

## CHAPTER 3

# LESSONS: APRIL 5, 1899–JUNE 18, 1915

*“Oh, this learning, what a thing it is!”*

~ Shakespeare  
*The Taming of the Shrew*

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### **Saturday**

Morning: Walk to the host village.

Afternoon: “March” to the town’s main square.

Evening: Play a concert in the town’s band gazebo.

Night: Sleep in a local building on a straw mat or, if lucky, a cot.

### **Sunday Feast Day**

7:30 a.m.: Parade through village to wake up townsfolk.

8:00 a.m.: Eat breakfast.

8:30 a.m.: Perform around the village in small groups of 6-8.

10:30 a.m.: Perform at the church service.

12:30 p.m.: Parade of the Saints

2:00 p.m.: Sunday dinner in a village home

3:30 p.m.: Siesta

5:30 p.m.: Parade briefly through village once again.

9:00 p.m.: Perform another concert in the town’s band gazebo.

Night: Sleep in a local building on a straw mat or, if lucky, a cot.

## Monday

Morning: Walk back home to Roseto  
 Afternoon: Time to relax at home with family<sup>1</sup>



THERE WERE INFLUENCES OTHER THAN HIS FAMILY, of course, which inspired Leonard Falcone to be the virtuoso he became. Most important among them, Falcone once said, was the “rich musical heritage of the country and city of his birth” and playing in Roseto Valfortore’s municipal band.<sup>2</sup> The two were inextricably intertwined. That the Italy of Leonard Falcone’s time had a “rich musical heritage” goes almost without explanation. The 19th century exploded in lyrical melody written by the likes of operatic giants such as Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, Verdi, and Puccini. Their operas were everywhere, not just in great opera houses, but also on village streets.

Everywhere, too, were the ubiquitous and popular Italian wind bands, which played not only for public events, but also led religious processions and funerals through the streets of Italy’s cities and villages. By the end of the nineteenth century, almost 5,000 of these bands, most sponsored by a local merchant or businessman, were in existence, representing nearly every commune and military unit in Italy.<sup>3</sup> One of the best, perhaps *the* best, of the community bands was located in Leonard’s village, Roseto Valfortore.<sup>4\*</sup>

What music might it have played in the early 20th century when Leonardo was 5 or 10 or 15 years old? No account shows, and in the end it hardly matters. What counts is that something of its power seized his imagination in a way that marked the young boy forever.

**Leonard Falcone:** *In programming and performance, you might say that the Italian heritage is with me. When I think of it, it’s there. But it isn’t conscious. I don’t think, “Now, that’s what we did in Italy!” No. Not that. But if I were to analyze, shall we say, my musical feelings. . . they have been influenced by the training and experience I received in Italy before I came here. Very much so. The clarity, the lightness of technique, and the sparkling*

*style that you hear in Rossini, for instance, well, that influenced me. When teaching, I sometimes think students' performances are too heavy, too thick. That idea stems from my training and experience in Italy. Yes.*<sup>5</sup>

Roseto took pride in its band<sup>6\*</sup> even to the extent that the village itself hired a top conductor— Donato Antonio Donatelli, grandson of its founder Domenico Egidio Donatelli, the man who in 1790 organized the village's first band<sup>7</sup>—and then made sure he made a good living. In a town with many poor, his home was a comfortable place complete with servants. His job was simply this: to offer beginning instrumental instruction to the village boys free of charge, and to build a good musical unit to be made available for municipal festivals and events, which sometimes included service to the king and other royals.<sup>8</sup> Donatelli's career is interesting for a number of reasons, not least of all for its magical qualities. When he was merely seventeen, his music director took ill just before the band he played in at the time was to give a concert at the San Carlo di Napoli exhibition in honor of King Umberto Primo and Queen Margherita of Savoy. He was called upon to fill in as conductor. The performance was so successful that the royals personally “congratulated him with a handshake” and released “400 pounds,” a handsome amount of money, to him as a reward.<sup>9</sup> Later, in 1878 when Donatelli was the director of Roseto's band, King Umberto Primo and the queen crossed his path again when the band gave an impressive performance after walking all the way to Foggia, some nine hours from Roseto on foot, to play at a banquet given in honor of the royal couple's visit there. The king and his queen, in true fairy tale fashion (and in a in a gesture not unlike that of Oldsmobile's “Black Jack” Wolfram's to MSU's John Hannah forty years later), summoned the conductor and asked if they could grant him a wish. Maestro Donatelli didn't hesitate. He requested that his son, Michangelo, the group's principal clarinet player, be sent to the Conservatory San Pietro Majella in Naples so he could study to become a conductor like his father. The wish was granted. The latter story so took hold of Leonard Falcone's imagination that he told it many times in interviews,<sup>10</sup> including during his final interview, ninety six years after its occurrence. Perhaps it had

also fascinated him as a young boy as he hoped against hope to someday be in one of the two service bands in Foggia, the principal city in the region, or like his teacher and his teacher's son before him, become a music student at the Naples Conservatory.<sup>11</sup> The first of the two goals was within his reach. But as for the second, realistically, he knew along with everyone else, that a conservatory education was only for the rich or the very lucky— like Michelangelo Donatelli, the boy whose dream came true when he was favored by a king.

Donato Donatelli's influence on Leonardo's musicianship was nothing less than profound. Superbly trained at the Conservatory of San Pietro Majella in clarinet, piano, harmony, theory, and arranging, he also had more than a working knowledge of brass instruments, though he didn't play them. Leonardo began his lessons with Donatelli on the upright alto horn, a non-melodic rhythm instrument. He was only eight years old, and the youngest or one of the youngest of a beginning class of fifteen boys who from October 1907 to March 1908 received fifteen-minute, five-day-a-week private lessons, which included brief daily assignments. Though he tried, not everything came easily to the nascent musical genius. For one thing, apparently he had rhythm problems.<sup>12</sup>

**Leonard Falcone:** *I remember I had trouble with time changes, especially changing from  $\frac{2}{4}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. I could not play  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. During one of the lessons, Maestro Donatelli became so exasperated that he took ahold of my right foot and forced it up and down to beat the time said, "This is one on this side! The second beat is the foot to the right! The third is up!" I finally got over the problem.<sup>13</sup>*

Troubles with time signatures or no, Leonardo must have mastered his beginner's skills quickly, as at the end of the first few months of lessons he was one of just a few in his class to pass his band entrance examination. He was surely delighted. The chance to join his older brothers Nicholas, who played clarinet, and Carmen, who played tuba, in the band, parade around town in front of his friends (all of whom, according to him, admired village musicians they way young American boys admired sports heroes and so naturally aspired to become band

members themselves),<sup>14</sup> and please his family had to have been heady stuff for the youngster. Selected to work his way up to playing fourth alto horn, he was to begin rehearsals immediately in preparation for his first spring band tour, a gig that paid. As if it weren't enough to receive the adulation of peers and the pride of his family, his selection meant that “at the age of (barely) nine, he was earning his own living,”<sup>15\*</sup> a feat which would also allow him to pay for his music lessons. Now that he was a member of the band, he was no longer entitled to the free basic instruction provided by the city.<sup>16</sup>

So it was that shortly after Christmas of 1907, Leonardo began attending rehearsals in preparation for his first April through August concert season with the band.

**Leonard Falcone:** *Following policy, I was first instructed in the simpler instruments. I crashed the cymbals in my first appearance with the band.*<sup>17</sup>

In no time, he was playing the alto horn, followed by instruction in other brass instruments.<sup>18</sup>

Practices, which lasted two hours, five evenings per week, brought about magnificent outcomes—but were tiresome affairs. Donatelli's deliberate, section by section rehearsal technique would have left little Leonardo waiting in silence and inactivity for long periods of time which must have, at least at first, bored the little boy nearly to distraction. And while this method no doubt taught him persistence and musical perfection, it also caused him a bit of problem when he first came to the United States: under Donatelli's tutelage, he never learned to sight read,<sup>19</sup> a skill particularly necessary to his future work as a theater musician.

**Leonard Falcone:** *(Donatelli was) very methodical, note by note. Every note had to be correct. It was a very thorough training, and no distractions were allowed. The band was the main thing. (Rehearsals) were tedious, meticulous, slow—but the results were absolutely perfect in technique, expression, and style.*<sup>20</sup>

Each year the 40-member band's repertoire was wide-ranging, and included approximately a dozen new marches, many written by Donatelli himself, fifteen or so selections extracted by him from opera scores, and numerous lighter numbers, such as mazurkas, polkas, and potpourris. One of the band's flutists hand copied all the parts in manuscript form during the off season, a daunting task which also included copying the daily lessons and etude books. Years later, after immigrating to the United States, Leonardo saw his first printed music in Ann Arbor and, unaccustomed to it, found it difficult to read.<sup>21</sup>

The Roseto Banda Municipale was in demand all over the Apulia region for spring and summer religious celebrations, but most especially during the month of August, when it was so popular it had nearly daily performances. Leonardo and the other bandsmen walked the pathways over the tawny, green dappled hills of Apulia to these concerts, sometimes as much as twenty miles away,<sup>22</sup> each carrying his own instrument, some bread, cheese, fruit, bacon, or prosciutto (or the equivalent), and a small suitcase of clothes. One donkey in the strange menagerie would carry Donatelli, while others, carefully negotiating the rutted, bumpy cart paths, carried trunks of music, uniforms, and music stands.<sup>23</sup>

Feast days were always on a Sunday, but celebrations began on Saturday afternoons. On arriving in a host village on Saturday morning, the band followed much the same routine.

**Leonard Falcone:** *Usually we had a schedule. The festivities would start the day before the fiesta, on a Saturday. After we walked to the village in the morning, we'd march (a kind of slow meandering) through the streets to the town's band shell, a wooden structure, where we stood in a circle with the conductor in the middle. We carried our own stands, they were metal stands, especially made, you know, and we never sat down. No complaints. That was the way it was done. Afterwards, there would be a break, a 3 hour siesta.*

*For the evening concerts (on Saturday and Sunday) we played purely symphonic pieces, except at the end, there would be some popular songs. They were very well attended. The concert se-*

*lections, by the way, were very long. They would last anywhere from 15 to 25 minutes or 30 minutes. We might play the entire second act of Rigoletto, and then there would be a break, an intermission, and the people would promenade for 10 to 15 minutes, and maybe take some refreshment. And then the drummer would roll the drum to call the people back for the next selection. Very relaxed. We'd play 3–4 big selections and then a few shorter popular things. It would be 11:30 or 12 o'clock before it was over. These were big events.*

*The next day, (Sunday) morning, there would be a parade from 7:30 or 8 o'clock to get the people up, you see.<sup>24</sup>*

Then, after the band leisurely paraded through the town and had breakfast, it would break into small groups of six to eight, and visit every villager's home.

**Leonard Falcone:** *These groups would cover various sections of the city, playing folk songs, polkas, waltzes, and other music. It was in this way that I, and many others, made our first solo appearances.<sup>25</sup>*

Accompanying them was a committee person from the village in charge of collecting money to defray the costs of the fiesta. As for the band, its remuneration was that it got a portion of the proceeds, along with lodging (often straw strewn on the floor of the local school) and one free meal in a villager's home.

**Leonard Falcone:** *Afterwards, there would be the church service, a high mass. Usually there would be an important speaker, a well known priest, and he would talk about an hour so. The sermon would be extra long. You can imagine—we were sitting most of the time up in the loft, so we all would sleep during the sermon. Toward the end of it, the conductor would wake us up and we would play the "Ave Maria" or something of that nature.*

*Following the church service, we'd have the procession with all the statues of the various saints through the main streets of the community, and the band would play various slow marches.*

*Every so often they'd stop the parade and the people would offer a 1,000 lira bill. (The parade) would take about 2 hours.*

*Then, at about 2 o'clock in the afternoon—well, that was the time to eat! Most of the time, we'd eat in homes—the people in the community would invite the members of the band as their guests. After that there was a siesta for 3 hours, and then from about 5:30–6 o'clock, the band would play again briefly before the concert that evening.<sup>26</sup>*

After playing the three hours of music (again, all this in less than 24 hours), the band would lead the crowd in a parade to the city park to witness a spectacular ending to the feast: a dazzling display of fireworks.<sup>27</sup>

**Beryl Falcone:** *We were in (Roseto) Italy, in 1963, (it was the year Mary, our first daughter, had her thirteenth birthday) for this particular holiday, I don't know which one . . . and at night they had fireworks—and you never saw such fireworks like they have over there. Their fireworks are completely different than ours—much more elaborate. This particular trip we also went to Venice, and we saw fireworks there, too, but from a boat, and they were fabulous. They are much bigger, more colorful, the shapes are different, they are louder than ours, and they go on forever—maybe a whole hour of fireworks.<sup>28</sup>*

Being in the Roseto band had to have brought a lot of enjoyment and pride to young Leonardo, as it also provided him a model of musical performance excellence. Part of that modeling came from the number of outstanding solo players in the band that he could hear and emulate.

**Leonard Falcone:** *The band was very good, I thought. It had some outstanding soloists. I remember that all the players who started the same time I did, we were very much impressed by soloists' performances and we would try to imitate their styles and play their parts—sometimes even during concerts, to the dismay*



*of the conductor, who didn't approve. But we were so taken up by their beautiful style that we would try to imitate them. The first cornetist, for tone and style, I believe was one of the very finest I've ever heard. He was quite a musician and performer. His name was Filippo de Cesare. I studied with the conductor, but I also studied with de Cesare. He aided me in becoming a better musician in terms of my understanding of musical style.*<sup>29</sup>

During the first three years of Leonardo's private study of the alto horn with de Cesare, he tried the various brass instruments, and finally settled in 1911 on the melodic Italian *trombone de canto*,<sup>30</sup> a valved instrument which performs the tenor aria parts in the vast Italian operatic concert repertoire. His lessons with the master cornetist continued for eight years,<sup>31</sup> until, barely sixteen years old, Leonardo left Roseto for America, toting his trombone along with him.<sup>32</sup>

Leonard's study with Donatelli and de Cesare and his years with the Roseto Banda Municipale were invaluable, teaching him during the most impressionable period of his life that a love of musical instruments is as powerful and as Italian as the love of music itself. These two men and the band they built not only gave him high standards of performance and style, but something more exquisite . . . and more important. The sheer magic of the sounds they created captured the young boy forever, and fashioned in him a very Italian musical mystique so that when he played, it "was like hearing a tenor from an Italian opera; his vibrato, intense tone, and lyricism, created a brilliant sound, unequaled today."<sup>33</sup> They gave him the precious ability to hear melody calling to him from a place and dimension outside the boundaries of mundane human awareness, to answer that call, seek its source, and, following blissfully past all limits of reality, to lose himself in it and vanish altogether.