

Meet a Renaissance Man

Kayla Pantano (December 08, 2016)



Sicilian-born New Yorker Roberto Scarcella Perino has written music for theater, choir, chamber ensemble, and children's productions, but his artistic talents extend to the kitchen as well.

From folk to classical, music has always played an important role in Italy, inventing instruments such



as the piano and violin. But of course, the Italian culture is also one steeped heavily in food, popular for its regional diversity and abundance of different tastes. Sicily, in particular, is a cross-section of both of these arts, home to the country's largest opera house, [Teatro Massimo](#) [2], and often nicknamed "God's Kitchen" for their variety of noted cuisines and wines. So it's only natural for Messina-born [Roberto Scarcella Perino](#) [3], who now lives in New York City, to be torn between them. "I have two passions in my life: good music and good Italian cuisine," Perino shares.

The art of music...

Since he was a child, he knew music was going to be a big part of his life. His nonno, a surgeon who could speak Latin and Greek, played the violin and sung as a tenor. Moreover, his aunt was a soprano, who frequently sang with Franco Corelli—an Italian opera singer celebrated universally for his powerhouse voice—and another aunt also played the piano very well. Surrounded by the trade, he followed in his loved ones' footsteps and started taking piano lessons at seven years old, subsequently writing music. "I wanted to write music for different reasons. For one, I needed to create, the other because I didn't like to study so much or to practice scales. To me, writing music was like drawing for kids."

At the age of 20, he moved north to study at the [Conservatory Giovanni Battista Martini](#) [4] and at the University of Bologna. Afterwards, he entered the workforce as a composer, commissioned by the [Fondazione Arturo Toscanini](#) [5] in Parma, later having operas performed in Pisa (A Caval Donato, 1999), Busseto (Merli Verdi e Cucù, 2001), and Torino (Blackout, 2008). Repeatedly touched by his music, Perino feels that hearing the sounds of his own creations are often the best moments of his life. "Whenever I listen to the performer or an orchestra play my music, I realize that what was once just an idea became something that I can really touch, that I can really enjoy."

... and the art of food

Similar to the craft of song, he was also exposed to the culinary arts at a young age, as his father was fond of hosting his big family and cooking for them. During his time in Emilia-Romagna, which he considers the capital of food, he first learned how to cook fresh pasta. "That was the moment my creativity took two different paths," Perino recalls. Upon this discovery, though still pursuing a career in music, he immediately immersed himself into cooking. He threw parties, made meals for his friends, and asked his parents about recipes. However, in terms of recipes, he never follows them the "right way." This ensures variation so that no two ever dishes are ever the same. Akin to listening to his music, Perino is gratified by the process of preparing food because when it's finally ready he feels a sense of accomplishment.

Moving to America

In 2001, he moved to New York, where he presented himself as a composer and, to his surprise, was very well received. He found a job at New York University and is now a Senior Language Lecturer of Italian. It was here where he premiered his first ballet, Colapesce (2004), at [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [6]. Perino went on to write two more ballets, Constellations (2005) and Basket-Dance (2007). Impressively, the latter was performed both in Pisa and at the Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. He continues to write music, presenting two world premieres this last spring at Casa Italiana, Piano Sonata No. 2 and String Quartet No. 1.

Cooking in New York

Perino also finds the time to cater private parties and to teach others how to cook. "It is beautiful to share all of my knowledge about Italian cuisine," he says. Proud of his Sicilian roots, he always utilizes the region's ingredients, like eggplant, almonds, and "lots of tomatoes, of course." Although he's removed from his motherland's Mediterranean climate, he takes advantage of places like the Union Square and Chelsea markets to buy the freshest ingredients. While, for example, he can't find Sicilian eggplant, he adapts to the American-grown alternative. Fortunately, he loves the result "because it's like tasting Sicily from New York."

Another aspect he misses from home is collecting almonds from the beautiful mandorlo in fiore



(almond trees). This makes tasting his semifreddo alle mandorle (almond parfait) even sweeter because it reminds him of his childhood. "It's a beautiful moment and very nostalgic at the same time."

His most popular dish that he likes to cook and that others always request is Parmigiana di Melanzane (Eggplant Parmesan). "When I prepare dinner for my friends, I offer a part of Italy to them, especially a part of Sicily, of my culture, of my family, my family's recipes. It's a beautiful way to share what I am," he says. This happens also with music. "I write my music in a small room with just the piano. Then in a big hall, I present all of my music, which is actually my story translated with notes."

The two arts as one...

"Composing a dish is like putting together different elements of the taste, like the sour of the lemon or the sweet of the honey. All of the elements are different from each other but when combined they make something unique. The same thing happens when I write my music. When you do an orchestration you have the string, the clarinet, and the percussions together. You invent and you create a new sound that is unique just for the precise moment. Just as you need time to enjoy beautiful music, you need time to taste a fantastic dish."

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