

A Night at the Opera

Judith Harris (April 29, 2012)



This op-ed began with conductor Muti and will end with him. Two nights after their appearance in Rome the Chicago Symphony performed at the historic San Carlo Theater in Naples. Once again turning to the audience after the symphony's last notes rang out, the director Riccardo Muti confided, "I first came to this theater at age fifteen in a rented tux--it was obligatory to wear one. The trousers were too long, and I tripped on the steps. But I made it. So can you. Do not to wait for the government to act for you--act for yourselves."

ROME - On Monday night in Rome's magnificent opera house the Chicago Symphony Orchestra performed Shostakovich's dark Fifth Symphony, composed on the eve of war in 1937, and steeped in foreboding. When the last notes faded, conductor Riccardo Muti turned to the sell-out audience to remark that to find a suitable musical encore would be a challenge, but that he intended to do so because Italian President Giorgio Napolitano was in the audience.



Until that moment the President's presence had gone unnoticed, but the moment Muti spoke, the audience rose to its feet as one, whirling around in Napolitano's direction, and bursting into applause and shouts of "Bravo, bravo!" When the encore came, it had been carefully selected: the overture from Giuseppe Verdi's "La Forza del Destino," the force of destiny.

The reason for this truly unusual outburst was that Italians—at least the sort of Italians who attend concerts of classical music—are deeply concerned, not to say appalled, at the all too apparent double whammy of political and economic decline. In these tough times President Napolitano is seen as the guardian angel of a country on the edge of a political and economic abyss.

In the background is the daily dose of political scandal. The latest Milan wiretaps show the under-age party girl, Ruby Rubacuore, boasting that former Premier Silvio Berlusconi offered her cash in exchange for her silence. In the mythical northern Padania the Northern League's administrative manager admits hiding gold ingots behind a chest of drawers in his house (the police had already looked there so there may be a curious epilogue here). He was also hoarding diamonds bought with party funds--that is, with taxpayers' money-- as a currency hedge when there were fears of a Euro meltdown.

Not even Pier Luigi Bersani's Partito Democratico (PD) is immune. And

right-wing banner headlines trumpet (perhaps unfairly) that the professorial pro tempore government of Premier Mario Monti, which preaches financial chastity, just splashed out to buy 400 new cars to shuttle government VIPs and their aides about town.

This month also marks the third anniversary of the Abruzzi earthquake, in which 309 died, 2,000 were injured, and 56 town centers were destroyed or semi-destroyed. At present, according to the local press, 33,000 people are still lodged in temporary dwellings of one kind and another, and, although over \$300 million has been spent to support weak walls at L'Aquila, real reconstruction of the historical town center is yet to begin. Rumors of misuse of funds are rife.

The political dissolution is complicated by economic woes. A rash of suicides of troubled businessmen--one every four days--cannot yet be compared with the far worse record in Greece, but is of obvious concern. When the small manufacturer fails to be paid by his customers, he cannot pay his creditors, his employees or his rent, and finds himself facing bankruptcy. Another straw in the wind: during the past six months rents in ten large Italian cities have fallen by 5%--that is, a projected 10% or more annually--while in Naples and Venice, by 10% (20% annually).

"We are in a recession on a par with that of 1929," sentenced Giovanni Sartori, one of the grand old men of Italian political commentators. Writing in the *Corriere della Sera* of April 22, Sartori said that the mainstream political parties are all mired in "the same political sludge." In his analysis, Italian politics have passed through three distinct political phases. The first, from the early postwar years until about 1990, was characterized by a trio of "mass political party organizations": Communist, Catholic and Socialist.

But after 1990 this type of political party organization disintegrated into formations generated and dominated by TV. This second phase of "the light-weight party" (*partito leggero*), in which the mass political organizations were gradually dissolved, has lasted twenty years and was characterized by televised political propaganda.



This has now been supplanted by what Sartori calls the “liquid party,” a term coined by Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman referring to societies which change too quickly for solidity. On the Italian political scene this liquidity, which is canceling the very term political party, is a result in part of Facebook, blogs and Twitter, and has produced the Beppe Grillo movement, which pollsters say may now have up to 8% of the potential vote in administrative local elections to take place within the next few weeks.

The problem, says Sartori, is that Grillo has no plan for governing the complexity of a nation state. As for candidates, the comic turned political crusader seems to be proposing spontaneous lists of candidates for which he will more or less guarantee, though upon what basis is something of a mystery.

Behind Grillo, however, more than tweets or sms's, is anger and the obvious fact that the political rot has brought disgrace upon all the larger establishment parties, to greater or lesser degree. Not even Catholic leader Roberto Formigone is escaping unblemished as photographs of him in a bikini on a rich buddy's yacht grace the dailies.

But what people continue to disagree about, during this week which commemorated the liberation of Rome from Nazi-Fascism on April 25 of 1944, is what is to be done and the underlying causes. For some it is all the fault of accepting the Euro and joining Europe. Others blame poor mass education, family and buddy clientelism, the lack of reward

for professional merit, the failure to teach languages in a serious way and the failure to invest in research.

A few--and they are still in the minority--insist that Italy, with its absolutely unique heritage of art, architecture, archaeology, museums and lovely historical cities, has not invested enough in protecting and promoting these marvelous resources. Anyone reading this blog knows that this is my personal opinion.

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Thank you, Maestro.

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