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Philadelphia Musician Joe Soprani Keeps the Accordion Fresh

Many people stereotype the accordion as a peripheral instrument reserved for polka bands and German festivals. However, veteran accordionist Joe Soprani's six-decade career serves as a testament to the truly versatile nature of the instrument.

Soprani of Local 77 (Philadelphia, PA) has performed accordion in Broadway shows, including *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Cabaret*, operas, including *La Traviata*, and has appeared as a soloist with The Philadelphia Orchestra. His résumé as an arranger is equally impressive: he has arranged countless classical songs for the accordion, and even arranged a piece for Bon Jovi's 1996 tour.

While Soprani has performed many different styles of music over the years, he remains closest to the genres he grew up with—classical and Italian folk music. "My grandfather was an enthusiast," says Soprani. "He taught me all the classic Italian folk songs."

Soprani began playing at age five, and took quickly to the instrument. By age 18, he had won a talent competition on *The Arthur Godfrey Show*, which led to an offer to perform with the USO for troops stationed in Korea and Japan.

Soprani recalls his time playing in the USO fondly, noting that the GI crowds were always eager to see him perform. But one bad memory that sticks out in his mind is a plane crash he was in, while traveling between bases in 1953. The ill-fated flight was transporting USO performers to Miho, Japan, in dark and rainy conditions, when it overshot the runway and went down.

"I made the sign of the cross and said a prayer," says Soprani. "Fortunately, we were able to stay afloat just long enough to get everyone out safely." However, he lost the accordion that his grandfather had given him. He continued to fly when he later enlisted and performed with the Air Force Band, but has avoided air travel ever since.

Upon returning to the States, Soprani found it was more difficult to land accordion gigs. "The accordion was dead in the '60s," says Soprani. So he attended the Philadelphia Musical Academy and became a music teacher in the Philadelphia area, pursuing accordion projects whenever possible. "Sometimes I'd bring in the accordion and play. The students would have a great time," he says.

Along the way, being an AFM member helped him land gigs in theater and on television. "They have done me well," says Soprani.

Over the years Soprani has performed in so many venues, and in front of such diverse crowds, that he has difficulty picking a single favorite performance. He says that playing with Luciano Pavarotti on several occasions was a definite highlight. "He was an exciting performer to watch," says Soprani. He also mentions performing with renowned tenor Russell Martin on *Good Morning America* as one of his proudest moments.

Still, despite his successful music career, Soprani is conscious of how some of the music community views the accordion. "I've been fighting [accordion stereotypes] for many years," he admits. "I've been self-conscious about it, especially with the music elite."



Joe Soprani of Local 77 (Philadelphia, PA) enjoys arranging classical music for the accordion.

But Soprani's love of the instrument has shined through. At 75, he is as busy as ever. In addition to performing as an in-house accordionist on a Philadelphia-based Italian radio show, Soprani plays in an Italian folk trio, as well as a concert trio. "I have fun with the instrument," he says Soprani.

Soprani continues to work as an arranger as well, adapting classical music for the accordion. He is in the process of digitizing his arrangements for www.musicforaccordion.com.

And while Soprani doubts that accordion will ever be as popular as it was in his youth, he is confident that talented young accordionists across the country will help pass his instrument on to future generations. "I marvel at these young accordion players," he says. "But I'd like to think I still give them a run for their money."

By Adam D'Arpino, Staff Writer