



Versatile A Solti Peretti répétiteurs' masterclass at La Posta Vecchia hotel in Ladispoli, Italy

Clive Barda

Musical Cinderellas

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The Slow Lane



In 1962 the accompanist Gerald Moore published an autobiography – *Am I Too Loud?* – which promoted his neglected art while humorously alluding to the traditionally downtrodden nature of the role. Moore was accompanist to the greatest Lieder singers of his time, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Victoria de los Angeles; Fischer-Dieskau said “he is always an equal with his partner” (though perhaps not quite equal financially). Moore helped to accomplish a minor revolution: in the early days of recording, the accompanist to great singers such as Enrico Caruso or instrumentalists such as Jascha Heifetz was often not named and could only be heard in the distance, as if tinkling away in an adjoining cupboard. Today’s best accompanists – Roger Vignoles, Julius Drake, Malcolm Martineau and others – have achieved a visibility as well as an audibility denied to their 1930s predecessors.

Spare a thought, then, for that completely invisible musician, the répétiteur – the operatic equivalent of the accompanist. Even music enthusiasts may struggle to recall what a répétiteur does. But they have to be among the most skilful and versatile of all musicians, and indeed their skills have to stretch far beyond mere musical accomplishment, as I discovered recently on a course for “reps” as they are known (that self-deprecating humour again) held in the splendid surroundings of La Posta Vecchia, a luxury hotel outside Rome.

If reps are the Cinderellas of the music world – they start off downtrodden but some of them one day become conductors as famous as Georg Solti, Riccardo Muti, Valery Gergiev or Antonio Pappano – then the sponsors had organised the perfect setting for a princely transformation. The generous host Roberto Sciò had opened up his

hotel, a former Getty mansion on the coast outside Ladispoli, a week early for the six “reps” on the course, but insisted that normal service and standards should be maintained. It helps to be treated like a prince or princess rather than a skivvy.

These Solti Peretti répétiteurs’ masterclasses were set up by Jonathan Papp, a vocal coach and accompanist, and Georg Solti’s widow Valerie, with help from the Peretti Foundation. The point of the course, as I understood it, was to reveal just how rewarding work which has traditionally been considered menial can be. Its origins lay in the desire of Georg Solti, who started his illustrious professional career himself as a répétiteur at the

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Budapest Opera, to honour the craft he regarded as the best training for conductors. As Valerie Solti explained to me, Georg “thought the best way was to begin in the opera house and get a job as a répétiteur. He used to quote Napoleon – ‘one must be a good corporal before one is a good general’. It’s an apprenticeship – you start out as a junior member of the team but you learn your trade, you learn about singers, opera houses – and you have a lot of fun. So it’s the opposite of the current idea of instant stardom in music.”

The most obvious thing a rep does is to play the piano. Indeed if you have an image of a rep it might be of a person battering out the notes of a piano version of the orchestral score on a not very good piano. Low status can breed low expectations – a

vicious circle. Papp, who is the course’s artistic director, urged the pianists to up their own ante – “to give the singer something to work with”, bringing out orchestral detail, thinking about sound. “You do not drop your level of pianism just because you are playing as a répétiteur,” he says. “What you offer will inspire the singer.”

The repetiteur, who can seem so downtrodden and anonymous, can in fact be a kind of benign Svengali. In George du Maurier’s novel, Svengali used hypnotism and other dark arts to turn Trilby into a great singer; the methods of the modern répétiteur need not be nearly so sinister. All the same, as the thoughtful young English pianist Paul Wingfield told me, “a large part of this job is psychology”. Répétiteurs, just as much as playing the piano, need to understand how singers tick, their fears and insecurities as well as their interpretative powers. “The voice is so fallible, and yet so intimately linked to how you feel. I envy them that,” admits Papp, while understanding that a sore throat can wipe out months of work and fees.

It was fascinating to watch, in baroque high-ceilinged rooms during rehearsals of Mozart scenes and arias, not just the drama of the music but the meta-drama of the relationships between young reps and young singers. Singers tend to be extroverts, and reps can be introverted. But as the pianists realised the power of their ears and their musical sense, not to mention the power of eye contact, you could sense a balance being redressed. Those quiet pianists may one day be calling the tune – but they will have benefited immeasurably from learning the ropes in the old, slow but rewarding way.

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