

Italy runs in San Francisco Opera's blood like vin santo down the throat of a tipsy padre. In 1923, it was an Italian, Gaetano Merola, who persuaded City Hall to support a full-time opera organization rather than depend upon touring troupes that had been visiting the city since the Gold Rush days. Merola then proceeded to feed audiences a diet of Verdi and Puccini sung by the greatest Italian divas of the age. The country's second-big-

gest opera company (after New York's Metropolitan Opera) is now returning to its roots. San Francisco Opera's 2009-2010 season includes such Italian staples as Verdi's *Il Trovatore* and *Otello*; Puccini's *Il Trittico* and *La Fanciulla del West*; and Donizetti's *The Daughter of the Regiment*. Even more significantly, the company has hired one of the world's foremost Italian opera interpreters, Nicola Luisotti, as its new music director. Hailing from a small Tuscan village, the self-effacing yet effusive 47-year-old conductor's meteoric trajectory has included assistant conductor stints at La Scala and guest appearances at London's Royal Opera House and the Met.

*SF Weekly* caught up with Luisotti just before the launch of his inaugural season.

**What were your earliest musical experiences?**

I grew up in Bargecchia, near Lucca. My father played clarinet in the village band. My mother used to sing "Ave Maria" at weddings. When I was six years old, I remember crying when my mother sang to me, I was so moved by her voice.

I was also fascinated by the organ in our village church. I used to sneak over and try to play it, which made the priest very angry. I was thumping at the keys and he thought I would destroy the instrument. He would run after me and slap me. Eventually, he realized that I was doing it because I loved music so much. I was 10 when the priest asked me if I'd like to learn to play the organ properly. I said yes. That happened on a Tuesday. On Sunday, I was playing the organ in church. I couldn't read music. I learned just by watching the priest. A year later, I started conducting the church chorus.

**You spent many years working as a chorus director and rehearsal pianist in Italy before becoming a conductor. What does it take to become a conductor?**

I don't believe in baby conductors aged 22 or 23. Conducting is not waving a stick. It's who you are. It's what you became and who you are becoming. You can't discover these things at 20.

The best way to become a conductor is to work as a rehearsal pianist, study, and watch other experienced conductors in action. You start to conduct when you become a man. It's not enough to be talented. You need life experience, whether you're conducting a symphony orchestra or an opera production.

**What's behind San Francisco Opera's return to an Italian-opera-centric agenda?**

Opera was born in Italy in the early 17th century. By focusing on the Italian repertoire, we are returning both to the origins of the art form and of this company, which was

# The MAESTRO

For S.F. Opera's new music director, conducting is a lot like making love.

BY CHLOE VELTMAN



Nicola Luisotti

Terry McCarthy

founded by Italians. To do Italian opera successfully, however, a conductor has to know much more than Italian opera. He must also know about German and French opera as well as symphonic and chamber music; he must be able to sing; he must be widely read; he has to know about painting, writing, and sculpture. In other words, he must be immersed in culture.

Ultimately, though, it doesn't matter what country the music comes from. Music is music. It is impossible to change its essential nature. It's like going to the hairdresser and getting your hair dyed blond. You will still be the same person, even if your hair is a different color.

**What's it like starting your new job in this financially difficult climate?**

There are many challenges. The state of California should take more responsibility for the arts. Politicians need to understand that if you want better cities, you need to build culture and bring people together to experience incredible arts events. Without art, people become brutes. We have to educate the public or the world will soon be in crisis.

**Do you like working with singers?**

If you conduct opera, you have to love singers. It's hard to work with them, though. They have their instruments in their throats. They are fragile. What they do is very difficult. They have to stand in front of the conductor, orchestra, audience, and critics regardless of whether they have stomach cramps or a cold.

It's very rare that I've met a happy singer. I've seen singers cry before performances. I smile at them and hug them. I tell them that I will follow them, no matter what.

**How do you prepare for a classic versus a new work?**

New work creates more doubts and frustrations in me. It's like a first date. You don't know if your clothes or hair are good. You don't know what the person you're meeting likes. But even classic works yield surprises. I think I know everything about something I've conducted many times before, but then I realize I don't. I still have to study.

**How does San Francisco Opera's orchestra compare to other orchestras with which you've worked?**

The orchestra here learns music fast. They play with passion. They expect me to be extremely well-prepared. It's like making love. When a man doesn't know what he's doing in bed, the woman gets bored quickly. When both orchestra and conductor are both well prepared, we can create beautiful musical moments together.

**You and your wife will spend around five months of the year here in San Francisco. What does this city mean to you?**

When I was asked if I'd like to come to San Francisco, I answered yes without hesitation. Naturally, I wanted to work with the company. But I was particularly excited about coming to this city. I couldn't accept a job in a place I don't like, even if it's with the best opera company or orchestra in the world. Life is too short to make compromises.