

Rediscovering a Neapolitan Musical Treasure in New York

Eleonora Mazzucchi (April 16, 2008)



A talk with the musicians from the Neapolitan Music Society and with Matilda Cuomo during a wonderful concert in New York City.

The [Neapolitan Music Society](#) [2] closed its world premiere showcase of Neapolitan music at the [Skirball Center](#) [3] Sunday evening. Introducing the Neapolitan Symphony Orchestra were Peter Ravella, the chairman of the NMS and once again, Prof. Robert Gjerdingen. Gjerdingen, a self-described Norwegian-American, stressed “that this music isn’t just about being Italian” and that the



Neapolitan genre was a force unto itself. Indeed he used a very New York metaphor to remind the audience that royals across Europe sought out Neapolitan musicians of the 18th century like "George Steinbrenner scouring the Triple-A Club."

And there is at least one person who still believes in the "Triple-A Club" potential of Neapolitan music. You could even say that without her support the entire Neapolitan music event might not have been possible. Matilda Raffa Cuomo, wife of Governor Mario Cuomo, was an unmistakable presence at the concert. She attended with the Governor, sitting in a side aisle, and affectionately received those who came to speak to her at intermission. She is a woman who radiates warmth and when I approached her she earnestly welcomed my questions. Our discussion led to a timely comparison between the history of Neapolitan music, which was founded in Neapolitan "conservatori" for orphaned boys, and the state of the foster care system today. How did you become involved with the Neapolitan Music Society?

My good friend Ana Constandino [Assistant to the President of the NMS] introduced me to the whole thing. She really understood Maestro Longobardi [President and Artistic Director of the NMS] and his vision. I love this music, and not just because I'm Italian American. I really appreciate the wonderful efforts being made.

Was there anything in particular that appealed to you about this project?

The story of the orphans in the conservatories being trained in this music is fascinating. The fact that the orphans were given a trade is important, and the results they produced-- writing symphonies even from a very young age-- are just really impressive. So you have a personal connection to this story?

I traveled to Italy to see how the orphanages and foster care system were being run. I found a progressive methodology that houses Italian kids as a family. They're taught trades, and they become accomplished, well-adjusted members of society. It was an inspiration for me to set up Mentoring USA [Mrs.Cuomo has been a tireless advocate of this program, whereby each child in difficulty is assigned a mentor. It now also has a branch in Italy]. Our own foster care system could really learn from that. The system here is in trouble-- teachers become depressed about their teaching because they can't reach out to students, can't understand what they're interested in. In Italy, kids in foster care choose their own spheres of interest and can even work as apprentices in artisans' workshops or artistic fields. These are necessary things to help a child grow, and we're trying to bring that here. Do you have a memory from this trip?

I remember that one of the orphans who was working in ceramics gave me this beautiful ceramic plate [she opens her hands wide to indicate the size of the plate] and it was just amazing, like a professional had done it.

On that note, I thanked Matilda Cuomo. She smilingly shook my hand and I left her to speak with other women whom she greeted with that same familiar, disarming manner.

The program for "The 18th Century Neapolitan Masters" proceeded, and the music of such luminaries as Scarlatti, Fiorenza and Hasse, born of humble origins and then catapulted to world-wide fame, was lovingly rendered by the orchestra under the direction of Maestro Longobardi. A notable piece, fiery and dramatically melodic, was Johan Adolf Hasses' "Alma Redemptoris Mater". Contralto Tiziana Pizzi gave herself entirely to this piece, bellowing with poise and supplication the cries of redemption that for those moments, seemed to transport listeners to a different time-- perhaps a time when redemption was naked, something tangible felt in those full-bodied tones. The previous pieces had been jocular, up-tempo, though through the force of an all-strings ensemble (and one organ), no less emotive.

Longobardi and his orchestra were met with raucous applause, and then a standing ovation. Pleased by the reaction, the Maestro tenderly patted on the back friend and colleague, Concertmaster Alberto Vitolo.



I had the chance to speak with Maestro Longobardi, Alberto Vitolo and Tiziana Pizzi after the show.

How do you feel about this evening's performance? It is, after all, the culmination of all your hard work.

Vitolo: It was an interesting experiment putting together this music and bringing it to an audience for the first time. It's a music with a different language, a particular sound and we're very happy with the results we were able to achieve in a short amount of time. There is some difficulty in performing this kind of music, because it's essentially chamber music.

Longobardi: This is, in fact, the first time this kind of music has been taken on. I'm very pleased with the collaboration of the American musicians in our orchestra. They demonstrated a strong desire to play with us, to be involved in something different. It was their decision to join the orchestra.

Pizzi: The quality of their music and professionalism is very high. We're glad to have worked with them.

How were your music and your project received by Americans?

Longobardi: Like everything in the U.S., we were welcomed with great openness.

So what's next for the Neapolitan Music Society?

Pizzi: Should we tell them? We'd like to keep it under wraps!

Vitolo: Sure, we can tell them! We're going to do a big event in 2010... so that gives it away. It's Pergolesi's anniversary. Between now and then we're probably going to do two more concerts.

Longobardi: We've gotten a lot of great support, especially from the Cuomos. I think they have a special place in their hearts for this music because it's close to their origins. They've sort of taken us under their wing. We feel very hopeful!

The Neapolitan Music Society, based on this performance, has every reason to be.

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