

Florence & Its Music Scene

Fred Plotkin (July 10, 2015)



Fred Plotkin, one of America's foremost experts on opera, meets with the mayor of Florence Dario Nardella in New York. They discussed his city and its music scene—rich but usually overshadowed by its more popular visual masterpieces— as well as the new initiatives that the City is launching to promote many aspects of Florence's cultural heritage

Signor Sindaco, We know Florence for its visual art, its textiles, in architecture. But I would like to begin by talking about something that is less spoken about: music. I know that you are a musician yourself but you are not from Florence. Why did you go Florence in the first place?

I am not originally from Florence. I was born near Naples. My family moved from Naples to Florence when I was twelve years old. My encounter with music preceded the one with politics by many years. I started studying music when I was seven years old, in Naples, in the oldest conservatory in Europe, the San Pietro a Majella Conservatory. I then continued as I moved to Florence. I attended the Luigi

Cherubini Conservatory, named after a great Florentine composer and musician. And there I got a violin diploma. I pursued my studies in Switzerland and specialized in chamber music.

And then you went into law. How come?

In part because I had to come to terms with the reality of Italy, a country with great artistic and musical heritage, which however doesn't give young musicians many opportunities for work. So I chose a more pragmatic road, to have more professional opportunities. I went into law because I had always been fascinated with it. For a while I continued both with music and university work. I have to say that the relationship between music and law is a good mix because music is based on very precise rules. On the one hand, music follows a more natural law, which is what makes it universal. But there is a form of regulation, just like there is in law, living besides it, that humans had to come up with in order to interpret music.

And this form of regulation was first written down in Tuscany, by Guido d'Arezzo! So now tell me, who has more imagination, a musician or a lawyer?

Good question! For a musician, imagination is necessary. For a lawyer, it is not. But lawyers who try to interpret law with creativity and courage, often meet with greater success.

Let's talk about Florence now. Obviously, many of the tourists who go to Florence, do so to experience the visual art and to go shopping. But for me Florence is the city where opera was born. Unfortunately, I find that when people think of opera, they think of Milan, Naples, Venice, Turin now, and other cities, but not of Florence.

That worries me a little too. Because, as you said, opera developed from "Recitar Cantando" which originated in Florence. And even today theatre is very important in Florence and we have the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (Florence Music May Festival), which is the oldest such festival in Europe after that of Salzburg. The orchestra of the Maggio Musicale was founded in the 1930s, so it has a great history. But if this fact isn't well known around the world, then we Florentines have to ask ourselves some questions. We must become more effective in conveying this aspect of Florentine culture. In fact, many tourists come to Florence and the first thing they do is visit the Uffizi Gallery. However, it would also be great for these tourists to visit the spaces dedicated to music, where opera was born. We surely don't lack in cultural patrimony, we just have to learn how to promote it to the full.

What about the Nuovo Teatro? Can you tell us about that?

It was sold to get the resources to build the new one and to invest in transformations all over the city. The architecture of the Teatro will remain the same on the outside, changes will be made on the inside. It will serve a mixture of functions: part residential, part touristic, but also educational. This year we will also reopen, after twenty years, the Teatro Nicolini.

A classical Italian theatre of barely 400 seats, it's located right next to the Duomo and was built in the mid 1800's. So, as we open a new theatre, we also bring back an old one. Then there's also the Teatro della Pergola, the most famous legitimate theatre of Florence, one of the most ancient in the world, an architectural jewel. It's linked to the history of the United States because it's there that Antonio Meucci, the inventor of the telephone, worked. Although everyone believes Alexander Graham Bell to have been its inventor, it was in fact Meucci who came up with the first system that we know today as the telephone. To this day, the Teatro della Pergola has a great program, it hosts the great artistic director Gabriele Lavia. It also hosts opera and many other concerts.

So there are many theatres in Florence, but is there a system of communication and collaboration between all of them, especially considering that not many people know

about them?

During the last years we have been working to create networks between theatres. We have created a net that ties together prose theatres not only within the city but all over the metropolitan area. It incorporates many contemporary and experimental theatres. At the same time, we have a net of musical institutions, encompassing the orchestra at the Opera and the orchestra of the Teatro Verdi. Florence is a small city but with the numbers of a capitol: We have three permanent orchestras, one important theatre company, a well-developed ballet, especially in the field of contemporary dance.

How do you attract the young public in Florence?

Starting with small children. We have created a project that will offer one hour of musical instruction per week starting from kindergarten. It will be launched in a few months in all kindergartens in Florence. Music can be learned very early on, as a game. We also have program with the Teatro dell'Opera called "Crescendo" aimed at older children in elementary and middle school, who will get the chance to experiment Opera by reenacting simplified versions of operas themselves. I believe that by living music in first person, it's possible to get a deeper understanding of it and to then appreciate it more as a spectator.

Finally, moving on to Florentine food and restaurants. Since Florentine cuisine is particular in that it's "cucina povera" (poor cuisine) brought to excellence, it is sometimes underappreciated compared to other Italian cuisines. Are there any initiatives being carried out to further promote Florentine cuisine?

Well, first of all, we should note that, from a historical point of view, Florence is home to the first major cookbook to cover all the cuisines of Italy, written in the nineteenth century by Pellegrino Artusi. In addition, by coming to Florence, people can experiment some of the newest spaces dedicated to Italian cuisine such as the "Mercato di San Lorenzo". Florence also hosts many celebrated restaurants, like Enoteca Pinchiorri, which offer cellars filled with exquisite Tuscan wines and a variety of Tuscan dishes. But like in any touristy city, the best restaurants have to be dug out and it may take some time to discover in which "osterie" lie the best "ribollita" or a truly unforgettable "pappa al pomodoro". Florence is not a city that can be experienced in a hurry.

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