

‘You get bolder as you get older’

By Eluned Price

Published: October 30 2009 23:17 | Last updated: October 30 2009 23:17



‘I began working when I was 10 and this is the first house I bought, 34 years later’

Antonio Pappano, 50, has been music director at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London, since 2002. He holds a similar post with – and is conducting – the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome, Italy’s oldest symphonic orchestra. The Accademia’s season opened this week and it is due to play in Vienna in November and Frankfurt in December.

Your parents came from Campagna in southern Italy, but you were born in Epping Forest, Essex, eastern England. Tell me about your childhood home.

Oh, there were so many! My dear parents, Carmela Maria and Pasquale – he died five years ago – moved to London shortly after I was born. My godmother Anne Schembri, who came from Malta and had many Italian friends, found us a council flat on the Peabody Estate near Victoria. We began in the smallest, dingiest flat there was. It’s amazing to think what was considered sufficient for a family in those days. We moved our way up, finally, to B Block. It sounds funny, doesn’t it? My younger brother Patrick and I had pull-down beds in our room. Our parents made it cosy. It was on the ground floor and since I used to practise piano before school every morning and on Sundays, the woman two floors up used to come down and bang on the door, complaining about the noise. Except for her, though, the community feeling was wonderful.

What was life like at home?

My father taught singing, mostly in the evenings. He had many other jobs in the day and my mother worked as a cook and cleaned offices. They were always working. I was often home alone. Like when, just after my parents had painted our room a beautiful, vivid, light green, and I had chicken pox, I plastered the wall with my best pictures of the Liverpool football team. There was red everywhere. My parents' shock when they came home was indescribable. When they pulled the pictures away, the paint came off. I got a good thumping. I'm a Chelsea fan now.



MY FAVOURITE THINGS

My CD collection. There are thousands along the wall facing the piano in my studio. And **the surround-sound system** that EMI gave me two years ago that is in the living room. **My wine collection.** It's not big, maybe 200 bottles. I like finding out new things about wine. It's easy to expect quality from a £100 bottle but the fun is to find the same quality in a bottle a third of the price.

What made the family move to America?

We left England in 1973 after my baby sister Tina died aged eight months. We moved in with my mother's sister, her husband and our two girl cousins a little bit younger than Patrick and me, which was fun. My mother's parents lived in the same house – a three storey, two-family home in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Eventually my parents bought a house on Capitol Avenue. They rented out the top apartment and made a studio for my father's teaching in the basement.

Did life get easier then?

In some ways it was more work. I began playing *répétiteur* for my father's students. He'd do half an hour vocal technique with them, then send them up to me to work on the music – everything from opera to pop – while he started with the next student. I'd come home from school at 2pm and we'd work until 9pm. My mother hated it. Eventually, we moved to a cosier home with a beautiful garden. The work pattern was the same but at last, at 17 years of age, I had my own room – and a lovely dog called Fritz.

Everything must have changed when you became *répétiteur* for the New York City Opera.

It did for my father. I was 22. Until then, I'd always come home every day to help him. For him, it was very traumatic. Now I could only manage one day a week for him. I was studying piano and composition also, playing recitals for singers, organ in churches and cocktail piano bar in the evenings.

Phew!

It's an immigrant thing. I am blessed with the energy to work.

You conducted your first opera, *La Bohème*, in Oslo when you were 28, and then lived there. How was Norway?

I went to Barcelona, Frankfurt and Bayreuth as a pianist and got my first opportunity to conduct in Denmark. I had never dreamed of being a conductor – I couldn't conduct my way out of a paper bag. But I could communicate my love of music and what I wanted from it. With *Bohème*, I discovered my life's calling. I became music director of Norwegian Opera in 1990 and lived in Oslo for two years. It was a whole other world, the cold bracing sea and the cold, bracing beer. I had an incredible top-floor flat. The view of the fjords from the balcony was something I'll never forget. That and the love the Norwegians have for their country and nature. There I learned to love the sea and have done ever since. My wife Pamela, a freelance *répétiteur*, and I take cruises nowadays just to look at the sea.

Where did you live afterwards? You spent 10 years in Brussels as music director of the Opera House, Théâtre de la Monnaie.

For two years, in a first-floor flat in a 19th-century building. It had high ceilings and huge windows in the drawing room, with space for my grand piano in another room and a nook for a tiny bedroom like a nest. Pamela and I married in 1995 and moved to a former stables of a château. It had a garden the size of half a football pitch, which gave me the contact with nature – so unlike my work life, which is all about emotion and people screaming at each other.

Where do you live when you're in Rome?

We rent an apartment on the fourth floor of a very old building with a fabulous balcony facing the 16th-century Doria Pamphili Palace in the Via del Corso. We can enjoy beautiful evenings sitting there, surrounded by the atmosphere of the past. We are looking for somewhere to buy in the centre but it is very difficult and very expensive, much more so than London.

Do you have any other property in Italy?

We have an old stone village house in Umbria with a pantiled roof. It is very simple: whitewashed inside with arches to the rooms and a turned timber stair with a wrought iron rail to two bedrooms. Best of all, it has a 30ft verandah, covered with bougainvillea, overlooking the rooftops down to Lake Trasimeno – more water again, you see.

And your apartment in Hampstead has an elegant drawing room and dining room, pale yellow walls and interesting paintings.

Yes, we are very happy here. I think we will paint the walls a deeper colour – you get bolder as you get older. The painting over the fireplace that looks like the sun and the moon together is by a friend in Rome, Stefan Iraci. Very serene. And we have funny things, like the New Yorker cartoons Pamela gives me for my birthday, all music-related. We inherited some of Pamela's father's antique English furniture and a dozen of his clocks. This is my favourite home. I began working when I was 10 and this is the first house I bought, 34 years later.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2009. You may share using our article tools. Please don't cut articles from FT.com and redistribute by email or post to the web.