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## When It Comes to Travel, Steve Perillo is a Tour de Force

Steve Perillo keeps the family travel business humming while navigating his own road as a respected composer.

By [Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco](#) | January 12, 2018 | Appears in the [January 2018](#) issue



Steve Perillo travels about once a week every two months, but is more often found in his Woodcliff Lake office or at the keyboard in the Saddle River home built by his late father, Mario.

Photo by Brad Trent

The sprawling, Mediterranean-style Saddle River home of Steve Perillo, CEO of [Perillo Tours](#), still bears the distinctive imprint of his late father, Mario, who had it built some 40 years ago. Life-size bronze horses cavort on the cobblestone courtyard. A fountain gurgles near the front door. On the door, a brass plaque bears the engraved initials MPP.

But enter the 6,000-plus-square-foot home, and you quickly observe the younger Perillo's influence. A modest room down a hallway lined with what Perillo calls his father's "hand-painted fakes" provides clues of the 62-year-old travel executive's lesser-known side. Here, a drum kit sits opposite a computerized Korg Kronos keyboard for

audio sampling, recording and editing. These are some of the tools of Perillo's other trade as a composer of classical music.

In Perillo's dining room, three acoustic guitars are displayed near the Steinway grand piano. It's the same keyboard where Perillo masterfully played the haunting aria "O mio babbino caro" in a 2014 television commercial for his tour company. "Ah, Puccini," he intoned, "it brings out the Italy

in all of us.” But when this visitor requested a selection from one of his works, Perillo responded, “I really don’t play.”

Yet Perillo has written many serious works for a range of instruments, though occasionally with whimsical titles, such as “Hangoverture,” “Requiem for a Goldfish” and “Crushed Tomatoes.” His “Magnificat for a New Millennium” was performed on a Centaur Records CD that also includes chorale works by Beethoven and Schubert. Other compositions have been recorded by the St. Petersburg Symphony Orchestra, the Russian Festival Orchestra and the Bogota-based trio, Palisades Virtuosi. In December, the trio performed a new Perillo piece for piano, flute and clarinet at its holiday gala in Ridgewood.

“He’s very modest—and he shouldn’t be,” says flutist Margaret Swinchoski of Bogota, who founded Palisades Virtuosi with clarinetist Donald Mokrynski of Cresskill and pianist Ron Levy of Teaneck. (Perillo is a member of the advisory board.) Swinchoski says Perillo’s work is “challenging to play technically,” but adds that it’s “very user-friendly.... The average person who has not studied form, theory and structure can listen to it and enjoy it.”

Says pianist Levy, “Steve is hyperkinetic...totally curious about everything. He’s got a childlike aspect that I just love. He’s refreshing to be around.”

Perillo says there’s no magic to his music. “You just try to find something that works, and by working, that means it’s logical and it’s emotional at the same time.” Sometimes he gets “germs of new ideas” from folk music he hears during his travels. “I record stuff on my iPhone, and when I get back, I input it by ear,” he says. “The past is a stepping stone. No one invents anything; you add a little bit onto what the last person did.”

Back in the music room, two photos of Perillo’s paternal ancestors stare down from the walls. There’s great-grandfather Paolo Raffaele Trojano, a humanist philosopher who taught at the University of Turin in the early 20th century, and grandfather Joseph, a lawyer who emigrated to America from the Neapolitan city of San Giuseppe Vesuviano two years after Mussolini took power. In 1945, Joseph started the touring company his grandson now heads. But first, he turned it over to his son, Mario.

In the 1960s and ’70s, Mario Perillo navigated a sea change from individual travel by steamship—the mainstay of his father’s business—to escorted tours via chartered jets: “Three 747s—full a week” in the years immediately following airline deregulation, recalls his son.

Now, Perillo 3.0 is excited about the possibility of fully exploiting the Internet, which initially seemed to be bringing the curtain down on the wholesale travel industry. His company’s new booking application, italyvacations.com—he calls it the “travel genie”—is designed to do what he says the online travel behemoths like Expedia have been unable to: let users plan and instantly confirm complex, multicity itineraries and activities. It launches this month.

Even before Steve Perillo took the helm of his family's business upon his father's death in 2003, the company had expanded its offerings with packages to Bermuda, the Bahamas and Hawaii. Today, the firm offers guided trips to various countries and custom Learning Journeys tailored to interests ranging from birding to religion. Its intrepid CEO is as likely to go to Iceland on an inspection visit (which he did in November for a client, the Smithsonian Institution) as he is to Italy.

Whereas Mario, a lawyer like his father, enjoyed two-martini business lunches and cultivated a suave, paterfamilias image as Mr. Italy, his son is more likely to be found eating a tuna sandwich from Panera Bread at his desk. In his TV spots, he projects a low-key style. While the TV commercials are filmed on location, his weekly videos are recorded before a green screen in the basement of the palazzo-esque headquarters that his father built in Woodcliff Lake in 1987. His go-to prop isn't a Ferrari, but Harry, his golden retriever. The company's fail-safe, however, remains its ability to satisfy empty nesters' seemingly insatiable appetite for carefree travel to Italy's most famous trio. "If you want to make money, you offer trips to Rome, Florence and Venice over and over again," says Perillo. "Most people in this country don't have a passport. They're going to go once in their life, and they want to see the basics—as they should."

Perillo knows the score intimately. As a child, he helped stuff envelopes with travel brochures. By the time he went to college, he'd been to Italy a dozen times.

Perillo took up guitar at 11, piano around 15. He attended Boston University's School of Music, where he studied piano, and studied composition under David Del Tredici, who would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1980. Del Tredici encouraged his student's interest in melodic composition rather than the atonal work that dominated the era.

"He was very enthusiastic and wrote pieces with a lot of energy: slow, melodic, then rhythmic excited pieces," recalls Del Tredici, who retired in 2016 as distinguished professor of music at City College of New York and is still composing at 80. As for the family business, Del Tredici says, "I always thought that music was probably his way of getting away from that, a little window into some other world that he loved."

After graduating in 1978, Perillo tried to make a career of music, writing background pieces for corporate videos and hosting a 15-minute weekly radio show, "Stephen at the Steinway," on WVNJ from 1980 to 1982. "I was into classical music, and that's not viable. There's less interest in classical music now than there ever has been in our lifetime," he says. "You have to make it in your 20s, otherwise, you're playing weddings and bar mitzvahs." With no interest in teaching music, he joined the family business full-time, rising to president of the firm in 1997.

Though Perillo travels about every two months, he's typically at his office from 9:30 am to 6:30 pm, six days a week, with a few hours on Sundays as well. "It's only about a mile away," he says. "I walk my dog to work."

He lives alone—“zero stress”—seemingly disinterested in ever starting a family of his own. Yet family is nearby. His sisters—Christine Pepper, a mother of two, and Linda Zazzali, a mother of eight who blogs at [therealhipmom.com](http://therealhipmom.com)—live on the same cul-de-sac.

Though Perillo says he’s “much better traveled in the last 20 years,” he still has visited only one country in Africa, most of Asia and much of the United States. His own travel wish list includes Southeast Asia and the islands off the coast of Sicily. He says he’d like to tour the United States in a “country-music-star type of bus,” exclaiming, “Wouldn’t that be fun?”

But business beckons. Come the new year, he says, “I’ll be here. January, February, March: When you’re selling travel, especially European travel, that’s when everyone books.”

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