

OPERA FELLAS / You don't have to be a paesano to love

Italian arts and music

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In Verdi's sweeping opera, "Attila," an impassioned Roman general named Ezio sings a duet with the invading Attila the Hun.

"Avrai tu l'universo, resta Italia a me," Ezio implores. "You may have the universe, let Italy remain mine."

That sentiment pretty much sums up the attitude of the men of Il Cenacolo -- even the guys who are Irish.

Tastes, trends and affinity groups have come and gone in San Francisco, but over 75 years Il Cenacolo has stayed the course with minimal change. The club exists today for precisely the same reasons it was founded in 1928 by the signori Avenali, Campione, del Lungo, Filiasi, Turco, Usigli and Ponce de Leon: so that its members can learn about and support art, music, language and culture -- particularly of the Italian persuasion.

Throw in the fact that this civilized pursuit has taken place all these years, primarily over weekly lunches, and the marvel that is Il Cenacolo becomes apparent.

So, guys get old and die?

So, their sons and grandsons, nephews and sons-in-law pick up the torch and carry it to lunch.

So, the number of Italians who actually live and work in San Francisco --

let alone have time for such things as cultural enlightenment -- is not what it used be?

So, the club finds some Chinese, German, Irish, French and Jewish American guys who are paesani in their hearts and they take their place alongside the Italian pillars.

After all, one of the most loyal and enthusiastic Cenacolisti of all time was not a Veronese but a Viennese: Kurt Herbert Adler, who massaged, hammered and thrashed the San Francisco Opera into an international force during his 28 years as general director.

"We have many members who aren't Italian -- our best Italian speaker is Chinese -- but we do ask that everyone be an Italophile," said Bob Palazzi, a retired high school principal who is the current president of Il Cenacolo. "And we still have a tradition: the president has to have a vowel at the end of his name."

The term "Il Cenacolo" (pronounced "eel Chey-KNOCK-oh-lo") was picked by the club's founders to mean "a meal among friends in a private room." Leonardo da Vinci titled his famous painting of Jesus and the disciples -- which we know as "The Last Supper" -- "Il Cenacolo."

"Cena is 'supper' in Italian and the cenacle is the room in the abbey where the friars eat together," said Gianni Audieri, who does not belong to Il Cenacolo but has cooked for the men every week for 22 years at his North Beach restaurant, Fior d'Italia.

"I inherited the crowd when I came," he said. "They've been eating here for 30 years. Some of the other clubs, it's unfortunate, they're down to about 10 or 11 members, everybody's passed away. Cenacolo,

they're persistent."

That persistence -- the club still has more than 200 members -- and decades of Il Cenacolo generosity will be honored April 2 at the Merola Opera Program's annual gala at the Ritz Carlton.

"We'd never honored a group before. But when we looked back on all that Il Cenacolo has done for Merola, all the Adler Fellows they've sponsored, how they've been the most faithful of our group supporters, we thought it was time," said Blanche Germain Streeter, a Merola board member and chairwoman of the gala.

And who but the Cenacolisti to better fit the theme of this year's gala: "Mille grazie, Italia"?

Back in the early days, when Il Cenacolo's membership included Bank of America founder A.P. Giannini, the donations were a little less structured. Since 1979, however, the club has been formally handing out thousands of dollars each year in Merola Opera scholarships.

The late Adler created Merola as a kind of operatic farm club to San Francisco's big-league opera company, as a training program where talented young singers can hone their skills and gain an edge in the powerfully competitive world of professional opera.

Among the 46 Merolini who've received scholarships from Il Cenacolo are baritone Thomas Hampson, sopranos Patricia Racette and Laura Claycomb and mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Bishop. The men also award two annual scholarships for Italian language study at various Bay Area universities and high schools.

Il Cenacolo's combined purpose of cultural patronage and camaraderie has proved irresistible to all the Cenacolisti, no matter their profession, ethnic heritage or geographical upbringing.

"I'm not by nature a joiner, but after I spoke to the group at a lunch, they asked me to join. I was honored," said composer David Litwin, who operates a sound studio in Sausalito and hasn't a drop of Italian blood in his veins.

But Litwin has traveled often to Italy to research and record an album of historical music played on six famous pipe organs. The oldest, in Bologna, was built in 1473.

"I became infatuated with Italy," he said. "It's the whole ball of wax: the physical beauty of the country, the cuisine, the art and all the layers of history that are right there in front of you in every city. Overriding all that -- the Italian people; they know how to live and they do a lot of it.

"And there's the language itself. As a musician, I am particularly aware of the music of speech. The Italian language is wonderful music. Oh, and did I mention the wine?"

Nearly every Il Cenacolo lunch is anchored by a speaker who educates the men -- and frequently their female guests -- about anything from Renaissance art to astronomy. Slide shows or PowerPoint displays are common.

Earlier this month, San Francisco State University professor emeritus Ludmila Ershov discussed Italian architects in Russia. Last week, Angela Cincotta, of the Alioto-Lazio Fish Co. spoke on what it's like to run a women-owned firm in a male-dominated industry. In April, Jeff Kraft and Aaron Leventhal, who wrote "Footsteps in the Fog," will talk about Alfred Hitchcock's films in San Francisco.

"In all the years I've belonged (24), I've never regretted going to a meeting," said semiretired lawyer David Giannini, no relation to A.P. "The talk is usually pretty lively and you never go without learning something."

Celebrated chanteuse Wesla Whitfield graced an Il Cenacolo lunch a few months ago, sharing the story of her career, which includes an early stint in the chorus of the San Francisco Opera. Whitfield's husband (and arranger- accompanist) is Mike Greensill, another non-Italian club member.

Of British and French descent -- "We came from Devonshire pirates" -- Greensill was recruited by retired college English teacher Don Cunningham, who'd previously been sponsored by a retired City College colleague, Warren White.

White likes to joke: "I'm responsible for the Irish renaissance in this club."

Like most of the men in Il Cenacolo, White said one of his favorite things about belonging is that, despite the high level of professional accomplishment among the men, "We never talk business. It's the comradeship, the group itself. Somebody like Rocco Gulli, he's just delightful."

Gulli is a soft-spoken retired biochemist. In 1956, a ship brought him to New York from his native Calabria; a Greyhound bus hauled him to the West Coast. He has lived a few blocks from North Beach ever since, the last 40 years with wife, Sandra. He joined Il Cenacolo in 1965, thanks to his father-in-law, Julian Pardini.

Gulli used to be a big fan of the operas of Richard Wagner. He especially loved discussing them with Maestro Adler.

"Then I get disenchanted with Wagner -- too long and only 20 minutes of dramatic singing in all the hours of music," he said.

He would be happy to listen to Verdi, Puccini and Rossini on any stage anytime but laments that "today Italian opera isn't really sung, it's bubbled. Most singers, they just don't enunciate."

One of the Gullis' longtime Russian Hill neighbors is Ernestine Cervelli Campagnoli. It was her father-in-law's restaurant, Campagnoli's on Geary Street, that served as the first home of Il Cenacolo. Widowed for three years now, she remembers dozens of Cenacolo trips with husband, Fred, especially to the Louis Martini winery for sun-dappled afternoons of socializing with opera stars beneath the trees.

"I remember one year Fred and I drove Mario del Monaco and his wife up to Mr. Martini's. She was worried the whole time about his throat, always wrapping a scarf around him and calling him 'tesoro,' which is 'treasure' in Italian," said Campagnoli.

Then there was the year, sometime in 1970s, when Fred came home from a meeting and said that wives were invited to Il Cenacolo's big, black-tie Christmas dinner, then usually held at the Bohemian Club. Ernestine was reluctant -- the men seemed to enjoy their single-gender get-togethers so -- and she passed on the party.

"But most of the other wives came and wondered where I was. From then on, women were part of the Christmas dinner," she said.

Il Cenacolo's gender exclusivity pops up from time to time as a minor bone of contention among its members and the public. When Pamela Rosenberg became the general director of the San Francisco Opera, the club bent its seven-decade-old rule and extended honorary membership to her. If Rosenberg leaves the post, the deal dissolves.

A small but vocal minority of the Cenacolisti think it is time to admit women to full, dues-paying status. But

most don't. They emphasize that the club is private and that its *raison d'être* is not to foster business or political connections, but to support the arts and promote a bit of male bonding.

"I don't see why anybody would be intimidated by a bunch of men getting together and enjoying one another's company," said Giannini. "My wife belongs to all kinds of women's societies and clubs. I don't want to join them, and she doesn't want me to."

Sandra Gulli, Rocco's wife, feels the same way.

"It doesn't bother me if they want a club just for men," she said. "Women are welcome at the lunches and all the other outings. Besides, I've always been a liberated woman, and Rocco's always known that."

More pressing matters these days concern such things as what the official wine of *Il Cenacolo* is going to be now that Louis Martini has been acquired by E&J Gallo, and no one at that giant winery seems to have the club on his or her radar screen.

Then there is the organization's official motto to ponder:

"Itala gente dalle molte vite."

Ask six *Cenacolisti* what it means and you'll get six different answers. (Ask an automatic Internet translator and you'll get an utterly absurd -- and erroneous -- literal translation.)

"It's old, formal Italian, I believe from Dante, and therefore very hard to translate literally," said president Palazzi, who was born in Abruzzi.

"It's essentially a statement about the Italian personality, getting at the notion that Italians are a people of many varieties yet celebrating the fact that they are able to stay united and be together."

Ten or 11 years ago Giannini and Al Cavagnaro "had a big argument" about the motto, said Giannini. "You know, you have three or four glasses of wine and start discussing these things ..."

And the outcome was?

"Well, I can tell you, nobody won the argument," said Giannini. "That's not the point."

Of course it isn't. *Il Cenacolo* isn't about winning arguments. It's about civilized dialogue, expanding intellectual and cultural horizons and helping young singers and linguists to make the world a better, more genteel -- and Italian -- place to inhabit.

It's something Attila the Hun would never understand.

Merola's soiree

Information about Merola's April 2 gala can be found at sfopera.com/merola or by calling (415) 565-6427.

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