. It takes a great cast to convey the greatness of this piece of work, and this year's Met revival of the Giancarlo del Monaco production from 1995 could hardly be bettered. James Levine led his orchestra, which never sounds as good as they do under his baton. But Verdi really makes it easy thanks to some of the most beautiful pages in opera history, especially in Act I, with the tension of

Boccanegra's famous Council Chamber scene, which was created from scratch for the 1881 version, with the help of librettist Arrigo Boito, who would later become the librettist of Verdi's last two operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff*. Domingo sang the title role brilliantly, mastering the baritone low notes and making the high notes seem almost too easy (which they probably are for a singer with his extension). At his side soprano [Adrienne Pieczonka](#) [13] as his daughter, Amelia; bass James Morris as her grandfather, Fiesco; and Sicilian tenor [Marcello Giordani](#) [14] at his best as Boccanegra's enemy and Amelia's lover, Gabriele Adorno, a role that he seemed meant to sing.

It will still be possible to attend *Carmen* performances in February, although without Garanča, Frittoli or Alagna, on the 1st, 5th, 9th and 13th. The final Simon Boccanegra performances, on the other hand, will take place on February 2 and 6, with all the stars. Not to be missed! The Genoese conductor Marco Armiliato will take the podium for two Met revivals: Donizetti's *La Fille du Regiment*, a 2007-08 hit, starring bel canto champion [Juan Diego Flórez](#) [15], with the bass Maurizio Muraro in the role of Sulpice, and another Zeffirelli landmark production (this time from 1981), Puccini's *La Bohème*, starring Russian soprano [Anna Netrebko](#) [16] and Polish tenor [Piotr Beczala](#) [17]. Tuscan baritone Massimo Cavalletti will sing the role of Schaunard. At the end of the month, Maurizio Benini will conduct the final performances of Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* in the clever and entertaining production by Bartlett Sher, already reprised this past fall. Franco Vassallo will be singing Figaro while Bartolo will be sung by Muraro.

Before going back to the Met, we can take a glimpse at some other events of interest taking place in the Big Apple. At [Carnegie Hall](#) [18], for instance, violinist [Fabio Biondi](#) [19] will be performing for the Early Music in Weill Recital Hall series. The program will include compositions by Vivaldi, Veracini, Bach, Locatelli and Lonati. The founder of Europa Galante will be accompanied by Paola Poncet on harpsichord. At Zankel Hall, on February 2, the Symphony in C orchestra, conducted by Mattia Rondelli, will perform Luciani's *Le Tombeau Perdu* and Boccherini's *Stabat Mater* with Norwegian/Italian soprano Elizabeth Norberg-Schulz. Also on the program, entitled Italian Music. Rarely Performed Masterpieces, is Verdi's beautiful Quartet in E minor, transcribed for string orchestra. On February 27 and 28, Milanese conductor Riccardo Chailly will be conducting his Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (of which he has been Music Director since 2005) in the main Stern Auditorium. Works by Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Dvořák will be performed on the first night, Chopin and Brahms on the second. The Dicapo Opera Theatre will be presenting, on February 25, the world premiere of a new opera by composer Francesco Cilluffo, *Il Caso Mortara*, the true story of Edgardo Mortara, an Italian Jewish boy taken away from his family and brought up by force as a Catholic by order of Pope Pius IX himself, which created a lot of controversy during the mid-nineteenth century and was at the center of an international dispute between the Papal States and Protestants, Jews, atheists and basically anyone who was battling for the unification of Italy at the time. The Church had its way and Mortara became a priest and a missionary, living out his days in a monastery until his death in 1940, at age 89.

If you wish to experience something different, Lincoln Center is hosting the series of archival films *Great Pianists Play Chopin on Film* at the Walter Reade Theater on February 6 and 10. On the first day one can see Arthur Rubinstein and Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, while on the second day one can see Martha Argerich, Krystian Zimerman and Maurizio Pollini. If, instead, it's a talk you're interested in, on February 18 Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimó at NYU will be hosting legendary singer [Catherine Malfitano](#) [20] in conversation with [Fred Plotkin](#) [21], for the series of talks, *Adventures in Italian Opera*.

Saving the best for last, just as the new *Carmen* production was the centerpiece for the month of January, February offers a mouth-watering event for all audiences: conductor [Riccardo Muti](#) [22]'s Met debut with Verdi's rarely performed *Attila*, never before seen at the Met, in a brand new production by Pierre Audi, starring [Violeta Urmana](#) [23], [Ramón Vargas](#) [24], Carlos Alvarez, and Russian bass-baritone Ildar Abdrazakov as the Emperor of the Huns himself. Performances begin on Tuesday, February 23, and go on through March, though the last performances will be conducted by Armiliato, while Muti takes on the [New York Philharmonic](#) [25], always at their best under his competent guide.



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