

A Phone Call From a Statue in Parma, Italy

Story and photos by Claudia Flisi

In a city best known for what goes in the mouths of diners around the world, its famous dead people come to life and tell you their stories.



Paola Greci photo by Talking Teens: Le Statue Che Parlano

The phone call from Giuseppe Verdi came promptly—barely a second or two after I had waved my phone at a bar code on a nearby totem. We were sitting side by side on a bench in Piazzale San Francesco in downtown Parma, the Maestro and me. Well, a life-sized bronze statue of him anyway.

We were facing the city's appropriately named Casa della Musica (Music House), which helps opera lovers make the most of their visit to Parma. It has an opera museum, a display of sound devices (think phonographs to iPods) from the 19th and 20th centuries, an auditorium for concerts, a music archive, and a research library. Some opera buffs come here because of the connection with Verdi, and the Verdi Festival that takes place here every October. Verdi wasn't actually born *in* Parma, but Roncole Verdi, his birthplace, is about 20 miles northwest of the city, so *i veri Parmigiani* (those truly born in the city) have no trouble claiming him.

Verdi started the phone call by complaining about his itchy nose and how his bronze limbs prevented him from scratching that itch. He didn't sing or hum bars from any of his famed operas, which was just as well: his gravely voice reflected his advanced years,

though a connoisseur of Italian theatrical talent might have recognized his voice as that of a well-known local actor.

Parma is full of so many surprises that phone calls from a long-dead composer can almost be taken in stride. Although it is known internationally as the city of ham and cheese because of the fame of its prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano-Reggiano, it has a lot more going for it food-wise than that. Within its borders are the highest number of DOP (*Denominazione di Origine Protetta*, or protected designation of origin) and IGP (*Indicazione Geografica Protetta*, or protected geographical indication) food products in Europe. It was named a UNESCO Creative City for Gastronomy in 2015, the first Italian city to receive this recognition. In a country where good food is literally everywhere (you can get a bad meal in Italy, but you have to work very hard to do so), that is saying a lot.

Its major cathedral has a ground-breaking 16th century *trompe d'oeil* painting by Correggio that encouraged the use of



foreshortening and spatial illusion. The pink-marbled Baptistery next to the cathedral is considered by many to be among Europe's most beautiful examples of Romanesque-to-Gothic architecture. And it's beautiful without any label at all.



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Parma also boasts the largest bamboo labyrinth in the world, composed of more than 200,00 plants and a pathway of more than two miles. It opened in 2015, the result of a quirky bet between Italian art publisher Franco Maria Ricci and Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges.

Back to those talking statues though. The city has a total of 16, and all of them were able to converse with me in Italian (some in local dialect), English (British, not American), or sign language from the screen on my phone. Together they represent much of the cultural life of the city—its music (Verdi and Arturo Toscanini, who was a true Parmigianino), art (Correggio and Il Parmigianino), and religion (Padre Lino). Politics come in the form of Garibaldi, who wasn't from Parma, but every Italian city has some statue or piazza honoring him. Then there are the ones with Roman origins: statues celebrating Arianna, Victory, and the group of Silenus, among others.

There is even a talking statue honoring Parma's most famous homeless person, Enzo Mât (meaning *matto*, or crazy) Sicuri, who died in 1988. What other city would commission a bronze statue to a vagabond, and then provocatively set him down, along with a bronze version of his beat-up bicycle, in an elegant area of downtown? This also attests to Parma's quirky character in contrast to its graceful, semi-Romanesque setting.



Photo by Talking Teens: Le Statue Che Parlano

The creator of the Talking Statues project is a dynamic, 30-something woman named Paola Greci, a vera Parmigiana of course. Her thesis at the University of Parma was about the statues of her city, and that got her thinking. She saw a talking statue installation in London and decided to adapt the idea. "I wanted a project to value our statues *and* to involve young people in the cultural life of this city. Teenagers are the

hardest age group to involve in cultural life, so we designed this project to ensure that it will continue to involve the teenagers of this city. It will be constantly renovated, as Parma is constantly being reinvented."

The statues began talking in May 2019, after 2.5 years of preparation. First Paola found funding from local government, banks, foundations, private companies, and crowdfunding. Then she found 15 classes from local high schools to "adopt" the statues; they studied the history of each sculpture, subject, and artist, wrote the texts for the phone calls, did a one-minute video for each, and created the web site, which is called [Talking Teens](#). All the texts were reviewed by a scientific committee consisting of museum experts to ensure historic accuracy.

Only one statue was handled differently: the approachable, Instagrammable Verdi in Piazzale San Francesco. Locals of any age were invited to submit a text for him, and the winner was a 25-year-old drama student

An important feature of the project is its accessibility, not only for the deaf but also for the mobility-restricted and the blind. The information totems beside each statue are in Braille and the height is geared to wheelchair level.

Patting Verdi on his unscratched nose, I wandered to another statue tucked away in a corner of the same piazza—a massive muscular sculpture of Hercules wrestling with Antaeus. The locals call it *i du brasè* (the two, embraced), tongue-in-cheek and also a little bit quirky. It's been around since 1687 but moved several times, most recently in 1981, after a local reveler broke off Antaeus' arm on New Year's Eve when the statue was located near City Hall. Since then it has been in a supposedly safer location in Piazzale San Francesco, as opera lovers are presumably less rowdy than local politicians.



A curious traveler can visit all 16 statues over the course of a three-hour itinerary (including the time to listen to each call) covering about 2.7 miles (4.4 kilometers). A shorter itinerary in Parma's historic center stops at nine statues and takes about an hour.

But it's all very loose. If I happened upon a statue while wandering through the streets, that statue would tell me what others were nearby and what would be the recommended route to find them. About a 10-minute walk from my conversation on the bench with Verdi was another monument to the composer, much grander and more imposing. He was sitting in contemplation surrounded by his muses: melody, song, dance, love, and death. This art was not nearly as friendly as Verdi on the bench, but the location on the verdant lawns of the Palazzo della Pilotta more than compensated.

The Palazzo is a series of white marble buildings set in a green park dating from the late

16th century. It was originally created not as a residence by the then-ruling Farnese family of Parma but as an administrative center. New structures were added over the centuries, utilization changed, and American bombing raids in World War II also forced changes. Restoration began after the war ended, as the cultural and historic value of the complex was recognized. Today it houses the city's national gallery, an archeological museum, Italy's oldest printing museum, a major research library, and Teatro Farnese, one of the largest (if not THE largest) wooden Baroque theatres in Europe. At its opening in 1628, the theatre seated 4,500 spectators and hosted tournaments with floating ships and naval battles. Eventually these productions became too expensive even for noble families and the theatre fell into decline. Today it is rarely used for theatrical productions (all that wood isn't compatible with contemporary fire regulations) but is well worth seeing as a glimpse into an opulent past.



A short stroll away on the Plaza of Peace, a statue of *Il Partigiano* (the Partisan) stands in sharp contrast to the name of its location and the patrician surroundings. The *partigiani* engaged in left-wing resistance to fascism during World War II, and the burly figure, gun in hand, represents that fierce struggle, with a dead comrade lying behind him. The latter is doubly symbolic: the monument was inaugurated in 1956 by the then-mayor and provincial president of Parma, both ex-partigiani. Five years later a young political extremist tried to blow up the statue and the "fallen comrade" was damaged. It was subsequently repaired and removed to a local cemetery, while the bronze body lying behind the Partigiano today is a copy.

Close by this political intrigue, also on Plaza of Peace, is Parma's paean to its cultural roots: Teatro Regio. The 19th-century opera house, all gold ornamentation and red velvet, was constructed on a former monastery. It is known for its unusually vociferous

audience, especially when it comes to Verdi. The better-known La Scala may have its "clagues" but Regio audiences have been known to break into competing "bravos" and "boos" for a singer when they feel so moved.

Parma may have its partisan preferences—in culture as in politics—but it is too open-minded a city to lock itself rigidly into a 19th century mentality.

About a mile east of Teatro Regio, easily walkable, is Auditorium Paganini, part of a multi-structure congressional center hosting non-operatic musical events, meetings, and conferences in Parma. Famed Pritzker architect Renzo Piano created the complex in 2001 from an abandoned sugar factory. It is as clean, crisp, and contemporary as the Regio is neo-classical . . . though Paganini also has red velvet seats.

A statue of conductor Arturo Toscanini waves his bronze baton south of the auditorium, just in front of the foundation bearing his name. The phone call from him may sound

vaguely familiar to film buffs of spaghetti westerns since the voice is that of Parmense Franco Nero. Both Toscanini and Nero had career successes far from Italy, so they accurately reflect the outward looking perspective of what would otherwise be another lovely mid-sized Italian city (albeit one where the food can be amazing).

Professor Michele Guerra, Parma's councilman for culture, is adamant about the lessons his city can impart to the world: "We represent all the multi-dimensional facets of a city—historic, contemporary, multi-cultural. Today the concept of multiculturalism is viewed as a negative in many places, but we express it in a positive way and this could be a lesson for others. We are a paradigm, an integration of culture and commerce, not simply a 'provincial city.'"

Guerra helped spearhead Parma's successful bid to become Italian City of Culture 2020-21, and is working with UNESCO to strengthen the obvious bonds between food and culture.

Too bad none of the talking statues can cook.

[Claudia Flisi](#) is a dual citizen writer based in Milan, Italy. Her stories have appeared in the International New York Times, Newsweek, Fortune, Variety, and many others. She has visited more than 100 countries, fallen off horses on six continents, and trained dogs in three languages. Her book about an Italian dog, [Crystal and Jade](#), was published in 2016.

All photos by Claudia Flisi except where indicated.

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