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Portrait of the artist: Antonio Pappano, conductor

'It's very easy to point your finger at expensive opera seats – but just think what going to the football costs'



Interview by **Laura Barnett**
guardian.co.uk, Monday 21 March 2011 22.29 GMT

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Antonio Pappano in King's College chapel, London. Photograph: Clive Arrowsmith/Celebrity Pictures

Were you a musical child?

Not extravagantly so. I started piano lessons when I was six, and got serious about it when I was 13. Before that, I had dreams about becoming a football player.

How did you get into conducting?

That came later. It wasn't something I had an ambition for. Some singer friends saw my potential, and they found me some conducting work. Then, in 1987, I did my first opera, and I realised, "Yeah, this is what I need to do."

Do you suffer for your art?

I don't know if I suffer – I don't have an ounce of self-pity – but I work very hard. Conducting is much harder than it looks.

If you could send a message back to your critics, what would it be?

You do it.

Accusations of elitism are often levelled at classical music and opera. Are they unfair?

Yes, they are. It's very easy to point your finger at the most expensive seats, but West

End theatres are very pricey – and just think what a ticket to a football match costs. In opera, we have a full orchestra, chorus, stage and everything that goes with it – it's an expensive thing. But it's not elitist; opera can be anything from Wagner to Anna Nicole.

What advice would you give a young conductor?

Be patient. We don't all have to become famous overnight.

What's the greatest threat to classical music today?

Fear. People are scared of classical music, and that's a great shame.

Is there anything about your career you regret?

Not taking more time off. I try to get six weeks off per year, but with two jobs that's quite difficult.

What work of art would you most like to own?

There's a fantastic reclining nude that Modigliani painted. It's just the most sensational thing I ever saw.

What one song would work as the soundtrack to your life?

There's a recording I love of Bill Evans, the pianist, and Tony Bennett, the singer, doing But Beautiful. The key line is: "If you were mine I'd never let you go." That pierces me.

- Antonio Pappano's recording of Rachmaninov's Second Symphony, with the Santa Cecilia orchestra, is out now on EMI.

In short

Born: Epping, Essex, 1959.

Career: Music director of both the Royal Opera House, London, and the Rome-based orchestra Accademia di Santa Cecilia.

High point: "Ensuring the organisations I'm in charge of are in a good place artistically."

Low point: "My debut at the Royal Opera House in 1990. I got clobbered by the critics."

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