

MSU Press imports a new director with a musical ear

Written by Bill Castanier

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Gabriel Dotto is taking over the helm of the Michigan State University Press at one of the most turbulent times in the history of the publishing industry. It is being flummoxed by rising costs, digital downloads, outsourcing, information overload and, more significantly, a populous that increasingly doesn't read. A recent survey showed that one quarter of Americans did not read a single book last year.

Dotto, 54, formerly of Milan, Italy, and the sixth director in the Press' 60-year history, is unflappable and frankly optimistic about the opportunity.

"You have so much data coming at you that it is uncontrolled information, and in the age of clutter it is difficult to winnow through," he says. "The function of the academic press is to filter that information."

Dotto, who was trained as a composer and worked in the music publishing industry for BMG Ricordi in Milan, compares the information overload to an excess of audible frequencies.

"There is a parallel to white noise in music," he says. "When you have everything, you have nothing."

Sorting through the noise makes the role of the publisher as vital as ever, maybe even more important, he said. One reason he gives is that "There are so many brilliant people who write terribly, and that makes the simple editorial process as vital as ever."

The new director said what attracted him to the MSU Press was the university's commitment to moving forward. He said at a time when 10 to 12 academic presses nationwide are curtailing their efforts, MSU has reaffirmed its importance to the university.

"I got an enormous feeling of commitment of energy at all levels of administration and staff," he said.

Although he has only been on the job a few weeks, Dotto has some specific goals for the operation, including raising its profile.

"We need to get our list out and to expand the list," he says.

"List" is publishing jargon for books that have been published and are still in print.

MSU Press has more than 650 books available on its backlist. One of Dotto's first goals is to market the books that are published and then expand the number of books published. The press publishes about 30 books each year, and he would like to double that number. It also publishes 11 journals.

Dotto also understands the changing nature of the publishing industry and how, like the music industry, it will need to increase digital delivery in order to survive.

However, he does not see that trend as necessarily replacing books, but rather supplementing them with rich, complex and up-to-date information that can't be included in a book.

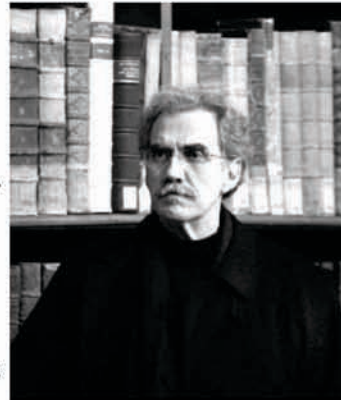
"We will always need books," he said.

Another goal of Dotto's is to maintain the tradition of the press, which in the 1950s was the first to print novels by renowned Indian writer R.K. Naryan and recently reprinted the highly sought-after history of the 1967 Detroit Riots, "Violence in the Model City," by Sidney Fine.

Dotto said MSU Press is also known worldwide for its African Diaspora series, which he said it is the type of publishing that is important for it to continue. MSU Press is currently the largest distributor of African-published books in North America. It also publishes the popular series "Discovering the Peoples of Michigan," which is an ongoing effort to document the history of both cultural and ethnic groups in the state.

Dotto said that academic publishers are "analogous" to the cutting edge research that is being done by universities and can be the "risk takers" that traditional publishing companies cannot.

Another goal Dotto has for the Press is to increase the synergy with other departments and faculty at MSU. Dotto said the tradition of scholars' needing to go to other university presses to have their work published is changing. He said for many years it was thought to be self-serving to publish



New MSU Press director Gabriel Dotto. (Courtesy photo)