

PERFORMING ARTS

Ask Luisotti about music, not about porcini

By Janos Gereben
Special to *The Examiner*

Nicola Luisotti answers interview questions quickly, enthusiastically and completely — except one.

Where do he and his wife Rita find porcini in the wild on their mushroom hunts in and around The City? Known for his generosity to colleagues and audiences, the maestro draws the line at giving away that secret.

When the San Francisco Opera music director — conducting Mozart's "Don Giovanni" opening Saturday — arrived here three years ago, he spoke glowingly about The City, which reminds him of his native Tuscany.

It was "totally love at first sight," he said back then: "I fell in love with The City, with the opera house, with the people, and everything that this place — for me, quite magical — offered."

Today, the veteran resident walks and hikes with his wife and friends (looking for mushrooms), visits Napa, Marin and elsewhere, and enjoys the local ambiance thoroughly.

"When you drive, people wave at you to go ahead, they are respectful and considerate. It's a respectful city, nice, beautiful, very calm," he says, although he doesn't specifically compare it out loud with Italian cities. "In restaurants, they smile at you and take pictures, but don't bother you."

It's certainly a contrast to the busy and less polite places Luisotti visits on a dizzying schedule: Milan's La Scala, Metropolitan Opera (to conduct the San Francisco production of the centennial revival of Puccini's "Girl of the Golden West"), London's Royal Opera ("Aida," "Turandot"), Vienna State Opera ("Simon Boccanegra") and Paris Opera ("La Traviata," "Tosca"). He is also principal guest conductor of the Tokyo Symphony.

The City is different, and while he never stops working — he just completed a long run of "Turandot" and is now preparing "Don Giovanni," Bizet's "Carmen" and an opera orchestra concert of Beethoven's Fifth and Seventh symphonies in Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley — Luisotti still considers San Francisco a place of respite.

With its pervasive Italian heritage, The City also offers the conductor native comforts, such as a recent lunch — a prosciutto di Parma and fresh mozzarella sandwich from the Lucca Ravioli Co. The famous old Italian deli on Valencia Street happens to be run by Irishmen, but isn't that typically San



COURTESY PHOTO

At home: San Francisco Opera Music Director Nicola Luisotti says The City reminds him of his native Tuscany.

Francisco?

Unlike some of history's short-tempered great maestros whose mantle he wears, Luisotti is cheerful, sociable and a consummate professional who performs to the best of his ability under all circumstances.

A year ago, conducting "Aida" and preparing for "The Marriage of Figaro" and "Madame Butterfly," his mother had a stroke in Italy and died 10 days later. "I was screaming at the chorus at a rehearsal," Luisotti recalls, with regret. "I am human, not a machine ... but the performances went on and I did my best, even as I felt my soul being destroyed."

IF YOU GO Don Giovanni

Presented by San Francisco Opera

Where: War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco

When: 8 p.m. Saturday, Tuesday, Oct. 21, Oct. 29; 2 p.m. Oct. 23, Nov. 5; 7:30 p.m. Oct. 26, Nov. 2, Nov. 10

Tickets: \$29 to \$330

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During the recent run of "Turandot," tenor Salvatore Licitra, a good friend of Luisotti, died in a motorcycle accident. "I wanted to stop and take time off to deal with the shock," Luisotti says, "but there were performances to give. Singers, orchestra musicians, we all have to overcome problems and feelings, and serve the composer and the audience."