



SFO-bound maestro
Luisotti

Westward Expansion

Despite his inclination to apologize for his imperfect English, Nicola Luisotti communicates volumes. The Italian conductor's laughter rings with uncommon eloquence. Spending an afternoon with him, one learns to interpret those throaty exhalations, and to translate his mock posturing when, over lunch in a Paris bistro, he declares, as he orders a pinot noir, that white wine "isn't really wine." It's impossible to mistake the sarcastic inflection as he seeks his guest's opinion of the blunt architecture of the Opéra Bastille, where, in between craft-union strikes, he has been conducting a revival of Puccini's *Tosca*.

Still, the laugh that seems the most revealing is the chuckle that accompanies the discussion of his giddy rise, within a scant five years, to a position of eminence in the rarefied circle of important podium talents. The sound of that laugh suggests incredulousness and gratitude rather than self-satisfaction. This, after all, is the musician who reflects on his heady ascent by declaring, "Everyone is born for something. As a politician, I might be a disaster. But as a musician, maybe I can express something in this unbelievable material."

Today, the opera world seems ready to bank on that expressive ability. Yet as recently as 2002, Luisotti, now forty-six, hadn't turned up on anyone's radar of significant musicians. It was in that year that a production of *Il Trovatore* at the Stuttgart State Opera drew attention from all corners of the opera world. Debuts for the maestro rapidly followed in Paris, Toronto, Los Angeles, Munich, Genoa, Seattle and London. Former San Francisco Opera general director Pamela Rosenberg, who has described Luisotti as "the most gifted Italian conductor of his generation," hired him for a new production of *La Forza del Destino* in 2005.

Rosenberg's designated successor, David Gockley, was on site during that project, and his first live encounter with Luisotti at the War Memorial Opera House burned itself into his memory: "I was nodding off in the music-staff box," Gockley recalls, "and I thought, 'Here we go again.' Then I heard the overture, sat up straight and wondered, 'What the hell is going on?' There was something special happening here."

Gockley pursued Luisotti's performances all over the map, listened to recordings, talked to musicians and interviewed the conductor at length. "This," Gockley says, "is one lovely human being with not a bit of arrogance. Nicola has all his values in a row. He left a trail of good feelings." Last year, Gockley appointed Luisotti San Francisco Opera's music director, on a five-year contract that begins in September 2009, with a new production of *Il Trovatore*. He succeeds Donald Runnicles, whose seventeen-year tenure has elevated the San Francisco Opera orchestra into a band of distinction. Runnicles is expected to be a frequent guest in the pit, most prominently for the upcoming *Ring* cycle, but Gockley felt he wanted to return the company to its roots in the Gaetano Merola period as an "Italian house." He explains, "If you are Italian to the core and lavish an Italian opera with detail and nuance, it reaches a level we don't often see."

Luisotti, who bowed at the Met with *Tosca* in 2006 and returns

for *La Bohème* this month, sees music as an inexorable, almost mystical force that cannot be contained. As we chat in his Opéra Bastille dressing room, he recalls, with a touch of the philosopher, his boyhood in a Tuscan village. "It is not quite right to say that I discovered music when I was eight. No — music discovered me. A human being," Luisotti says, "is not able to discover music. It is, like nature, too big for us to comprehend. I remember the priest in church playing the harmonium. I remember crying when my mother sang, and I didn't know why. But it's the same feeling I have today when a character in an opera dies. I can't resist. I can't remove myself from the emotional situation."

At eleven, Luisotti was directing his church choir. He trained first as a pianist, following with degrees in composition, trumpet and voice. Experience came in three of the major Italian houses. He served as rehearsal pianist at La Scala, sang in the chorus of Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, assisted Lorin Maazel and Riccardo Muti in Milan and landed his first full-time position as chorus master for La Fenice in Venice.

Fame, Luisotti says, was not uppermost in his mind. "I always wanted to be a conductor, but I was never ambitious about a career. I was always charmed by music, which I felt was a kind of mission. I would say to myself, 'Study, try to improve your musicianship and your mind. What will happen later will happen.' I never thought I'd be asked to conduct at Covent Garden or the Met."

At both those houses and elsewhere, core classics — Verdi and Puccini — served as Luisotti's calling card. That he risks comparison with the interpretations of colleagues past and present doesn't faze him in the slightest. His task, he believes, lies in making choices. "Look," Luisotti says, tailoring his analogies to his present surroundings, "if you go to the Louvre and you want to see the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* or *La Gioconda*, if they are badly lit, you will come away with a terrible impression of these works. It's the same if you illuminate an opera the wrong way — you can kill the composer. In a letter to Ada Mainardi, Toscanini agonizes about killing a score during a performance. It doesn't mean destroying the music. It means that the tempo today will be this way, and the dynamic will be that way. Even if what you decide is right, in choosing you are killing the thousands of other possibilities for interpretation."

How, then, can Luisotti bring a fresh quality to a familiar work such as *La Bohème*? "It's not easy," he confesses. "First, of all, the moments that seem so easy for the conductor can be the hardest, like the ensemble in Act II and, oh my God, the beginning of Act IV. You always wonder, 'What will happen tonight?' But for the Met, I got a new copy of the score without markings. I say, 'Take a look, Nicola, as if it were the first time. Maybe you will discover something new.' You must, of course, have respect for many of the traditional features. And you must have respect for the singers' ideas. When I was much younger, I studied *La Bohème* by myself and found what I thought were solutions. After I tried them with the singers, I realized I had been completely wrong. In the end, everyone must enjoy the experience,

ALLAN ULRICH speaks with

San Francisco Opera music-director designate

Nicola Luisotti about his repertory plans

for the company,

his return to the Met in *La Bohème*

and how easy it is to “kill” a score.

and in the end, Mimì will still die.”

Still, Luisotti defends Puccini against charges of pulling emotional strings. “We must not confuse sentiment with sentimentality,” he cautions. “I know that many people think Puccini wants to grab the public with easy emotion. But when you study the scores, you realize that he is trying to convey to the audience his feeling for the text and the characters. It’s like going to a film and hearing wonderful background music.”

Luisotti bolsters his thesis by bounding from the couch, rushing to the piano and launching into Ennio Morricone’s haunting theme for Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon A Time in America*. “You remember the movie longer through the music,” he says. “It serves the story. It’s much the same for the opening of the third act of *Tosca*.”

In discussing his new post, Luisotti can’t resist one cliché. “Yes,” he says, “I really did leave my heart in San Francisco. I loved the geography, the food, the wine, the orchestra, the people.” He is expected to spend up to twenty-three weeks a year on site and conduct four productions a season. It will take time away from the old house in Tuscany that he is restoring with his wife, Rita, whom he met in primary school and married in his twenties.

In San Francisco, Luisotti will busy himself with the Italian material, including an *Otello* his first season and a centennial production of *La Fanciulla del West*, missing from the War Memorial stage for three decades. Gockley has urged him to consider other repertoire, of which *Salome* will likely be an early project. Following the lead of James Levine at the Met, Luisotti plans to launch a concert series with the San Francisco Opera Orchestra, if scheduling permits and a suitable auditorium can be found. “I told the board that the players need to go onstage. They will only grow from the experience.”

The coming years, says Luisotti, will be the time to spread his musical wings, away from opera. “I would like it some day to be half and half.” Major debuts loom with the Berlin Philharmonic and the San Francisco Symphony. Luisotti seems poised to become a household name in the most discriminating of households.

Yet he can’t resist quoting a favorite conductor from the past. “Karajan said many great things, among them that you’re not really a conductor until you’re fifty and a chorus master until you are sixty,” he notes. “So, someday I may really learn how to conduct.” □

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Photographed in New York by Dario Acosta

