

Author's note: During this unprecedented time I have kept busy by writing down episodes from my student days at the St. Cecilia Conservatory in Rome, Italy and conducting career entitled '**Waiting in the Wings**'. I shared two such episodes earlier this summer; '**Sing Herman! Sing!**' and '**There's No Business Like Show Business**'. What follows is another excerpt from my collection of musical adventures entitled '**Crossing Paths with Nino Rota**'. I hope you enjoy. Cal Stewart Kellogg, December 2020.

## **Crossing Paths with Nino Rota**

Maestro Nino Rota was one of the nicest people to walk the face of this earth. Quiet and unassuming, he went through life serenely, and unafraid to write extremely tonal compositions for the concert hall, the opera and of course for the movies. He and Maestro Franco Ferrara, my conducting teacher, collaborated on practically all of the Federico Fellini films. Rota composed the music and Ferrara conducted. This partnership helped Maestro Ferrara cope with the sudden epileptic attacks that terminated his concert hall career. He could function much better in situations where the public was not involved. At Cinacitta, (Cinema City), where film scores were recorded, a special conductor's booth was created for Maestro Ferrara. It was padded and sealed off so that if Maestro Ferrara fainted (his fainting spells were legendary) he would not hurt himself.

Rota and Ferrara had also worked together on a one act opera entitled '**I Due Timidi**' (**The Two Timid People**) broadcast on radio in the 1950s. Ferrara chose that opera for the 1972 student production at the St. Cecilia Conservatory. I was finishing my second year in the conducting class. My assignment was to be the prompter, which meant I was to feed the first few words of a singer's line before it was time to sing the line. This was tricky business, because if you were a bit late with the cue the singer might not come in on time. If you were a bit early, the singer might enter before the correct entrance in the score. My duty was further complicated by the fact that there was no prompter's box in front of the stage. I had to hide behind the scenery and get as close to the singers as possible before anticipating their vocal lines. I learned quite a bit about the inner workings of opera during the rehearsals and performance of that opera.

The performance of '**I Due Timidi**' was quite successful and Maestro Renato Fasano, the director of the conservatory, decided to take the opera to Venice for the two-week workshop he organized each August. When the student conductor of the opera got a better offer and announced that he was not available, Ferrara turned to me and said, "It's up to you to conduct this opera." He and I spent the next few weeks at the piano. I would play and sing the parts; he would conduct and demonstrate what needed to be done.

Maestro Rota loved the end results. He kept in touch and followed my remaining years at the conservatory with an avid interest. I am getting ahead of myself. Allow me to back track a bit and share with you how we met.

The pensione where I lodged had closed in January 1966 due to the death of the lady who ran it. The conservatory had a housing agreement with the Foro Italico buildings where athletes stayed during the 1960 Olympics: four students to a room. My Italian was improving and a few of the boys were in my classes. They also knew of my ability with a ping pong paddle in hand. I fit in. But the Foro Italico closed during the summer months. Most of the students from other parts of the country simply went home. I was headed home to Miami, Florida for a visit about a month later. Lodgings needed to be found, so I teamed up with Carlo, a trumpet player from Bari. He found us a pensione in the center of Rome and we moved in. Carlo was vivacious and fun loving. He came to Rome for better instruction than he had at the Bari conservatory. His teacher in Rome kept up his lessons during the summer months. Carlo was destined to have a very good career.

One day Carlo suggested we take a walk to meet someone he thought I should know. This man was the director of the conservatory in Bari and had helped Carlo make the transition to the S. Cecilia Conservatory. His name was Nino Rota.

Maestro Rota met us warmly and took us to lunch. (No matter how many people were in the group, he always picked up the check.) He was most interested in Carlo's progress but also wanted to know what I was studying. I told him about my bassoon studies and mentioned my interest in someday studying conducting with Maestro Franco Ferrara. We spent a lot of time having lunch, which was perfectly normal when Italians sit down to eat. They say: "A tavola non invecchia mai," (at the table no one grows old).

A few days later, Carlo got a call from Maestro Rota. At Cinacitta, Franco Zeffirelli was shooting scenes for his upcoming movie with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, '**The Taming of the Shrew**'. Rota was writing the film score. Extras were needed for the wedding scene. Would Carlo like to participate? It was one day's work and Carlo made enough money to move into a hotel for the remainder of the summer had he wanted. I was impressed with the thoughtful gesture on Rota's part.

After the success of his one act opera '**I Due Timidi**' in Venice, Maestro Rota, impressed with my contribution to that success, insisted I conduct his oratorio '**La Vita di Maria**', (**The Life of Mary**), which had been selected for the grand finale of the S. Cecilia Conservatory's scholastic year in 1973. The score had everything but the kitchen sink: 2 choruses, a children's chorus, triple winds, 2 pianos, an enormous percussion section, a full string section and 4 soloists. It was presented in a large cathedral. I usually began studying an opera or oratorio score by reading the text. St. Mary is mentioned in the Gospel of Luke and briefly in the Gospel of Matthew, but there was nothing I could find in the Bible that confirmed the text I was reading. I was not a believer at that time, but I wanted clarification of what all this meant. I said as much to Maestro Ferrara as he heard me play the piano and sing my way through the vocal score. When I stopped to question the text, he exploded. "Never, never question the music you are engaged to conduct. Give it your best performance and believe in what you are doing. If you can't do that, you have no right to be on the podium." He stormed out of the room. In a day or two he saw me at the conservatory and asked abruptly, "Are you going to perform this piece?" I quietly said that I would. From that day I have always tried to give the very best accounting of the compositions entrusted to me. Ferrara would have expected no less.

In the summer of 1975, within the span of a few weeks I won the Gino Marinuzzi International Conducting Competition held in San Remo and finished second at the Guido Cantelli Competition at La Scala in Milan. In the fall of 1975, October 5 to be exact, I made my professional symphonic debut with the Monte Carlo Orchestra. (Side note: after the concert I was invited to have tea with Princess Grace. I mention that only because my wife, Jamie, is a Cary Grant fan and relishes the idea that I shook hands with the hands that touched Cary Grant.) The success in Monte Carlo coupled with gaining recognition in International competition was enough for Nino Rota to invite me to conduct his opera '**Aladino e la Lampada Magica**' at the Rome Opera House in February 1976.

Maestro Rota and I crossed paths a number of times. Once, we were both in New York City. He came to a performance of mine at the New York City Opera and I accompanied him to the Manhattan School of Music to see a production of his comic opera '**The Italian Straw Hat**.' I would visit him in Rome as often as I could. One afternoon, I stopped by for tea. He asked me to go to the piano. I saw two piano pieces there; both were written in pencil in a very clear hand. "Read them both and tell me what you think" he said. I read them each a couple of times. "Which one do you like better?" he asked. They were both haughtily beautiful melodies underlined with a melancholy sadness. "Hard to say Maestro. They are both exquisite." "I'm having trouble deciding which one to use as the principal theme of the film score I'm working on." "Which score is that Maestro?" "Godfather 2."

His first heart attack shocked everyone who knew him. He was counseled to fly to Houston for a heart transplant. Heart transplants were still new and precarious at the time. He shrugged off the advice. "In a few days, all will be better," he said. Sylvia Blanchart, Maestro's cousin, came down from Milan to be with him and to ensure that he was following doctor's orders. She called and asked me to join the two of them for dinner at one of his favorite restaurants. She added, "He really wants to see you." I was honored to be invited to dinner that evening. He had ghastly pale white skin and walked with effort. Still, he brightened up when I arrived. He wanted all the latest developments of my career; where I had been, where I was going next. At a certain point he got up and asked to be excused for a moment. While he was gone, Sylvia told me that he really needed to fly to Houston. She asked if I would help drive the message home when he returned to the table. Five minutes or more had passed. We started to wonder where he was or, more importantly, how he was. Ten minutes passed, and still the Maestro had not returned. Now there was real concern for his well-being. Where had he gone? The restrooms were in the general area where he had headed. Should I go and look to see if he was all right? Finally, with a very sluggish gait, he came back to the table, asked forgiveness for his absence and began to eat the food left on his cousin's plate. Neither of us said anything about it and Sylvia very slowly pushed the plate closer to him. He told us as he ate that he would be okay in a couple of days. It had been wonderful seeing me again and in case I wondered why he was gone for so long he explained that he had gone to the kitchen where he was delayed by speaking with the owner of the restaurant and paying the bill. I went home wondering if he would leave for Houston or not. Two or three days later, in April 1979, he died.

The Maestro left no will to speak of. He, like W.C. Fields before him, had money in safety deposit boxes all over the world. A collection of keys was located but no way of telling which key belonged to which bank and where that bank was. The cousin paid an enormous inheritance tax and acquired the rights to all his published works. She asked me to help create a catalogue and in exchange for my assistance, she gave me a piano vocal score of '**La Boheme**' autographed by Puccini himself.

I'll conclude with a very special but bittersweet reminiscence of Maestro Rota. In 1981, I conducted the Radio Orchestra of Rome in a concert of all the major film music he had written for Federico Fellini and others. It was an outdoor concert, and I was given a trailer for a dressing room. The program was very well received, and everyone went home whistling one theme or other. As I was on my way out of the trailer there was a knock. I opened the door to find a tiny frail looking woman who had tears in her eyes. She looked at me for a moment before speaking. "Please let me thank you from the bottom of my heart for bringing Nino back this evening." It was Giulietta Masina, wife of Fellini and star of his most successful films. There are not many moments like that, believe me.