

RE: Dame Felicity Lott Bursary

A Short Report of my Attendance of the RICCARDO MUTI ITALIAN OPERA ACADEMY

For a long time already I have felt a strong affinity for Italy and its wonderful culture that celebrates and aspires to beauty on all levels of life. Whether one turns to Italy's ingenious cuisine, to the stunning architecture of its great cities, or to the universally loved operas, which have moved peoples' hearts ever since they were written – at their core there always seems to lie the same profound, but uncomplicated, love of beauty that is so integral to the “Italian way of life.” To immerse myself for two weeks into that “Italian way of life” whilst studying Verdi's famous opera *La Traviata* under the guidance of one of the greatest maestros of our time was therefore an incredible joy for me, which has left its imprint forever on my heart! I cannot put into words how very grateful I am to Dame Felicity Lott, and to the Academic Awards Group, for having enabled me to make this tremendously inspiring experience!

The idea and intention of the Italian Opera Academy is in its essence a very simple one. In the summer 2015, so a little more than one year ago, Riccardo Muti had founded this special academy program in order to teach and pass on to the younger generations what he had learnt from his own teachers in a tradition that goes, via Antonio Votto and Arturo Toscanini, right back to Verdi himself. To do so, a cast of young singers as well as four young conductors and four young répétiteurs had been selected to work with Muti on stage towards a public concert performance of *La Traviata*, which the two-week program was to culminate in. In addition to those active participants, a number of ‘*uditori*’ (listening students) were given the opportunity to observe the intensive rehearsal process from the stalls of the beautiful Teatro Alighieri in Ravenna, which is where the Italian Opera Academy took place; and I had the privilege to be one of them.

The daily schedule usually consisted of a morning and a late-afternoon session, and although these sessions had much in common with a typical master class set-up, they functioned at the same time as serious rehearsals geared towards the final concert. And I think it is precisely this – besides the wonderful venue and the maestro's brilliancy – that made the Italian Opera Academy so special and unique: Muti did not only offer a wealth of advice and explanations, but we could actually follow from closest distance the intense and meticulous work that leads to a great opera performance. Just by watching closely how Muti and the student conductors interacted with the singers and with the orchestra, and by absorbing all the important concepts that Muti taught us – from questions concerning baton technique to the secrets of the opera's musical and dramatic construction – I feel as though I learned as much in those two weeks as I have in the whole previous year!

Particularly close to the maestro's heart, and something he kept coming back to, was the importance to respect the score and with that the composer's intentions. Unfortunately, though, this respect is not always guaranteed – especially when it comes to Italian operas. Often, for example, the note at the end of certain vocal parts is just transposed to the octave above in order to end on a high note. From a musical and dramaturgical perspective, however, such alterations often make no sense at all, and it was extremely interesting to hear Muti's explanations for why this is so. But respecting the score also means to study (in this case) Verdi's music with much care and devotion

so as not to reduce Verdi's typical accompaniment forms to a mere "Um-Ta-Ta" music, which Muti complained is happening all too often. Instead, the finesse and the subtleties that Verdi's scores exhibit must be carved out with great attention; and, again, it was highly inspiring to observe how the maestro did this in the rehearsals.

Something else that also stood out to me over the course of the two weeks was Muti's talent to entertain and communicate with the musicians in a way that always kept the right balance between humour and seriousness. This is clearly not something that can be learned from textbooks, if it can be learned at all. But I realised more than ever before how important this balance is, and how much it can animate and brighten up the rehearsal process if it is there. Like in the music itself, the right balance between consonance and dissonance is essential.

Yet another important gain was Muti's reminder that composition (that is harmony, counterpoint and orchestration) is absolutely fundamental and indispensable to the work of a conductor. In a question-and-answer session at the end of the academy, he told us of his own musical education and how intensively he had studied the craft of composition before he had started attending a conducting class, which was not only entertaining to listen to, but quite illuminating as well. It would take many more paragraphs, though, to list all the precious insights and ideas that I have taken with me from these two weeks in Ravenna, not to mention the lovely encounters with some of the other musicians who attended the academy. Both from a musical as well as from a human perspective – and of course, the two usually come together – these two weeks have been an incredibly enriching time! But perhaps the one most important thing the Italian Opera Academy has done to me is that it doubled my passion for music and for the wonderful Italian operas. And for this I am deeply grateful, because passion is the ground upon which true learning takes place!

I therefore want to express my sincerest thanks to Dame Felicity Lott for the generous bursary, without which this unforgettable learning experience would not have been possible!

"Diede una voce alla speranza e ai lutti. Pianse ed amò per tutti." GABRIELE D'ANNUNCIO

"He [Verdi] gave a voice to our hopes and to those in mourning. He cried and loved for us all."

