

Inspiration in the Italian air

By Helena Matheopoulos

The art of bel canto still lies at the heart of great opera singing. The Georg Solti Accademia is ensuring that the traditions and techniques forged over the centuries in Italy are being passed on to a new generation of international talent

The Georg Solti Accademia, dedicated to masterclasses and tutoring of young singers and répétiteurs, was founded in memory of the great conductor Sir Georg Solti in 2004 by his widow Valerie (who sadly died on 31 March this year), together with Candice Wood, a former violinist and organiser of high-profile musical events, and Jonathan Papp, senior principal operatic and vocal repertoire coach at the Royal Academy of Music.

The Accademia runs an annual three-week course of private coachings, masterclasses, and concerts focusing on the art of Italian bel canto every summer in the attractive Tuscan seaside town of Castiglione della Pescaia, which Georg and Valerie Solti made their summer home.

Papp, artistic director of the Accademia, is a distinguished and well-loved accompanist of famous singers, from Sir Thomas Allen, Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, Dmitri Hvorostovsky and Sergei Leiferkus, to Ian Bostridge and Christopher Maltman. With these sorts of connections, he can ensure that masterclasses are given by some of the best singers in the world. This year's young singers were tutored by the legendary American soprano Grace Bumbry and longtime faculty member Barbara Frittoli and past names include Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, Frederica von Stade, Barbara Frittoli, Massimo Giordano, José Carreras and Angela Gheorghiu. (An enthusiastic annual attendee is Richard Bonyngé, who sadly could not come this year because of a bad chest infection.)

'The idea behind the Accademia is this relationship between mentor and protégé – that you invite the best people in the world, the experts in their field, to join the faculty, and offer the students a period of intense concentration and study with these mentors, during which time they can achieve a level of work that is usually impossible,' says Papp.

In addition to Papp and Wood, the third key figure at the Accademia is its associate director Jonathan Palmer Lakeland, himself an opera conductor, vocal coach, and alumnus of the GSA. 'Studying at the Accademia is such a special experience,' says Lakeland. 'The size of our courses is quite small, so the young musicians in attendance get a lot of individual attention. Every time I am conducting, playing the piano, or coaching, I'm in constant use of the knowledge that I gained as a student at the Accademia.'

This year's crop of young singers came from all over the world: sopranos included Australian Alexandra Oomens, Italian Chiara Mogini, Iranian Forooz Razavi, Briton Grace Marie Wyatt; mezzos Aigul Akhmetshina, originally from Russia, Lituanian Gabrielė Kupšytė, American Kathleen Felty and Greek American Polixeni Tziouvaras. The men were American tenor Martin Luther Clark, Serbian bass Mark Kurmanbayev and Ukrainian bass Oleksii Vereshchak.

Outstanding, in my view, both at the coaching sessions and the one concert I attended were Aigul Akhmetshina, well known to British audiences for her appearances in Coven Garden and already on the way to a great career; Alexandra Oomens, the excellent

Semele at the Royal Academy's production a couple of years ago; and Kathleen Felty, a technically astute singer with a fantastic vocal range – from low contralto to soaring high notes – and an ardent desire to improve and perfect herself in every sense. This desire was palpable among all the participants, and it was exhilarating to watch them improve every single day, after the constructive advice and tips from Jonathan Papp and the young tenor Freddie De Tommaso, demonstrating the complex art of inhalation and exhalation as a basis for good technique.

Like many ventures that turn out to be life-changers for those concerned, The Georg Solti Accademia happened almost by chance. As Lady Solti once explained in an interview to Reuters: 'A neighbour in Castiglione, Candice Wood, said the Royal Academy of Music was having a summer class for singers and wouldn't it be nice if the singers could come to Castiglione. And even nicer if we named the event after Solti? I felt this would be a wonderful way to repay the musical world in which my husband had risen to the top of his profession.'

Wood had just organised the Amiata Summit in 2004, dedicated to nurturing innovation and revitalising the traditions of violin making. Its sponsors included the Province, the Region, the Comunità Montana and the Gas Company GEA of Grosseto (who also went on to support the Accademia). 'In the first year, however, we started the whole project with a budget of just €3,500 euros!' Wood recalls. 'That year the singers paid for >

The GSA young singers perform in concert in memory of Lady Valerie Solti in Castiglione di Pescaia

Coaching with soprano Barbara Frittoli and GSA artistic director Jonathan Papp





their accommodation and tuition but we and the coaches didn't get paid. Now, with the help of a raft of philanthropic support, the Accademia offers every student a full scholarship covering everything from the teaching fees to the full-board accommodation.

As with most charitable organisations, fundraising is a year-on-year focus for the GSA. One of the GSA's main supporters from its earliest days has been Rolex, famous for its extraordinarily generous support of music and opera worldwide, who came on board initially through connections with Lady Solti and Dame Kiri Te Kanawa. Other support emerged by happy chance: 'I met Stefano Palumbo, who runs the Nando and Elsa Peretti Foundation [a major funder of education and arts projects, among other things], when I happened to be standing next to him at the same window at the annual Palio in Siena. I had no idea who he was, but we started chatting and he asked what I did. I told him about the young singers' programme and he asked, "Do you need help?" So our relationship with his Foundation started right way and they have been supporting us for the past 18 years!

'Elsa Peretti herself has been a great supporter of the Accademia. She gave generously to support our students, and gave wonderful dinners for us at her house. Elsa and the Peretti Foundation foundation have also long supported the GSA's other initiative, our course for répétiteurs which runs annually at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice. She wanted to do something for the unsung heroes behind the scenes. Through her work as a celebrated jewelry designer, she knew and appreciated the world of technicians. Together we started the Solti-Peretti Course for Répétiteurs, now based at the Giorgio Cini Foundation, in Venice.' Like the bel canto course for singers, students on the répétiteur course also receive full-tuition scholarships.

An extremely accomplished vocal coach and répétiteur himself, Jonathan Papp (GSA Artistic Director) has a deep appreciation for the challenging work of the opera répétiteur. "The répétiteur is often an unsung hero. It's a very interesting job, and it's an essential one. Opera singers rely upon répétiteurs and vocal coaches more than anyone."

There is cross-pollination between the GSA programmes in Castiglione and Venice. On both courses Richard Bonyngue, Jonathan Papp, and Jonathan Palmer Lakeland are tutors, providing continuity. Each year, two répétiteurs attend the bel canto course for singers. Meanwhile, six singers from the bel canto course are dispatched to the répétiteur course as "guinea pigs" for the répétiteurs. 'We try to make it a mix,' says Wood. 'Say, a confident, accomplished young opera singer with a young pianist who may have just begun their postgraduate training.'

On the répétiteur course, students create their own five-piano arrangement of an opera overture, and take turns conducting and playing the Act finale from *Così fan tutte*, in addition to playing, studying, and coaching a multitude of other repertoire. "The course is such fun yet very challenging. You leave there with a far deeper capacity for the practical and theoretical concepts that great opera répétiteurs must master," says Lakeland. Wood and Papp have an as of yet unfulfilled dream 'to perform opera in a proper theatre so that we can offer our singers the full roles to train for'.

After spending a few wonderfully refreshing and yes, educational, days watching the accomplishments of the Accademia and visiting the Solti summer house in nearby Roccamare, I left assured that Sir Georg Solti, (one of the warmest, most 'giving' individuals that I have ever encountered in the music world),

would have been proud and thrilled to have such an organisation founded in his name, dedicated to creating the future generation of singers. As he mentioned in my book *Maestro: Encounters with Conductors of Today*, he loved singers – his older sister Lily was an accomplished soprano. And he was in turn loved for the way he encouraged, cushioned and breathed with the singers he worked with in

his during his long and distinguished career in the world's great opera houses. **ON**

The Georg Solti Accademia is auditioning singers for its bel canto course to be held in 2022. Visit www.georgsoltiaccademia.org/belcanto. The next round of application for the répétiteur course will open in autumn, 2022 for the 2023 iteration of the course.

This year's Accademia singers at the final concert, with the artistic and administrative team: front, from l to r, Candice Wood, Jonathan Papp and Jonathan Lakeland

The stunning Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice, with (right) participants in the 2020 répétiteurs' course

Freddie De Tommaso – the teaching tenor

During my stay in Castiglione, I met the young tenor Freddie de Tommaso. The 28-year-old's star is on a meteoric trajectory: this year saw the release of his first recording for Decca, entitled *Passione*, dedicated to this late father Franco who died when Freddie was eighteen, without seeing his success. The release topped the charts as the No 1 classical album soon after its release (beating the previously unavailable Andrea Bocelli).

A regular habitué of George Solti Academy activities, this time Freddie was in Castiglione not as a student, but as a coach – a role in which he makes maximum use of his sunny disposition, innate communicative gifts, technical know-how and fresh approach.

'I first came here in 2017, my last year as an undergraduate at Royal Academy. My coaches were Barbara Frittoli and Massimo Giordano, who being a tenor himself gave me a huge insights into singing with my voice-type. For a young singer, a lot of what you do is about trial and error. You have to try various things and find out what works for yourself. Jonathan Papp was my tutor at the RAM as well. I loved his course, and he knows how much I enjoy teaching.'

Originally, he found out he could teach when a young student wrote to him in London after seeing a performance of his and asked to meet and perhaps get some advice. 'So we did a few scales and I gave him some feedback. He said he found it useful and asked if we could meet again the following week! So there I was – a teacher!'

Tommaso certainly has a flair for tuning into singers' individual

personalities and showing them a few technical pointers that instantly change their performance. I watched him working with an Italian soprano on wonderful way of positioning the sound after the word 'Signor' in Tosca's aria *Vissi d'arte* that would ensure that the next phrase sounded smooth. It was a small point, but the difference was obvious straightaway. 'What I really like about this course,' Tommaso says, 'is that everybody is really eager to improve.'

