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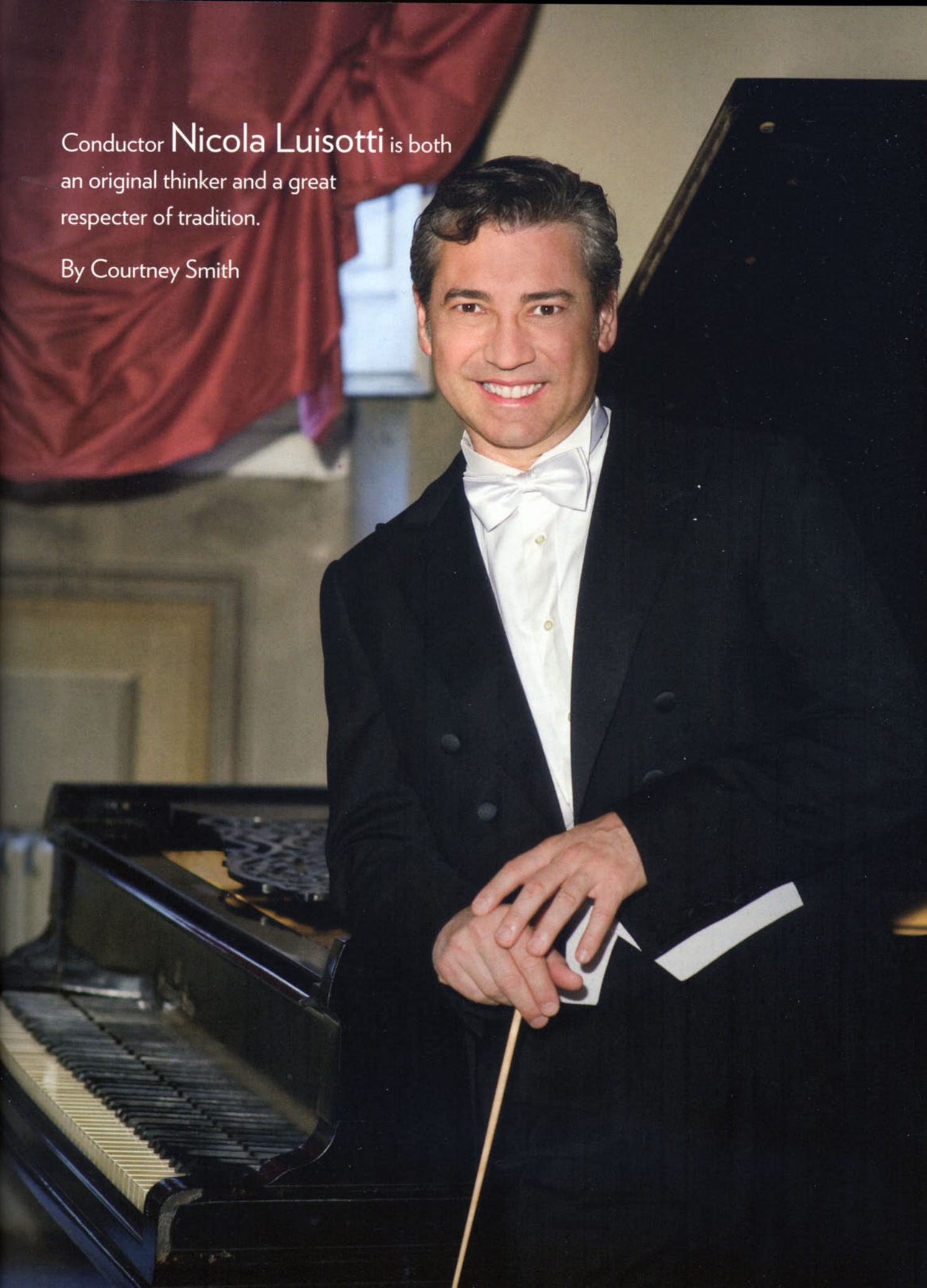


Very few things about Italian conductor Nicola Luisotti are conventional. He rejects the idea of classifying the less popular operas of Giuseppe Verdi as “*Verdi minore*,” and in keeping with this stance, he chose for his 2002 Milan debut Verdi’s first opera, *Oberto*, which hadn’t been staged there for more than fifty years. →

Conducting at San Francisco Opera, above, photographed by Terrence McCarthy; with Puccini’s piano, opposite page, at Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Mansi in Lucca, Italy, photographed by Marco Rossi

Conductor **Nicola Luisotti** is both
an original thinker and a great
respector of tradition.

By Courtney Smith



He defied expectations again seven years ago when he offered, for his debut with Rome's Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, a rather idiosyncratic concert program in which Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* overture was followed by Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. Music director of San Francisco Opera since 2009, Luisotti straddles the old and emerging new schools carefully. At forty-nine, he's a glamorous figure — he used to wear made-to-measure Ermenegildo Zegna tuxedos, although he now favors Canali. Yet when it comes to conductors, he has learned to be wary of the almost fetishistic — and very Italian — cult of personality.

This past February in Rome, I had lunch with Luisotti at *Ambasciata d'Abruzzo*, situated among the winding roads of Rome's light-infused Parioli neighborhood overlooking Villa Borghese. It's one of his favorite restaurants, and over dishes of *manzo al pepe verde* and fresh ricotta, he spoke in a meaty baritone, his Italian saturated with a Tuscan accent. He shared an anecdote that summed up his personal view on the old-school "cult of the conductor."

"Many years ago, a maestro — an old man who has since passed away — said to me in a very grand way, 'Sir, you are a maestro and a man of great talent, but if you make an entrance at the opera house without a scarf, you will never have a successful career.' He wanted to make it clear that the gesture of wearing a scarf would have vocalized the antiquated attitude of a *grande maestro*. But this shallowness — this act, which is only about ego — is something that I've always refused. I'm a person of valor and honor. If one has to affect a particular personality — especially if someone has to modify their own personality to try to be something that they're not — I initially thought to myself that maybe it would be better not to choose this career if it had to be that way. So I listened to him but decided to not take his advice, and I continued to behave in a way that made me comfortable, regardless of other people's perceptions. I truly believe in being true to yourself wherever you go. Whether it's in Tokyo [Luisotti is principal guest conductor of the Tokyo Symphony] or San Francisco or New York or Milan, I always behave in the same way."

Luisotti was in Rome to lead the Santa Cecilia in a series of concerts to honor the late Italian composer Nino Rota's 100th birth year. Works included Rota's Piano Concerto in C and a resplendent reading of his *Il Gattopardo* Suite — along with Beethoven's Fourth Symphony.

The *Gattopardo* Suite — from Luchino Visconti's 1963 film after the top-selling 1958 Italian-language novel by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa that narrates the transformation of Sicilian society during the political upheaval of the *Risorgimento* in the nineteenth century — was chosen to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Italy's Unification. Luisotti admires Nino Rota because, he says, Rota's work magically transcends film and speaks across generations and cultures. He considers Rota to be Italy's Sergei Prokofiev for the subtle mix of wit and melancholy that layers his work.

Rota didn't compose exclusively for the movies; he wrote quite a few symphonic works as well. Luisotti, however, emphasizes that he doesn't consider movie soundtracks to be necessarily less-

er music. "It's all about creativity and problem-solving. You need to create an atmosphere of sweetness here and of fear there. Beethoven would have composed film music, too, had cinema already been invented in his lifetime. I'm definitely sure of this." Luisotti believes "in the power of music as a direct personal expression, because music speaks to every person in the world, regardless of language, religion or faith. We could all be in a concert hall and there could be someone from every single faith of the world, but everyone would be moved by the music in the same way. Music can speak so much to just one person without actually uttering a single word."

Luisotti owes much of his musical spirit to his upbringing. He was born in the Italian coastal city of Viareggio, in the shadow of the massive sixteenth-century ramparts of Lucca, where he now makes his Italian home with his wife, Rita. In his childhood, the works of eighteenth-century local hero Luigi Boccherini overflowed from the town's Romanesque churches into the labyrinth of ancient streets. His great-great relatives enjoyed languid summers duck-hunting on Lago di Massaciucoli (the picturesque lake between Viareggio and Lucca) with another native son, Giacomo Puccini.

Luisotti finds great resonance with Puccini, who was born in Lucca in 1858. (Alfredo Catalani was also born there, four years before Puccini.) Luisotti is one of his generation's most accomplished Puccini conductors: his performances offer charming pulses and heavenly measures that are elegantly polished in succinct interpretations. His *Tosca* and *La Bohème* for the Metropolitan Opera were highly praised, and in December 2010, after the Met's 100th-anniversary performance of Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*, he was awarded the fortieth Premio Puccini Award for his distinguished service in the preservation of the composer's grand heritage.

Far from Tuscany, Luisotti oversees musical matters at San Francisco Opera, where his directorship follows the seventeen-year reign of Donald Runnicles. At the time Luisotti's position was announced, in 2007, general director David Gockley spoke to the press about the opera house's future, dedicated to the fundamentals of Italian opera.

Luisotti is on the record as questioning egregiously controversial modern productions. "In reality, I'm not skeptical of new productions," says Luisotti. "I'm only apprehensive towards people who put themselves in front of our great works of art. Let me think of a good example. Okay, let's pretend I take you to the Musée du Louvre to see Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. When we get there, I put myself directly in front of the artwork, blocking it from your view, and I start explaining the painting to you like this — 'Behind me, there's da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. In the background there's a bridge leading to the mountains. She has her hands folded like this, and she's smiling in a peculiar way, just like this.' And you say to me, 'Get out of the way, so that I can see the painting for myself!' But I refuse to move. Because I want you only to look at me. Because I feel that I merit all of your attention, instead of Leonardo da Vinci, who is really the great artist of this work."

"Often — and we're not just talking about the directors,



“Music speaks to every person in the world, regardless of language, religion or faith.”

"Today we find a growing political class that's destroying everything we believe in."



San Francisco Opera rehearsal, above: speaking to San Francisco opera fans after conducting the Opera in the Park concert, 2009

actors, conductors or singers — people put themselves in front of their respective works of art. I believe that the artist has an obligation to stand side by side with art, and not to impose himself onto it. I believe that all of us have a responsibility to serve the art. And yes, it's possible to do that even for the modern works. I'm not against modern works — not at all. I'm against scandal. I detest those who make a scandal in order to make a spectacle of themselves, or those who use works of art for the sake of publicity. This I can't support."

Although he had already conducted in Milan, Luisotti made his La Scala debut last month with Verdi's *Attila*, staged by Italian theater director Gabriele Lavia. *Attila* is Verdi's ninth opera, dating from 1846. It tells the story of the ruthless, ambitious king of the Huns who invaded Italy during his rule in the mid fifth century. Another of the works labeled *Verdi minore*, it's academically grouped with Verdi's lesser-known works, although credit goes to conductors such as Riccardo Muti and Bruno Campanella for folding *Verdi minore* back into the repertory of major opera houses.

But Luisotti takes offense at the notion that there is such a thing as "lesser Verdi." "*Verdi minore* doesn't exist to me," he insists. "Of course, it's clear that Verdi's style evolved, because he was born to compose, which he did for almost seventy years. He composed for his own sustenance, and it became integral to his

existence. It allowed him to mature, to grow, and to provoke his audience. He lived through a period of chaos and irony that was immense. So to me, *Verdi minore* only exists in the classification system, naturally, since he wrote so many works, and it was therefore necessary.

"We can also think of *Nabucco* as *Verdi minore*. After all, it's his third opera, with the music narrated through the libretto of Temistocle Solera. Let's look at *Nabucco's* third-act chorus, 'Va, pensiero.' Here, in the libretto, we have the most beautiful words. We've already heard it and reheard it a million times, and by now we know it by memory. So you go to the opera house, and you've heard all of the notes, and you've heard the orchestras play it many times before — but when those notes take flight, it still makes you spontaneously stop and listen. 'Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate. Va, ti posa sui clivi, sui colli, ove olezzano tepide e molli...' I hear it, and I cry. It makes you cry. It overwhelms me. You can't call something *Verdi minore* that moves me like that."

Luisotti has already conducted *Attila* at Naples's Teatro San Carlo, and he greatly admires the way the opera depicts an outwardly infallible barbarian crippled by doubt and fear. Luisotti senses a parable within *Attila* and extrapolates it to modern times. "*Attila* was written in a tempestuous time full of revolutionary and *risorgimentale* spirit," he notes. "*Attila* speaks about the presence of

barbarians. In Italy during the *Risorgimento*, they tried to kill all of the barbarians to protect their country, because it was during an epoch that was full of barbarians. So in today's world, who exactly are the barbarians of Verdi's time? I think that the barbarian is the modern threat to culture. It's the enemy of history. It's a force that threatens [to keep] the younger generations from growing up with artistic and cultural educations, with poetry and literature and the principles of valor that follow. Today we find a growing political class that's destroying everything we believe in. It's very important to teach the new audiences and young people about all these artistic and moral ideals that we hold sacred."

As an Italian who dedicated many years to study in Italy's august musical conservatories, he is deeply affected by the financial crisis that's crippling Italy's fourteen *enti lirici* (the fourteen foundations of the Italian opera houses). Luisotti ultimately believes that classical music can unite people, just as it did during the *Risorgimento*.

"In the spoken English between Americans, a person from Texas can communicate with a person from Ohio. Maybe they have a slightly different accent, but they're speaking in the same language. Some speak better than others, and some have different accents, but everyone speaks in English. In Italy, up until about fifty years ago, people just didn't understand each other. If a Sicilian was talking to a Venetian, they couldn't even begin to understand each other. The Italians were indifferent about it, because there were local dialects. It was like there were hundreds of different languages, even in such a small country. Finally, now we all understand each other. So why is it that today we want to divide ourselves?"

All beliefs aside, once he's on the podium, Luisotti allows the music to speak and to breathe for itself. He transforms himself into an inexhaustible, graceful conduit of music with a full, idiosyncratic range of motion, although always elegant, refined and precise. The Italian school of conducting seems to be divided between the maestros who are more faithful to the score's pulses (the *come scritto* school of Arturo Toscanini and, today, Riccardo Muti) of fast, swift tempos and the school of more poetic, pensive conductors (such as the late Carlo Maria Giulini). One wonders which point of view Luisotti, as an apprentice who was immersed in the lustrous school of Italian conducting, finds closest to his own sensibility.

"The school of conductors doesn't exist," Luisotti counters. "What do I mean by that? There only exists the music." But then who controls the music? "The music controls the music. Who forms the air? Who forms physical matter? The material of music originates from the past. Music is something that comes from the past, but not just from the passage of time. How could we even project something so finite onto an expression that's so intrinsic? How can we say that music was born three hundred years ago? Or two hundred years ago? Music was born as a direct expression of the universe — there was an explosion. Then there was the creation of the universe. Then there was the passage of millions of years. Then man arrived. There was the discovery of music. Music is a discovery. It's not a construction. Then along came the conductors and the ones who interpreted the music. But the fact is that those who write the music are those who will remain in history.



"We are not the music. Music is something so much larger than us. It's like if I was to tell you that I'm the sun. But that's not true — the sun is the sun. The point is, no one can be something that they're not. Music is an ideal, and I'm just the servant. Therefore, a school of orchestra directors doesn't exist. But there exists an individual consciousness that every conductor has." □

COURTNEY SMITH is the American, Milan-based writer behind the *Opera Chic* website. She currently writes the "Stasera Esco" column for *Grazia.it* and has contributed to *W* magazine's Editors' Blog, *Style.com*, *Women's Wear Daily* and *BBC Music Magazine*.