

After 67 Years, Sanremo Festival still Bewitches Italy

Judith Harris (February 09, 2017)



In both the good times and the bad, the Sanremo Festival is an institution which Italians love almost as much as spaghetti and Michelangelo. One out of every three Italians watches the grand finale of the Sanremo Song Festival, now in its 67th year.

In a nation of some 60 million, the grand finale of the [Sanremo Festival](#) [2] draws an amazingly huge audience of over 22 million. Now in its 67th year, the Festival began Tuesday and concludes Saturday, Feb. 10, with the winner chosen from among 22 singers, including eight beginners.

During its first night there was already a winner, given a standing ovation: the courageous rescue team, introduced on stage as "the heroes of the Mezzogiorno." These are the men and women representing the thousands who had raced to [Amatrice](#) [3] to try to save lives after the earthquakes which flattened the ancient town of Amatrice in September.

Introducing them in a pause between song contestants, co-host [Maria De Filippi](#) [4] said, "Heroes are those who don't give up, who don't just sink into tears. They do their duty, they go home without publicity or pay. It is important for us not to forget them." With them was the rescue dog Thor, a



labrador brought on stage in the Ariston Theater together with his owner, Fabio, volunteer with the Alpine Rescue team from Amatrice. With them were Italian Crisis Unit representatives from the Guardia di Finanza, Red Cross, Army, Civil Protection Agency and Fire Brigade. In another touching moment, homage was paid to the late singer [Luigi Tenco](#) [5], who died, perhaps a suicide, at Sanremo 50 years ago. (To see and hear him and the song he wrote, click here [>>>](#) [6])

This was the third year when the amiable presenter [Carlo Conti](#) [7] co-hosted the Festival. Conti, 46, was born in Florence and had worked as a part-time DJ and full-time bank teller from 1981 through 1985, when he made a debut on Rai1 as a presenter on a musical show. An instant success, he later hosted the popular Sunday TV show "[Domenica In](#) [8]" as well as a series of televised Miss Italy contests.

Hosting with him was Maria De Filippi, also 46, a veteran presenter of popular TV shows and the author of two books. The fourth wife of TV star [Maurizio De Costanzo](#) [9], De Filippi conducted several popular TV programs herself, including "Saranno Famosi" (They'll be Famous), whose name was later changed to "Amici di Sera" (Evening Friends) the title of one of her two books. She and Costanza have an adopted son, three dogs and three horses, and she reportedly goes riding every morning.

These co-hosts do not fit into the customary TV "star" firmament. Neither is exactly a sex symbol: at 46, both are middle-aged. And what a delight to have, on stage for a pop song contest, two people with interesting appearances, down to the glasses they each wear (your correspondent has worn glasses since she was ten years old). In a way, their presence, along with the choice of various types of music and singers of all ages, has helped to rejuvenate the Sanremo Festival.

In musical terms, the Festival has always been noted for what is called the Italian melodic style, whose roots are from the bel canto and characterized by elaborate melody lines. A short essay on Italian music traces the version developed in the past half century to Domenico Modugno (who can forget "Volare"?) and to Nilla Pizzi and Al Bano. (Click [here](#) [10] to see). Most interestingly, [Al Bano](#) [11] himself was on hand Tuesday singing, albeit without great praise from the usual early critics, the lyrical "Di Rose e di spine" (Of Roses and Thorns).

The actress [Nilla Pizzi](#) [12], who died in 2011 at 82, has often been dubbed "the queen of Sanremo." She was a farmer's daughter, and won fame during the Fifties and Sixties, particularly for her song "Grazie dei Fiori" (Thanks for the Flowers), which won the Sanremo competition during the very first Festival year, 1951.

Years ago I personally co-hosted a multi-lingual radio broadcast of the Sanremo Festival for [Rai International radio](#) [13]. Our finest moment was when an Italian woman then studying in India phoned to say weepily that she was so grateful to hear our international broadcast, which made her homesick. However, within the Sanremo musical media we radio broadcasters were definitely second-class, and, instead of being inside the Ariston Theater along with the TV crews, so that we too could admire the fantastic lighting shows that often outshone the singers, we broadcast from inside a Rai truck at the edge of the red carpet.

Still, one after another, into our studio truck came the song contestants. Some of these interviewees were fascinating, others challenging: the worst moment was my attempt to interview a fledgling songstress of 15. ("Uh, how was school today?") The best moments were when Nilla Pizzi dropped in. She would hop around the truck with teenage vigor and sing along, and on top of, the contestants' songs which we were transmitting worldwide. Fortunately, no one noticed this, and she was a Festival guest of honor at Sanremo in 2010, just one year before her death.

Stay tuned! Saturday night is the grand finale.

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