

# GOD & I: Damiana Natali

*An interview with Maestro Damiana Natali,  
one of Italy's leading female conductors, founder and  
artistic director of the Ars Armonica Orchestra*

By Mario Conte, OFM Conv.

## WHEN did your love for music begin?

It all started when I was 4. The discovery of the sounds in nature aroused in me a great love for music, and this love has become the love of my life. I was living in the country with my grandparents, who owned a spinning mill. Grandma would teach me to build all sorts of things with my hands, while grandpa taught me to recognize the most diverse sounds. By listening to the sounds and vibrations from a machine he was able to discern any malfunction it had. It was also wonderful for me to hear my mum singing and my dad listening to classical music and song arrangements with the orchestra; it made my heart beat faster. A watershed event, an epiphany moment, was watching the RAI (Italian TV) Orchestra on TV with its conductor.

In everyday life we are surrounded by sounds which, unfortunately, we are not used to listening to. The human voice, in particular, is truly unique; it is something that is given to us from Above. It is a most beautiful instrument which belongs only to us, and resounds in and outside of us.

## How did you become an orchestra conductor?

I started playing the piano thanks to Sister Augusta, a Rosminian Sister who turned 90 in April last month. My parents weren't wealthy, but they

loved beautiful things. They took great pains to offer me a sound education, and so they sent me to a religious institute directed by Rosminian Sisters at Borgomanero, near Milan

in northern Italy. The Sisters soon realized that I had a particular gift for singing, and so they made me sing solo at Mass.

Later, when Sister Augusta saw that I liked playing on kettles, she showed me their piano and allowed me to play it, and this is how my love affair with this instrument began. She gave me my first lessons during breaks between lessons. One day Sister Augusta said to my dad, "This child must



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become a musician,” and even though he had other plans for me she kept on insisting, and eventually dad bought a piano. What a present that was for me! However, my dream was that of becoming a conductor, even though in the small town where I was living people didn't even know that such a profession even existed.

When I got older I started attending lessons at the Conservatory of Novara, and then in Turin and Milan. At the age of 15 I started conducting the scores of my fellow students in composition, and that was when I understood that I had an innate talent for conducting – that was what I really wanted to do. However, women were not welcome in conducting classes in those days. So I kept studying hard, and I finally graduated from the Faculties of Piano, Composition, Choir and Orchestra Conducting in the State Conservatories of Milan and Turin. At the same time I was maintaining myself by giving piano concerts and teaching music in schools.

**Did you start working as a conductor immediately?**

No, not immediately; many years of study are necessary to start that profession. I started to go and help in the great theatres, where I learned all that goes on behind the scenes. Then I began to accompany singers with the piano, be in charge of the stage-light team and act as the stage manager, and only later did I become an assistant to conductors. In this way I was able to learn from some very great masters. It was a first-rate schooling for me.

I then started conducting orchestras in Italy and abroad until, in 2008, I was able to found one of my own, the *Ars Armonica Orchestra*. I had always dreamed of having an orchestra of very talented musicians whose ideal was to provide music to the public with enthusiasm and passion. *Ars*

**BORN IN** Cureggio (NO) in northern Italy, Damiana Natali lives in Bergamo. Maestro Natali began playing the piano at the age of 5 and later conducted the scores of her fellow students at the conservatory. To conduct and compose music had been her dream since childhood.

Natali became a pianist, composer and orchestra and choir conductor by attending the two main conservatories in Italy, the G. Verdi Conservatories of Turin and Milan, and she is continuing her studies in other prestigious music conservatories.

Maestro Natali has studied under various masters, such as Wolfgang Sawallisch, Lorin Maazel, Elisha Inbal, Myung-Whun Chung, Gerd Albrecht, Georges Prêtre, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos, Riccardo Muti, Donato Renzetti and Antonio Pappano, this last maestro at the Accademia Santa Cecilia in Rome and at the Royal Opera House in London.

Highly appraised by all of them as a talent destined for orchestra conducting, she has learned a great deal in terms of technicality, interpretation and style, gradually developing her own original style, which has aroused the interest of the public, trusts, the media, magazines and TV networks.

Italy's newspaper *La Stampa* wrote of Maestro Natali, “She is one of the few women in the international arena who work as orchestra conductors; she unites expertise and professionalism, technicality and passion, rigour and femininity.”

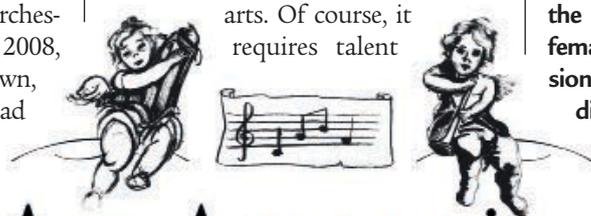


*Armonica* unites the beauty of music with ethics, that is, with social commitment and solidarity. For me, it is important to take music to places where it is missing. In fact, the world is full of ‘noise’ which prevents us from appreciating both silence and the beauty of an art which can only be fully valued when one is ‘listening to live vibrations’. To establish an orchestra in Italy was a real enterprise, a true miracle, and this orchestra has so far performed hundreds of concerts. It is no mere chance that the logo of *Ars Armonica* is that of a music score between two angels.

**You are one of the few women conductors in the world, as this profession is usually reserved to men. How did you manage to attain this position?**

I do not believe gender roles are important, especially in the field of music, because it is the most ethereal and intangible of all the

arts. Of course, it requires talent



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and a great deal of commitment, but these gifts have nothing to do with one's race or gender. Therefore, I find nothing strange in a woman conducting an orchestra. Unfortunately, prejudice is always present. Albert Einstein once said, “What a sad era when it is easier to smash an atom than a prejudice.”

I had to make a lot of sacrifices and go through many humiliations, but all this has strengthened me and has made me feel proud – I fight and smile. I was able to reach this important position through a lot of study and thanks to the talent I received from Above. What defines me is not merely that fact that I am a woman, but also that I am a composer besides being a conductor, and also that I have achieved management and human skills that enable me to handle certain situations and unforeseen events.

**What can be done to overcome the gender gap between males and females in the conducting profession? Is it enough to overcome prejudice?**

No, that is not enough; it is also necessary to introduce equal opportunities. My dream is that of conducting great symphonies, and the

## Cover Feature

**Damiana started playing the piano thanks to Sister Augusta, in photo, at Borgomanero near Milan**

people chosen to direct them should be selected exclusively on the basis of their artistic talents, not on the basis of other considerations. It is very sad to see, for instance, that in the prominent theatres of the world there are no women with permanent contracts. Within a conductor, whether man or woman, there must not only be great preparation and talent, but also a great personality, capable of conveying to the public intense emotions and vibrations.

**What is the role of the conductor, and how would you describe your personal conducting style?**

As conductor I try to gather and channel all the energies, both mine and those of the orchestra. I try to highlight and bring out the best in every component of the orchestra, and to coordinate and channel everything towards a great final synthesis. In this way, I become the instrument that conveys something that is already within the composition so as to recreate emotions that come to life again from the score, and to give it new energy.

It's no use having talent and not putting it to good use. First, you must recognize your talent, cultivate it, and then put it to good use with great humility and simplicity. No job is more important than another one; every job has its unique value and specificity. Music must be performed with your head clear, but in a very sincere way; it must not only pass through the chords of the instruments but also through the chords of the heart of those playing them, and above all it must touch the chords of the hearts of the listeners.

**What takes place in you when you turn your back to the audience and start conducting?**

At first, I feel a great sense of responsibility because I know that I have to give the best of myself and of those who are working with me.



It is great to feel the public behind you listening to the music it thirsts for, because music is beauty and we all need to fill our souls with beauty. For us musicians, our performance is a gesture of love towards those who are listening.

My task, as conductor, is to bring a masterpiece out of that score. After the first notes I feel the whole weight of responsibility lifted from my shoulders, and I sense the presence of the composers who wrote the scores next to me. I feel them placing their hand on my shoulder, as though they are the ones who are guiding me. All this makes me feel very confident despite the great tension in a 'live' performance.

**What does music give humanity?**

Music unites what we are with what we do not see – earth and heaven, the human with the divine. Music, in fact, allows us to perceive concealed values, like friendship, love, and faith. Music is able to reach those places of the heart which the word is unable to. It is felt from within; it is seen with the eyes of the heart, of the imagination.

**What is music for you?**

Music is a gift from God. It is constituted by the same vibrations by which both human beings and the Universe are constituted. Its alphabet is the most universal in the world, written everywhere in the same manner and with the same letters. With orchestra musicians or with students at the conservatory we may speak different languages, and yet we are able to communicate through the same language of music.

To me, it is also an infinite, inexhaustible language which can be recreated. It only has seven notes, but they can be united in an infinite number of combinations in terms of rhythm, melody, harmony, tonality, etc. Its parameters are essentially those of space and time just like those of life. It is up to the composers to express through the notes what they wish to communicate as a positive message both in life and in music.

**At the age of 18 you experienced a serious and rare cardiovascular disease. How did you overcome it?**

It was a life-changing experience. At the age of 18 I was diagnosed with a rare cardiovascular syndrome, and I was told I had only three months to live. I then went through a surgical operation in Lyon, France, during which my heart stopped and I felt as though I was falling into a deep and frightening vortex of darkness. My soul was leaving my body, but then a blinding light arrived, and I saw the Queen of Heaven, who told me, "your time has not yet come!" With the palm of her hand extended towards me she sent me back with the speed of light, as though she had trespassed the threshold of time, which for us is invisible. And so I came back to life and my heart started beating again. The vision was Our Lady, whom I had seen in the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière, who is also called Our Lady of Light. I could see this basilica from my hospital window after the operation.

Our Lady made me understand that time is precious and must not be wasted. The duration of our lives does not depend on us and must be put to good use in order to be always



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ready when our time comes. This experience gave me great energy. When something like this happens to you at the age of 18 you become an adult immediately. You realize how each day is a gift from God. This is why I feel close to all those who are sick and suffering, and I try to donate my concerts for important causes every time I have the chance to do so.

**What role does Mary have in our times?**

I believe she is the Queen of Light, a pure light that enlightens us and who welcomes us at the end of our earthly lives. If we wish to reach that light, however, we must commit ourselves to good deeds by loving God, ourselves and our neighbors.

I cannot accept those who waste time and throw away their lives. Life has immense value; it is a gift from Above. Even if you are in darkness you must still search for the light and the beauty that is within you, and if you cannot find it you must absolutely believe that you will find it.

**What image do you have of God?**

I believe that all that exists is an emanation of God. I believe in the Lord of the whole world and all that is in it, both visible and invisible. I love Psalm 24, which says, “The earth is the Lord’s and all it holds, the universe and those who dwell in it. For He founded it on the seas, established it over the rivers.” Whenever I play an instrument I think that the sounds coming from it are the same sounds of the Universe, the same sounds through which God creates and communicates with us.

**I know that you are familiar with the figure of St Anthony. What does this Saint mean to you?**



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In 2016 Maestro Natali wrote *Dona Pacem* (Grant Us Peace) for the victims of the Paris terrorist attacks

St Anthony has always been my friend. He helps me, and whenever I go to Padua I pay him a visit in the Basilica. Often, when I am confused and don’t know what to do, I turn to him, and he gives me answers.

It was the same with my family. My grandfather, Nello Natali, was very devoted to the Saint, and even though he didn’t go to church every Sunday he had St Anthony in his heart and kept his image in his wallet. Many people pray silently, and I believe all prayers are heard.

**What are your projects for the future? What can you tell us about your future compositions?**

In this period of my life I am prioritizing study and composition, and I am planning new concerts. I would be very grateful to conduct in shrines, including the Basilica of St Anthony in Padua, my composition for solo, choir and orchestra called *Dona Pacem* (Grant Us Peace). It was written in 2016 for the victims of the Paris terrorist attacks, but it is very relevant now for all the victims of the corona-

virus in Italy and abroad. I conducted the world premiere during the canonization of Popes John XXIII and John Paul II. I feel very privileged to have met St Pope John Paul II, and I dedicated *Soffio di Luce* (Breath of Life) to him. This score was performed for the first time in Leopoldis in Ukraine by the soloists of the RAI Orchestra of Turin, and broadcast throughout the world.

Pope John Paul II was very pleased with *Soffio di Luce*, and it was also played in Padua by the late Maestro Claudio Scimone, the founder of the *Solisti Veneti*.

But going back to *Dona Pacem*, I think it would be ideal to dedicate it to St Anthony on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of his Franciscan vocation. This composition is a request to God for the gift of peace: a universal good and a communion of all spirits and peoples.

Some Franciscan friars explained to me that the word *amen* (which means ‘so be it’) concludes the prayers of Christians, Jews and Muslims alike, and this is why I added a long tail to the concluding *amen*, where I also included a harmonic scale which recalls Arabian music. I did this because I wanted to highlight how peace is a gift for all, no matter what religion one may have. ♦

After conducting orchestras for many years, Maestro Natali founded *Ars Armonica Orchestra* in 2008

