

# Opera

£6.20 December 2017

**Vienna's new 'Zauberflöte'**  
**Training the next generation:**  
**Muti and Zajick**  
**Wolfgang Koch—more than**  
**a Wagnerian**



## MUTI'S ACADEMY

### George Loomis sits in on Riccardo Muti's conducting classes

**A**fter conducting seven high-profile performances of *Aida* at the Salzburg Festival in August, you might think Riccardo Muti would be ready to return the score to the shelf, but the following month he turned to it again under very different yet also stimulating circumstances. He presided over the third edition of his Italian Opera Academy, an annual event affiliated with the Ravenna Festival and held in this ancient town near the Adriatic where Muti makes his home. The Academy, which ran from September 1 to 14, included two concerts of extracts from *Aida*, preceded by masterclasses and rehearsals.

Five young conductors from as many countries, ranging in age from 22 to 35, were selected to participate from a pool of hundreds of applicants. The Academy also trains young pianists who serve as répétiteurs, of which there were four. Understandably the conductors attracted most of the attention, but the presence of répétiteurs reflects Muti's belief that their function has been sadly diminished in modern opera houses.

Muti makes no secret of what he regards as declining standards and an uncertain future for classical music. He worries about the ability of great American orchestras, such as the Chicago Symphony, of which he is music director, to continue to thrive and wonders why the government doesn't do more to help. Young conductors, he feels, take on great works before they have the requisite seasoning or experience. And it is a source of continuous frustration that mainstream Italian opera still seems to be considered 'category B repertoire', as Muti has put it, compared to German and Austrian operas.

Muti shrugs off the notion that with the Academy he is trying to shape the future, but he believes that his knowledge and experience as well as the musical tradition of which he is a part, which goes back (though his teacher Antonino Votto) to Toscanini and Verdi himself, have given him something to say to the next generation. The Italian Opera Academy is his way of influencing that generation. Its facilities would be the envy of any conservatory. Sessions take place in the main hall of Ravenna's opera house, the charming Teatro Alighieri, which dates from the 1850s and seats approximately 850 in a classic horseshoe design. Orchestral sessions have the benefit of the Luigi Cherubini Youth Orchestra, which Muti founded in 2004 in another major effort to include young people in his musical sphere. And there were six highly capable soloists to do the young conductors' bidding, including Vittoria Yeo, Muti's *Aida* in the second cast in Salzburg, as well as the mezzo-soprano Anna Malavasi, the tenor Diego Cavazzin and the baritone Federico Longhi.

Rather than plan my trip to coincide with the concerts, I chose to be present for the first four days because I wanted to observe Muti's work with the young musicians and also because I was, no less than they, eager to hear what Muti would say about *Aida* in a setting that was sure to concentrate heavily on details of the score. I was not disappointed. Each day consisted of piano and orchestral sessions aggregating in most cases seven hours. In a stupendous display of energy, Muti, 76, presided over every session in authoritative, sympathetic and scintillating form. The piano sessions allowed the répétiteurs to shine (Maddalena Altieri and Alice Lapasin Zorzit from Italy, Emmanuelle Bizien from France and Wei Jiang from China). 'Répétiteurs used to be



■ *The Italian Opera Academy: Riccardo Muti coaching at the Teatro Alighieri in Ravenna*

essential in teaching new roles to singers—great pianists who went on to become conductors,’ Muti said. ‘Now they are accompanists and are hardly allowed to say anything to the singers.’

*Aida* continued the Academy’s emphasis on Verdi, which focused on *Falstaff* in 2015 and continued with *La traviata* last year. For Muti, too much has been made of *Aida*’s spectacular moments—its ‘faraonismo’ involving warriors and the desert and its tradition of accommodating live animals—and too little of its intimacy. ‘The music is often like chamber music, full of many written instructions such as *pianissimo*, *diminuendo* and *morendo*, and it deserves to be treated like Schubert. Yet even great orchestras are losing the ability to play *pianissimo*.’

If the importance of playing and singing quietly was one of this year’s recurring interpretative themes, so was the importance of legato. ‘Italians are thought of as people who shout, but we’re more refined and subtle than others think.’ Legato is built into the language: ‘È una lingua legata’, he said. ‘If the orchestra plays pizzicato or staccato, singers must sing even more legato.’

Muti gave much attention to the treatment of words. The musical shape of a phrase should reflect the way it is spoken, even if it may not always follow exactly the notated rhythm. Sometimes a key word is not given the right stress in performance, Muti said, citing an example from the first scene. After learning that a warrior has been selected to lead the Egyptian armies, Radames exclaims: ‘Se quel guerrier io fossi!’ (‘If I could be that warrior!’). Often ‘fossi’ is stressed because it falls on the first beat of a bar, but the word that needs to come across, he said, is ‘quel’ (‘that warrior’). Often, Muti pointed out, ‘there is an element in the orchestra that illustrates a particular word’.

Regarding the physicality of conducting, Muti cautioned that ‘musicians are very sensitive to gestures’ and may react to some that ‘you may not think are important. You

have to feel in your arms and body the impression you want to make.' He disagreed with the pattern of one conductor's beat of 6/8 rhythm (interestingly, he called 'Celeste Aida' 'a kind of barcarolle', which tenors might bear in mind) and suggested a different one. Apropos Amneris's initial entrance ('Quale insolita gioia'), for which, he said, the orchestra should be quiet and expressive, he noted, 'You're inviting them to play, not commanding something'. He admonished his charges not to conduct with their mouths open. ('When you open your mouth, you close your ears.') He quoted with approval Dimitri Mitropoulos's advice ('Use the right hand for rhythm, the left for expression'), likewise a remark by Richard Strauss ('When the trombones have *fortissimo*, don't look at them'). He also voiced disapproval of having both hands do the same thing in mirror image, noting that Verdi disliked seeing conductors look like windmills.

Muti imparted a wealth of thoughts about such musical matters as tempo (the King's 'Sul del Nilo' 'can sound fascistic, especially if taken too slowly'), nuance (the chromatic ascents and descents in the orchestra at the start of 'Ritorna vincitor' 'should exaggerate her terror') and high notes (Radames's A flat after he learns he is the chosen warrior 'is an orgasm for the tenor and must be controlled').

Muti had advice for the young conductors on non-musical points as well. They can expect tension with the stage director, especially since he is the one at the top nowadays. 'In opera houses a "new production" refers to something you see on stage, but if you have a new conductor and new singers, that is a new production. Stage directors will spend three days trying to get one gesture right, and then no one will see it because everyone is looking at the surtitles.' He also talked about establishing good rapport with the orchestra. 'It's important to maintain the right decorum even when greeting the orchestra, and in rehearsal the less talk the better. When you make a mistake, you must admit it immediately and apologize.' Soon thereafter Hossein Pishkar, a 29-year-old Iranian, made such a mistake and immediately, and amusingly, put Muti's advice into effect, winning a warm reaction from players and spectators.

As with any successful masterclass, Muti kept the audience engaged and entertained. (All of the Academy's sessions are open to the public.) He got laughs by imitating how *not* to deliver certain phrases, and also made some wry comments about the opera ('Radames thinks that attaining military glory will make Aida love him, even if it means killing her countrymen'). His repertoire of fascinating stories for illustrating points is vast, one of which involved a 1954 *Aida* from Naples's Arena Flegrea. He related how in *Aida*'s duet with her father, the baritone Giangiacomo Guelfi, famous for his immense voice, shouted out the line 'Dei faraoni tu sei la schiava!' ('You are the slave of the pharaohs!') so loudly, ending in a pitchless roar, that the audience demanded an encore. But the conductor Gabriele Santini wouldn't stop the performance, despite the lengthy ovation. 'You can hear it on YouTube,' Muti said.

The baritone's stentorian cry epitomizes a perennial problem for conductors of Italian opera. 'Some people experience opera as if they were in a train station, waiting for the tenor or the next high note. The public wants to be impressed by sonorities,' Muti said. Singers are only too happy to oblige, thereby reinforcing expectations in a vicious cycle that adds to the challenge of enforcing instructions, like those in *Aida*, to play and sing softly. 'You have to insist,' he told the young conductors. Like other Italian operas, *Aida* comes with its own 'traditional' deviations from the printed page that have accumulated over decades, many of which are accepted unquestioningly by conductors. 'Conductors are too weak today. They act as ambassadors of all the

bullshit that has come before.' Some traditional deviations may seem innocuous, such as adding a fermata to 'mio' in Amneris's phrase 'all' amor mio t'affida' in her duet with Aida, but Muti commented, 'no instrumentalist would do this'.

Since early in his career Muti has been linked to the term *come scritto* (as written) because of his fidelity to the score. Yet he sees *come scritto* not as an end in itself but as a means of attaining an artistically satisfying result. In effect



■ Katharina Wincor being coached by Muti

he urged his disciples to weigh the effect of a 'traditional' alteration against the musical harm, if any, that results. 'Sometimes you'll decide to please the soprano, and the gallery too, by letting her prolong a high note.' Although he disapproves of interpolating a high E flat at the end of 'Sempre libera' in *La traviata*, he once indicated to a talented but untested young soprano at a Scala opening that she should do so, suspecting it would win over the gallery, and it did. Interpolating high notes in *Aida* was not mentioned. It's almost never done, but at the same time as the Academy was holding its sessions, the soprano in Washington National Opera's season-opening *Aida* sang a high E flat at the end of the Triumphal Scene. It's a safe bet that Muti would not have approved.

The sessions were a lot for the rookies to take in, but they embraced it all enthusiastically. A favourite among observers was Kaapo Johannes Ijas, 29, from Finland, who studied with the legendary Jorma Panula and who exhibited a polished podium demeanour. The Iranian Pishkar projected an engaging personality and established good rapport with the orchestra. The others had strong moments too, including Marco Bellasi, 35, from Italy; Gevorg Gharabekyan, 35, from Switzerland; and the one woman, Katharina Wincor, 22, from Austria. Among earlier Academy participants, Erina Yashima, currently serving an apprenticeship at the Chicago Symphony, and Vladimir Ovodok, who conducts operas this season at the Teatro Alighieri, are off to promising career beginnings.

Muti included a word of warning to anyone who disregards his advice. 'Don't bother to visit my grave or bring flowers. But if you don't do what I'm telling you, I'll visit you during the night!', he threatened. He says the grave is likely to be modest in any event. 'A good epitaph would be, "Here lies a poor man who spent all his life trying to get a quaver right."' The Italian Opera Academy is another indication that he has done considerably more than that.