

### **A Conductor Rising Quickly, but Naturally**

By Susan Elliott, *MusicalAmerica.com*

November 1, 2014

“OK, guys. We need to map this out; it’s not easy stuff.”

It is the first orchestra rehearsal for Rossini’s *Il Turco in Italia*, set to open the the Juilliard Opera season Nov. 19 in a new production by John Giampietro. Perched on a stool on the podium, in rehearsal room 309, is a freckle-faced young woman dressed in a pink and gray tunic-style blouse (plenty of arm mobility) sporting a huge mound of curly, strawberry-blond hair tied back in a ponytail. Speranza Scappucci is preparing the Juilliard Orchestra for what will be her New York conducting debut.

“When I first got on the podium,” she tells me later, “I thought, ‘I auditioned here!’ There was a moment when I pictured the jury over there and me at the piano. Those eight minutes changed my life.”

Born and raised in Rome, in an opera-loving household, Scappucci first arrived at Juilliard in the 1990s, aiming for an artist diploma in solo piano, after earning her degree from Rome’s Conservatorio di Musica Santa Cecilia. It wasn’t long until she moved into accompanying (a term since politically corrected to “collaborative piano”), studying with the master of the artform, the late Sam Sanders.



She switched from the solo track because “I love making music with other people,” she says. After earning her masters degree in collaborative piano, she was asked to stay on to coach at the school’s Opera Center. She then moved across the plaza to the New York City Opera.

In the ensuing years, Scappucci coached singers for the Chicago Opera Theater, Santa Fe Opera, Glimmerglass Opera, the Met and many others. She spent six summers at the Glyndebourne Festival working with the likes of Vladimir Jurowski, William Christie, and Charles Mackerras. While at the Vienna Staatsoper she coached for Seiji Ozawa, Zubin Mehta, and, most significantly, Riccardo Muti. Not a bad group of role models.

“I had been assigned as pianist and continuo player for Muti’s production of *Figaro*,” says Scappucci. “I remember he asked me where I got my opera training and I really didn’t know how to respond. I think it’s something instinctive that you develop over the years.” It probably didn’t hurt that she grew up with a father who can identify the opera, composer, singer, and conductor from hearing just a snippet of a recording.

“After *Figaro*, I started working with Muti regularly as a pianist; I was able to refine my coaching skills just watching him -- he loves to coach singers. Pretty soon, I found myself preparing his casts when he wasn’t there.”

She was at Muti’s side for his final Salzburg opera in 2011, Verdi’s *Macbeth*. It was in rehearsal, she

recalls, that she first caught the conducting bug. "There were two pianists and no one to conduct the chorus that day," she remembers. My colleague said, 'I'm not doing it,' so I got up there. Suddenly I realized that my arm was an extension of my brain."

Far from a wunderkind who has skyrocketed to stardom in a dramatic last-minute substitution for an ailing maestro, Scappucci has arrived on the podium "the old fashioned way."

"It just sort of happened," she says. "And it wouldn't have if I didn't have all that experience," not to mention knowledge of the repertoire. "Otherwise I wouldn't have had the confidence to just stand up and conduct the one-hundred strong Vienna Staatsoper Chorus in Salzburg. I got there step by step. I never planned to be a conductor."

Maybe not, but she is now. Having made her professional conducting debut all of two years ago, with *Così fan Tutte* for the Yale Opera, which re-engaged her in 2013, she has covered a lot of ground in very little time: Last summer saw her conducting *La Traviata* at the Macerata (IT) Opera Festival, *Norma* at Teatro Sao Carlos in Lisbon, Rossini's *L'Equivoco Stravagante* at the Teatro Arriaga in Bilbao. Last fall, she opened the Scottish National Opera's 2013-14 season in a new production of *Don Giovanni* directed by Sir Thomas Allen; from New York she heads for her debuts with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, the Finnish National Opera, the Washington National Opera, Santa Fe Opera, the Salzburger Landestheater, the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, and l'Orchestra Regionale della Toscana in Florence. Her future calendar includes debuts with the Wiener Staatsoper, the Royal Concertgebouw, and a great deal more.

That she is moving this fast is indicative not only of her skill and experience but also of the kind of person she is: energetic, enthusiastic, and clearly ambitious. On the podium she is part charisma, part charm, all no-nonsense.

Back in room 309, Scappucci is admonishing the strings. "Don't crescendo until I tell you to." They try the passage again, "Shhhh! "It's still not *piano* enough."

Then: "No accent on the last note. It should be elegant. Not *bum-ba-ba-BA* but *bum ba-ba-baahhhhh*."

Rehearsing at the keyboard later with Korean soprano Hyesang Park (she sings the role of the two-timing Fiorilla), Scappucci is multi-tasking -- singing, playing from the full score, conducting. Park is in full throttle, "Less lyrical, more coquette," says the conductor. "You're doing the right rhythm but you're not feeling the eighth note. If all you do is sing the melody, it doesn't mean anything."

When I ask her about the woman-conductor issue, she shrugs. "I haven't felt any problem at all. When you're up there, it takes the musicians about three or four seconds to figure out that you know what you're doing and that what you're saying makes sense.

"I've made peace with the fact that I can't be liked by everyone," she goes on. "It's not up to me to worry about that. I just have to get the job done."