



## “Out of the temple, to the world”

Italy ‘in vetrina’

The Editor in conversation with Amb.Dott. Francesco Bongarrà,  
Director of the Italian Cultural Institute, London

Francesco Bongarrà has quite a story – law graduate from the University of Palermo, a political journalist for 30 years, starting from his coverage of the story of ‘Tangentopoli’ and continuing to the present day – he is also a historian, a recordist, a philanthropist, an academic, and a witness to many events of historical significance. An experienced reporter, he was previously head of the Parliamentary service of the Italian news agency ANSA, for which he was a correspondent in Berlin, London and Buenos Aires. He is an Ambassador at large of the Republic of San Marino. He lectures in Parliamentary and Political Journalism and Crisis

Communications at the LUMSA University in Rome and is Honorary Senior Visiting Fellow at the Faculty of Finance, Bayes Business School, London. Before joining ANSA he worked at the Osservatore Romano, The Times, Reuters and the BBC.

Now two years in post, the very energetic and charming Director of the Italian Cultural Institute, London, engagingly passionate to reveal the many splendid achievements of his country to the world, the events he organises are created to reflect and involve the community – and they are not only cultural events. He selects ‘gente motivata’, presenters from a wide pool of talent, as they are always full of interest.

“The real role of this position is to be a showcase for Italy (‘Italy in vetrina’) and to recount what we have been, what we are, what we want to be.” He explains: “We are not only Michelangelo, for example, but we are also paramount in many areas, such as science – with fascinating work in space, our amazing telescope, our neurosciences, our economy, which is going well and is successful.” And there are special elements. Take opera, for example. “Opera, Italian opera, is The Best!” He notes that there are very many opera houses in Italy – as well as the famous La Scala in Milan, there is also La Fenice in Venice, and opera houses in Naples, Palermo, Rome, Verona

– the list is impressive. “And who comes to the opera premieres in these wonderful places? The English!”

There are 80 million Italians around the world, but everyone speaks English. So to counter balance this, Dott. Bongarrà presents 12 books in Italian, per year, but here, also in English – it diffuses the works and the appreciation of current Italian literature. He has also invited English authors to present to ICI audiences – recently, for example, Olivia Lang was invited to present. The challenge: “I’ve come out of the temple, to the world.” He continues: “For example, in this past year we set up a number of exciting projects

– to note just two: the famous ballerino Virgilio Siemi danced at the Victoria and Albert Museum; the pianist Beatrice Rana played the Goldberg Variations in the National Gallery in front of the paintings.”

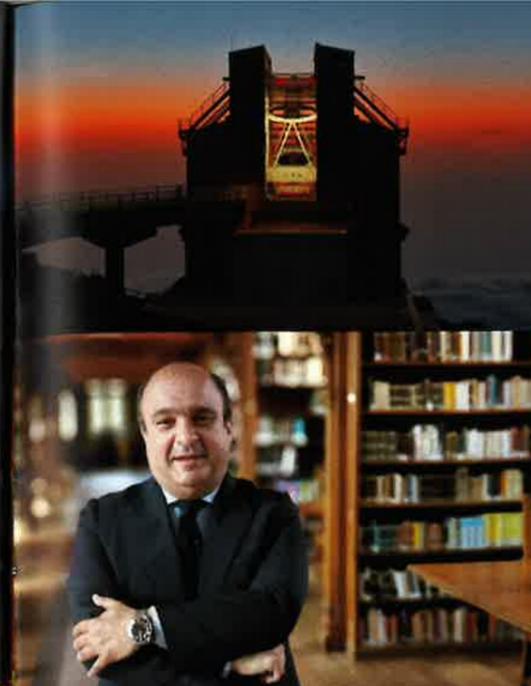
At Pembroke College, Cambridge, the ICI made three presentations in Italian: “We wish to transmit the spirit and the ‘vibe’ of Italy! What we present is selections of the great beauty of Italy.” He pauses. “The variety is always a surprise. When I am in Rome, I see something new every day. I count myself lucky to have this pleasure – to have these experiences and these sensations.” Now, living in Britain, he observes that the traditional Englishman

doesn’t exist any more. “There are no men wearing ties, for example, which was a very elegant English tradition.”

He mentions that the Institute also showcases photography, recently organising two big photography exhibitions. The first featured Gianni Barenago Gardin, Milanese, now aged 96.

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He is considered the Cartier Bresson of Italy. The next event will be the last before the Institute moves premises – it will be a retro exhibition of the work of the eclectic photographer, writer, traveller, mountaineer, anthropologist, academic – the Florentine, Fosco Maraini (1912-2004). And then the Institute will move to another very attractive location, leaving Belgrave Square for Buckingham Gate. And another chapter will begin.



Above left: Public domain; Wikimedia Commons; Telescopio Nazionale Galileo; Galileo Cultural Institute

Opposite page: The magnificent Arena di Verona, home to world class opera; this page top left; the Galileo National Telescope, (Telescopio Nazionale Galileo; TNG), a triumph of Italian scientific endeavour; centre left; Amb. Bongarrà; left: photograph from the Fosco Maraini exhibition; above: visitors enjoy the Gianni Barenago Gardin exhibition