An Interview with Paul Salerni

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Tony Caruso's Final Broadcast, an opera in ten scenes with music by Paul Salerni and libretto by Dana Gioia, was given in concert version on January 24, 2004 in Baker Hall, Zoellner Arts Center, Lehigh University.

Professor of music and former chair of the department at Lehigh University, Paul Salerni studied at Amherst under Donald Wheelock and Lewis Spratlan and at Harvard, where he received his doctorate in music under the composer Earl Kim. He has been the recipient of numerous fellowships and commissions, and his work has been performed widely. Under his direction LUVME (Lehigh University Very Modern Ensemble) has given over seventy concerts of contemporary music in the past twenty-three years. He has devoted himself to bringing young people to music and often features children in his work. Between 1988 and 1993 he composed the *Domenic Chronicles* which includes *Birthing Suite* (large orchestra, synthesizers, and computer), on events surrounding the birth of his first son; *Up and Dancing* (string quartet, string bass, alto saxophone), on a child's attempts to walk and then to dance; and *Toddler Riffs* (chamber trio), on the day in Domenic's life, aged two. Paul Salerni is the Chair-elect of the Suzuki Association of the Americas, the body that oversees Suzuki Method education in North and South America.

We asked Professor Salerni to tell us about his Italian background and his connections to Italy: "My father's family is from Salle in the Abruzzo (previously provincia di Chieti, now provincia di Pescara). My paternal grandparents emigrated at the beginning of the twentieth century. My mother's family is from the province of Catanzaro in Calabria. They say they are from Santa Caterina, but I couldn't find any records to prove that when I visited there. My great grandparents were the immigrants from Calabria. My two orchestral fables with narratives by Dana pay homage to each ancestral home: the hermetic Prince of *The Big Sword and the Little Broom* lives in a castle on the Maiella (the mountain just above Salle) and *The Old Witch and the New Moon* takes place in Santa Caterina—my mother is a great cook and the point of the story is that the witch has a magic pot which produces any dish you sing into it. *The Old Witch* was

written as a gift for her on her 70th birthday.

"I was born in New Britain, Connecticut. Growing up, it was a working-class town of 70,000 where half the population was Italian American, the other half was Polish American. I am the first in my mother's family to go to college, and I think the first in either family to earn a doctorate. My entire nuclear family speaks Italian: my sons learned Italian in Vicenza; we lived there for a year (1999-2000) and they went to Italian public school—I wanted to make sure they spoke Italian early in life, that they wouldn't have to struggle to learn it at an older age as I did. My wife Laura Johnson is a stage and opera director; her opera apprenticeship was served under the great Met bass/baritone Italo Tajo and the eminent vocal coach, Lorenzo Malfatti. She has assisted or directed at the opera festivals in Barga and Lucca and directed operas in Italian all over the United States. She is artist-in-residence at Temple University.

"My son Domenic is an accomplished violinist; at the age of twelve he made over twenty public appearances in Italy as either a recitalist, soloist, or in adult professional orchestras. He has won numerous competitions and will be attending the pre-college division of Juilliard on scholarship next year. My son Miles is a fine percussionist and soccer player spending the summer at the Kinhaven Music School in Vermont. He has the best Italian pronunciation in the family; I have him do the narration in the Old Witch whenever possible because it includes a list of Italian dishes that he pronounces so beautifully. He will narrate a performance of *The Big Sword and the Little Broom* in December.

"Rumor has it that I'm a pretty good cook, having prepared nearly all the meals for my family during 25 years of marriage. Given that situation and the trio of pieces I have written that have food as a subject, I think the picture of me at the stove that you've included here is highly appropriate."

Tony Caruso's Final Broadcast is only the latest in a series of collaborations between Paul Salerni and Dana Gioia, who is the current Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts and longtime Poetry Editor of *Italian Americana*. Their *The Big Sword and the Little Broom* and *The Old Witch and the New Moon* are both based on Italian fables. The latter is clearly related to "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," the former is adapted from the collection of Italo Calvino.

As *Tony Caruso's Final Broadcast* opens, Radio Station WEZY has been sold and the new management is canceling Antonio "Tony" Caruso's program *Opera Lover*, on the air for twenty-seven years, to make way for soft rock, which is far more sellable. "Easy listening! W-E-Z-Y!" (as opposed to "difficult" music) harmonizes a trio comprised of the Marketing Research Director, Account Executive, and Program Director ("Fill your drive-time on the freeways"). Unkempt and slightly intoxicated, unlike his normally well-groomed self, Tony enters and prepares for his final three-hour broadcast. He recalls his youth when he trained to be a singer and his friends called him "The Second Caruso." But his career went nowhere, and he turned to radio as a means of expressing his love of music to a live audience. "Being here with this music was as wonderful as singing at the Met or La Scala." Only during his broadcast does his life seem to have meaning ("I'm alive–utterly alive"). The remainder of the opera explores the causes behind Tony's failure.

As his program begins, it is apparent that it will differ from all the rest. In a flashback, a nun brings young Tony to join the church choir; he has the "voice of an angel," she says; the priest retorts that he is "a devil everywhere else." When Tony sings *Tantum ergo Sacramentum*, they agree he will be a "second Caruso." His name is already becoming a curse. The ghost of Tony's mother, speaking in Italian and English, pleads that he sing to her and urges him to keep singing. The Marketing Trio breaks in with cynical banter, dumping the classical LPs and delighting in the new age ("The past is over").

The next ghost that Tony summons is Maria Callas, who makes a grand entrance. "I always tried to learn from you," he pleads, but she calls him an "imbecilic . . . amateur" who failed because he "wanted love without its pain." In a cavatina with cabaletta ("I have not come for you. / I come here to perform") she warns that an artist's life must involve a sacrifice amounting to death-in-life. Now that Tony finally has the opportunity to sing with his idol, he finds himself unprepared. Imperious, she scorns his excuses and withdraws. The Intern and Engineer interrupt to report that Tony's final broadcast is going over remarkably well with the public. The priest and nun, now aged, pass by and wonder what ever happened to Tony. They are joined by the station intern, engineer, and marketing trio in a septet ("God, protect us till tomorrow").

Midnight approaches and Tony cannot decide what to play for his last selection: a love scene, a mad scene, or a death scene. He is visited by a Dark Lady, "the one you waited for," a composite of every woman he has ever wanted to love. But Tony lacked the courage to love, and his only choice is how to bring the broadcast to a close. He will do so with "the passion that I've always felt, / But never had the chance to live." After his poignant aria ("Memories of love are midnight's poison"), the Dark Lady persuades him to forget the past and depart with her ("Now leave your fears and sorrows behind"). In a duet in which they sing of oblivion in love and death ("Only us and only now") they exit through the lighted door of the ghosts, and the curtain falls.

JPR: Some composers write their libretti, others accept what is given to them, others go back and forth with their librettist requiring constant alterations. Did you participate in the making of Dana Gioia's libretto or were you given a finished product?

PS: The subject and the form of the libretto were Dana's idea. The initial stage of our long collaboration involved my producing musical settings for already-written Gioia poems. Those settings were wide-ranging in style: dissonant/contemporary, consonant/quasi-operatic, rock-tinged, etc. Having become acquainted with this fluency, Dana came up with the Tony Caruso idea because it would require all those different styles. He initially suggested the broad outlines of the scenario in 1994. Dana had originally conceived the piece as featuring snippets of operatic pieces Tony might play on his show. We quickly decided that might lend the piece too much of a "pastiche" flavor. Now complete, *Tony Caruso* contains not a single direct quote from any other opera. There are, however, some sly quotes from the well-known classical instrumental pieces mentioned during the LP discarding/James Brown section of "The Past is Over."

Dana finished the first six of the ten scenes in 1999 and tried sending them to me. I was living in Vicenza at the time, and the libretto never arrived. Only when I returned home in the summer of 2000, did I discover the libretto and start to work. After I sketched those first six scenes, I traveled to California to play them for Dana. With that music in mind, he proceeded to write the libretto for the rest of the opera. At that point, I started giving more input about the nature of the scenes, asking that Callas provide very specific reasons why Tony failed at his career. Dana finished scenes seven through nine before becoming

NEA chair. Scene ten took a long time to finish and was the one scene where we had long discussions about the nature of the scene. I wanted the mysterious woman who appears at the end of the opera to be a real woman, possibly a failed romance from his past. Dana rightly believed that would be inconsistent with the premise of the piece, but he did incorporate a generalized romantic connection between the two characters ("every woman you've ever loved") in order to deepen the meaning of the resolution.

JPR: Dana writes that this opera is "a work very much built around the physical stage?" What does he mean? Why this opera more than another?
PS: It is important in such a compressed opera for the audience to quickly understand what is happening in the present, the past, and the future. Therefore, characters from these contrasting time frames inhabit different areas of the stage. Similarly, profane characters appear in different spots than sacred characters, real characters in different spots from visions. Even in the unstaged premiere, we were careful to place and light the singers so it was clear where and who they were.

Much of the opera takes place in Tony's mind—not a tremendously *physical* place. That makes it even more important that the reality of the radio station be apparent, that it provides the tangible frame and counterpoint for Tony's visions. Without that contrast, much of the tension and the fun of the piece would be lost.
JPR: To some extent Tony lives in and on illusion. To begin with, his name Caruso gives him an illusion that he might be "another" Caruso, as if that were possible. Then he wants to sing with Callas—that's the twentieth-century operatic Dream Team—Callas and Caruso. For him,

it is another illusion. How do you assess Tony's problem?

PS: At the beginning of Scene 9, the nun, now old, referring to Tony, tells the priest, now infirm: "Father, he was a dreamer." I think that's one of the keys to his character. He dreams of a career as a singer, but hasn't the will, the discipline, or the true desire to be a performer. His is also the victim of others dreams for him. The nun and priest imagine him as a Second Caruso, hence the much more grand accompaniment when they take over the singing of the *Tantum Ergo* from Young Tony's more innocent rendition. His mother was also convinced he would be a great success because he "had a gift from God." Tony loves his art, but Callas tells him he was unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to become an artist. For me, Tony understands the limitations of his will to succeed and chooses to become a broadcaster –that allows him to be close to the art he loves and to share it with others. Sure, it pains him not to be singing in public, but he gets satisfaction from simply being around the music. My personal feeling is that this combination of suffering and generosity lead to his salvation. Some interpreters have found the ending of the opera somewhat ambiguous. For me, the music I've written and Tony's opportunity to sing it with the mysterious woman are clearly redemptive.

JPR: Musically, the opera is extremely varied in texture–it changes pace quickly, from imitation of soft rock and advertising jingle to sacred hymn, a high-wire Callas aria, jazz, etc. What is your intention? Is it to convey the broadest spectrum of musical materials available today? Is it to rejuvenate opera?

PS: My intention during the actual composition of the piece was to choose a style for each scene and character that communicated best who they were and what they were saying. Hence the obvious "commercial" quality of the Marketer's music, the simplified Puccinian language for Tony's immigrant mother, etc. Of course, the stylistic oppositions also amplify the sub-theme of "high" versus "popular" art, and better yet, the smorgasbord of styles is not unlike something you would hear if you surfed your radio dial. The opera is also about the American experience—somehow America accommodates and celebrates all these styles.

What I hope I've done as a composer, and what is my internal test of the success of the opera, is to find clever ways to migrate between the styles and to produce a balanced and satisfying architecture. Dana's witty verbal elisions helped greatly in terms of

that migration, and the repetitions and parallels in the libretto itself were clues to how the music was to be structured. Moreover, there are strong motivic connections between all the scenes; the sequence of keys is carefully planned, and if I might say so myself, quite satisfying. Above all, I wanted the audience to have a moving and entertaining experience.

JPR: Is satire a strong theme in your work?

PS: No. My usual stance is very straightforward; for the most part, I try to speak honestly and directly to an audience in my music. *Tony Caruso* is an exception in that I was required by the premise to utilize variable and ironic voices during much of the piece. For example, you can't put Maria Callas up on stage without some hint of irony. Since no singer can replicate how she performed, what you can expect and relish in that scene is its implicit satire. The "vision of Maria Callas" who appears in the opera takes herself and her message to Tony seriously. Hopefully, the audience receives the message with awe for her vocal virtuosity seasoned with a grain of salt. There is an interesting analogy between my stance as the composer of the piece and the evolution of its main character. Tony "makes" music by presenting others' performances. Only at the end of his life does he get to sing himself (whether that's real or imagined). Throughout most of the piece, I speak with "adopted" voices. Like Tony, I only get to sing with a truly personal voice in the final duet of the opera.

JPR: The "Path of Tears" septet is quite a surprise. Not many septets are written these days! Did you have any particular ensemble in mind? I am thinking of the beautiful quintet from Barber's *Vanessa*.

PS: Again what I had in mind was fulfilling the psychological action of the story, that is, writing a kind of "spiritual" about redemption through pain. I also felt the structural imperative of connecting this scene to the other "religious" piece in the opera, the *Tantum Ergo* of the fourth scene. In order to insure that connection, I performed a simple composerly operation—the "Path of Tears" tune is the inversion of the *Tantum Ergo* tune. What is more fun, and more telling is that, as the piece progresses, the musical style slowly transforms itself. It starts as a solemn hymn, but by the time it reaches the "Jesus walked the path before us" section with everyone finally joining in, it has become a rocking gospel number. I actually had a piece by the Yellowjackets called "Revelation" in mind when I reached that climax. Again, after the fact, my subconscious intention might have been to demonstrate

that popular and classical culture are not so distant, that African-American idioms like gospel music incorporate Western influences, that these styles co-exist on the same grand American continuum.

JPR: You studied with Earl Kim and have championed his music. In what way did he exert an influence on your musical style?

PS: Where do I start? Earl was my teacher, my mentor, my friend, a second father, an idol. Earl taught me about high standards, and he also gave me permission to be me, to find a voice by trying all the styles I loved. At a time when student composers were locked by their teachers into opaque, audience-distancing idioms, Earl always dealt with my music on its own terms. He actually led me to discover my own Italianness. Despite its being unfashionable for academic composers at the time, Earl loved Puccini–his first revelatory musical experience was hearing "Un bel di" at the Hollywood Bowl. His musical voice, especially after 1980, is intensely lyrical and direct. Thanks to Earl I actually discovered that is was OK to love Italian opera. Through acquaintance with that music and his, I discovered that lyrical and direct and most personal voice that appears at the end of *Tony Caruso*.

JPR: That's a surprise–you came to Italian opera rather late then, during work on your doctorate?

PS: Even later than that. I had discovered Mozart's operas, again thanks to Earl, during graduate school. My interest in Italian opera was provoked during a couple of post-graduate summers spent in Cambridge with Earl and by my wife's work staging Italian operas. Growing up, the only musician in my family was my Uncle Eddie who played trumpet in dance bands at weddings and in clubs. Although there was a great love of music in my family, there was no one to point me to Rossini, Donizetti, Verdi, Puccini. It took my Scots-Irish wife and a Korean-American teacher to get me to discover and embrace that incredibly rich heritage.

JPR: Your collaboration with Dana Gioia has been very fruitful. What is it like working with him? Do you have another work with Dana in the making? What are your current plans?

PS: Working with Dana is a both a joy and a royal pain in the culo. He is knowledgeable, brilliant, a generous friend, a caring family man, and simply one of the best poets and writers of his generation. He is terrific company. Strong artist that he is, he naturally has strong opinions. Of course, I'm *almost* as strong-minded as he is, so we often

spend our time together in disputation ad alta voce. In the end, we actually do listen to each other, having enjoyed the heated Italian dramatics necessary to reach the final artistic goal.

Because of Dana's commitment to serving his country at the Endowment, any big plans we have together are on hold. We've agreed to consider small revisions in *Tony Caruso* if he can find the time in the next few months. Once he is done at the Endowment, I am hoping we will tackle a full-length opera. In the meantime, I am working on a commission to write music for a multi-media setting of Grimm's "The Snow Queen." I'm also sketching a piece for electric violin and wind ensemble as a gift for my son Domenic, trying to find a performance of a choral trilogy on Dana's poems called *Requia*, preparing a concert celebrating what would have been Earl's eighty-fifth birthday that includes a new string orchestra setting of my Italian song cycle called *Regimen Sanitatis Salerni*, and feeling confident that someone will decide to mount a fully-staged production of *Tony Caruso*.