

Classical New York. Italian Notes in the City

Julian Sachs (February 27, 2010)



Our second immersion in what's Italian in the New York classical music scene. The Met announces its new season while Muti debuts with Verdi's *Attila*. The DiCapo Opera Theatre presents a new work, while March promises plenty of Italian repertoire

On February 22 the [Metropolitan Opera](#) [2]'s General Manager Peter Gelb and Music Director James Levine held a press conference to announce the program for the 2010-2011 season. The main highlight for the season will be the first half of a new Wagner Ring cycle directed by Robert Lepage, but we, of course, are more interested in Italian programs and performers. To begin with, of the seven new productions for next season, two are of Verdi operas (*Don Carlo* and *La Traviata*) and one is the Met premiere of Rossini's *Le Comte Ory*, which will be directed by Bartlett Sher and will star Juan Diego Flórez, Joyce DiDonato and Diana Damrau. The *Don Carlo* production has already been done in England, as it is a co-production with the [Royal Opera House](#) [3], [Covent Garden](#) [4], and the [Norwegian National Opera and Ballet](#). [5]Roberto Alagna will be singing the title role. The production of *La Traviata* by Willy Decker was originally produced at the [Salzburg Festival](#). [6]and will be



conducted by Gianandrea Noseda.

The new season will also feature reprises of Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* with Fabio Luisi conducting, Rossini's *Armida* under the baton of Riccardo Frizza, Puccini/Zeffirelli's *La Bohème* conducted by Roberto Rizzi Brignoli, Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* and *Lucia di Lamermoor*, Verdi's *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore* and *Simon Boccanegra*, Puccini's *Tosca* and, for its 100th anniversary, *La Fanciulla del West*, with Deborah Voigt and Marcello Giordani, conducted by Nicola Luisotti.

But let's not forget that the 2009-2010 season is far from being over. First of all, February offered us an acclaimed reprise of Laurent Pelly's production of Donizetti's *La Fille du Régiment*, once again with its original star, [Juan Diego Flórez](#) [7], whipping out high Cs as easily as the composer put them in the score, never imagining that someone would actually try to sing them di petto one day. [Diana Damrau](#) [8] was fantastic in the title role that had been [Natalie Dessay](#) [9]'s two years before. Marco Armiliato, in the pit, kept everything (and anything) together, including a slowed-down Argentinian song, *La Cancion del Arbol del Olvido*, sung by the legendary soprano Kiri Te Kanawa in the otherwise spoken role of the Duchess of Krakenthorp.

While Bartlett Sher's production of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* is revived again at the other end of the season (the first performances took place in October and November 2009), what has caught the most attention from the media is the first Metropolitan Opera production of Verdi's 1846 opera *Attila*, featuring the Met debut of [Riccardo Muti](#) [10]. We had the honor of asking him a few questions about the opera and he told us how happy he was with the orchestra and chorus. After the opening night on February 23, we can now say how happy we are with them, as well. Opening night was greeted with standing ovations for the Maestro and the performers, while Pierre Audi's production and Miuccia Prada's costumes were met with a strong round of booing.

Attila is a fierce, direct opera, not psychologically complex. Verdi had an objective when he wrote it: to stir up the northern Italian patriotic feelings that at the time were muffled by the Austrian occupiers. And it worked! It's an opera that clearly depicts good and bad, noble and barbaric, through its libretto and music. But all of this can be easily lost if the chorus is turned into an abstract group of observers; if the fierce, dynamic characters are locked up in port-holes 20 feet above the stage; and everyone is dressed in futuristic Star-Trek-like garb. How beautiful it is to know that you can close your eyes and immediately be handed Verdi's compass, whose four cardinal points – the superb interpretations by Ildar Abdrazakov in the title role, [Violeta Urmana](#) [11] as Odabella, [Giovanni Meoni](#) [12] as Ezio and [Ramón Vargas](#) [13] as Foresto – are so clearly pointed out by the expert needle of Maestro Muti and his deep understanding of the road he is traveling, that you cannot possibly be lost or confused.

Just five years after Verdi composed *Attila*, a baby named Edgardo Mortara was born into a Jewish family in Bologna. Having been secretly baptized by his Catholic nurse, at age six he was abducted by the Papal police and brought up in Rome in close contact with Pope Pius IX; he later became a priest. This abduction, which was legal according to Vatican policies of the time, turned into an international case which saw the Church's view opposed by leaders, followers and allies of Italy's Risorgimento, all of whom took an interest in this example of the Pope's abuse of power. Even after the reunification of Italy, Mortara never returned to his family or to Judaism, but remained a priest for the rest of his days. He died in Nazi-occupied Belgium in 1940 and, according to the Nuremberg Laws, would have been considered a Jew and arrested, had he lived any longer.

On February 25, 2010, the Dicapo Opera Theatre presented the world premiere of its first commissioned opera, *Il Caso Mortara*, by young Italian composer Francesco Cilluffo. The plot is based upon the life of Edgardo Mortara. This was a remarkable event for many reasons – first of all, because it highlighted the seriousness and determination of this small but enterprising opera company, led by its charismatic Italian-American General Director Michael Capasso, who also directed this new production. Secondly, it was important for Italian opera, since this is the first commission of an Italian opera by an American opera company since the Metropolitan Opera commissioned Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* exactly 100 years ago.



These two factors are reason enough to go and check out *Il Caso Mortara*, but there's more to it than that. Cilluffo has composed a very interesting score that follows the dramatic events closely, underlining the emotional and political struggles of its main characters. The valiant little orchestra, conducted by Pacien Mazzagatti, struggled as well, but rose to the occasion as best it could in dealing with a new score written in an untraditional idiom. It was clear that the opera could be quite powerful and moving if supported by a larger and more compact ensemble.

The singers, on the other hand, delivered very well in the small but acoustically pleasant 200-seat auditorium. Romanian mezzo-soprano Iulia Merca conquered the stage with beautiful singing and convincing acting in the role of Edgardo's mother, Marianna. The libretto, written in conventional conversational Italian, lacked poetical depth or refinement, leaving everything in the hands of the music, the clever stage direction of Capasso and the simple but effective set designs by John Farrell.

It was a perfect example of how opera can work if the staging is kept simple. Big opera companies should take a look at these smaller productions, every so often, and remember how important it is to cast away, occasionally, whatever is irrelevant to the artistic purpose, because excess may end up obstructing a performance instead of helping it.

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Riccardo Muti is not one to take days off when he's in town, so on practically every night that he won't be conducting *Attila* at the Met, he will be at [Avery Fisher Hall](#) [14] with the [New York Philharmonic](#) [15], conducting two sets of concerts - one featuring Hungarian pianist (but Florentine resident) András Schiff in Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 1 (also on the program, Hindemith's Symphony in E-flat), and the other featuring violinist Vadim Repin in Beethoven's Violin Concerto (also on the program, Franck's Symphony in D minor).

Apart from *Attila*, March at the Met will feature the final two performances of Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and three Italian repertoire revivals: Puccini's *La Bohème* in Zeffirelli's famous production, conducted by Marco Armiliato and featuring [Anna Netrebko](#) [16] and [Piotr Beczala](#) [17]; Verdi's *Aida*, conducted by Paolo Carignani with Hui He, [Dolora Zajick](#) [18] and [Salvatore Licitra](#) [19]; and Verdi's *La Traviata*, once again in the Zeffirelli production, with [Angela Gheorghiu](#) [20] in the title role.

There will also be many other chances to attend Italian repertoire operas in town away from the Met. Beginning on March 19, the [New York City Opera](#) [21] will be re-mounting Mark Lamos's [Emmy award-winning](#) [22] production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* with Shu-Ying Li in the title role and George Manahan conducting. The composer's *Suor Angelica* will be performed on March 13 by the [Opera Company of Brooklyn](#) [23], as part of their OCB BYOB AT CFAN series at the [Church For All Nations](#) [24].

Verdi's *Rigoletto* was performed on February 27 at [Symphony Space](#) [25] by the New York Lyric Opera and will be repeated at [Carnegie's Weill Hall](#) [26] on March 6. Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* will be staged by the [Regina Opera](#) [27] beginning on March 6 under the baton of [Matthew Oberstein](#) [28] and with the direction of John Schenkel. The composer from Bergamo is mainly known as an opera composer, having written sixty-nine operas during a twenty-nine year career. So it won't come as a surprise that his Requiem from 1835, dedicated to Bellini, has never been performed in the United States. The [Amor Artis Chorus](#) [29] and the [DiCapo Opera Theatre Orchestra](#) [30] are putting an end to this absence on March 20, at the Church of St. Jean Baptiste.

Another Italian requiem, this time by Florentine composer Luigi Cherubini (1760-1842), will be performed at Carnegie Hall by the [Oratorio Society of New York](#) [31] together with works by Vaughan Williams and Britten. Also at Carnegie Hall, Respighi's *Pines of Rome* will be performed by the Penn State Philharmonic Orchestra, and Mongolian soprano [Saran Erdenebat](#) [32] will give a recital that features selections by Puccini, Verdi and Bellini.

The [Starr Theater](#) [33] at Alice Tully Hall will host the Voices of Ascension orchestra and chorus

performing Rossini's Petite Messe Solennelle, preceded by pianists [Anna Shelest](#) [34] and [Kana Mimaki](#) [35] performing Liszt's Paraphrase Fantasia on Verdi's Rigoletto.

Away from the stage, the [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [36] at NYU will be hosting, for its Adventures in Italian Opera, conductor Marco Armiliato on March 4, in conversation – as usual – with [Fred Plotkin](#) [37]. At the Met Armiliato has just conducted Donizetti's Fille du Régiment and will be conducting Puccini's La Bohème as well as the final performances of Verdi's Attila.

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