

# Bel canto by the beach

*Opera Now* visits the Georg Solti Accademia in Castiglione della Pescaia, where young singers with budding international careers are immersed in Italian life and language while being coached by the best in the business.

As you stroll through Castiglione della Pescaia's back streets on a lazy summer's afternoon, be prepared to be stopped in your tracks. Where did that gorgeous phrase of perfectly executed Rossini coloratura come from? Isn't that Angela Gheorghiu doing a spot of shopping in the main street? And what is Richard Bonyngé doing here, tucking into a delicious fish lunch?

This unassuming but immensely charming beach resort in southern Tuscany has ancient, narrow streets winding their way up to a medieval citadel with wonderful views over the sea. But apart from its obvious seaside charms, over the past 10 years, Castiglione has established itself as one of the most important and respected international training centres for young singers and répétiteurs. The town, after all, has a distinguished musical legacy: this was the summer home of the great conductor Sir Georg Solti.

The Georg Solti Accademia convenes here for three weeks each summer when, from a field of 200 high-achieving applicants, 12 singers are chosen to undergo total immersion in 19th-century Italian repertoire under the tutelage of some of the biggest names in the business. Last year's course, marking the 10th anniversary of the Accademia, included masterclasses with Dennis O'Neill and Richard Bonyngé, along with Italian divas Luciana Serra and Daniela Dessi.

Jonathan Papp, teacher, répétiteur and co-founder of the Accademia, was motivated by a sense of frustration at the lack of focused training in Italian bel canto available to young singers at college level: 'One of the challenges that singers face in college, and indeed in real life, is the sheer amount of different styles you have to juggle at the same time. You can be doing Donizetti while preparing for Wagner. At the Accademia, we focus essentially on one style and one language, and we concentrate on perfecting that. Having that brain-space, with a uniform message coming from everyone on the coaching team, means that

real progress can be made in a short time.'

For the 12 students on the course, the three weeks in Castiglione are spent living, breathing and thinking Italian. As soprano Anna Gillingham says, 'What we learn in the coaching sessions is just part of the experience. Once you step outside into the streets, you're plunged into the essence of Italy and its people, that helps you with your whole approach to bel canto: colouring the language, phrasing and communicating the text.'

New Zealand-born Samoan soprano, Marlena Devoe, agrees. 'We don't get a lot of exposure to European languages in New Zealand, so the level of intensity of our exposure to Italian on the course is incredibly helpful.'

Papp says that the sense of being involved in the life of Castiglione is a vital element of the Georg Solti Accademia 'experience'. 'When Candice Wood, our executive director, and I set up the course a decade ago, we really wanted it to be integrated into the life of the local community here. We put on free concerts and involve local people in our chorus. We feel very much part of the town and everyone is very welcoming.'

Having rooted itself firmly in Italian soil, the Accademia is now growing its international credentials. Partnerships with the Juilliard School of Music and the Met Young Artists Program in New York have recently been established, and the best of the first intake of Juilliard students will be invited to Castiglione this summer. The Accademia has also forged links with Chicago Lyric Opera and with the Verbier Festival, where course graduates get to perform in a concert performance of a full opera: 'Verbier is the final piece of the international jigsaw,' says Papp. 'It's a chance for our students to sing with a full orchestra in the professional context of an international festival.'

Meanwhile, the name of Georg Solti isn't worn lightly by the Accademia. Lady Valerie Solti, Sir Georg's widow, keeps a watchful eye on proceedings from the home that she still owns and loves just outside Castiglione. Whereas the Solti Foundation is still a major resource that helps young artists at critical times in their career, offering money for lessons, travel or even just to buy a decent suit for an audition, the Accademia remains true to Solti's desire to recognise and promote excellence in young musicians throughout their development. 'We're very much a live educational project which is ongoing beyond the course,' explains Papp, 'offering advice, answering questions and making connections for our singers and pianists in the wider world.'

At the end of June this year, 12 more singers will gather in Castiglione to be put through their paces. What will Papp and his team expect from them? 'Top-quality singing; fabulous legato; real engagement with the text and the drama; and a compelling presence on stage.'

Public concerts by Accademia students will take place in Castiglione della Pescaia on 18 and 19 July.  
[www.georgsoltiaccademia.org](http://www.georgsoltiaccademia.org)



Angela Gheorghiu and Jonathan Papp in a coaching session