

Music on the Gulf of Poets: Suoni dal Golfo

BY TOBY GUISE | [TOBYGUISE](#) / 22 SEPTEMBER 2017



The village of Lerici on Italy's Ligurian coast has left an indelible mark on the Romantic imagination. Wagner came here. Byron wrote here. Shelley died here. The stretch of water dividing its fishing harbour from the more famous Cinque Terre is now called the Gulf of Poets. This pocket of marine inspiration is the scene of new international youth music festival – *Suoni dal Golfo*, which will now take place annually during the second half of August.

The event is the creation of an upcoming Lerici native who has already carved a path across the furthest reaches of the classical-music world. Conductor Gianluca Marciano has won critical acclaim at posts in Georgia, Armenia and Serbia. This footprint has given him unique access to the conservatories of Eastern Europe and Central Asia – regions which now figure heavily in the festival's simply-named Orchestra Excellence. Although its new-generation members are drawn from twenty countries – including Venezuela and the UK – at the

ensemble's heart is the militant artistic seriousness of the former Soviet Union. Marshalling these forces is the festival's co-director Maxim Novikov, the highly-rated Russian viola player who has performed as a soloist with the Mariinsky Orchestra.

The result is a youth orchestra of exceptional quality. Deployed with minimal rehearsal time to non-professional facilities, it produces commanding performances of big pieces matching the festival's Romantic theme. The principal venue is the barrel-vaulted baroque church of San Francesco – a building as beautiful as it is acoustically unforgiving. Yet throughout the loud and difficult topography of Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*, the orchestra sections found a balance which would elude many established ensembles. In a second half of Verdi arias and duets, they were successfully tested against the heavy artillery of a pair of mature professional singers. Playing in the open air presents worse challenges – but a beachfront performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* held the attention of a local and international audience with its warm tone and theatricality.

Marciano clearly delights in challenging his players. With a day's notice, he replaced a mild-mannered Mozart concerto with Beethoven's huge and predatory Seventh Symphony. This would be a fast serve for many professional festival orchestras not used to playing together. Ever keen for punishment, the Orchestra Excellence picked up their instruments and hit the ball back over the net – and hard.

Their dedication is well-rewarded. Everyone appearing in the festival's fifteen concerts is given a full biography and picture in the sea-blue programme. When not shunting players between hotel rooms or looking after his sponsors, Marciano is quietly welcoming musical power-brokers into the ensemble's presence. When the trustee of a London orchestra drops into a rehearsal, he is casually identified to the players. The up-tick in their playing is audible. Contrasting their appetite with the more comfortable, tenured world of Western orchestras, Novikov says that musicians need to be hungry (they also need to be watered: with the camaraderie of an officer looking after his troops, he liberates open bottles from the gala functions to take back to the hotel).

Marciano's local roots lend the festival a touching inclusiveness – aided by a programme of free or donation-only events. During rehearsals, the orchestra is fed from the presbytery of the Church of San Francesco. Inquiring as to the identity of some VIP guests, the priest quietly concludes: 'Ah, they're from Lerici. I'd better say hello.' At the back of the church, a dachshund quietly ponders the standing ovations.

Early on Friday morning – before the village is awake – a viola trio forms up in Lerici’s old Jewish quarter to play new works by Israeli composer Eliezer Elper. No audience is needed: the performance is a memorial to those deported when the region was under German occupation. They included Gianluca Marciano’s own grandfather, who became one of the few escapees from Buchenwald then remained in hiding for months after the end of the war. In contemporary terms, the festival has no political mandate – existing purely for art’s sake. Yet the mixing of young musical talent can only be welcome as political fault-lines reopen between East and West.

The event’s powerful musical resources mean it need only lean lightly on Lerici’s literary heritage. The organisers secured a world-first by opening Shelley’s villa for a public recital by Maxim Novikov and Maria Mikhaylovskaya, one of Russia’s best new-generation harpists. They promise to up the stakes next year by placing the orchestra on a pontoon moored in the sea and starting to release material on their own label. Once a graveyard of poets, the bay of Lerici has been reborn as a gymnasium of musical talent whose DNA will be found in global orchestras for years to come.