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Home » Sections » **Playing Around** » Maestro Enrico Onofri: At the Helm of the Arturo Toscanini Philharmonic

Maestro Enrico Onofri: At the Helm of the Arturo Toscanini Philharmonic

Posted on February 5, 2021 by **Maria-Cristina Necula** in **Playing Around**



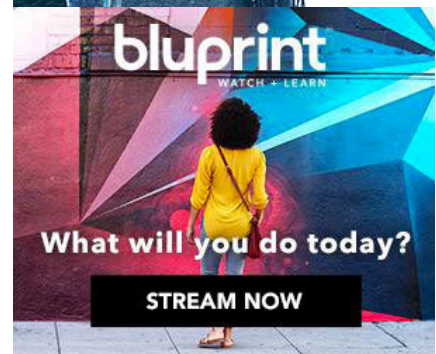
In 2020, Enrico Onofri was appointed chief conductor of the prestigious Arturo Toscanini Philharmonic, one of the most important Italian orchestras, whose mission is to promote the values of rigor, innovation, and passion upheld by the one-and-only Maestro Arturo Toscanini. Maestro Onofri's career began with an invitation from Jordi Savall to be the concertmaster of La Capella Real while he was still a student. Soon he came to work with groups such as Il Giardino Armonico, the ensemble whose concertmaster and soloist he served as for more than two decades.

As a conductor and violin soloist with expertise in historical practices, he has been exploring repertoire from the 17th to the 20th century creating new and informed avenues of interpretation. His career as a conductor has brought him widespread acclaim and countless invitations from orchestras, opera houses, and festivals in Europe, Japan and Canada. Since 2019 he has also been chief guest conductor of the Haydn Philharmonie in Eisenstadt and music director of the Academia Montis Regalis. A sought-after pedagogue, he teaches Baroque violin and Baroque music interpretation at the Rossini Conservatory in Pesaro, and has given masterclasses throughout the world, including at the Juilliard School in New York.

What does this appointment as chief conductor of the Filarmonica Arturo Toscanini mean for you and what do you think makes the Filarmonica Toscanini exceptional?

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It's a great honor for me. After decades spent abroad as soloist and conductor, I now fill a position in my country, and moreover in my own region, Emilia-Romagna, whose official symphonic orchestra is the Filarmonica Toscanini. All of its members are extremely clever, passionate, and skilled artists. During concerts they give back the work done during the rehearsals with all of their souls: it's definitely an orchestra worthy of the great artistic tradition of Verdi and Toscanini's hometown.



Enrico Onofri (Photo by Chico de Luigi)

You are not a fan of streaming music performance, but like other artists, you have had to adapt to our times. How do you motivate your musicians, and yourself, to perform for an audience you cannot see or hear?

Unfortunately, it's not possible to render what an audience gives to musicians while they're on stage. It's extremely difficult to play facing a camera: even if you know that behind that camera your audience is there, its feedback, while playing, is essential to us. It's the same "cold" feeling I always experienced while recording a CD: in a recording studio, though, a musician can play many times as he wishes, in order to find the spirit as close as possible to that of a live performance, which is not possible of course in a streaming concert. It's so hard and painful to hear the silence of the empty hall after the last note! We can just give all our energy, looking forward to a reopening of theatres and music halls when possible.

Are you based near Parma?

I'm based in San Leo, 250 kilometers southeast of Parma, a spectacular Middle-Age village in the hills close to the Tuscan border.

How is the pandemic being handled there? Are you able to travel at all?

My village has been spared, being quite isolated, but Parma and other towns in our region have been hardly hit during the first wave. Actually, many colleagues all over Italy got sick and some lost their lives. Although the situation is now better, the high number of infected people makes it very difficult to handle a resuming of normal activities. Travels in Europe are extremely complicated at the moment, mainly dependent on luck: last December I had to cancel, at the last minute, three concerts in Spain where I was going to conduct the Royal Philharmonic of Galicia, because the lab didn't deliver in time the result of the Covid test compulsory for traveling, due to the overwork of testing people. It's hard.



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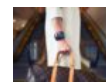
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Sections (1)

Shopping Around (301)

Sponsored Content (4)

Washington DC (1)



Filarmonica Arturo Toscanini by Luca Pezzani

Please tell us about your lifelong passion for historical performance. Why is the constant dialogue between present and past so important for the integrity of music performance?

Historical performances are to me an irreplaceable source of inspiration (it couldn't be otherwise: I grew up in a family of antiquarians, it's a kind of imprinting!) Despite often leading me to impasses, the doubts they generate allow me to light the fire of imagination. Nowadays we enjoy a great privilege: we are on the top of a high mountain, from which we admire the panorama of the centuries through a quantity of information and investigation tools that were not available until now. The knowledge of historical performance practices and of the historical contexts in which musical works have been composed – whether it's Monteverdi, Bach, Beethoven, Brahms or Stravinsky – is probably the most coherent of approaches, beyond the final choices of each performer. It's not easy of course to connect such an amount of information, however, knowledge as wide as possible gives us more consciousness in our decisions while performing, allowing [us] in some way to be modern, walking backwards to the future.

Catalan conductor, viola da gamba player, and early music advocate, Jordi Savall, was an especially important figure in your life. What did you learn from him?

He taught me an essential matter: no ancient music actually exists, we just have ancient scores. Musicians must respect their contents and meanings, but at same time, they have to transmit those contents by touching modern hearts and minds. It's a challenge: on one hand, we risk to sell the work by using improper tools, on the other hand, an archeological performance is eventually impossible, the music being an ephemeral object that cannot be restored like a statue or a painting.

The Toscanini Philharmonic has some great plans for 2021, including the new Arturo Toscanini International Studies Center and the web radio initiative, Radio T. Please tell us a little bit about each of these projects and the mission behind them.

The mission of Radio T. is to reach a wider audience, including young people, and provide information about the classical music world, the orchestra, and its backstage activities. The new International Studies Center intends to pay homage to Toscanini connecting all centres in the world which preserve his memories, in order to promote studies about his extraordinary life and his role both as a musician and as a man in the history of the 20th century. An important undertaking for Parma, Toscanini's hometown.

You have won numerous awards, most recently the prestigious French distinction "Diapason d'or de l'année 2020" for your album with the Imaginarium Ensemble "Into Nature." As not only the conductor and principal violinist but also the founder of the Imaginarium Ensemble, what does this award mean to you?

My aim is to give voice to the indications of historical sources in the belief that music is something alive, which fully involves us in a dramatic way when we perform it. To enable this process, over the past fifteen years I have struggled to resist many of the compromises that concert life imposes, as well as standardizations and certain "fashion" trends in the music market. A hard, narrow path, which makes me even more grateful for such an award.

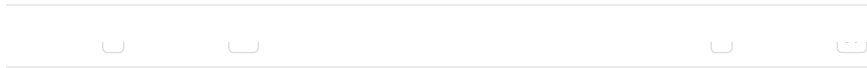
Do you envision an enthusiastic return of audiences to concert halls or are you a bit apprehensive that all this music streaming has now created a hard-to-break habit of "attending" concerts from the comfort of home?

Music, ballet, and theatre, since millennia, have an irreplaceable social role that needs the audience and the artists to be physically gathered in a single place: the impact of a live performance and the many interactions it entails cannot be replaced by a sofa and a laptop. The end of live performances, as well as physical presence in museums, exhibitions and lectures, could be the beginning of a dark and barbarian age. Therefore, I'm confident that people will spontaneously return to crowd the concert halls.

Learn more about Maestro Enrico Onofri and his work.

Discover the Arturo Toscanini Philharmonic and more on the **Toscanini Foundation website** (A pop-up from Google Translate gives the option to translate the website text in English).

Top photo: Enrico Onofri; photo by Masiar Pasquali



About Maria-Cristina Necula (76 Articles)

Maria-Cristina Necula's published work includes "The Don Carlos Enigma: Variations of Historical Fictions," "Life in Opera: Truth, Tempo and Soul," two translations: "Europe à la carte" and Molière's "The School for Wives," and three poetry collections. Her articles and interviews have appeared in "Classical Singer" Magazine, "Das Opernglas," "Studies in European Cinema," and "Opera News." As a classically-trained singer she has performed in the New York City area at Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall, Merkin Hall, Florence Gould Hall, and the Westchester Broadway Theatre, and has presented on opera at The Graduate Center, Baruch, The City College of New York, and UCLA Southland. She speaks six languages, two of which she honed at the Sorbonne University in Paris and the University of Vienna, and she holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from The Graduate Center. Discover more about her work at www.mariacristinanecula.com.

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