

## Solti's legacy schools singers in Italian bel canto

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By Michael Roddy

LONDON (Reuters Life!) - "Figaro, Figaro, Figaro..."

The Italian sounds perfect, the hand gestures are there and at the end of the aria from Rossini's "The Barber of Seville", the audience at London's bijou Wigmore Hall erupts in cheers for...baritone Dong Jun Wang of China.

Wang, a native of northeastern Liao Ning province, is a 2006 alumnus of the Georg Solti Accademia di Bel Canto, named for the late Hungarian maestro and longtime music director of the Royal Opera who died in 1997. Founded in 2004 by his widow, Lady Valerie Solti, it is installed at their summer house in the Tuscan seaside town of Castiglione della Pescaia.

The academy immerses 14 young singers in Italian bel canto style for three weeks under the tutelage of a professional faculty and guest artists like Mirella Freni, Kiri Te Kanawa, Leo Nucci and Frederica von Stade.

"Freni was absolutely amazing, she'd know just what was wrong, how to fix it, she'd hear the sounds and say, 'Do this', make this sound more Italianate, and not to push it -- that was her big thing, not to push....I might audition and do it again," said soprano Meeta Raval, 24, of London, another 2006 alumnus.

Lady Solti told Reuters that founding the academy was her way of helping her late husband, who died suddenly of a heart attack, repay his debt to people who'd helped a young Jewish man escape from Hungary before the outbreak of World War II, and to the musical world in which he rose to become one of the great conductors of the latter half of the 20th century.

Here is an edited transcript:

Q: Why did you create the academy and what is the purpose?

A: "About five or six years ago a neighbor in Castiglione, Candice Wood (now the academy's chief executive), 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 call it after Solti."

Q: And this was to pay back some of the debt Solti felt for the breaks he got in life?

A: "When Solti was at the Budapest Opera House and they brought in anti-Jewish laws (in 1939) he didn't have a job. The (industrialist) Alfred Fellner, chairman of the Friends of the Opera, said there's going to be no future for you here...Gyori (Solti's name in Hungarian) said he wasn't ready to go away...but Fellner put money in his pocket and said go tomorrow, go to Lucerne...Shortly afterwards war broke out and his mother sent him a cable: 'Stay where you are, don't come back home.'"

Q: What happened to his family?

A: "His father died of diabetes because there wasn't any medicine, his mother was hidden by the concierge and his sister, because the family were a farming family since the 1500s in a village near Lake Balaton, they said she'd gone off to work on the land....(Gyori) was very lucky, terribly lucky."

Q: So you are giving back, on behalf of Solti?

A: "Yes, it's very pleasing if you can help them (singers)...It's the total culture, the meaning of Italian. Some people who come are from the Far East and it's a different culture so you introduce them to Italian culture and its pronunciation. Because you hear people come sometimes and present a piece which they've obviously watched a video or heard a record but they haven't got the true deep understanding of it. But they're all very talented and we have lots and lots people who audition and want to do it."

Q: And what did Castiglione mean for Solti?

A: "It was the first house he ever owned...and life had been tough and so you see Castiglione is a symbol for him, that's the point. This wonderful village gave him a sense of home. I remember when he took me there he said, 'Look at this red earth that's the color of the earth in Hungary. I feel in another life I lived here.' He always felt very close to this place. So it's really been so much a part of him and his life."

Q: He also became reconciled with Hungary at the end of his life, and is buried there (in Farkasreti Cemetery, Budapest)

A: "He was such a Hungarian -- when he ate apricots, fruit, he loved the smell of pines. Essentially deep down he was this Hungarian countryman, who loved bread. His family were millers as well. All these basic things he was very, very Hungarian. And the heat and the warmth."

(Editing by Paul Casciato)

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