

THE MAKING OF A MALTESE TENOR –

Paul Asciak's Meteoric Career (Part one)

The artistic career of the Maltese tenor Paul Asciak spans between March 1946 and March 1961, a mere fifteen years, during which his fame soared high like a meteor and then petered out nicely when the artist was still in the prime of life, glorying in the success, which was still being achieved by him where ever he was asked to sing. This notwithstanding Paul Asciak lives in his tape recordings and records, especially in that cut on the initiative, enthusiasm and expense of the renowned Maltese architect Richard England, photographer, poet and writer.

It is to be noted that Paul Asciak came face to face with the opera-loving public of Malta on December 8, 1946 at the Radio City Opera House, Hamrun, when *Cavalleria Rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni and *I Pagliacci* by Ruggiero Leoncavallo were staged together for the first time in this theatre, under the baton of Maestro Mario Cirillo, who had formed a company of amateurs for this purpose.

Paul Asciak was barely 20 years old and although he had an attractive voice, he had still to learn how to use it; his acting lacked polish but all in all, as a debutant, he sang correctly and captivated the admiration of the public, which applauded him warmly.

Paul Asciak continued his studies with the Maltese tenor Nicolò Baldacchino. Four years later, the Impresa Cantoni, an Italian Company was engaged to give a short season of opera at the Radio City Opera House. This was to be a very important turning point in Paul's career when *Aida* was about to be performed, the principal tenor Leonida Bellon was suddenly taken ill and Maestro Luigi Cantoni asked Asciak to take the role of *Radames* in his stead.

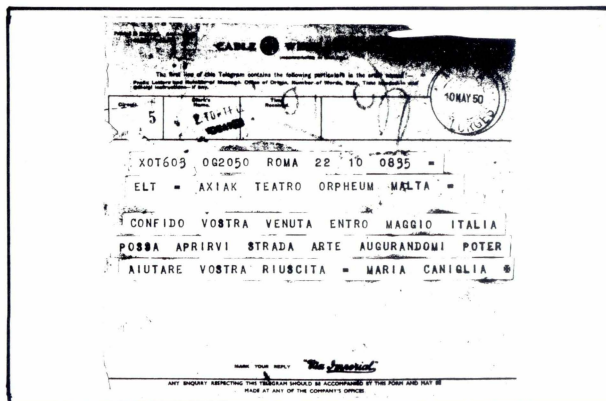
Asciak had mixed feelings when confronted by such a difficult role, but at the same time he felt that this offer was an enticing opportunity and was reluctant to refuse it. Cantoni in order to reassure Paul told him: "I have taught you the part of *Radames* and I have full confidence in you; rest assured that you will succeed." Paul gained self-confidence and when the opera was performed on January 6, 1950 he scored full marks. In the first act Paul was obviously nervous but later on he sang smoothly, interpreting with full vigour the role of the victorious leader and ended the opera with felt sentiment and pathos to the clamorous applause of an appreciative audience.

Later on in the same year Paul Asciak began his

innumerable celebrity concerts in Malta and abroad when he was asked to participate with the famous Italian tenor Tito Schipa in two concerts given on March 25 and 26 at the Orpheum Theatre, Gżira. Paul Asciak's powerful voice enthused the audience.

J. Tonna in the *Times of Malta* of March 29, 1950, considered the show as rather disappointing. "Tito Schipa at sixty, however long his experience and wide his fame, left the audience rather cold; inspite of his mezza voce and falsetto and all the technique of the art, he lacked freshness and a vigorous personality which impress the audience most. On the other hand, Asciak threatened to steal the show by his rendering of his initial *Core 'ngrato*. It came as a very enlivening and welcome interlude after Signor Schipa's somewhat drab and routine-like songs at the beginning of the concert. A roar of applause greeted this young tenor at the end of his song, exhibiting a sort of pent up feeling on the part of the audience which had expected to be swept off their feet by the celebrated Italian tenor, but who were obviously somewhat disillusioned".

Another "Orpheum Concert" was held on April 30 and May 1, 1950. The guest artist this time was none other than the renowned soprano Maria Caniglia, who in both recitals sang with superb artistry to enthralled audiences. Supporting Maria Caniglia were the Maltese tenors Oreste Chircop and Paul Asciak, who sang admirably in their respective duets. Maria Caniglia was favourably impressed by Asciak's beautiful and powerful voice. She promised to help the young singer if ever he decided to follow his studies in Rome. After her departure from the Island she sent Paul the following telegram from the Eternal City: "Confido vostra venuta entro maggio, POSSA APRIRVI STRADA ARTE AUGURANDOMI POTER AIUTARE VOSTRA RIUSCITA - MARIA CANIGLIA".



Maria Caniglia's telegram to Paul Asciak

(Photo credit: Paul Asciak)

Italia, possa aprirvi strada arte, augurandomi poter aiutare vostra riuscita”.

Paul Asciak left for Rome on May 30, 1950 just a few days after he had taken part in a concert given to the Malta Cultural Institute members at the Phoenicia Hotel. He sang in a programme of operatic arias with a pleasant voice and clear high notes.

While Paul Asciak was in Rome, Soprano Maria Caniglia kept her promise and entrusted his singing education to Maestro Alberto Paoletti under whom he studied for two years. After the first year he had an audition at the Teatro dell'Opera of Rome and having satisfied the judging panel, the Management advised him to enter the Concorso Nazionale per Giovani Cantanti Lirici 1951. After succeeding to win a place among the winners of the contest he was selected to sing the part of *Radames* in Verdi's *Aida* with Anita Cerquetti in the title part at Spoleto, with the entire complex of the Teatro dell'Opera of Rome, chorus, orchestra, ballet, scenery and costumes.

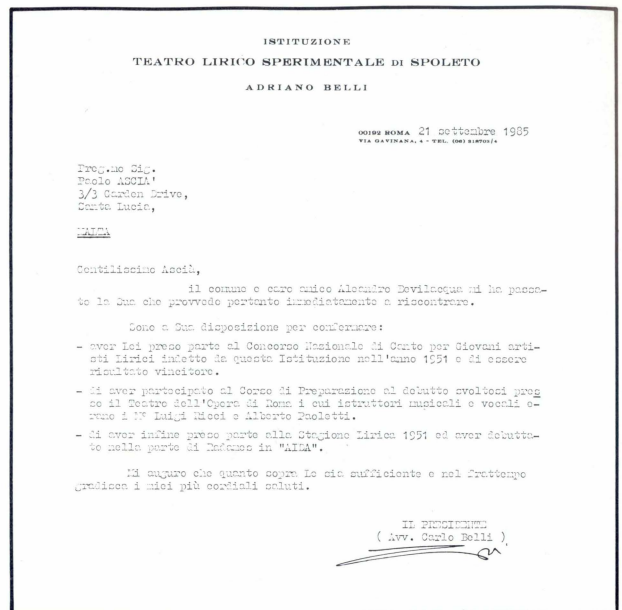
It is to be noted that Spoleto, a town in central Italy, has become the centre for budding opera singers. In fact, Spoleto has been the launching school of many a great singer as Anita Cerquetti, Anna Moffo, Antonietta Stella, Gabriella Tucci, Renato Cioni, Franco Corelli, Cesare Valletti, Rolando Panerai, Carlo Cava and many others.

While preparing for the debut at Spoleto, Paul Asciak's voice, as a dramatic tenor, had already made itself felt in operatic circles. He was awarded two scholarships and had the fortune of being coached by Maestro Luigi Ricci, while the necessary scores were supplied by Maestro Alberto Leone.

In November 1950 Paul returned to Malta at short notice to be present at the christening of twin boys, an addition to his family. But as he had been engaged by an Italian opera company to tour Calabria, he had to cut his family visit short and return to Italy.

The Calabria tour comprised the operas: *Il Trovatore*, *Rigoletto* and *Carmen*. Paul Asciak was to be *Manrico* in *Il Trovatore* and sung also *Don José* in *Carmen* and to quote from one single write up of a published paper at Crotone (*Magnia Graecia* December 31, 1950), the critic felt that Paul Asciak “si è disimpegnato in modo brillante nella parte di *Manrico* del *Trovatore*. La romanza del terzo atto è stata cantata con disinvoltura ed il pubblico ha ripetutamente applaudito il bravo tenore.” The opera critic of *Il Messaggero di Roma* December 18, 1950 said that Asciak sang with “slancio e passione”, while *Il Grido della Calabria* December 13, 1950 wrote that Asciak was a vibrant *Manrico* “appassionato dalla voce potente e dagli acuti squillanti” that merited unanimous praise.

During this period Asciak sang in 1950 at the Teatro Cilea, Palmi; Teatro Grandinetti, Nicastro;



The letter received from the “Istituto Teatrale Sperimentale di Spoleto”, confirming Asciak's success at the “Concorso Nazionale di Canto per giovani artisti lirici”

(Photo credit: Paul Asciak)

Teatro Italia, Catanzaro; Teatro Apollo, Crotone; in 1951 at Teatro Arcobaleno, Cassino. In the same year Paul Asciak took part in a series of concerts given at different cities to commemorate the fiftieth Anniversary of Giuseppe Verdi's death. *Il Messaggero di Roma* in an article written by Giorgio Lamargese noted: “Il tenore Paul Asciak non può essere giudicato in base ad un esame sommario e frettoloso. Molto, forse troppo giovane, ha dato una prova convincente e dignitosa delle sue possibilità che specie nel registro medio hanno avuto dei felicissimi momenti. Noi vogliamo guardare con fiducia questo ragazzo. Lo studio che gli manca potrà venirgli dall'Accademia del Teatro Sperimentale di Spoleto, presso il quale sosterrà la parte di *Radames* in *Aida* e non escludiamo che il canto verdiano, che esige dei veri specialisti, possa avere nell'Asciak un valoroso interprete”. (“Tenor Paul Asciak cannot be judged summarily and in a hurry. He is still too young and yet he has given a convincing and a dignified proof of his possibilities when, especially in the middle register, has produced appreciative admiration. We wish to follow with confidence this young tenor for all the training he still lacks will be given to him at the Academy of the Teatro Sperimentale di Spoleto where he will sing the part of *Radames* in *Aida* and we do not exclude that verdian singing, which requires true specialists, may find in Asciak a good interpreter.”) Lamargese was referring to the concert given at the Teatro Comunale, Terni.

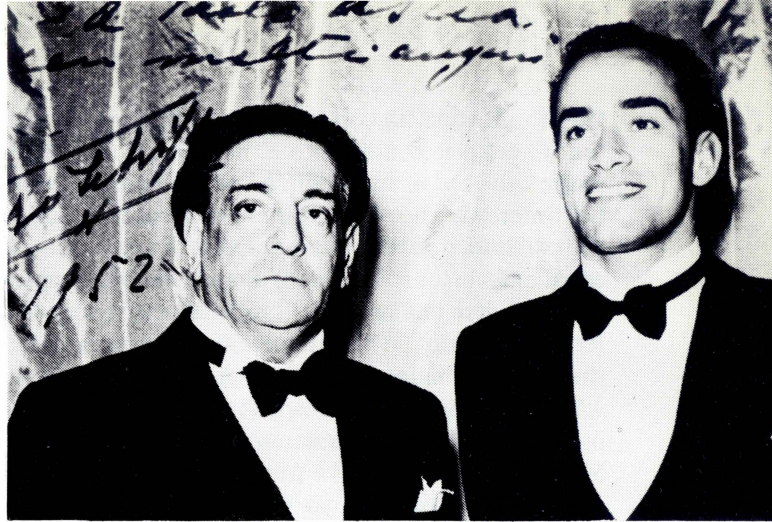
After this concert Paul Asciak took part in two others, one at California Gardens, Rome and the other at Albano under the baton of Maestro Guadagno. In both these concerts Paul Asciak

reaffirmed his successes and prepared for the great event at Spoleto.

Those who possess and treasure a programme of the Spoleto repertoire for the operatic season of 1951 will note that Paul Asciak's surname was changed to Ascià. This is not a misprint but a deliberate adaptation to Italian ears. The reason was to make it sound like a real Italian surname, because the competition at the time was open to Italian competitors only.

The repertoire comprised *Carmen* by Georges Bizet, *L'Amico Fritz* by Pietro Mascagni, *Fra Diavolo* by Daniel Francois Auber and *Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi. Paul Asciak, as we have already said was billed as *Radames* in *Aida*. Never before at Spoleto an opera was prepared so lavishly for *Aida* was being presented after an absence of 51 years from the Teatro Lirico of Spoleto. All scenery came from the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma and was the same used at Wiesbaden in Germany. The orchestra was also that of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma conducted by the celebrated Maestro Ottavio Ziino; choir master was Maestro Mario Cherici, choreographer and principal dancer was Attilia Radice while the producer was Professor Riccardo Picozzi.

The first performance of *Aida* was held on September 6, 1951 and as expected was a huge success. The theatre was full to capacity and among prominent personalities and people from all walks of life, were journalists, impresarios and music critics gathered from many parts of Italy and from abroad.



Asciak with Tito Schipa, Malta 1950, photograph autographed in 1952
(Photo credit: Paul Asciak)

Paul Asciak was indeed lucky when he met Maestro Luigi Ricci, who was to train him for his debut as *Radames* at the Centro Sperimentale of Spoleto. Luigi Ricci was a great maestro and since 1950 he collaborated with the Teatro Lirico of Spoleto rehearsing and conducting important operas, preparing vocally and artistically the young artists for their debut. What amazed Paul in Maestro Ricci was his great patience, wisdom and prudence and his persuasive manner with students without diminishing their personality. He sincerely believed that singing is an art that can be attained solely by possessing a voice, but this had to be refined and consequently by hard study make of the singer, an interpreter and a perfect musician.

Paul Asciak's success was therefore the fruit of severe studies and a strong desire to succeed. And succeed he did, for all the critics had nothing but praise for the young singer. It is true that in the first act he showed the usual effect of a first night stage fright, yet he showed that he can sing. He easily maintained his high notes and during the fourth act his vocal potential was intact and it remained sound and strong till the very end of the performance. Even if he was not yet at ease in his acting, one has to consider that tackling *Aida*, a forceful and difficult opera, was not an easy job, yet Asciak gave proof of possessing a great heart and a real passion for opera, which is exactly what is required for a successful career. *Aida* was performed three times at Spoleto and Asciak continued to improve, so much so that *Il Messaggero of Rome* September 13, 1951 declared that "today very few tenors could sing, adequately, the part of *Radames*, and it was therefore a great feat that Paul Asciak succeeded to tackle so ably the character of the victorious general". The same critic of the *Messaggero of Rome* confirmed again in the issue of September 14 that "Del valore dei cantanti e interpreti del grande spartito verdiano abbiamo già parlato e vi ritorneremo quando ci sarà possibile fare un resoconto completo del fortunato avvenimento; ma, intento, ci piace dire del tenore Paolo Ascià.



Paul Asciak with Maria Caniglia in the duet *O tentatrice, tentatrice* from Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, Malta 1950
(Photo credit: Paul Asciak)

Questo giovane ha rotto il ghiaccio, ha superato il timore del primo momento e, nella parte difficoltosissima di *Radames*, ha dimostrato di possedere un bel timbro di voce per il genere delle opere "forti" come l'*Aida*, e di essere un interprete di sentimento. È esordiente e, con un pò di buona volontà, potrà intraprendere una luminosa strada. Questo è il nostro fervido augurio". ("We have already spoken about the value of singers and interpreters of the great verdian scores and we will speak again when it will be possible to give a full account of the fortune event. Meanwhile we would like to speak about tenor Paul Asciak. This young man has broken the ice, has confidently surpassed the fear of a first night in the most difficult role of *Radames*, and proved that he possesses a resonant voice which is needed for difficult operas like *Aida* and that he is also an interpreter with fine feelings. He is still a beginner but through a good disposition he may attain a brilliant career. This is our fervent wish.")

Finally I quote from the daily *Cronaca di Perugia* that Paul Asciak "gave a brilliant interpretation in the difficult role of *Radames*, ... he sang with an increasing confidence, a sonorous voice, and on the whole he proved superior to the difficult test he submitted himself to, thus opening for Paul Asciak a successful horizon which becomed to this young Maltese artist, in no uncertain manner".

To be numbered among the artists who had graduated at Spoleto, a good number of whom became famous, is indeed an honour to be proud of,

especially for our small Island. Everybody knows how difficult it is for foreign singers to be acknowledged in Italy, the cradle of lyric opera.

After his Spoleto success Paul Asciak returned to Malta for a well deserved holiday but the enthusiasm of the Maltese public for this young tenor knew no bounds and during his stay in Malta he had to attend various soirées dedicated to him, in which, of course, he had to gratify his friends and admirers with his singing.

The musical evenings in honour of Paul Asciak began on October 11, 1951 when a concert was organized by the Stardust Review and Opera Company at the Queen's Hall, Sliema. Many well known singers and pianists and the Strauss Orchestra under the direction of Mro A. Manchè took part. The soirée was an unqualified success.

Miss Helen Buhagiar, always enthusiastic for whatever Maltese talent achieved locally and abroad, gave a cocktail party at her residence in Tigné, in honour of Paul Asciak. The distinguished guests invited, including Sir David and Lady Campbell, were regaled by Paul Asciak's splendid singing and many noted the enormous strides he had made both in technique and diction since his last appearance on the Island. His tuition in Italy had brought out the clear resonant notes and strong mellow timber of his exceptionally beautiful voice.

Another vocal and instrumental concert was held at the Hotel Phoenicia under the patronage of H.H. Sir David and Lady Campbell and the Hon. Dr



As *Radames* with Anita Cerquetti (third and fourth from left) in a scene from the Teatro Nuovo production of *Aida*, Spoleto 1951

(Photo credit: Paul Asciak)

Frendo Azzopardi and Mrs Azzopardi. Paul Asciak was in tremendous form and delighted all with excerpts from an extensive repertoire of operatic arias.

Paul also made his debut on the Gozo British Institute stage. The packed hall was evidence of the music-loving Gozitan public and he excelled again in a popular and classical programme, enthusiastically applauded and sincerely appreciated.

In December 1951 Paul received a telegram from the Royal Opera House Covent Garden inviting him to present himself for an audition in London. Though he would rather had remained in Italy, the home of Grand Opera, he decided to accept the invitation. He went to London and agreed to sing with the Covent Garden Opera Company. He signed the contract in Italy.

Before returning to Italy, Paul Asciak was honoured with a luncheon given by over thirty members of the Department of Agriculture where he was employed, and among the principal guest were Dr C. Caruana, then Minister for Posts and Agriculture and Mr R. Biasini, Director of Agriculture.

Paul Asciak's first engagement in Italy was a broadcast on the Italian Radio – RAI, relayed locally by Rediffusion. Asciak was chosen by RAI from among many promising Italian singers for their weekly concert. On this occasion Paul sang: *Fu vile l'editto* from Mascagni's *Isabeau*, *Ma se m'è forza perderti* from Verdi's *Un Ballo in maschera* and *Visti la guibba* from Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* with the

Turin Orchestra of RAI conducted by Mario Figuera.

Other occasions for which Paul Asciak was engaged were at the Teatro Sistine in Rome for the Stagione Operistica Primavera where he interpreted the part of *Turiddu* in *Cavalleria Rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni; at Tolentino–Fermo for La Stagione Lirica Straordinaria di Giugno at the Teatro de l'Aquila where he sang *Chenier* in *Andrea Chenier* by Umberto Giordano; at Barletta where he sang *Manrico* in *Il Trovatore* by Giuseppe Verdi and at Siena where at the Teatro Estivo he performed the same part; at the Terza Estate Musicale Irpina, where again he sang the leading role in *Andrea Chenier*. These performances were to be among the last which Paul Asciak gave in Italy prior to his new engagements in England, at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden. It is therefore important to register here the glowing tributes achieved by our Maltese tenor from the Italian critics who are well known for the rigour with which they judge artists in general and foreign artists in particular.

Il Messaggero of June 13, 1952 says on Paul Asciak's performance of *Andrea Chenier* that "however various may be the views of critics, they all agree that the perfect artistry and remarkable volume of voice place Asciak in the front rank of the Italian lyrical field". And the critics of *Il Giornale d'Italia* and the *Giornale di Roma* are equally emphatic; the former confirms that Paul Asciak has indeed a beautiful voice and has been an ideal *Chenier* also for



As Manrico in a scene from *Il Trovatore*, Siena 1952

(Photo credit: Paul Asciak)



As Turiddu in a scene from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Rome 1952
(Photo credit: Paul Asciak)



As Chenier in *Andrea Chenier*, Tolentino 1952
(Photo credit: Paul Asciak)

his physical appearance while the latter in its issue of August 13, 1952 says that "the protagonist of *Andrea Chenier* was a young man who has before him a bright future. The rare power of his vocal chords have literally enthused the audience who were moreover impressed by his beautiful well-built figure. I can safely, convincingly say that he is the major dramatic tenor of our day."

On *Il Trovatore* the *Cronaca di Siena* wrote "The most important role, that of tenor Paul Asciak was greatly appreciated. He is an exuberant youth who demonstrates his particular interpretation with an imposing and, in certain instances, suave voice with sure and perfect acting. From the first to the last act his potentiality was in the forefront and he was applauded with enthusiasm." Paul ended his commitments in Italy at Acquapendente singing the part of *Canio* in *I Pagliacci* in August 1952 with the Compagnia Lirica Roma.

It is rather strange, to say the least, that a tenor who in Italy had achieved such genuine success should have opted to try his luck in another country, a country which was not the home of Grand Opera as

Italy was. The answer which Paul Asciak gives to such a query is: "I accepted the contract with the Royal Opera House Covent Garden for the very reason for which singers leave Italy to sing abroad, when they can do so. Singers are better paid in England than in Italy and singers who are also family people like me, have to think also of the family budget. As man does not live on bread alone, so no singer can live by singing alone. He has to keep alive and in good form to continue singing. The artist needs a great deal of money to finance his career."

Before going to England Paul Asciak returned to Malta for a brief stay with his family. Taking this opportunity he thanked publicly all his friends who in some way or other had helped and encouraged him, particularly members of the Malta Society of Art, Manufacturers and Commerce who worked hard to obtain for him a subsidy to defray the cost or part of his studies in Italy.

(to be continued)

V.M. Pellegrini