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# Antonio Pappano: 'I didn't know what I was. Now I'm discovering my Italian roots.'

As he prepares to bring an Italian orchestra to England, Antonio Pappano talks about the musical soul of Italy – and why he no longer wishes he was called Tony Smith...

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**Peter Conrad**

The Observer, Sunday 13 March 2011

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Antonio Pappano: 'There's a lot of cynicism, but Italians still have a kind of Utopian hope, and it's rooted in music.'  
Photograph: Johan Persson/ArenaPAL

I wonder whether Antonio Pappano would have succeeded as a conductor if, as he wished when he was a teenager, he'd been called Tony Smith?

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## **Pergolesi: Stabat Mater - A Tribute to Pergolesi**

Anna Netrebko

Deutsche Grammophon

2011

On the podium, Pappano – music director of the Royal Opera in London and of Rome's Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, whose orchestra he brings to Manchester, Birmingham and Basingstoke this month – embodies Italian gusto. Rehearsing, he is liable to ask for a crisper rhythm by saying the music should sound like spaghetti cooked "al dente", gritty not mushy; he likens the tone of his Santa Cecilia orchestra to the colour of Amarone wine, made in the Veneto with dried grapes. "Lots of sugar, a very high alcohol content," as he said, smacking his lips, when we talked in Rome last year. Pappano's slightly tubby physique ought to be an advertisement for these culinary pleasures, but he sweats off the calories in performance: conducting opera, he needs to replace his sticky, puddled shirts at the end of every act. He even chews while beating time – a ruminative tic, I suspect, not evidence that he's actually eating.

Yet this man for whom music is an Italian meal happens to have been born in Epping in 1959. His father had migrated to London from the south of Italy and worked in restaurants while moonlighting as a vocal coach for singers. At school in Pimlico in those more monocultural days, Antonio was teased for possessing an exotic name with too many open vowels, which got mockingly garbled into Pappino or Pappone. Anxious to merge with the anonymous mob, he begged his parents to change their name to Smith.

When he was 13, the Pappanos moved to America. Sent to a new school in Connecticut, Antonio was again a misfit: "It took my brother about two days to lose his English accent, but I never got rid of mine." He escaped the school bullies by growing up fast. By the time he was 16 he was already a working man, playing the piano for his father's students, at choir practice in local churches, and in a cocktail lounge. "I did the whole gamut of music," he told me, throwing his arms out wide to encompass all that tingling, twangling, resonant air. "I loved playing three-minute show tunes in the cocktail bar, though it hardly prepared me for the five-hour Wagner operas I conduct today!" In his 20s he moved back to Europe, and – now defining himself as "an Italo-American

English boy" – served as Daniel Barenboim's assistant at Bayreuth. His conducting debut was in Oslo in 1987; five years later he became the music director of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, where his colleagues frenchified his name by re-accenting it as Páppanó. After a decade he returned to London with his American wife, also a vocal coach, to take over from Bernard Haitink at Covent Garden; now, once again, he was Tony.

Up to this point, Italy had played no part in Pappano's career and little enough in his life, though the country is stamped on his face. He may not be Roman but his nose is, while the dent on his forehead is a souvenir of a childhood holiday spent with his grandparents in the family's ancestral village in Campania. "I fell while I was playing, and hit my head on the pavement edge. The village had no doctor, so they carried me down the street to the barber, who closed the hole with sealing wax, not stitches! I'm a tribute to rustic medicine."

Then in 2005 the Accademia – founded in 1585 by pope Sixtus V, who made the church composer Palestrina its first president – hired Pappano as the principal conductor of its orchestra, at the time in the doldrums. The appointment was his belated homecoming. "In middle age," he beamed, "I'm discovering my Italian roots. Until now I didn't really know what I was, though I found it easier to be Italian-American than Anglo-Italian. These days I feel I'm acquiring a real Italian identity, joking with the players in their language – though they're always correcting my errors, since I never learned Italian. At home with my family we spoke a patois, a language of our own that was the southern dialect of my parents with English words and American slang mixed in."

Last year on BBC4 Pappano undertook an operatic tour of Italy, bobbing ebulliently on the Grand Canal and bawling a gondolier's serenade. In publicity photographs for his orchestra, he has been promoted to a Roman icon, posing – though in person he is affable and earthy, not at all imperious like many baton-wielders – next to a crumbling chunk of stone incised with the initials SPQR, standing for Senatus Populusque Romanus, signature of the ancient republic. But working in Rome has acquainted him with the more chaotic aspects of Italian life, nerve-wracking for someone used to the more disciplined habits of the north. "The guys in this orchestra need handling. I love their virtuosity and the theatrical spell they can weave when they're playing instrumental music. They have qualities you can't translate – panache, brio. But rehearsals can be temperamental. It doesn't come naturally to them to concentrate or to sustain a tone, and I tell them that it takes me four sessions to get results I'd achieve immediately with my orchestra at Covent Garden. It's not that they're less good, it's just the result of what I call their endless yap-yap-yap. So I'm trying to make them more German, without taking away their native swagger."

When performing Respighi's symphonic poem *Pines of Rome* – included in the Manchester concert this week – Pappano also indulges the unlovable Italian hobby of shooting songbirds during the autumn, a small reminder that a Roman holiday once consisted of watching lions gore Christians at the Colosseum. During his residence in Italy, Wagner fumed about this cruel habit, and thought the silence in the countryside proved that music had fled to Germany. Italians may be lustily passionate, but they are not sentimental: anything that moves is fair game, especially if it is edible. In his musical description of the rustling nocturnal pines on the Janiculum Hill, Respighi included the song of a nightingale; convinced that orchestral players could never compete with the bird's lyrical rhapsody, he insisted that a recording of an actual nightingale should always be used. "Ah," said Pappano, "we don't do it that way! One of our technical guys is a hunter, and he has an elaborate collection of whistles, lures that trick birds out of hiding so they can be shot. He hides in amongst the orchestra, and he's our decoy nightingale."

The Santa Cecilia's season opened with concert performances of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, an epic of Swiss nationhood composed in French for the Paris Opéra; on the poster, Pappano gamely impersonated the son of the archer William Tell, sceptically eyeing the apple pierced by an arrow that was propped on his head. "There's something about Rossini," he said after the final rehearsal, "that gives you a sense of the ideal Italian character type – his measured elegance, his modishness, his exhibitionism... though of course nowadays most of these qualities are on display in the work of clothes designers, not musicians! Yet at the time people called Rossini 'il Tedeschino', the little German, and thought he wasn't Italian enough, just as Puccini, who for us is so Italian, turned away from the native tradition and followed Wagner's example – all those dark-hued symphonic harmonies in his later operas. Verdi worried that the generation of composers that came after him would betray Italy. It's still a problem for musicians: with a symphony orchestra you inevitably think of doing Beethoven, Brahms and Mahler."

With the Royal Opera, which his matey conviviality revitalised after the departure of his aloof, abstracted predecessor Bernard Haitink, he has performed an eclectic repertory that includes the recent, joyfully scandalous premiere of Mark-Antony Turnage's *Anna Nicole*. But he hinted, with a guilty twinge, that he may have neglected his own patrimony. "I've done productions of Wagner, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Britten and Birtwistle at Covent Garden, but maybe not as many of the Italian classics as they expected me to." He will make amends in future seasons, conducting Verdi's *Otello* and his French grand opera *Les vêpres siciliennes* along with Puccini's *Trittico* and *Manon Lescaut*. More works by Rossini – the feminist comedy *L'Italiana in Algeri* and the majestic Babylonian tragedy *Semiramide*, which for Pappano is Rossini's *Aida* – are on

Pappano's wish list, and he thinks that Covent Garden should have a new production of those loud, lachrymose shockers, *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*.

The Santa Cecilia is one of the few Italian orchestras not confined to an opera-house pit. It is a national treasure, but is there enough national music for it to play? "True, my first concert here had nothing Italian in it. But gradually we're restoring the repertory that's been neglected, and we're adding to it by commissioning a work from a contemporary composer every season."

Pappano has returned to the baroque period in a new recording of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, out next week. It's a plangent, agonised performance, with Anna Netrebko and Marianna Pizzolato emoting at the foot of the Cross – a reminder, like Pappano's recent CD of Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, that in Italy religious faith is an operatic drama of despair and jubilant recovery.

He has also not been snobbish about recognising the work of current composers best known for their film scores. Last Christmas he performed a cantata by Ennio Morricone, who wrote the violently metallic soundtracks for Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns, and in February the orchestra played Nino Rota's dance suite from Visconti's *The Leopard*. "There's an enormous nostalgia in Italy for the 1940s and 50s," Pappano explained. "The films of de Sica or Fellini seem to come from simpler, happier times. *Cinema Paradiso* sums that up, and Morricone's music brings the lost paradise back." *The Leopard* caters to a deeper and perhaps more painful nostalgia: quotations from Verdi accompany the story of a Sicilian aristocrat who shrewdly compromises with an upstart democracy during the Risorgimento, the campaign to free Italy from foreign occupation.

Although the Santa Cecilia tour commemorates the 150th anniversary of Italian unification in 1861, it's questionable how much there is to celebrate in the country's subsequent history. Was the Risorgimento really a resurgence? Liberators like Garibaldi and Cavour hardly expected the advent of Mussolini or of Berlusconi, the perma-tanned magnate with re-afforested hair who recruits babes for his "bunga bunga" parties from the inane game shows on his television network. "Well," said Pappano, "it was not so long ago that all these separate provinces gave up their autonomy, joined together, and started to speak more or less the same language. Rome may have been here for ever, but Italy is a very new idea. There's a lot of cynicism now, but Italians still have a kind of utopian hope, and it's rooted in music – for instance, in Verdi's patriotic choruses." The best loved of these is "Va, pensiero", the homesick lament of the slaves in *Nabucco*. It supposedly served as a political protest during the Risorgimento; it is now always encored in performances of the opera, and functions as Italy's unofficial national anthem. In his television series Pappano conducted it in the open air in Naples, with a chorus of hundreds and an audience of thousands, all of whom fervently sang along.

Why, I asked, does this piece have such emotional appeal? "Italians don't have unity as one of their traits," Pappano replied, returning to his comment about the peninsula's makeshift unification. "They're individualists, like the players in my orchestra. 'Va, pensiero' grabs them because it offers a respite from that: for once they can do something together – and it's all written in the middle voice, so anyone can sing it!" Italy's political and cultural institutions are mostly in disarray, like Roman ruins with their feral cats. Despite that evidence of carefree civic irresponsibility, a chorus, like an orchestra, is a model of co-operation; perhaps music may yet be able to unify this melodious but unharmonious country.

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Bear66

13 March 2011 2:23AM

"At school in Pimlico in those more monocultural days, Antonio was teased for possessing an exotic name with too many open vowels"

Oh we do have to slip in a PC dig don't we? And the fact that his family left a monocultural Italy is beside the point I suppose?

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[weakdrain](#)

13 March 2011 5:36AM

Left a monocultural Italy which has remained pretty much a monocultural Italy until now, except for the occasional exotic excursion into bunga bunga

Recommend? (79)

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[Stired](#)

13 March 2011 6:51AM

Italy has never been "monocultural". It is and was extremely regional, to a greater extent than the UK even. A Sicilian is not a Venetian, and that is clear in food, music, art and the mores of the people.

What it has not had is an influx of immigrants from colonies that it exploited over past centuries, as it was a country of emigrants.

I believe what you meant to say was an Italy with few blacks and Asians, which is true enough. But irrelevant to this article.

Nice knee-jerk reaction, though.

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[Kritik](#)

13 March 2011 10:12AM

"At school in Pimlico in those more monocultural days, Antonio was teased for possessing an exotic name with too many open vowels"

Teasing (and more) still happens in these more multicultural days.

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[LemboTundry](#)

13 March 2011 10:28AM

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[pat2008](#)

13 March 2011 10:57AM

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[pat2008](#)

13 March 2011 11:15AM

@ Lembo Tundry, well said and I dont think you should apologize for lowering the tone, Mr Conrad is the one that made something about a great musician into a farce.

Best

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[Vinthic](#)

13 March 2011 11:37AM

@LemboTundry Thanks for saving me for having to post what I was thinking before I read your comment. I'm not an Italian national nor am I a descendant of Italians but I'm disgusted by the ignorance and transparent bigotry in some of the above posts.

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[Bear66](#)

13 March 2011 12:39PM

Yes, mine was a knee-jerk reaction, because I'm sick of everything being constantly forced through the prism of "multiculturalism".....so what if was teased at school for having a funny sounded name? Lots of kids get teased like this in mono, multi, or whatever varient of culture you like. But no, this unfortunate episode for this kid happened because of the evils of monoculturalism and the author had to slip it in

somehow.

So let's start a campaign to diversify predominantly monocultural countries like Turkey, Thailand, Indonesia, Iran, Polynesia, Cuba etc. etc., yes, all those place multiculturalists love to visit in order to "experience the culture"....hypocrites.

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[nickmavros](#)

13 March 2011 1:00PM

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[Bear66](#)

13 March 2011 1:16PM

Why?

Recommend? (31)

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[fullmoon](#)

13 March 2011 2:34PM

Er...the music anyone?

Recommend? (5)

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gwp3

13 March 2011 7:16PM

Interesting piece. I'm looking forward to the Anvil Basingstoke concert on Thursday - seats still available at <http://www.anvilarts.org.uk/whats-on/11/mar/orchestra-accademia-nazionale-o>.

It seems that the anti-PC brigade are just as hypersensitive as the PC brigade.

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Allgoaliesaremad

13 March 2011 8:05PM

How bizarre that some readers have taken the fact that Pappano was bullied for his foreign name to have a pop at Italy, thus totally missing the point of the story.

Yes, Italians can be xenophobes, as can a minority in most countries in Europe. When it comes to the culture of Italy, if you can encompass it in such a restricted phrase, you have to admit they are anything BUT mono-cultural, having absorbed the cultures of the Celts, Greeks, Arabs, Normans and various Germanic tribes through either conquest or having been conquered, and having sprung the Roman and Etruscan cultures from their own soil.

Recommend? (1)

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Barwidgee

13 March 2011 8:33PM

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Maritz

13 March 2011 9:29PM

Well we have another example of how some do not like it when the mirror is held up for them. Too bad.

Italian society embraces individualism. I have been part of social groups in Italy including individuals' who's temperaments were the abject opposite of one another, but which were both considered equally important members of the group. In part this is the origin of the "yap, yap, yap" quality of the orchestra di S.C. as described by Pappano. Pappano is very protective of the reputation of the orchestra for the obvious reasons. As I've alluded to earlier Italian orchestras need that extra rehearsal time!

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