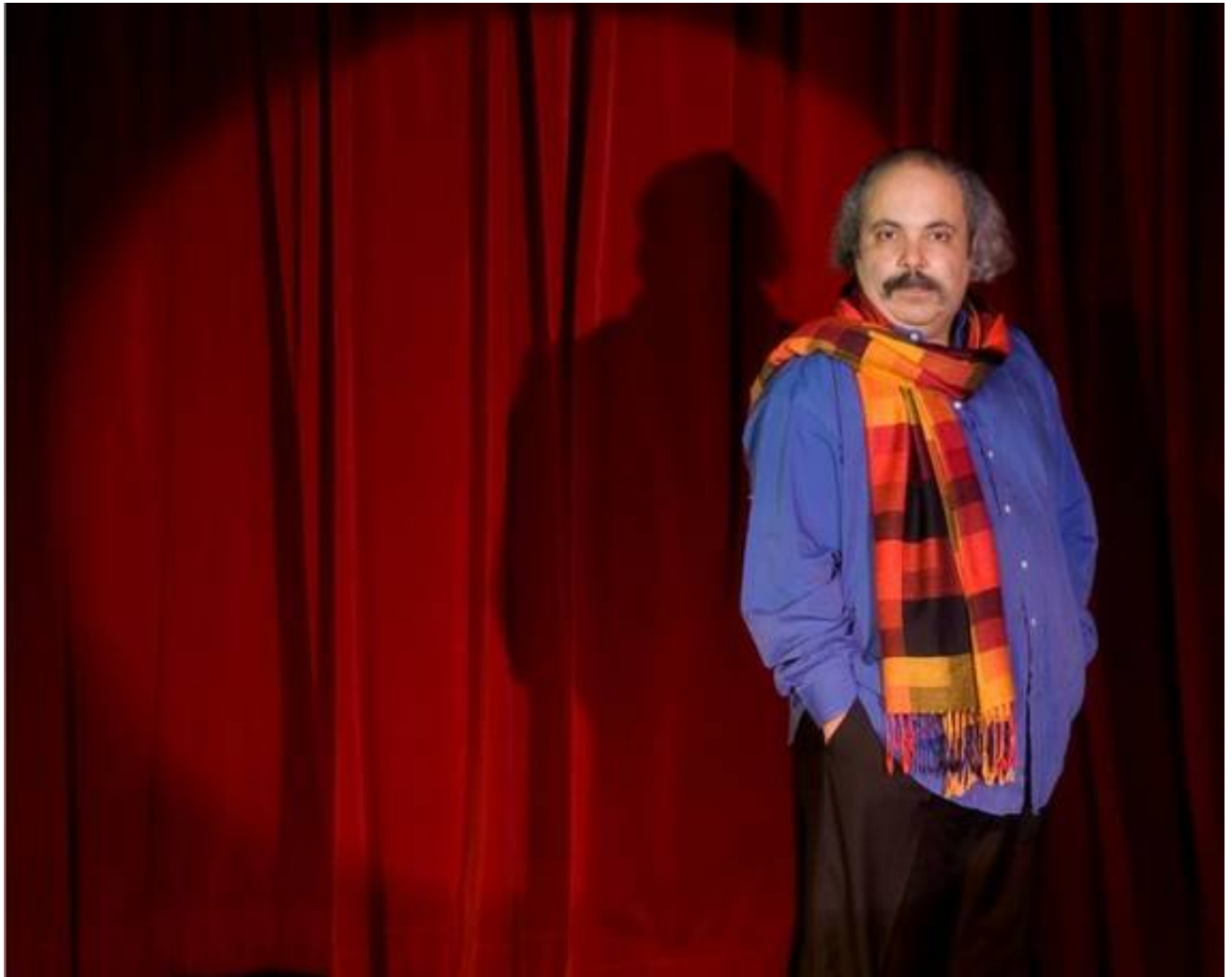




Adventures in Italian Opera with Fred Plotkin

Natasha Lardera (April 19, 2012)



Fred Plotkin is a world-renowned speaker and writer, much admired for his passion and thorough knowledge of the topics he loves. Looking forward to the upcoming evening with guest Francesco Ernani, i-Italy discusses his memorable conversations held at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò.

“After another sensational season, Adventures in Italian Opera with [Fred Plotkin](#) [2] comes to a close with a special guest, [Francesco Ernani](#) [3], General Manager of the [Teatro Comunale di Bologna](#) [4],” writes Stefano Albertini, Director of [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [5], in his announcement for the upcoming evening of April 24th.



Fred Plotkin is an international personality who is known “for his knowledge and his ability to share it” regarding opera, classical music, gastronomy, wine, or anything related to Italy. He is the author of 9 books and his current best-selling titles are *Opera 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Opera*; *Classical Music 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Classical Music*; and *Italy for the Gourmet Traveler*, the most complete book about Italian food and wine culture for the traveler. He is a popular lecturer, speaker, teacher and consultant on all the topics about which he is passionate, and opera is one of them.

i-Italy had a chance to chat with him despite his busy schedule and peek into the world of *Adventures in Italian Opera with Fred Plotkin*.

How did you become passionate about opera?

“That is a story too long to tell in one place. I have had opera in my life since I was a small child, having listened to the Met broadcasts on the radio every Saturday afternoon, then attending very early and loving the spontaneity and theatricality. I adore the music and how it narrates not only story but emotions. I love that each opera is based on history, literature and the subtleties and contradictions of human nature. My first working relationship with an opera company was the Lyric Opera of Chicago, when I was sixteen. I then was the first foreigner to study at the DAMS Institute of the University of Bologna, which is Italy’s Juilliard. I worked in theaters and festivals around Italy, culminating with a year at La Scala, thanks to a Fulbright scholarship, where I was the assistant to the visionary stage director Giorgio Strehler and basked in the glow of the inspiring and brilliant Claudio Abbado. I later was Performance Manager of the Metropolitan Opera for five years, learning and accomplishing a great deal and basking in the glow of the brilliant and inspiring James Levine. This is my story up to age 32 and I am almost 56. Since then I have worked as an opera consultant for the National Endowment for the Arts and many regional companies, written more than 500 articles about opera topics and *Opera 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Opera*, the best-selling standard text in America for learning opera. It is one of my nine books. I broadcast for NPR, BBC and appear on the Metropolitan Opera Quiz. I lecture at BAM, the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera Guild and the Smithsonian Institution. I write an opera [blog](#) [6] for WQXR radio which has become very influential in the past year. I was the opera consultant on the film “Moonstruck.” There is so much more I can tell you....”

How did the *Adventures in Italian Opera with Fred Plotkin at Casa Italiana* originate? And how do you conduct them?

“*Adventures in Italian Opera with Fred Plotkin* began as a one-time event on February 21, 2006 that was a conversation with Maestro Gianandrea Nosedà who, at the time, was a rising artist but who has now blossomed into one of the foremost conductors of his generation. Because we were at NYU, I decided that this should not be a ‘tell me about you’ kind of thing but rather an occasional in which both of us could teach the audience. Following the success of that evening, where the audience was highly enthusiastic and wanted more, I was asked by Dr. Stefano Albertini, Director of the Casa, and by the lovely Mariuccia Zerilli-Marimò, the benefactress of the Casa that bears her name, to consider a series. Both of them are great sustainers and promoters of the best of Italy, including its opera.”

“I think I bring a skill set to these evenings that helps them succeed. I speak Italian and know and love Italy immensely -- The [New York Times](#) [7] called me ‘a New Yorker with the soul of an Italian’--and that allows me to ask informed questions. Singers quickly realize that this is not going to be an interview that makes them uncomfortable. I see it as a great privilege to have them as my guest and see it as my responsibility to have them speak openly and with ease about operatic topics that they are seldom asked in other settings, where it is mostly superficial biography and fishing for gossip. I don’t do that.”

Were there any memorable conversations? Some that you are particularly fond of?

There have been so many that it would be unfair to single any out. But I recall Nosedà for how he inspired the audience as he taught them. Joyce DiDonato explained beautifully how she reads an opera score and looks for the keys to creating the character. Ferruccio Furlanetto, with utmost



modesty, nonetheless revealed the depth of his soul and we could see how it informs his creation of opera characters. David Daniels was entirely candid and, in so doing, gave us a window into his artistry. Marcello Giordani explained the particular challenges and pleasures of singing French opera when you are an Italian. Barbara Frittoli made clear how singing Mozart, as an Italian, is both a gift and a daunting challenge, one that I believe she meets magnificently. Catherine Malfitano helped us understand aspects of the singing life that most people do not even think of. Thomas Hampson, my most recent guest, speaks so lucidly and spontaneously answers what he is asked rather than go on automatic as so many accomplished public figures do. His son-in-law, Luca Pisaroni, who will be one of the great stars of the next decades, seemed able to do some of all the things I described in the artists above, which is impressive. Marco Armiliato eloquently explained how the right and left hands of a conductor work together and apart to achieve the desired results. And then there was Dolora Zajick, who not only gave the most fascinating lesson on vocal technique I have ever witnessed, but performed the miracle of explaining the plot of *Il Trovatore* in a way that it made perfect sense."

Do you have a "dream guest"?

"Many of my dream guests have already joined me at the Casa. Two artists--Karita Mattila and Aprile Millo--had to cancel due to illness but they would be welcome back any time. If James Levine and Claudio Abbado ever want to come, they have more to teach us than anyone I can think of. I am spellbound when I listen to them. I have tried to get Plácido Domingo, who is a very busy man, but will keep at it. Among other singers, three whom I would adore are Renata Scotto, Mirella Freni and José Carreras. I have not asked Scotto but intend to. Freni and Carreras are in Europe. These three are paragons of so much of what I revere in Italian opera performance."

"I realized that there are certain people I will never get, so have designated one night per season to recalling great artists of the past by having people who either worked with them or knew them well in other ways. The first year was Renata Tebaldi. This year was Arturo Toscanini (with his biographer Harvey Sachs). Next season will be Richard Tucker and in 2013-2014 it will be Luciano Pavarotti, whom I knew for thirty years.

Tell us about the evening of April 24 with Francesco Ernani.

"This will be a first in several ways. It is the first time the Adventure will be an *Avventura* as it will be done entirely in Italian. It will be the first time we have someone to talk about the business side of opera. Signor Ernani is one of the most experienced and accomplished arts administrators in Italy, having run or played crucial roles in opera houses in Milan, Verona, Genoa, Florence, Rome and now the Teatro Comunale di Bologna, which turns 250 in 2013. I knew him when I was a student in Bologna and Milan, and he always had an admirably open perspective in a part of the opera world where many of its protagonists are cagey and guarded. Francesco Ernani serves the art form rather than the other way around."

Adventures in Italian Opera with Fred Plotkin will return after the summer break, what is the program for next year?

Oct 24 **Remembering Richard Tucker.** Following on the tradition of devoting an evening to a great practitioner of Italian opera, the great American tenor will be recalled on video and in discussion with his son Barry and other guests to be determined.

Nov 9 **David Alden.** The first director to appear as part of this series, David Alden, renowned the world over for his incisive stagings, will have his first new production at the Met, Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*, opening on November 8, 2012.

Dec 3 **Giuseppe Filianoti.** The fine Italian tenor appears in two operas at the Met in the 2012-2013 season: Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* and Puccini's *La Rondine*.

Feb 26, 2013 **Sondra Radvanovsky.** The marvelous soprano appears in two Verdi operas this season at the Met: *Il Trovatore* e *Don Carlo*.

Mar 12, 2013 **José Cura.** The compelling Argentine tenor returns to the Met for one of the summits



of the opera repertory, Verdi's Otello. He will join us the evening after his first performance.

One more date is still being finalized for the 2012-2013 season of Adventures in Italian Opera with Fred Plotkin. Please visit the Web site of the Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò for updates.

List of those who has appeared on Adventures in Italian Opera with Fred Plotkin at the Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò of NYU:

Conductors: Marco Armiliato; Riccardo Frizza; Gianandrea Noseda; Evelino Pidò; Roberto Rizzi Brignoli

Singers: Fabio Armiliato; Lawrence Brownlee; Fabio Maria Capitanucci; David Daniels; Daniela Dessì; Joyce DiDonato; Mignon Dunn; Barbara Frittoli; Ferruccio Furlanetto; Marcello Giordani; Thomas Hampson; Dmitri Hvorostovsky; Takesha Meshé Kizart; Maija Kovalevska; Catherine Malfitano; Angela Meade; Michele Pertusi; Luca Pisaroni; Patricia Racette; Dolora Zajick

Writers: Ken Benson; Robert Marx; Harvey Sachs

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[3] <http://www.francescoernani.it/>

[4] <http://www.tcbo.it/>

[5] <http://www.casaitaliananyu.org/>

[6] <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/people/fred-plotkin/>

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