

# La dolce vita

During an intense fortnight on the Tuscan coast, budding opera stars from all over the world discover that in Italy bel canto is more than a style of singing – it's a way of life.

**Amanda Holloway** drops in on the participants as they are put through their paces...

It's a late August afternoon in the seaside town of Castiglione della Pescaia, Tuscany. Light streams through the window of the small library where Mirella Freni, one of the world's greatest bel canto sopranos, is giving a masterclass to a group of young singers. Swedish mezzo Matilda Paulsson is the student under the spotlight. 'No! Not like thees, your mouth must be like thees'; Freni mimes an O shape... 'not EEEEE [she makes a strangled chicken noise]. That is too much in the throat.' Paulsson tries to follow her instructions. 'Is a little better, but you steel drop.' Freni grabs her chin and holds it in position while Paulsson starts her Bellini aria once again. The sound is forward and focused for a while, but loses momentum. 'No! Flat. Up,' Freni commands. From the piano, vocal coach Jonathan Papp says soothingly, 'Just a tiny bit more.' At the end of Paulsson's session, Freni announces, '*Bellissima voce*, but needs to be more *libera*.'

It's day nine of the Solti Accademia di Bel Canto, a 'total immersion' course in Italian language, music and the Italian sensibility. At moments like this, singers must ask themselves why they ever got into opera. But they have been chosen as

much for their resilience as their wonderful voices (that goes without saying, Jonathan Papp reminds me). An international pianist and accompanist and vocal coach at the Royal Academy of Music, Papp set up the Accademia with Italian language coach Emanuela (Pepi) Ferrari in 2004, and has been refining and expanding it since then.

Castiglione della Pescaia is a perfect place to ensure total immersion in the Italian language. The singers are plunged into the Italian way of life – the leisurely three- or four-course meals of antipasti, pasta and fresh meat or fish, the breakneck driving, cursing and hooting on the narrow streets. Emotions are always big, noisy and obvious – just like in opera. As Italian language coach Corradina Caporello keeps reminding the students, Italians wear their hearts on their sleeve.

Castiglione was the favourite holiday home of Sir Georg Solti, and his widow Valerie is still a prominent and popular figure in the area. When arts administrator Candice Wood approached Lady Solti with the idea for the Accademia, she immediately offered the support of the Solti Foundation. The Solti name helps sell the idea



The class of 2006 at the Solti Accademia

of the Accademia to potential sponsors, but Lady Solti herself is very involved, taking a personal interest in the progress of the singers and appearing in public to promote the course. A highlight of this year's session has been a day of relaxation for the singers in the swimming pool and grounds of the Solti villa.

If it sounds luxurious, the Accademia is actually run on a shoestring, reliant on goodwill and the energy of chief executive Candice Wood. A charming, tenacious English brunette married to an Italian, Wood is adept at cutting through bureaucracy and using her personal connections. She has drummed up financial support from the local commune and businesses, and individual sponsors. But her great coup has been to attract the interest of the Nando Peretti Foundation, which gives mainly to humanitarian, wildlife and environmental projects. It is now looking to expand into education, and the Accademia, with its brief to give overseas singers the chance to learn Italian repertoire and culture, is a good start. So far the Foundation's contribution has been modest, but Simonpietro Cussino says they are discussing plans for a *repetiteurs'* course, a winter Accademia, and a worldwide recital tour for course graduates.

Students are asked to pay their own travel and pay a few hundred euros towards the course (which is probably worth €6,500 per student). In return they get three weeks of tuition by top teachers, masterclasses with a diva, four public concerts (three with orchestra), publicity photos, 30 copies of a CD recorded at the concerts, and a showcase recital in London. And as Papp points out, they also get to work up audition arias with several teachers, which could help impress an agent.

For the first week, the timetable includes 30-minute individual sessions with Jonathan Papp (the 'best singing ears in the world', according to Paulsson) and Paolo Specca, head of the vocal faculty at Pescara Conservatoire. Shirley Keane, from East

End Opera, does two days of drama coaching, and Italian language is polished by the precise, organised Pepi Ferrari and the livewire Corradina Caporello, a teacher at the Juilliard and Curtis Schools.

Singers this year come from China, Japan, Mexico, Sweden, Poland, Canada, Russia and Great Britain, and pianists from South Africa and New Zealand. According to the coaches, each nationality has its own problems with Italian. For some it's the pronunciation of the consonants – Chinese speakers can't hear the 'l' and the 'r', the Dutch and Russians sing from halfway down the throat, and the English with their clenched jaw and clipped consonants tend to cut off the line of breath that is so necessary in bel canto. Says Caporello, 'The Russians use their whole body to make a big sound. In bel canto they have to find a sweeter voice.' It took Vladimir Tselebrovsky ten days, and a lot of angst, to find this 'sweeter voice', but when he did, he was delighted. 'I don't know how to thank you,' he said to her. 'In Russia we have no opportunity like this.'

After ten days of concentrated coaching, the singers are ready for masterclasses with the 'superstar'. Last year it was Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, who discovered an unexpected flair for teaching. This year Pepi Ferrari has managed to capture the busy bel canto soprano Mirella Freni, who is also a family friend from Modena. The singers are all very excited, but apprehensive, as well they might be. *La signora* Freni is a human dynamo – feisty, physical and relentless. Her fantastic technique – the result of constant hard work, she points out – allowed her to sing well into her 60s. Now she gives masterclasses all over the world, as well as at the institute in Vignola she and her husband, Romanian bass Nicolai Ghiaurov, started two years before his death in 2004.

The essence of her teaching seems simple – to produce the



Looking for the perfect mouth-shape: Mirella Freni in action

right sound in the right part of the mask (the 'casa harmonici', as she calls it), with the right mouth-shape. Everything she does is directed at getting singers to relax and find a natural, unforced sound. 'In the first days they were singing very stiff, the teeth closed. I say, it's impossible to sing this way – the voice doesn't come out.' When I observe that all the singers on the course have big voices, she looks sceptical. 'They believe sometimes if you push, you have a big voice. But like this, you will destroy your voice. If you sing in the right way, you save your instrument.' Though she is tough with the singers, she has an irrepressible sense of humour and a flirtatious manner – smiley Mexican tenor Jesús León was a bit of a favourite. 'I do a lot of

joking, but if they do something with no discipline, I change immediately. They need this, the young ones. It's a very hard career and it needs incredible discipline, incredible respect for the voice for you to go on stage in best form.' This transition between college and first professional roles is one of the hardest times in a singer's career. Papp says this course is not only about education, it's also about making connections for the students, introducing them to artists like Te Kanawa and Freni who can recommend them to other movers and shakers. Papp is keen to extend the reach of the course outside the Royal Academy, and this year he has succeeded. There are two alumni of the Royal College of Music, Simon Wallfisch, already a

successful professional cellist now hoping to exploit his attractive baritone, and New Zealand pianist Kirsten Simpson. Two wild cards are a couple from the Mariinsky Young Singers' Academy – petite blonde mezzo-soprano Ekaterina and her dashing baritone husband Vladimir. In spite of Larissa Gergieva's fearsome reputation for turning out drilled singers at the Mariinsky, their posture and voice production needed a lot of help, according to Pepi Ferrari.

On Day 12, the singers give a recital for invited guests in the luxurious Andana Hotel, owned by celebrity restaurateur Alain Ducasse. They get a rapturous reception, and the teachers are delighted with how much the singers have remembered. They

have a chance to improve on their performance in three more concerts with the Grosseto orchestra, in Castiglione, Grosseto, and finally the beautiful Palazzo Vecchio, in Florence. Meeta Raval will never forget that night. 'Everything came together. After 17 days working on these arias, my Italian was 100 per cent improved, the drama in the voice had increased, and, most important of all, I had a feel for the bel canto style of singing and a deep emotional connection to the music.'

A ringing endorsement, and one which Candice Wood could use to attract a fairy godfather for the Solti Accademia di Bel Canto.

*Auditions for the 2007 course will be on 1 and 2 February 2007. Visit [www.academiasolti.org](http://www.academiasolti.org)*

### Royal Northern College of Music

The **School of Vocal and Opera Studies** is one of six schools of study at the Royal Northern College of Music, a leading European conservatoire. The aim of the School is the development of the singing voice and the associated professional performance skills to their maximum potential. To this end, the course structure and content provide the singer with every opportunity to acquire the musicianship, versatility and breadth of skills demanded by the profession today. The emphasis throughout is on communication, as vital on the concert and oratorio platform as on the operatic stage.

Professionalism and the development of a sound vocal and stage technique are an intrinsic part of the



Brecht/Weill's Threepenny Opera at the RNCM

course. The element of dramatic training has ensured that the RNCM's

Vocal and Opera course has an outstanding international reputation as exemplified by the College's opera productions produced in the professionally-staffed Opera Theatre, Concert Hall and Studio Theatre.

Postgraduate students may benefit from a secondment to Opera North as part of the new Young Artist Scheme developed collaboratively by the RNCM and Opera North.

The School's success in training singers can be measured by the international careers of its alumni. These include Bruno Caproni, John Daszak, Jane Eaglen, Sara Fulgoni, Simon Keenlyside, Mary Plazas, Amanda Roocroft and John Tomlinson.

[www.rncm.ac.uk](http://www.rncm.ac.uk)

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The University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) offers the benefit of a professional training conservatory specialising in the performing and media arts within the setting of a comprehensive public university. CCM's educational roots date back to 1867, and it is now the largest single source of performing arts presentations in the state of Ohio, featuring nearly 1,000 events annually. More than 150 faculty members work with a student population of approximately 1,500, and CCM's state-of-the-art facilities include seven performance venues, sun-filled rehearsal rooms, scene and costume shops, wig, make-up and prosthetics studios, dance studios, and television, recording and multimedia studios.

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A scene from CCM's Don Giovanni

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*Other highlights of Opera at CCM:*

- 31-time winner of the award for 'Best College Production in the US' from the National Opera Association Production Competition
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