

Gianluigi Gelmetti

Ready to baton a perfect pitch



Sydney's newest maestro embraces **Randolph Magri-Overend**

Before I met Gianluigi Gelmetti I was apprehensive. For starters, I'd never met and conversed with anyone of his stature. Prior to this interview I'd chatted with other contemporary greats in the music world, but never face to face. When the interview was originally mooted I'd suggested a telephone conversation but that was discarded when it became apparent that Gelmetti's knowledge of English was pidgin at best and my knowledge of French and Italian even worse. My concerns did not improve when the first appointment was cancelled because Gelmetti was suffering from jet lag and then were increased when it became obvious the maestro's free time and mine refused to coincide. We only had this one week of opportunity before Gelmetti was off to Japan.

Eventually we settled for an hour at SSO headquarters where I was plied with a mug of coffee and given the freedom of the boardroom to ask my questions. But we had to make do without an interpreter. Actually Gelmetti's English turned out to be better than I had been led to believe. He spoke it haltingly but had difficulty

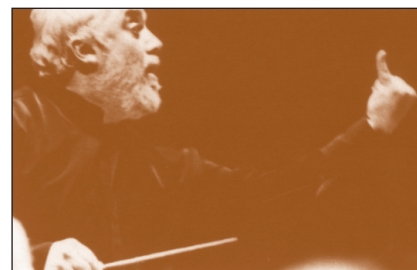
understanding some of my questions and kept asking me to repeat them in French. My French must have been worse than I thought because he kept complimenting me and answering questions I hadn't even asked! In any case, his facial expressions - always mobile and elastic - and my gesticulations - retrieved from cold storage where they had lain dormant since childhood - proved that communication can be achieved without the encumbrance of words.

Gelmetti was dressed in what seems to be the current conductor's garb - black trousers and a shirt that was probably black before washing had bleached it to pearl grey. He dangled a pince-nez on his chest and his close-cropped beard and thinning hair were more salt than pepper. But he had a cherubic face and what he lacked in language skills was more than made up for by a pair of twinkling eyes, eyebrows that defied gravity and a sense of humour that didn't. The first impression was that here was a man who loves life. And anyway just the sound of his name - Gianluigi Gelmetti - was poetry to my philistine ears.

Born into an Italian family that had known much wealth, Gelmetti's ancestors were forced to reside in Argentina for several generations after their riches evaporated. Gelmetti's father returned to his motherland, living in Rome and earning a living playing piano at silent movie theatres. But with the advent of sound, when silence ceased to be golden, he reluctantly went 'into commerce and had a shop selling sporting goods. He wasn't very happy,' continues Gelmetti junior, 'but when I was born he transmitted to me all the passion and the love of music.'

His mother, on the other hand, 'was a very good *poetessa* how you say [poet] who won many awards with her writings. My mother tells me that before I could walk, whenever I heard my father play on the piano I rush over to him, he place me on his knee and I go *Bam! Bam! Bam!* On the keys.' Not surprisingly, Gelmetti has always been passionate about music. 'I can remember when I first started writing ...A...B...C...but I cannot remember when I first started wanting to be a musician.'

Gelmetti's mother was the organising force in the family. She ensured he did not miss *la belle jeunesse*, however. 'Sometimes she insists I study,' he explains. 'I would much have preferred to play *calcio* [soccer] but my mother it was who arranged everything. I had to spend this much time on the piano, this much time swimming, and I also do judo.'



Gelmetti started playing the piano at three and conducted his first orchestra at 16. I start asking how it felt being a child prodigy, but he interrupts. '*Non, non, non alors, j'ai eu la chance de commencer très tôt* [I had the opportunity to start early] but I am no prodigy. Mozart was prodigy, but he is *un mystère*,' then pointing to the heavens '*un UFO!*' He pronounces it as one word. 'I have a copy of the original *Jupiter* symphony, which he composed with-

out a single change. When you speak about Mozart's genius it is like *Mosé* parting the Red Sea.'

Equally at home playing the guitar (which he studied with Segovia in Siena) or piano (which he commenced studying seriously at eight at Rome's Academia di Santa Cecilia) I ask which instrument he prefers. He laughs. 'Is the same as you asking which I prefer - blondes or brunettes!'

His mentors were the Italian Franco Ferrara in Rome and the Rumanian-born Sergiu Celibidache at the 'Academia di Siena, the oldest and most prestigious Academia del mondo.' At 16, Gelmetti was Celibidache's youngest pupil. He went on to become his assistant and succeeded him as director of Stuttgart's radio orchestra. Since then he has been chief conductor of the Rome Symphony (RAI), music director of the Monte Carlo Philharmonic and is currently permanent conductor and artistic director of the Rome Opera. As chief conductor and artistic director of the Sydney



Sydney, he is contracted for an initial period of three years, conducting the orchestra each year for three periods totalling 12 weeks. As a composer, which he practises fitfully, Gelmetti has written works commemorating both his mentors.

When asked how he composes he replies: 'In the meend! I soon realise he means 'mind'. 'That works for me, but I never write on the stone how others should compose.' Whether composing or conducting 'any good musician should have the capacity to imagine how the music will sound. I close my eyes and I hear the sound. With my orchestra I am never surprised with the results because I have already heard it in my mind. The conductor who doesn't already know what he wants is primitive.' He explains he becomes nothing more than a human metronome. 'But also...don't forget the most important quality of a conductor is to communicate. I tell my pupils you must try it without too much talk. If you have to explain then it is the beginning of the

defect. You must charm the orchestra; convince them to play like a chamber ensemble. They must listen to each other.'

I ask whether he's ever had rehearsals that were perfect, only for the performance to be a disappointment. 'Is usually the reverse,' he explains. 'Is like architecture. The rehearsal is like the foundation.'



You cannot have a cathedral unless you have good foundations.'

He envisages the Sydney Symphony producing a unique sound. 'The contra-bassi will be at the back and the violins on either side of the conductor,' is the way he explains it. 'It will take some years but we have already started.'

When we talk about his mother it is obvious he is still in awe of her. 'She wants to come here next year with a couple of girlfriends. She is 89,' he adds in a voice that does not mask the incredulity of such foolhardy deeds. I ask her name. 'Clelia,' he replies. Now Clelia is an unusual name. It is a name predating even Julius Caesar's Roman Empire. The odd thing, however, is that it is also my own sister's name. Gelmetti can't believe the coincidence.

Before he has time to recover I ask about how the Rome Opera chorus will find time to fly to Sydney for the Verdi *Requiem* they will share with the Sydney Philharmonia Choirs this month. Surely they have obligations in Rome? 'Is very easy,' Gelmetti replies. 'I am good friends with the managing director in Rome.' He indicates the two-fingered demonstration of a phone held to the ear. 'So I call him. He is very understanding. His name is Gianluigi...' there is a pause - and I'm thinking how coincidental it is that this director has the same name as our interviewee - , '...Gelmetti!' Hoots of laughter!

Gelmetti has to leave. He is auditioning prospective violinists at the Opera House. I extend my hand and suddenly find myself embraced southern-European style.

And to think I was initially worried about the meeting.

Gelmetti Recordings

The new chief conductor and artistic director of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra has recorded exclusively for EMI for many years and it's a shame that only two recordings of his works are available in Sydney. That we have managed to obtain them is due to the efforts of Gary Henschke from EMI Australia. And yet according to reviews from overseas, Gelmetti has not been slack in the recording industry. He has recently conducted a highly acclaimed album of Mascagni's *Iris* featuring Jose Cura and Nicolai Ghiaurov, a well-received recording of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* with Thomas Hampson, Susanne Mentzer, Jerry Hadley and Samuel Ramey, and has also recorded Puccini's *La rondine*, Rossini's *Stabat Mater* and an album of Ravel's orchestral music. The albums featured here, a selection of Nino Rota's screen music and a compilation of Rossini overtures (which includes highlights from the *Barber* already mentioned) are excellent recordings in their own right but do nothing more than whet our appetites for the inevitable *fiesta di musica*. After meeting Gelmetti and listening to his plans for Sydney's artistic future I, for one, can't wait for *la fiesta* to begin.



Photos: Lorrie Graham.

