

FISHING FOR TALENT

Yehuda Shapiro visits the Solti Accademia di Bel Canto, which begins a partnership with the Verbier Festival this summer

At the mention of bel canto, the work of Georg Solti is unlikely to spring to mind, but there can be no doubt that he understood about fine singing. After his early days as a répétiteur, he went on to collaborate with the greatest singers of his time, and while central and northern Europe were crucial to his trajectory, it was in Italy—the cradle, of course, of both bel canto and Solti’s idol Toscanini—that he bought his first home. His low-slung modernist house, nestled in a pine grove near the seaside town of Castiglione della Pescaia in Southern Tuscany, was where he spent many summers with his family, relaxing and, ever a stickler for hard work, studying scores and background literature.

In 2004, seven years after the conductor’s death, the Georg Solti Accademia di Bel Canto arrived on the scene in Castiglione della Pescaia. Since then, the three-week summer school has become an annual event under the artistic direction of the pianist and vocal coach Jonathan Papp. On the staff at the Royal Academy of Music, he also performs with a number of leading singers and has enjoyed a long association with Kiri Te Kanawa, one of Solti’s sopranos of choice. In the Accademia’s second season she became the first star guest to give masterclasses in Castiglione della Pescaia. Te Kanawa’s charitable foundation now numbers among the school’s supporters, and over the past decade visiting teachers have included Mirella Freni, Angela Gheorghiu,

■ *Piazza Solti: a rehearsal underway at Castiglione della Pescaia, home of the Solti Accademia di Bel Canto*





■ *Class of 2012: singers at the Solti Accademia two summers ago*

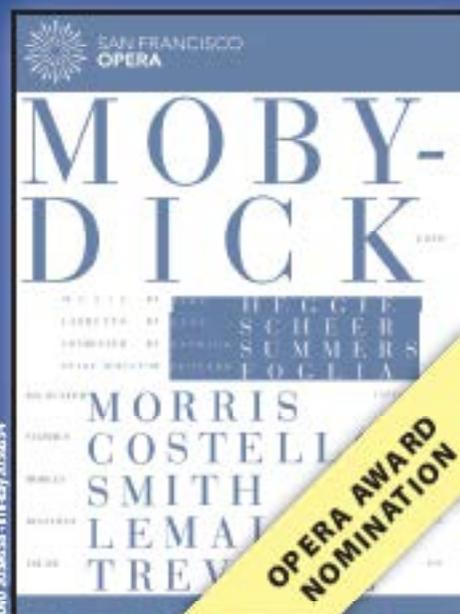
Luciana Serra, Daniela Dessi, Frederica von Stade, José Carreras, Dennis O'Neill (now the Accademia's official Principal Guest Vocal Coach and Artistic Patron), Thomas Allen and Richard Bonyngé. Before returning this summer to Tuscany—where he will share responsibilities with O'Neill, Leo Nucci and Mariella Devia—Bonyngé will travel to Venice for a week-long spring course for répétiteurs, run by the Accademia with support from the Nando Perretti Foundation.

For all the glamour of that operatic roll call, the Georg Solti Accademia di Bel Canto still feels like a family affair. Though not short of beach bars and boutiques, Castiglione della Pescaia is not a glitzy resort and is relatively remote from such cultural honeypots as Florence or Siena. The Accademia's dozen young singers, stringently selected from a large pool of applicants and mostly on graduate courses or young artist programmes, all receive full scholarships to attend. (In 2013 the vocally diverse participants—with a budding *spinto* soprano, a thrusting tenor and a rolling *basso cantante* beside voices of a more lyrical cast—came from the UK, Portugal, Malta, Turkey, the US, New Zealand and Samoa.) Their billet is a hotel just moments from the local library, where a large airy room becomes the Accademia's nerve centre. Lady Solti, who still visits her holiday home every summer, hosts a day of rest and recreation for the students ahead of the Accademia's climactic concert, a free, *al fresco* event given before a 1,000-strong audience in the Piazza Solti, high in the hilly and picturesque old town.

That concert is not, however, devoted exclusively to Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti and choice extracts from early Verdi. Understandably, Italian repertoire dominates the summer programme, but it runs from about 1810 to the death of Puccini: the Accademia's focus is on encouraging stylish, healthy singing that is rooted in sound *bel canto* principles. 'Bel canto has its origins in the 16th century,' explains Papp, 'and in typical fashion, each generation bemoaned the succeeding generation's vocal practice. Today, it has become synonymous with Italian opera of the early 19th century, but it is

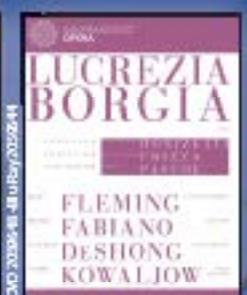
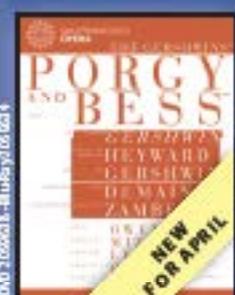


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just as relevant to Handel and Mozart—and it is really the only way to sing Wagner and Strauss ... The language and style can change, but not the fundamental bel canto mechanism.'

Papp, who trained in Milan after studies at the Royal Academy, was inspired to establish the summer school after teaching at the Istituto Nazionale Tostiano in Ortona, where his colleagues included Emanuela 'Pepi' Ferrari, who, with Corradina Caporello, coaches language at the Accademia, and Paolo Specca, who takes charge of vocal coaching and ensembles. 'When the language is placed correctly,' says Papp, 'all kinds of vocal problems disappear. Even almost imperceptible internal changes can alter the way the singing sounds.'

Papp developed the idea for a bel canto summer school in partnership with Candice Wood, the organization's Executive Director. A former singers' agent and Royal Academy-trained orchestral violinist, she elicited the involvement of Lady Solti and the Accademia was born. 'Sir Georg believed in nurturing young vocal talent and always emphasized how difficult it was for a student musician to make the transition to having a responsibility to the public, but one of his maxims was, "Never give up",' says Wood. 'Here, our students have the opportunity to spend three weeks focusing intensely, and without any distractions, on a precise area of repertoire. They acquire technical and interpretative tools they can apply to anything else they sing, and they should be able to leave the course with a meticulously prepared aria that will become their audition battlehorse—the aria that can always work for them. But they must be ready to be flexible, to take on new information, to let go of preconceived ideas and make changes.'

By the end of the Accademia the singers' professional armoury will also be strengthened with photos taken by Clive Barda, long a specialist in the performing arts, and with advice from gurus such as the American PR consultant Mary Lou Falcone, who spent 15 years supercharging Renée Fleming's career. They will also be able to rely on the Accademia's staff in years to come: for guidance, coaching and even for help in sourcing funding.

In its first year, the Accademia survived on just € 3,000. Its resources have increased significantly since then, thanks to support from foundations, private individuals, commercial organizations and the *comune* of Castiglione della Pescaia. Its ambitions have also grown. The separate *répétiteurs*' course was established in 2008, and the Accademia has now struck up a relationship with the Juilliard School.

A shared sponsor, the Geneva-based Rolex Institute, played a role in ushering another new phase in the Accademia's history—a partnership with the star-studded Verbier Festival in Switzerland. On several occasions in the past, the director of its Academy for young instrumentalists and singers, Christian Thompson, has turned to Papp and Wood for tips on vocal talent, but this year the Verbier Festival will formally present alumni of both academies, polished by a week's coaching in Castiglione della Pescaia, in a semi-staging of *L'elisir d'amore*. With Thomas Allen in charge of the production, Jesús López-Cobos will conduct the youthful Verbier Festival Music Camp Orchestra. Beyond that, all 12 students from this year's Solti Accademia will give a concert in Verbier, while the 2015 festival will include an operatic production conceived as a vehicle for singers cherry-picked from the class of 2014. As Thompson explains, Verbier can provide a high-profile showcase for outstanding young performers: 'When we staged *Figaro* in 2012, we received applications from 120 Susannas. Our responsibility is to find singers we can really believe in, who are worthy of the Verbier/Solti seal of approval.'

Bonyngé—who, as a tireless musicologist and conductor, as well as mentor to his wife Joan Sutherland, has been a force in the bel canto revival of the last 50 years—agrees that, 'when they get up to sing, it's not to show how well they can sing, but to make music and magic. The audience should be on the edge of their seats at least some of the time. But I don't agree with anyone who claims that it doesn't matter what the sound is like as long as the meaning comes across: beauty of sound is very important in all singing. Sometimes, a singer can work away without achieving anything, but if they have something to say, you have to teach them how to bring it out, to find what works for them. The Accademia Solti has strong leadership and the students have been carefully chosen—they are interested to learn. And I learn something from them too. A day when you don't learn something is a day wasted.'



■ Richard Bonyngé rehearses the soprano Rumette Botha

Singers from the Solti Accademia appear in 'L'elisir d'amore' at the Verbier Festival on August 1, c. Jesús López-Cobos, p. Thomas Allen. See www.verbierfestival.com for details.

Newsdesk

Dresden sacks Dorny

Making one of the most rapid reversals in recent operatic politics, the state of Saxony has dismissed Serge Dorny, the *Semperoper*'s Intendant-elect. Only last September Dorny—who for the last decade has successfully run Opéra de Lyon—signed a five-year contract that had been due to begin from September 2014, and he had already started planning future seasons. But on February 21, the Saxon arts minister Sabine Schorlemer issued a statement, saying 'I greatly regret we had to take this step ... Unfortunately, he was unable to establish a fruitful, trusting co-existence with the staff, both artistic and administrative.'

But according to Dorny, he had issued his own ultimatum to the arts minister, who had been ignoring his requests for intervention since November and who preempted his resignation by sacking him. In a statement reported in *Le Monde*, he blamed Christian Thielemann, Chief Conductor of the Staatskapelle Dresden, attributing the 'distressing situation' to 'a lack of transparency and accuracy in the information' provided prior to his appointment.

More Brits for the Met

The Metropolitan Opera has appointed Robert Rattray as its new Assistant General Manager, Artistic. He will take