

11 The Italian tradition

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The conductor, in any form recognizable today, emerged later in Italy than in other European countries. Italy had no Habeneck or Berlioz, no Spohr or Mendelssohn – and later, as the role of the professional conductor developed, no Bülow or Richter or Nikisch. It was not until the first years of the twentieth century that a real Italian star exploded on the international scene, and if the blaze of Toscanini's fame has tended to obscure the activities of his predecessors, that is chiefly because they had been obliged to struggle for so long with the last vestiges of a ubiquitous native tradition that would not easily relax its grip.

The dominating feature of that tradition was opera. The Italians invented opera, and they remained faithful to it as their main form of musical expression and social enjoyment for the best part of three centuries; in spite of the jigsaw of political frontiers it spread remorselessly over the whole peninsula, and was accompanied by a parallel decline in other forms of music. Church music (much of it on operatic lines) remained in constant production, but the history of Italian instrumental music, after the great days of the Baroque concerto, is one of gradual attenuation; the few interested Italians tended to go abroad – Boccherini to Spain, Clementi to England, Cherubini and Spontini to Paris. Italy was “the land of song,” and symphonic developments in other parts of Europe were regarded at best as irrelevant to the melodic invention that was the real purpose of music, at worst as a serious threat to it; orchestral complication was viewed with mistrust. Small wonder, then, that Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini followed their predecessors to Paris where new possibilities were opening up in both orchestral and operatic fields, leaving behind them a pack of lesser figures to feed the home market with renewed helpings of the operatic formula that had served Italian audiences for so long.

By the 1860s, however, the tide was turning: the Parisian operas of Meyerbeer (who, having craftily adopted the first name of Giacomo, could be accepted as a sort of honorary Italian) were already introducing Italy to a more adventurous use of the orchestra, and the works of Verdi's middle period were creating a new and more complex format for dramatic expression. As the last chamber activities of the old ducal courts disappeared in the newly united kingdom, philharmonic societies with middle-class patrons took their place. There was a new cultural seriousness in the air; Beethoven

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was gaining ground, the name of Wagner could be timidly mentioned, and there were signs of a revival of instrumental composition. But it was still opera, in its evolving form, that was to be the main beneficiary of this long overdue recognition of the possibilities of the orchestra.

The role of the conductor to the end of the eighteenth century

As elsewhere, the first Italian conductors were simply time-beaters: generally a performer who kept his colleagues together while singing or playing from his own part-book, using either the staff, which traditionally marked his office, or a rolled-up scroll of music, but often relying on simple movements of the hand. Up to the sixteenth century the singers had only their own parts, with no barlines. It was the coming of opera and the growth of instrumental music that made a score and barlines essential. But though instrumental groups in the Baroque period were directed by the principal violinist with his bow, we know very little about how the earliest operas were conducted. The first Florentine examples, where the accompaniment was confined to a small ensemble, could be treated with the intimacy of chamber music, but as opera developed and dramatic action became less static, a range of instruments had to be balanced with the needs of singers moving about the stage. Theatre records show that the composer was often present at the harpsichord, where he no doubt set the tempo and gave cues while filling out the continuo bass, but as late as 1739 Charles de Brosses observed: “They beat time in church for Latin music but never at the opera, no matter how large the orchestra or how complicated the piece being played.” And he noted the problems this caused in the accompanied recitatives which were then beginning to find their way into *opera seria*: “the execution of these . . . is very difficult, especially for the instrumentalists, because of the capricious changes of pace, which are not indicated by any conductor’s beat.”¹

Eventually the increasing size of opera orchestras (the San Carlo in Naples around fifty players by the middle of the eighteenth century, the Scala, Milan, sixty-seven by 1778) and the growing complexity of relations between orchestra and stage brought about the system of dual responsibility that became standard over the whole of Europe: the *maestro al cembalo*, at the keyboard, continued the role of filling out the harmonies and accompanying the recitatives – he taught the singers their notes, rehearsed them, and in performance marked the tempo for them with his hands or by stamping his feet; the principal violinist, or *capo d’orchestra*, reading from a violin part, directed the orchestra by playing confidently (and generally loudly) with bold gestures of his bowing arm.



Figure 11.1 Caricature of the Neapolitan composer Nicola Logroscino banging on the side of his harpsichord (Pierluigi Ghezzi, c. 1740/50)

Any system of divided authority risks confusion, not to mention disagreement and rivalry, and there is evidence of stamping, tapping, and banging on the side of the harpsichord as methods of keeping performers together. (See Fig. 11.1.) Banging was anyhow an established practice in choral performances, as Goethe found at Venice in 1786:

The performance would have been even more enjoyable if the damned conductor had not beaten time against the [choir] screen with a rolled sheet of music as insolently as if he were teaching schoolboys. The girls had so often rehearsed the piece that his vehement slapping was as unnecessary as if, in order to make us appreciate a beautiful statue, someone were to stick little patches of red cloth on the joints . . . I know this thumping out the beat is customary with the French; but I had not expected it from the Italians. The public, though, seemed to be used to it.²

And apparently remained so. Seventy years later the English baritone, Charles Santley, was at High Mass in Milan Cathedral. “The conductor was a great nuisance,” he wrote. “For *bâton* he used a piece of music twice doubled and folded flat, with which he beat the first two beats of every bar on the book in front of him. In a quick three-four movement the constant flip-flap engrossed the attention . . .”³

Audience and orchestra in the early nineteenth century

Since the opening of the first public opera house in Venice in 1637, local Italian audiences had come to regard opera more and more as a social occasion where they could indulge their passion for theatre – much as the Spanish do with bullfights or the English with football – rather than as a musical or dramatic experience. The conventions of Metastasian opera were rigid and predictable, the mainly classical plots pretty well known, and in any case most Italians would go to see the same opera night after night; what they really wanted was a chance to cheer the star castrato in a favorite aria, or boo some unhappy lesser mortal who had not the luck to please them. The emphasis on enjoyment never failed to provoke comment from foreign visitors. “Chess is a marvelous invention for filling the gap of those long recitatives, and music perfect for interrupting too great concentration on chess,”⁴ wrote de Brosses (an admirer of Italian opera for all that), and even when the long recitatives gave way to more varied dramatic treatment the situation showed no signs of changing. At La Scala in 1816, “during the . . . overture, several very expressive accompanied recitatives, and all the *pièces d’ensemble*,” wrote Spohr, “the audience made so much noise that one could scarcely hear the music . . . All over the house, people conversed aloud. Nothing more insufferable can be imagined for a stranger who is desirous to listen with attention, than this vile noise.”⁵

Nevertheless the playing at La Scala “very much surpassed” Spohr’s expectation. At the San Carlo too the execution was precise: “under the correct and spirited but somewhat too loud direction of Signor Festa, [the orchestra] had studied it well, though they were somewhat wanting in *nuances* of *piano* and *forte* . . .”⁶ In 1831 Berlioz (who it must be said had not yet been to Milan) found the Neapolitan orchestra excellent “compared with those I had encountered till then,” though he rather spoils it by adding “it was quite safe to listen to the wind instruments,” and he still notes “the highly disagreeable noise made by the conductor tapping with his bow on the desk.”⁷ Mendelssohn remembered that it was “a tin candlestick” on which the four quarters of each bar were beaten, “which is often more distinctly heard than the voices (it sounds somewhat like *obbligati* castanets, only louder).”⁸ So

did this mean that Festa, who was sixty by 1831 with other duties to attend to in Naples, had taken a night off? Or was the tapping so universal that Spohr thought it not worth mentioning? Berlioz was told that “without it the musicians would sometimes have been hard put to it to play in time” – which, as he adds, “was unanswerable.” And old habits die hard: in 1892 in London, when the seventy-year-old Arditi shared the conducting of *Eugene Onegin* with the young Henry Wood, “he still continued to tap every first beat of the bar on the top of a Bechstein conductor’s piano whenever the music was at all complicated.”⁹

If the orchestras at La Scala and the San Carlo generally commanded qualified respect, in the smaller provincial theatres even Stendhal, that passionate apologist for the Italian operatic scene, was forced to admit that “there are certain notes which their fingers just do not possess the necessary dexterity to strike correctly.”¹⁰ And in Rome, where the orchestra at the Teatro Valle was “permitted to chatter in a loud voice, to applaud the singers when the audience disapproves of them, to leave and resume their seats, and from time to time straddle across the partition which separates the orchestra from the pit,”¹¹ Spohr found that the Italian obsession with melody at all costs put yet another obstacle in the way of orchestral discipline:

The ignorance, want of taste, and stupid arrogance of [the Roman orchestral players] beggars all description . . . Each individual makes just what ornamentation comes into his head and double strokes with almost every tone, so that the *ensemble* resembles more the noise of an orchestra tuning up than harmonious music. I certainly forbade several times every note which did not stand in the score; but ornamentation has become so much a second nature to them, that they cannot desist from it.¹²

The baton

Although the official titles of *maestro al cembalo* and *primo violino capo* were retained long into the nineteenth century (at La Scala until 1853), the disappearance of *secco* recitative in all but *opera buffa* was rapidly making the role of the keyboard in operatic performances irrelevant. The composer of a new opera was still expected to “accompany” the first three performances at the piano, and while he did so his was clearly the authoritative voice: Donizetti wrote of the importance of seating the composer in such a way “that he can indicate to the principal violinist, by word and gesture, the various *tempi* that he desires.”¹³ But after the first three nights this authority passed solely to the *primo violino*. “Signor Rolla . . . directed as first violin,” wrote Spohr in 1816. “There is no other directing whether at the piano, or from the desk with the baton, than his, but merely a prompter with the score

before him, who gives the text to the singers, and if necessary, the time to the choruses.”¹⁴ Twenty years later, when the authority of the conductor had been well established elsewhere in Europe, the Scala orchestra was still led by Cavallini (Rolla’s successor) “for they have no conductors in Italy,”¹⁵ and even the great Paganini, fresh from Paris, found his proposal for a conductor of the modern type at Parma rejected as newfangled and unacceptable.¹⁶

Under the circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that the first Italians to establish a conducting career in anything like the modern sense did so outside Italy. Gaspare Spontini (1774–1851), who moved to Paris in 1803 and leapt into fame with *La vestale* four years later, entered conducting history in 1820 with his appointment as Generalmusikdirektor in Berlin, where he became probably the first Italian to conduct an orchestra with a baton. Spontini’s Berlin activities belong essentially to the story of German conducting,¹⁷ though the fanatical pursuit of precision and tyrannical control for which he was famous recall Toscanini as much as any German successor. And Toscanini springs to mind again in the case of Michele Costa (1808–84), another disciplinarian with an iron grip on his players. Costa, who later anglicized his name to “Michael”, settled in London in 1830 as *maestro al piano* at the King’s Theatre, where within two years he had abolished the existing system of dual leadership and, following the example of Spohr, Weber, and Mendelssohn, taken up the baton as sole director. His immediate success and lasting influence on London’s musical institutions are an English story,¹⁸ but Moscheles noted in 1849 that “[he] wields his baton more in Italian than German style,”¹⁹ and his tempos in symphonic works were criticized for a tendency that has often been seen as characteristic of Italian conducting. Verdi knew this, yet considered Costa “one of the greatest conductors in Europe;”²⁰ on the other hand Sterndale Bennett, hearing that Costa was to conduct the Philharmonic concerts, wrote to J. W. Davison: “I hope not: the only advantage would be that we might hear the whole of Beethoven’s symphonies in one night and still have time to spare for supper.”²¹ There were similar feelings about another Italian who ended up in England: Luigi Arditi (1822–1903), famous in the drawing rooms of Europe as the composer of *Il bacio*. Arditi’s long career took him to New York, St. Petersburg, and Vienna, but seldom to Italy: “He can conduct anything,” observed Shaw, “and come off without defeat, thanks to his address, his experience, and his musical instinct. But symphony is not his department.”²²

By far the most important of the Italian conductors of this generation, however, was Angelo Mariani (1821–73; see Fig. 11.2), whose career, apart from two brief interludes, took place entirely in his own country. Mariani is normally credited with being the first conductor to use the baton in Italy, although exactly when he did so is not easy to establish. At Messina, where



Figure 11.2 Angelo Mariani at the time of the premiere of *Aroldo* in 1857

he became *maestro concertatore* and *direttore d'orchestra* in 1844, he was unable “to give proof of what [he] could do” because of protests by the Sicilian musicians at having to play “under a *foreign boy*,”²³ which suggests that he was already trying out some stronger form of central control. Two years later he made his Milanese debut at the Teatro Re with Verdi’s *I due Foscari*, and followed it at the Carcano with a *Nabucco* that nearly landed him in prison for “having given Verdi’s music an expression too evidently rebellious and hostile to the Imperial government.”²⁴ But it was in 1852,

when he began a lifelong association with the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa, that he showed his true mettle, enlarging and improving the orchestra until it became the best in Italy, conducting it (certainly with a baton by now) with skill and authority, and making himself responsible for every detail of the performances in a way that had never been seen in Italy before.

His taste was adventurous: his virtuosity found an ideal vehicle in the operas of Meyerbeer, and when he doubled his position in Genoa with a similar post at the Teatro Comunale in Bologna he opened with Verdi's latest opera, *Un ballo in maschera*. His arrival on the scene came at a fortunate time for Verdi, whose development as a composer was reaching a point that demanded the services of a real conductor. At the rehearsals for the premiere of *Aroldo* at Rimini in 1857 his expertise was crucial to Verdi in the new and complex orchestral writing of the final act; when a performance of *Aroldo* was mooted in Paris, Verdi advised against it, saying "without Mariani the opera is impossible." The warm personal relationship which grew up between the two men in the years following *Aroldo* was not to have a happy ending, but Mariani's passionate advocacy of Verdi's music never diminished, and reached its crowning point in Bologna in 1867 with the Italian premiere of *Don Carlo*. Mariani surpassed himself, and the Milanese critic Filippo Filippi wrote:

The first and greatest credit for this marvellous achievement is due to the conductor, Angelo Mariani, for whom no praise, no epithets, can suffice . . . Not only did he rehearse and conduct the score, but he thought of everything, down to the smallest detail of the staging. From the orchestra his genius (it really is genius) sparkles; one would say that by richness of colour, by fire, by the magic of sonority, he creates another *Don Carlos* within the *Don Carlos* of Verdi.²⁵

Four years later he made operatic history with the first performance of a Wagner opera in Italy. *Lohengrin*, at Bologna on November 1, 1871, was a sensation, and Bülow, who came from Germany and attended several performances, added the enthusiastic praises of the Wagner camp. *Tannhäuser* in the following year, though no failure, made less impact, and seven months later Mariani was dead.

Clearly Mariani had the kind of personal magnetism that we associate with star conductors today. A good-looking man of great charm (which he used ruthlessly to attain his ends), he was severe and sometimes irritable in rehearsal, but in the theatre, "from the eminence of his conductor's rostrum, he dominated the orchestra, the stage and the adoring crowd of spectators."²⁶ Verdi, in whose eyes Mariani in his later years could do nothing right, was nevertheless clear about the importance of the new development. "Always remember", he wrote to Ricordi, "that the success of our operas lies most of



Figure 11.3 Verdi in 1879, a cartoon in *Vanity Fair* published when he visited London to conduct the *Requiem*. “The fire, which burns in . . . his dramatic music, is revealed undiminished . . . as soon as he holds the baton in his hand . . . [He] does not merely beat time, he conducts in the fullest sense of the word, he mirrors the musical ideas in his expression, his stance and the movement of his baton.” (August Guckeisen, cited in Marcello Conati, *Interviews and Encounters with Verdi* [London: Gollancz, 1984], p. 125.)

the time in the hands of the conductor. This person is as necessary as a tenor or prima donna.”²⁷ And to Escudier: “See how right I am to say that one single hand, if secure and powerful, can work miracles. You have seen it with Costa in London; you see it even more with Mariani at Bologna.”²⁸ When reported as having described Mariani as “a fine conductor who overdoes all his *tempi*” he explained: “he has this tendency, to give more *brio* to the pieces . . . Besides, I should have the same tendency, if I were a conductor.”²⁹ But he also saw the dangers of the new role, and wrote to Ricordi:

I want only one creator . . . We all agree on [Mariani’s] worth, but here we are not talking about an individual, however great, but about art. I cannot concede the right to “create” to singers or conductors . . . Once you praised an effect that Mariani got out of the overture to *La forza del destino* by having the brass in G enter *fortissimo*. Well, I disapprove of this effect. These brass instruments, *a mezza voce* as I conceived them, could not express anything but the religious chant of the Father Superior. Mariani’s *fortissimo* completely alters its character, and the passage becomes a warlike fanfare that has nothing to do with the subject of the drama, where war is purely episodic.³⁰

The succession to Mariani

Mariani’s example had a profound, if gradual, effect on the Italian musical world. At the San Carlo, the old ways continued until the 1870s (Verdi refused to allow performances of *Forza* and *Don Carlo* there because of the lack of an authoritative conductor), and at La Scala in 1865 Santley witnessed the survival of the old methods under Alberto Mazzucato (1813–77), *maestro concertatore* since 1854, whose *primo violino*, Eugenio Cavallini, had been director of the orchestra for seventeen years before that.

Cavallini [directed] the orchestra with his fiddlestick . . . taking the time from Mazzucato, who, seated in front of the stage, beat the time with his hand, whilst the chorus-master stood in front of his regiment also beating time. Altercations between [Cavallini] and the principal instruments were not uncommon. I remember one . . . [which ended] in the double-bass requesting the conductor to “shut up,” as he did not know what he was talking about.³¹

Nevertheless, the growing importance of the orchestra was changing traditional attitudes, and after Mariani’s death three contenders were waiting in the wings for the position of Italy’s leading conductor: Franco Faccio (1840–91), Emilio Usiglio (1841–1910), and Luigi Mancinelli (1848–1921). Usiglio, a brilliant young promise, seemed at first destined to step into Mariani’s shoes, but his dissolute lifestyle compromised his career and after

he had been too drunk to conduct *Aida* at Perugia in 1874 his reputation for reliability suffered. Usiglio's deputy, who saved the day on that occasion, was the young Mancinelli, a budding composer who was already considered brilliant enough to accompany the Scala orchestra to the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1878, and to conduct the inaugural season of the new *società orchestrale* at La Scala in the following year; he was later to build an international career as an authoritative and skillful director in London, Madrid, New York, and Buenos Aires, but he never achieved the preeminent position in Italy that Mariani had left vacant.

Faccio, on the other hand, unquestionably did. Like Mancinelli he began as a composer, but at the age of twenty-six turned exclusively to conducting, and only five years later succeeded Eugenio Terziani, Mazzucato's successor, as *maestro concertatore e direttore per le opere* at La Scala. After a bad period, the Scala orchestra was in need of strong direction, and in spite of his gentle manner Faccio provided it with panache for the next eighteen years. "He maintains the most perfect discipline," wrote Giulio Ricordi to Verdi; "he is very severe and reserved with the members of the orchestra who esteem and obey him without a whimper . . . [and has] a secure, calm and effective beat which brings about a truly commendable performance."³² By the time of the Paris visit, the Scala orchestra was once again the best in Italy; the programmes were varied, and the French press praised "the precision of attack, the clarity of sound and the scrupulous care for nuance" of the visitors, who played "with incomparable assurance. The indications given by the conductor are rigorously obeyed, without the smallest deviation – a spirit of ensemble perfect in the tiniest details."³³

The Paris visit was a remarkable tribute to the new interest in symphonic music that was by now spreading across Italy. In Turin, which provided the only other Italian orchestra at the exhibition, an early symphonic culture had been nurtured by a pioneering series of weekly *concerti popolari* set up in 1872 under the conductorship of Carlo Pedrotti (1817–93). Until his appointment as director of the Teatro Regio at the age of fifty-one, Pedrotti had been known mainly as a composer, but during the next fourteen years he transformed the musical life of Turin until it rivalled that of Milan and Bologna, and laid the foundations of the orchestra that Toscanini was to direct twenty years later. Even greater persistence in the symphonic repertory came from the composer Giuseppe Martucci (1856–1909), whose very first concerts in Naples included Berlioz, Schumann, Wagner, and the first performance of Brahms's second symphony in Italy, and who later, in Bologna, conducted the Italian premiere of that most symphonic of operas, *Tristan und Isolde*. At his concerts at the Turin Exhibition in 1884, Martucci's Neapolitan orchestra distinguished itself from its colleagues from Turin, Milan, Bologna, Rome, and Parma by giving complete symphonies (instead

of the single movements then favored) and actually including no operatic music at all, apart from overtures.

Martucci's conducting in Turin was seen to be markedly different from the more "extrovert" manner of Mancinelli and Faccio, but then Faccio, in spite of his wide range of taste (his last triumph at La Scala was the first Italian *Meistersinger*), remained essentially an opera man. Early in his career, rehearsals for the revised version of *Forza* initiated a close friendship with Verdi which lasted all his life. He was responsible for the Italian premiere of *Aida*, the revised version of *Simon Boccanegra* and in 1887 the *prima assoluta* of *Otello* – all of them under the grilling eye of the composer himself (and, in the last case, with the nineteen-year-old Arturo Toscanini playing as second cello). Faccio, in fact, is often seen as the link between Mariani and Toscanini, and in point of quality he certainly was. When Faccio took *Otello* to London in 1889, Shaw wrote: "The interpretation of Verdi's score, the artistic homogeneity of performance, the wonderful balance of orchestra, chorus, and principals, stamp Faccio as a masterly conductor. The work of the orchestra and chorus far surpasses anything yet achieved under Signor Mancinelli at Covent Garden."³⁴

Toscanini

Arturo Toscanini (1867–1957) marks a watershed in Italian conducting. He brought to their logical conclusion the reforms begun by Mariani, and summed up the opposition of Italian conducting to the more romantic, "interpretative" approach that had originated with Wagner and Liszt. But his international career also marked the end of an era, and his long life carried him over into an altogether new musical world of recordings, publicity, and media adulation. Though he began his career in opera, and directed at La Scala what is still regarded as one of the greatest regimes in operatic history, after 1929 he conducted no opera in Italy at all, and outside it only a handful of seasons at Bayreuth and Salzburg before he broke with both on political grounds. He was the first Italian conductor to make an international name in the concert hall, where his repertoire, though perhaps cautious by the standards of his contemporaries, included Berlioz, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Richard Strauss, and above all Beethoven, whom he regarded as the greatest of all. His passionate commitment to Verdi, who praised him warmly as a young man, and to Puccini, with whom he had a cordial but stormy working relationship, was perhaps to be expected given his background and temperament. But his championship of Wagner was also lifelong: he opened his first season in Turin with *Götterdämmerung* when he was twenty-eight, his first season at La Scala with *Meistersinger* three years

later, and made his farewell there with an all-Wagner concert at the age of eighty-five.

It was respect for Wagner that occasioned the first of those clashes with the entrenched habits of Italian audiences for which Toscanini was to become famous. At a performance of *Tristan* at Turin in 1897 he demanded the lowering of the house lights, an unheard-of procedure in a country where (despite Mariani and Faccio) opera was still a social occasion. When the audience reacted angrily he stopped conducting and, the lights being turned up, furiously smashed the lamp on the conductor's desk; the rest of the performance took place in half-light, Toscanini sitting, hardly moving his baton. The incident illustrates two things: the devastating nervous tension which could explode at a moment's notice into an outburst of totally ungovernable rage, and the uncompromising determination to obtain, in the orchestra, on the stage, and in the auditorium, the most perfect possible conditions for the presentation of a work of art. As director at La Scala he returned to the attack, lowering the house lights, getting the ladies of the audience to remove their hats, and refusing to allow encores. This last was hard: even Mariani, during the original *Don Carlo*, had found nothing odd in telling Verdi, "we had to repeat *four times* the famous eight bars for orchestra that conclude the trio in the third act,"³⁵ and audiences were not going to give in easily. Nor was Toscanini. On the last night of the 1903 season, unable to get his way, he walked out at the end of the second act of *Ballo in maschera* and did not come back to the Scala for three years.

Though his seven years as artistic director at the Metropolitan added American glamour to his reputation, the summit of Toscanini's operatic career was achieved in Milan between 1920 and 1929. As absolute master of a reorganized opera house he came as near as he ever did to realizing his vision of the ideal operatic performance; he exercised dictatorial control over every aspect of the production, coached the singers personally, inspired and terrorized the orchestra in equal degree, and finally banned encores. But his fanatical perfectionism, combined with growing opposition to the Fascist regime, eventually brought an end to his Scala career, and for the last twenty-five years of his life he lived in New York where he worked entirely with the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra and orchestra of the NBC.³⁶

It is from this period that his many recordings date. Toscanini is the first conductor in Italian history whose actual performances can be heard today, and the first thing that strikes one about them is intensity, and intensity at a level that can hardly be found in any other conductor. Even in old age, videos show a facial expression of fierce inner concentration that easily explains the famous outbursts of temper (which can also be sampled on recordings made live at rehearsals). Thanks to his notoriously accurate memory, he used no score, leaving him free for constant, piercing eye contact with his players;

there is a classical immobility of stance, and a wide, majestic beat. But there is no caressing movement to suggest the sense of intimate communication of, say, Bruno Walter, and still less is there the unpredictable flexibility of Furtwängler, whose strictures on his great rival were harsh:

He has no innate manual talent, and what he does have has been fought for and worked upon. But certain striking shortcomings have remained; above all the enormous waste of space in the *forte*. The size of his beat in the *f* is such that it makes any differentiation impossible. As a result, these *tuttis* are all the same . . . and the conductor's ability to bring out differences within the *forte* . . . is quite minimal.³⁷

But Furtwängler was of all conductors the furthest in spirit from the Italian instinct for directness, clarity, and precision that Toscanini epitomized; one can almost believe the story of the leader of the Scala orchestra who, watching Furtwängler's famously wobbly upbeat at his first rehearsal, leaned forward and whispered "Coraggio, maestro!" Equally one can understand (though not necessarily condone) Alma Mahler's plaintive sigh when Toscanini took over *Tristan* from Mahler at the Metropolitan in 1909: "the nuances in his Wagner were distressing."³⁸ The incandescent sense of original creation which characterized Toscanini's finest performances was the product of two deeply held convictions: first, an overriding insistence on the primacy of the composer's intention and the unique authority of the printed score; and second, an unshakeable belief in the power of the singing line to sustain and bind the elements of musical structure. "The motif of every rehearsal," wrote the BBC violist, Bernard Shore, "is '*Cantando, sempre cantando!*' You must sing every note you play, sing even through your rests! '*Ah cantare, cantare!*' 'Music, unless you sing, is nothing!'"³⁹ But the deliberately uncluttered directness of this approach and the continual search for melodic intensity could produce inflexibility and, in later years particularly, a relentlessness of tempo and attack that left little room for the subjective "nuances" of his German contemporaries.

For his many admirers, Toscanini was quite simply the greatest conductor in the world, and though this view might perhaps be contested today, he was certainly the greatest Italian conductor. "Maestro" in professional circles never meant anyone else. But in the end his Italian-ness was a matter of nationality and temperament, not of tradition. His insistence on fidelity to the composer's score, though it had a profound influence on his successors, was certainly no part of any normal Italian practice; his reforms deliberately attacked established attitudes, and the world recognition of his mastery in symphonic music was something entirely new in the history of Italian conducting. And in any case, by the end of his long life the values and priorities of the musical world were changing; internationalism was beginning to blur

the edges of traditional habit, and temperament, rather than tradition, was becoming the index of national style.

After Toscanini

For any Italian conductor whose life coincided with Toscanini's, comparison was inevitable, and it is ironic that the one man who looked like surviving it should have died tragically at the age of only thirty-six. But the meteoric career of Toscanini's special protégé, Guido Cantelli (1920–56), took up the American and symphonic aspects of the Toscanini legacy, and though the temperament was Italo-American any specifically Italian tradition is hard to identify. Much closer to the true lineage were three senior figures whose international fame did perhaps suffer from the Toscanini effect.

The eldest, Tullio Serafin (1878–1968), devoted his long career entirely to opera and was in many ways the traditional conductor Toscanini never was. A very different character, he achieved his ends by sensitive coaching and quiet insistence, and though he was responsible for the first *Rosenkavalier*, *Wozzeck*, and *Peter Grimes* in Italy his greatest contribution was in the field of traditional Italian singing. He worked with Callas, coached Sutherland, and was the father figure behind the post-war revival of Italian *bel canto* opera; he left in his recordings a model of perfectly balanced operatic conducting in a sphere that Toscanini hardly touched, and that has never received more unflinchingly natural and idiomatic treatment.

Nearer to Toscanini in style and dynamism was Victor De Sabata (1892–1967), whose early successes as conductor of the Monte Carlo Opera included the premiere of Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges* and the French premiere of Puccini's *La rondine*. When Toscanini finally left the Scala in 1929 De Sabata moved back to Milan for an association with Italy's first opera house that was to last fitfully until the end of his life, and would include visits to Munich and Berlin with the Scala company and a triumphant *Otello* in London in 1950. Though he was widely admired for his Beethoven, Debussy, and Wagner (*Tristan* in particular), his home was always Italy, and his musical sympathies were grounded in the world of late Verdi, Puccini, the *verismo* composers, and the new symphonism of Respighi. To this repertory he brought an aristocratic brilliance and fiery intensity that can often recall Toscanini, though there is greater spontaneity, and an acute ear for the subtleties of orchestral color. His few recordings include a *Tosca* that ranks with Toscanini's *Falstaff* and *Otello* as one of the classics of recorded Italian opera.

And finally there is Vittorio Gui (1885–1975), a more modest figure whose distinguished career was almost entirely confined to Europe. As a

result he has tended to be taken for granted, but this is to underrate a highly intelligent and accomplished conductor. Perhaps significantly, he was the only one of the three to be invited to conduct at the Scala during Toscanini's directorship (opening the 1924 season with *Salome*), and in 1933 he beat Toscanini by three weeks as the first Italian to conduct at Salzburg. He championed Brahms in Italy, conducted more contemporary music than most of his colleagues (he was personally congratulated by Debussy), but ranged back to Mozart, Gluck, and Purcell and made a speciality of rare and neglected operas. The vital buoyancy of his style made him an irresistible conductor of *opera buffa*, and he was a leading spirit in the Rossini revival of the mid-twentieth century; his recordings with the Glyndebourne company in this repertory remain models of elegance, humanity, and wit.

In a short survey that concentrates on representative figures it is inevitable that many names fail to get the attention they deserve: Verdi's faithful pupil Emanuele Muzio (1821–90), for example; or Giovanni Bottesini (1821–89), the double-bass player turned conductor whom Verdi chose to direct the premiere of *Aida* in Cairo (though only, it must be admitted, after Mariani and Muzio had turned it down); or Beecham's favourite Verdi conductor, Leopoldo Mugnone (1858–1941), who gave the first performances of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Tosca*; or Cleofonte Campanini (1860–1919), who put on the first *Otello* in New York, conducted all over the world, and ended up in Chicago. And that is not to mention the dozens of worthy practitioners across the country propping up what was left of the local operatic tradition. But by the time the careers of Serafin, De Sabata, and Gui drew to a close, air travel and ease of communications, the growing power of the media, the development of radio and television, and above all the establishment of the recording industry as a dominant factor in musical life, were all creating a vast musical supermarket, in which personality was everything and tradition had little place.

A conductor like Carlo Maria Giulini (b. 1914), who came to maturity in this world, was exposed as a student to a range of music that would simply not have been available to an earlier generation of Italians. The orchestra of the Accademia di S. Cecilia in Rome, a late product of Italy's growing interest in symphonic music, had been inaugurated by Martucci in 1908 and by the 1930s, in Giulini's own words, "was one of the greatest"; as a member of the viola section he found himself playing under the batons of Furtwängler, Klemperer, and Walter, and later making his own debut conducting Brahms on the same podium. By the early 1950s, he was a conductor at the Scala (where a recording of *L'italiana in Algeri* provides evidence of the dynamic brilliance of his earlier style), but his vision of the integrity of opera drove him to a perfectionism that rivalled even Toscanini's, and to an increasing disillusionment with the working conditions of opera. From 1967 he turned

to symphonic conducting, with deeply considered, spacious performances of the German repertory whose warmth and flexibility recalled his early admiration for Walter – and in later years, it must be added, the more eccentric tempos of late Klemperer as well. But his taste remained catholic, and in 1990 he completely rethought and recorded a blazingly convincing interpretation of that oldest of warhorses, *Il trovatore*, which shocked traditionalists – and magnificently illustrated the change in attitudes that was still possible at the heart of the Italian musical heritage.

Of Giulini's successors in the next generation Claudio Abbado (b. 1933) has most obviously followed the Giulini model, combining some fifteen years as director at the Scala with orchestral appointments in Vienna, London, and Chicago, before leaving Milan for the Vienna State Opera and finally, in succession to Karajan, the Berlin Philharmonic. His rival, Riccardo Muti (b. 1941), has also done the international rounds: the New Philharmonia in London in succession to Klemperer, the Philadelphia Orchestra following Ormandy, and the Scala the minute Abbado left it vacant. Of the two, Abbado has absorbed more of the central European ethos, with a persuasive rather than a dictatorial manner at rehearsal and a fine ear for integrated detail and balanced orchestral sound; Muti, a firm disciplinarian with a sharp wit, produces high-voltage performances that are perhaps closer to the Toscanini inheritance, and therefore more overtly Italianate. But both men still share with Giulini three characteristics that are widely seen as Italian: a vital feeling for rhythm, a powerful sense of melody, and a passionate directness of musical approach. Muti, in an interview in 1990, attempted to define what it was about Toscanini that was typically Italian.

I mean, to go direct to the music, to the essence of the phrase, just straight to the point. I think that has influenced many generations of conductors that may sound completely different from Toscanini, but still are under his influence in this strict approach to the music . . . I don't think that Giulini, or myself, or other Italian conductors, think in vocal terms when we conduct. But, of course, we . . . ask players to sing; *cantare* – that means to be extremely *espressivo* . . . I don't think that it is a limitation . . . I would not say that Italians are special [in this] . . . It is just that our temperament is different.⁴⁰

So is it tradition, then, that has survived – or simply temperament? As Giulini said: “If you ask me what makes an Italian conductor I have not the answer.”⁴¹