by JOHN VON RHEIN

Muti's *Magic.*

Riccardo Muti energizes a new generation.

THE QUIET NORTHERN Italian town of Ravenna is famed for 1,500-year-old early Christian churches that house the finest Byzantine mosaics in the world. But this adopted hometown of maestro Riccardo Muti is attracting a more specialized clientele: every summer since 2015, the ancient city near the Adriatic has served as the site of the Neapolitan conductor's Italian Opera Academy, an intensive two-week series of rehearsals and concerts for young conductors and pianist/*répétiteurs*.

The 2018 academy, which ran July 21 to August 3 in affiliation with the Ravenna Festival, was devoted to an in-depth study of *Macbeth*. Four conductors and four pianists, ages twenty-one to thirty-three, were chosen from hundreds of international applicants. Rehearsals, divided between morning and afternoon sessions totaling some seven hours daily, culminated in a pair of concerts of *Macbeth* excerpts, one led by Muti, the other by the rookie conductors. All events took place in the Teatro Alighieri, a charming, 830-seat neoclassical theater. Serving as the musical "laboratory" was Muti's own Luigi Cherubini Youth Orchestra, made up of Italian instrumentalists under the age of thirty.

Muti, left, watches Pak Lok Alvin Ho lead the Luigi Cherubini Youth Orchestra

Muti's Italian Opera Academy has two key objectives—offering talented young musicians an in-depth study of the music and drama in opera, along with preserving and promoting the heritage of Italian opera worldwide. He has long lamented the consignment of the mainstream Italian repertoire to what he calls "category B" in many international theaters, as well as what he considers its vandalization by

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interventionist stage directors. Muti is a living link to a tradition that extends from his teacher, conductor Antonino Votto, to Arturo Toscanini, to Verdi himself. (The young Toscanini played cello in the Scala orchestra at the premiere of *Otello* in 1887.) Muti ruled La Scala for nineteen years before an internal political imbroglio brought his tenure to an abrupt end in 2005.

The perspicacity and wit displayed by Muti—who turned seventy-seven eight days into the 2018 academy—were matched by his seemingly boundless energy. The opening event was an anecdote-laced discussion of the music and drama of *Macbeth*, led by Muti from the keyboard. As each conductor got up to lead selected scenes, with and without the singers, Muti's mantra—that what lies beyond the notes is more important than slavish fidelity to the printed page—emerged with startling clarity.

Indeed, the stereotype of Muti as an unbending purist proved inaccurate. "When I say *come scritto*, that does not mean you should be pedantic with Verdi," he told one of the *répétiteurs*. He later put the point in practical terms, when the promising young Sicilian tenor Giuseppe Distefano honored the memory of his famous namesake with the plangent ardor of his singing in Macduff's "Ah, la paterna mano." Muti stopped and, with a smile, said he was willing to excuse the singer's cavalier treatment of dynamics—"just this once"—because his sound and style otherwise were so authentically Verdian.

Verdi's orchestral fabric is indivisible from the vocal and choral parts.

For the most part, however, correct diction, dynamics, intonation and tempos were to be closely adhered to; phrases were to be invested with expressive urgency as well as precision; and, above all, the music was to serve the text and the drama. Clear communication was of the utmost importance: every gesture from the conductor must mean something, because, in Muti's view, careless instructions from the podium make for careless performances by the orchestra and singers.

Guiding a young conductor's right arm, Muti demonstrated how a subdivided beat pattern elicited greater precision from the orchestra. He pointed out to another apprentice that "Verdi marks every 'mio' uttered by Lady Macbeth in 'La luce langue' with a *marcato*—you must bring this out in the orchestra." During a run-through of the Lady's sleepwalking scene, he stopped Pak Lok Alvin Ho, a twenty-five-year-old conductor from Hong Kong, now based in Indiana. "The poor *contrabassi* have been waiting a half-hour to play," Muti lamented. "Why didn't you look at them when they came in?"

He chided the rookie conductors for failing to fully comprehend the text or the dramatic situations over which they were inscribing "correct" but expressively meaningless swipes of the baton. When Muti took up the baton himself, it was to demonstrate how to sustain Verdi's cantabile lines with optimum flexibility, or to stress that Verdi's orchestral fabric is indivisible from the vocal and choral parts.

A recurrent Muti complaint was that many inexperienced opera conductors are ignorant of vocal technique and are thus ill-equipped to assist singers when they need help. He was displeased to discover that none of the participants had heard of the great Italian tenor Aureliano Pertile. "You must all listen to his recording of the Improvviso from *Andrea Chénier*," Muti declared. "The line is always continuous, and he sustains the phrase with a multitude of different colors, like a great violinist would." This, he added, is what is meant by the term "l'accento Verdiano."

Having built his four previous academies around Verdi, Muti will shift the focus this summer, devoting the fifth Italian Opera Academy to Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro*, which another hand-picked international roster of young conductors and pianist/*répétiteurs* will rehearse and perform under the maestro's exacting tutelage for two weeks beginning July 20. ■

From top: conductor John Lidfors in conversation with Muti; Muti at the keyboard

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***John von Rhein** retired in July after forty years as the classical-music critic of the* Chicago Tribune.