

## From Italy to Bangkok: the golden age of opera

### Italian opera takes centre stage at Thailand Cultural Centre on Sunday

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'I love Italian opera,' said the great English novelist D.H. Lawrence, "because it doesn't have all those Wagnerian bellowings about fate and death and eternity. The Italians run on impulse and don't give a damn about their immortal souls."



Conductor Carlo Magni.

True or not, for over five centuries the word "opera" has been as synonymous with Italy as the Coliseum and spaghetti. The names Rossini, Verdi, Bellini and Donizetti bring tears to the eyes of opera fanatics. Even those who know little about opera are familiar with the quartet from *Rigoletto* and the operatic farces of Rossini's *The Barber Of Seville*.

At Thailand Cultural Centre's Main Hall on May 25 at 8pm, Bangkok will learn exactly why Italian opera is so treasured, when a quartet of Italian opera divas and an eminent operatic conductors will perform Italian opera arias with the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra.

Soprano Lucia Conte has sung in numerous operas, oratorios and cantatas ever since winning the prestigious Magnificat Lupiae international competition in 2010 and the International Opera Competition for many operas, including her role in *L'Elisir d'Amore*, which she will sing in Bangkok.

The lyric mezzo-soprano Paola Cacciatori is of French and Italian descent and has used her bilingual ability in many operatic competitions. She was the prize soprano at the International Competition in Bologna, first prize-winner at the International Operatic Canto Festival and a finalist with the International Vincenzo Bellini Bel Canto Contest last year.

Tenor David Sotgiu was originally a professional oboe player, but after studying with Luciano Pavarotti, he gave a winning performance in the European Union Contest for Young Opera Singers. Since then, he has broadened his roles to Wagner and Mozart, singing opera in Strasbourg, Paris, Lausanne and in tours through Canada, Poland, Hungary and Japan.

The multi-talented Giuseppe Ranoia is a playwright, actor, impresario (with his own theatre festivals), director and a noted bass singer. His voice has been heard in the famed Teatro di San Carlo in Naples, and the Teatro della Pergola in Florence. Ranoia has given life to many operatic principal roles written for bass, including *Il Barbiere Di Siviglia* and *Rigoletto*, both of which he will sing in Bangkok.

Leading the group with the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra is Carlo Magni, an internationally acclaimed conductor. In his home country of Italy, he was artistic secretary of the Lecce Symphony Orchestra and the Maggio della Musica festival in Naples. Internationally, Magni has conducted throughout Romania and the Middle East. In India, he was the first conductor elected to lead a series of operas in Delhi's famed Red Fort.

Since 2002 he has been a promoter and artistic conductor of the Festival Pianistico di Roma, as well as a professor at the Naples Conservatory of Music.

Although Italian opera goes back to 17th century and continues to present day, the golden age, for singers and composers, was between 1790 and 1890, when Giuseppe Verdi wrote his final opera, Otello.

The beginning of the golden age was also for singers, since they had never imagined that they would follow the notes Rossini and Bellini had written for them. In those days, the story was secondary to giving a chance for bel canto sopranos (those who specialised in the acrobatic use of their voices) to insist that composers write arias for them.

At the time, they rarely worried about what they were supposed to sing. They would improvise, holding notes higher and longer than they should, showing off their talents.

It was Rossini, in fact, who heard one soprano in his opera and compliment her. "In fact," he said, "I think I recognised a few my own notes in my song."

Later, Donizetti and Verdi wrote more realistic and serious stories, which meant the singers had to adhere to the notes.

The program in Bangkok will include all of this music and more. The first half consists of opéra bouffe, or comic opera. The second half will be opera seria, or serious opera.

The great thing about opera is that the composers of the golden age were like Shakespeare in the Elizabethan Age — they could write seriously, but they could also write farce when needed.

The one exception was Gioacchino Rossini, who wrote dozens of comic operas, including The Barber Of Seville, until he retired rich, famous and lazy at the age of 37. The arias from Barber, however, are still the height of operatic humour.

Vincenzo Bellini didn't retire, but died after a sudden illness. His music was as lyrical as that of his close friend Chopin. And in choosing an aria from his Romeo And Juliet, Bangkok can hear how clear and lyrical his music was.

Gaetano Donizetti wrote comic operas such as The Elixir Of Love and Don Pasquale (which will both be sung). His masterpiece, based on a novel by Sir Walter Scott, is Lucia Di Lammermoor, with its famous mad scene.

Finally we come to Giuseppe Verdi, who started writing operas at the age of 20 and continued until he was 80. His operas were rarely humorous. He told the tragedy of a hunchbacked clown in Rigoletto, the conquering of Europe by the Huns in Attila and the captivity of the Israelite Jews in Nabucco, all of which contain stirring arias. One, from Nabucco, became a patriotic favourite among Italians, who were fighting for the independence from the Austrians.

The Italian opera began, believe it or not, with the theatre of Ancient Greece. Nobody knew how the Greeks performed Oedipus Rex or Antigone. But in the middle of the 16th century, a group of intellectuals pondered that question. Their answer? Greek drama was not simply acted — it was sung!

After convincing the rulers of Italy's numerous princely states (it was not a country at the time), the princes commissioned other composers, who had written for the Church, to write grand ceremonial "operas" (a word meaning "works") for their courts.

The music was stately, pompous and boring. But in 1607, Claudio Monteverdi, who had previously written these boring operas, was asked to compose in Venice. Not for the Court, but for the people, in a public theatre.

Monteverdi was thrilled to be freed from the aristocrats. In writing his opera Orfeo, he created emotion, character, personality and singable tunes — in effect, he discovered the genius within the Italian mind.

The century following, the Germans produced a few minor operas. The French ignored it (they were into ballet), but in Italy, opera houses were built, librettists travelled the country with their stories and numerous mediocre composers put them to music.

Until Rossini came along. He destroyed old conventions, making opera a thing of riotous farce, endless song and stories filled with seduction, drinking and the joys of Italian life.

After that we had, yes, the golden age, when singers, classical writers (Scott, Hugo and Shakespeare) all produced the opera that will be heard in Bangkok.

Many are the secrets of this golden age, but Maria Callas — a Greek-American — decided to single-handedly resurrect Italian opera at its best.

Her secret — and possibly the secret of the divas to be heard here — was simple: "Study the music, colour the tones, learn the phrasing. Give each note its proper weight and value, and you will uncover opera's infinite internal mysteries."



Tenor singer David Sotgiu.

- The 'Gala Italiano Opera Highlight Arias' concert will be held at Thailand Cultural Centre on May 25 at 8pm. Tickets cost 400-2,000 baht and are available from Thai Ticket Majors outlets, online at [www.thaiticketmajor.com](http://www.thaiticketmajor.com) or by calling [HYPERLINK](http://www.thaiticketmajor.com).

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Mezzo-soprano singer Paola Cacciatori.



Soprano singer Lucia Conte.



Bass singer Giuseppe Ranoia.

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