

THE PROFANE CHORAL COMPOSITIONS OF LORENZO PEROSI

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Abstract

The vocal music created in Italy during the late 1800s and early 1900s is often considered to be the height of European vocal art forms, and the era when the operatic and choral genres broke their way into mainstream appreciation. One specific composer's career was paramount to the rise of this movement: Monsignor Don Lorenzo Perosi. At the turn of the twentieth century, his early premieres of choral oratorios and symphonic poems of massive scale thoroughly impressed notable musical colleagues worldwide and quickly received mass adoration and accolades. In addition to these large works, Perosi produced a prolific number of liturgical choral compositions that shaped the sound and style of choral music of the Roman Catholic Church for over half a century. However, despite this massive compositional output and historical acclaim among the greatest Italian composers of the time, his music is seldom performed outside of Italian religious communities and little is known about why this figure has been neglected from due attention. Thus, as a primary figure in the elevation of the Romantic oratorio and the redefinition of sacred choral music in the church, the music of Lorenzo Perosi deserves rediscovery and respect. The recent *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* publication of a catalogue of the composer's complete oeuvre of published and unpublished works sheds light on previously undiscovered, profane choral compositions that have received no mention in any biographical sources in print or online to date. This paper provides a brief biographical overview of the composer and an analysis of five of the so-called profane choral compositions. The study and analysis of this previously unknown repertoire allows secular musicians and scholars an avenue by which to approach this composer's substantial musical output and warrant inclusion back into the choral canon.

Introduction

No other musical figure of the last century has had more influence on the shape of Roman Catholic liturgical music than Don Lorenzo Perosi. A student of theology as an ordained priest and a skilled musician of the highest classical training, Perosi served five popes throughout his religious and music career. Perosi was the only ordained member of a group of Italian musicians called the *Giovane Scuola*, or “young school,” and his reputation as a foremost leader was recognized worldwide. This group of late nineteenth century composers, similar to the *Moguchaya kuchka* (“Mighty Handful” comprised of Russian composers: Borodin, Balakirev, Cui, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov) and *Les Six* (“The Six” comprised of French composers: Auric, Durey, Honegger, Milhaud, Poulenc, and Tailleferre), ushered in a new *verismo* movement in Italy. The operatic music of Puccini, Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Giordano, and Franchetti along with the revival of the sacred oratorios of Perosi established a resurgence of a newly reformed and respected national sound. Their music is characterized by expansive orchestrations and sweeping melodies that highlighted librettos and topics to which everyday folk could relate. He carried *verismo* style paired with his tutelage in plainchant into his work and would shape the sound of choral music of the Roman Catholic Church. Throughout his lengthy and reputable career as a church musician, he created thousands of compositions for liturgical usage. Simultaneously, his music was being performed across Europe and in the United States at the renown Carnegie Hall to critical review and acclaim, and yet the Perosi name has been all but forgotten in the annals of choral music history outside of his hometown of Tortona, Italy and select Catholic communities possessing his music in their repertoires. Whether a casualty of church politics or a general resistance to the performance of sacred music as an educational tool or aesthetic within choral programming, this ignorance of a prolific and

influential musical figure can be remedied by further study and appreciation of his profane choral music suitable for performance in secular settings. Therefore, while extensive research could be submitted that continues to unearth more about this composer and his mysterious erasure from choral history, the author endeavors to trace historical events that elevated Perosi to fame and offers an introduction to Perosi's compositional style by discussing several unknown, secular compositions to enable the modern choral director to consider their inclusion into her or his own repertory.

Biography

Born Pietro Luigi Giuseppe Maria Natale Ireneo Lorenzo Felice Perosi on December 21, 1872, “Renzo” was one of twelve children and became yet another addition to the strong lineage of Perosi men who served in prominent church positions in the Tortona region of Italy.¹ Notable figures include his father, Giuseppe Perosi (1849-1908), and brothers Cardinal Carlo Perosi (1868-1930) and Marziano Perosi (1875-1959). Giuseppe and Marziano held posts as *maestro di cappella*, the former at the Cathedral di Tortona and the latter at the Duomo di Milan.² Young “Renzo” received early musical training at home from his father and church alongside family members. He went on to study piano, organ, and composition at the *Conservatorio Santa Cecilia* in Rome³ and later the *Conservatorio di Milano* where he would graduate in 1892.⁴ While few sources shed light on his early training, later reviews of his public organ performances affirm his superior abilities. Mario Rinaldi, an Italian biographer and author who wrote what can be considered to be the most accurate and scholarly book about the life of Perosi, shares a Milanese review of an all-Bach recital performed in Milan just one year after his graduation: “In playing the concert, Maestro Perosi demonstrated such finesse and such a fine perception of the scores, that we don’t know who in Milan could stand next to him.”⁵

Subsequent studies in theology, liturgy, and plainchant would forever shape his musical output and the music of the Roman Catholic Church. Mentors in this realm of study included

¹ Arturo Sacchetti, ed., *Catalogo ragionato delle composizioni di Lorenzo Perosi (1872 - 1956) con esempi musicali originali*, (Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae Corpus Manuscriptorum Musicalium. Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 2013), Vol. 4, VII.

² “Prima Adunanza Generale,” *Musica sacra repertorio economico*, January 1892, Anno XVI, pp. 6-7, Accessed on February 10, 2019, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=mx5FAWH3228C&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA6>

³ Michael Dubiaga, Jr., “Musician to Five Popes: Don Lorenzo Perosi,” Accessed on March 2, 2019, <http://www.seattlecatholic.com/a051130.html>.

⁴ Leonardo Ciampa, *Don Lorenzo Perosi*, (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2006), 53.

⁵ Mario Rinaldi, *Lorenzo Perosi*, (Rome: 1967), 58.

Franz Haberl and Joseph Pothier.⁶ Haberl was a prominent German priest, musicologist, and choir director of the period, but lived and studied for a period of time in Rome. He created a school of sacred music in Regensburg at the Ratisbon Cathedral (where he met Perosi) and would later edit and codify an official edition of Gregorian chant for the church - the *Magister choralis* (1864) - and an authoritative edition of collected works of Palestrina, the *Opera omnia Ioannis Petralloysii Praenestini* (1880-1907). Additionally, Haberl chaired many sacred music organizations including *Musica Sacra*, a notable sacred music publisher with whom Perosi would later publish his own compositions. Similarly, Pothier was also a member of clergy and musicologist and remained a major advocate of Gregorian and liturgical chant. Pothier's achievements include contributions to the 1883 release of the *Liber Usualis* and a place among leading figures of Pope Pius X's later *Motu Proprio* of 1903. This particular period in Roman Catholic theology, referred to as the Caecilian movement, was established by German theologian, Francis Xavier Witt in 1868, but would go on to be influenced and perpetuated by these two Perosian teachers. Catholic musicologist, Dr. Michael Dubiaga, describes the focus of this movement further and reveals the environment in which Perosi would be trained:

Its objects included cultivation of plainchant, promotion of polyphonic sacred music, vernacular hymnody, and organ playing. Members sought to diffuse the highest musical standards among Catholic musicians. A second focus, which continues in universities today, was the scholarly study of Gregorian chant based upon the earliest manuscripts, and an authentic rendition of them in the liturgy. The Benedictine monks of Solemnes, of course, assumed a key place in this vast undertaking, which spread across Europe.⁷

⁶ Nick Strimble, *Choral Music in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Amadeus Press, 2008), 189.

⁷ Michael Dubiaga, Jr., "Musician to Five Popes: Don Lorenzo Perosi," Accessed on March 2, 2019, <http://www.seattlecatholic.com/a051130.html>.

Without any reasonable doubt, these two Caecilian teachers possessed a specific expertise rooted in plainchant as well as sacred choral polyphony and lyricism that would greatly impact Perosi's understanding of theology, the role of music within worship, and his own compositional voice.

Following his graduation in Milan, the 21-year old Perosi was appointed as a teacher of music at the Seminary of Imola. There, he was asked to create and lead a seminary choir, a *schola cantorum*, in addition to serving as director of the Cathedral choir which had been left in shambles after its director for 60 years finally retired.⁸ Thoroughly disappointed by his first premier position, Perosi's personal letters to friend bemoaned his frustrations:

What toil! If I knew that the situation were such, I would not have left other posts for this one. I have to teach everything twice. At least they all like me. I live with it tranquilly, sedately; and after the evening lessons, truly worn out, I go to be happy as a bludgeoned donkey who collapses into the hay.⁹

His work would pay off, however, as the seminary choir offered a rare public performance of Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* and gained immediate fame.

Just four years prior, Perosi had made a poignant acquaintance with the former Bishop of Mantua, Monsignor Giuseppe M. Sarto.¹⁰ Unbeknownst to the young maestro, this initial meeting would serve as Perosi's career step ladder and secure his position as the preeminent Roman Catholic musician of the time. Now, in 1894, following continued successes in various positions and demonstrated commitment to the church, his acquaintance with Sarto had grown into a dear mentorship and friendship.¹¹ Formerly addressed as Bishop of Mantua, Sarto had since become elevated to Cardinal and Patriarch of Venice. As a result, Sarto extended a quick yet sincere invitation on May 25, 1894 to join him as *maestro di cappella* at the patriarchal

⁸ Leonardo Ciampa, *Don Lorenzo Perosi*, (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2006), 82.

⁹ Mario Rinaldi, *Lorenzo Perosi*, (Rome: 1967), p. 55f.

¹⁰ Leonardo Ciampa, *Don Lorenzo Perosi*, (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2006), 53.

¹¹ "Traits of Pius X Shown in Anecdotes," *New York Herald*, Accessed February 19, 2019, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=nIGO2dPuN9sC&hl=en&pg=GBS.PP1>

cathedral in Venice, the *Basilica di San Marco*.¹² Perosi, then just shy of 22 years old, happily accepted the position. With this promotion, he earned one of the most esteemed music posts in European history joining the notable lineage of predecessors such as Willaert, Gabrieli, Monteverdi, Marcello, Lotti, and Galuppi, and made his own impression upon the Venetian style of sacred choral music. For this reason alone, he might deserve due recognition for holding such a prominent position in choral music. Regardless, this position would mark the start of nearly two decades of incredible musical achievement and his ascension to worldwide fame.

In Venice, Perosi penned his first masses and oratorios, and began the extensive release of his new works into publication. Notably, his Venetian output would include *Centonum* and hundreds of other liturgical works for keyboard instruments; *Missa Davidica* and his first requiem setting, *Messa da Requiem per tre voci maschili*; hundreds of motets released over thirteen years in fourteen volumes of *Melodie Sacre*; and his first oratorio, *La Passione di Cristo secondo San Marco*. Notable music scholar and critic Romain Rolland comments on this impressive output of compositions by Perosi in his 1915 book entitled *Musicians of Today*: “*La Passione* was finished in September, 1897, *The Transfiguration* in February, 1898, *Lazarus* in June, 1898, and *The Resurrection of Christ* in November, 1898 (Figures 1 & 2). Such an output of work takes us back to eighteenth-century musicians.”¹³ Rolland includes an entire chapter dedicated to the Italian musician, earning Perosi an inclusion among other familiar names such as Berlioz, Wagner, Saint-Saëns, Strauss, Wolf, D’Indy, and Debussy. In conclusion, the critic made the following definitive statement following his interview with Perosi:

¹² Dennis Shrock, *Choral Repertoire*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 610.

¹³ Romain Rolland, “Don Lorenzo Perosi” in *Musicians of Today*, (New York: Henry Holt & CO: 1915), 199-204.

The winter that held Italian thought in its cold clasp is over, and great trees that seemed to be asleep are putting out new life in the sun. Yesterday it was poetry that awaked, and today it is music — the sweet music of Italy, calm in its passion and sadness, and artless in its knowledge. Are we really witnessing the return of its spring ? Is it the incoming of some great tide of melody, which will wash away the gloom and doubt of our life today ? As I was reading the oratorios of this young priest of Piedmont, I thought I heard, far away, the song of the children of old Greece: "The swallow has come, has come, bringing the gay seasons and glad years. *How just.* I welcome the coming of Don Lorenzo Perosi with great hope."¹⁴

A NEW COMPOSER /
Rome Stirred By An Oratorio
By Father Lorenzo
Perosi,
A YOUNG VENETIAN PRIEST
His Subject Is "The Resurrection
Of Christ."
Sixteen Cardinals, Many Foreign
Ambassadors, Famous Musicians,
Italian Aristocrats, Crowded The
Opening Night—A Reward From
The Pope.

Fig. 1 - The Baltimore Sun, Jan 3, 1899, pg. 6: *A NEW COMPOSER*¹⁵

¹⁴ Romain Rolland, "Don Lorenzo Perosi" in *Musicians of Today*, (New York: Henry Holt & CO: 1915), 199

¹⁵ "A New Composer: Rome Stirred by an oratorio by Father Lorenzo Perosi," *The Baltimore Sun*, Accessed January 26, 2019, <https://newspaperarchive.com/baltimore-sun-jan-03-1899-p-6/>

The initial performances of his oratorios instantly catapulted Perosi into further worldwide fame, and various international newspapers began to present articles that covered his recent premieres and successes. The first instances of mention in the American press occurred in 1899 and continued through the first few years of the twentieth century. Most recount the success of the aforementioned premieres of 1898 or highlighted his role at the Vatican along with his relationship with the newly appointed pope.¹⁸

Most noteworthy of mention were the French premiere of *La Risurrezione di Cristo* in March of 1899 and the November 1901 premiere of *Mosé* in Milan (Figures 3 & 4). Not only did Perosi deserve the public spotlight and instant fame due to the rebirth of the Italian oratorio, but leadership by famous conductors contributed to the great success of these works. These two premieres were conducted by none other than Gustav Mahler and Arturo Toscanini, respectively.¹⁹

The following two decades (1903-1923) would see an incredible output of compositions by the composer. Rinaldi surmises in his 1967 biography of Perosi that the total number of works approaches nearly 600.²⁰ Later, Don Randel approximates this number around 400 total works.²¹ However, the 2013 Vatican collection, *Bibliothecae apostolicae vaticanae corpus manuscriptorum musicalium: Catalogo ragionato delle composizioni di Lorenzo Perosi (1872-1956) : con esempi musicali originali* edited by Arturo Sacchetti, provides evidence of 1,127 original compositions including all of the the unpublished works that were never released beyond

¹⁸ "Traits of Pius X Shown in Anecdotes," *New York Herald*, Accessed February 19, 2019, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=nIGO2dPuN9sC&hl=en&pg=GBS.PP1>

¹⁹ "International Gustav Mahler Society Vienna," Accessed March 2, 2019, <https://gustav-mahler.org/>

²⁰ Mario Rinaldi, *Lorenzo Perosi*, (Rome: 1967), 570.

²¹ Don Michael Randel, ed., "Lorenzo Perosi," *The Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), 683.

the Sistine Chapel library.²² This number does not include the additional 98 incomplete works and 143 untraceable works listed, bringing the total to 1,368.

Subsequently, the year 1903 held even greater significance as Sarto, now Pope Pius X, released his monumental edict on November 22 concerning worship music of the Roman Catholic Church: the *Tra le sollecitudini dell'ufficio pastorale*, or more commonly called, the *Motu Proprio*.²³ As *maestro di cappella* at the Vatican and long-time friend of the Pope, Monsignor Perosi heavily assisted in codifying the rules clarified within that statement. Historically, Catholicism had encountered various written statements clarifying its stance on the nature of music in worship, dating back to Pope Gregory I with his codification of many forms of chant into a singular practice. Later edicts as a result of major movements within the Roman Catholic Church include the Great Schism of 1054 led by Pope Leo IX and the declarations in response to the Protestant movement as presided over via numerous popes during the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. The majority of these historical statements maintain a common thread of regression to music of the early church as each papacy struggled with the development of sacred music. Catholic communities across Europe, like generations before them, had incorporated the popular sounds of secular operatic and social music into worship by ascribing sacred texts to these melodies. These musical developments growing from their roots in monophonic chant into advanced forms of polyphonic, instrumental accompaniment, and popular forms and genres of the secular world repeatedly prompted swift reactions from the Vatican. With obvious support from Perosi and other advocates of the Solesmes and Benedictine

²² This particular publication, and later personal correspondence with the editor, inspired my desire to complete research on Perosi. Further, his numbers prove previous figures incorrect.

²³ Pius X, "Tra le sollecitudini dell'ufficio pastorale," *Vatican Archives*, November 22, 1903, Accessed March 1, 2019, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/it/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-x_motu-proprio_19031122_sollecitudini.html

schools of chant, the 1903 edict banned this popular music and demanded a return to the elevation of text and purity. Regardless of a papal statement, institutional change of this magnitude took time, and even American resources such as the *The Catholic Choirmaster - The Official Bulletin of the Society of St. Gregory of America* (New York City) would publish commentary well into the 1910s. The following passage, printed in the January 1917, outlines some of the notable changes for implementation:

In the main, they called for the abolition of mixed choirs and the substitution of the music of Palestrina and other early sacred composers, the Gregorian chants and the purely religious composers for the modern sentimental and operatic music which have gained such popularity in the churches. This order, of course, excluded from use many popular works by famous composers, such as the masses of Mozart, Haydn and Gounod. These were classed with church music in which the text of the Psalms and the significance of the Liturgy were made subordinate to mere beauty of melody or skill in composition. Such treasures of ecclesiastical music, prized through long use, were not to be lost without regret. The Pope's final orders were the result of previous attempts in the same direction, combined with the interest of the present pontiff in music. He emphasized what his predecessor had discussed, and in his course had the advice of Don Perosi. To those who have heard only the oratorios of the priest-composer his opinions on music may not seem of great value. In the study of ecclesiastical music, however, he is said to show zeal and taste, and his knowledge of the subject on which he counsels the Pope is said to be comprehensive.²⁴

In addition to enforcing the desires of the *motu proprio*, Perosi was responsible for the disapproval of and gradual removal of castrati voices from the Sistine Chapel Choir. Historically an all-male chorus, where boy sopranos and castrati would sing the highest discantus and cantus vocal parts, the tradition of castration was quickly dissolved by the new choral director. Martha Feldman, a distinguished castrati historian, discusses Perosi's impact upon the choir in her contribution to the *Ernest Bloch Lectures*, entitled "The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and

²⁴ "Motu," *The Catholic Choirmaster*, Accessed March 5, 2019, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=wO9OAQAAMAAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA200>

Kinds.”²⁵ Challenging the chronology of castrati singers at the Vatican submitted by her scholarly predecessor, Paul Henry Lang, she describes the following environment:

Whoever those “white, clear, and powerful” voices were, Lang’s chronology is problematic at the very least, since by 1912 castrati had suffered almost complete eradication. In 1902 Lorenzo Perosi (1872-1956) took over full time from castrato-director Mustafà, by then a fifty-four-year member of the papal chapel and a devotee of the old ways. In 1903 castrati were banned from the chapel except for those grandfathered in. By early 1904 only two castrati were in any singing voice, and after March 10 of that year Moreschi was the only one alive. As far as we know all the altos in the Sistine Chapel during the nineteenth century were noncastrates.

This removal of singers and tradition while supported by the Pope made Perosi rather infamous (and perhaps, his only real rise to true fame of any sort in the twenty-first century). Ironically, most sources about the history of castrato voices pin Perosi as an evil figure and the sole cause of the demise of this vocal specialty. A twentieth century musical, *The Last Castrato*, recounts the true story of the last adored castrato of the papal choir that Feldman mentioned in her article: Alessandro Moreschi (1858-1922). Various online reviews of the work describe Perosi *and* the Pope as “sinister,” “power-hungry,”²⁶ and “repressed homosexuals.”²⁷ While there is evidence against these conjectures in personal letters written by Perosi which share his desire for traditional marriage among clergy and a general sense of humility and moral compass, this single decision of his lengthy career seems to receive more awareness than the entire corpus of works and service to the Church.

²⁵ Martha Feldman, *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds*, (Univ of California Press, 2016), 81.

²⁶ Jane Biberian, “Guy Glass's 'Last Castrato' in New York: His master's voice,”

BroadstreetReview.com, Accessed March 5, 2019,

https://www.broadstreetreview.com/theater/guy_glasss_last_castrato_in_new_york#

²⁷ Cindy Pierre, “The Last Castrato,” Accessed March 5, 2019,

<https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/last-castrato-60633/>

Nonetheless, the humble Italian composer continued an unparalleled output of original compositions and enjoyed premieres across his native country, throughout Europe, and in the Americas in the United States and South America.²⁸ He found friendship and support among fellow celebrated Italian composers Toscanini, Puccini, and Mascagni, and his French counterparts in Massenet, D'Indy, Guilmant, and Debussy were said to have been in attendance at his various Parisian premieres.²⁹ Longing to have a concert hall like that of Wagner's *Bayreuth Festspielhaus* that would satisfy the needs of his oratorios, he was able to establish the *Salone Perosi* on April 24, 1900 within the renovated *Chiesa di Santa Maria della Grazie* of Milan.³⁰ Sadly, his vision only lasted for a mere seven years due to administrative and poor finances, but the endeavor and however brief success of his own performance space attests to the dedicated support of Perosi's musical and religious patrons despite its eventual failure.

²⁸ Rufus Pereira, "Lorenzo Perosi 1872-1956," *The Furrow*, Accessed March 1, 2019, www.jstor.org/stable/27657081.

²⁹ Leonardo Ciampa, *Don Lorenzo Perosi*, (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2006), 166.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.



Fig. 4 - Ciampa, pg. 172: “Illustration 78: Perosi and Toscanini, in Milan for the world-premiere of Mose (1901)”³¹

³¹ Leonardo Ciampa, *Don Lorenzo Perosi*, (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2006), 172.

Arguably, the most solemn and unfortunately promulgated aspect of Perosi's biography was the declaration of his "insanity" (Figure 5). Various sources cite a weak physical and mental constitution since birth, but the explosion of the dramatic events regarding his mental state and the Vatican's interdiction have forever left a shadow upon an otherwise illustrious career. Beginning in 1903, Sacchetti states "Comincia ad essere afflitto da disturbi nervosi" and later in 1907, mention of a "depressione nervosa" came from the composer's own pen in a letter to a friend. A plethora of reasons are submitted by various biographers, including a [rather humorous] list of the evidence brought forth by the Vatican council as detailed in Ciampa's accounts. Those worthy of mention include the following:

1. He was a vegetarian.³²
2. He was sombered by the outbreak of World War I.
3. He was known to be overly generous in financial contributions to strangers.
4. He began studying multiple languages.³³
5. He occasionally altered the alphabet in his writings, "substituting K for C, CH for Q, etc."³⁴
6. He would frequently sign his works with various pseudonyms such as "Pietro Piolti Il Vegetariano."³⁵
7. He considered becoming a Protestant.³⁶
8. He devised a new calendar which reinstituted the year 1922 as year Number One.³⁷

Even more cause for intrigue, Perosi was said to have gone personally to visit Benito Mussolini, then the leader of the National Fascist Party (1922-1943), to request consideration for the nation of Italy to adopt Protestantism instead of Catholicism.

³² Arturo Sacchetti, ed., *Catalogo ragionato delle composizioni di Lorenzo Perosi (1872 - 1956) con esempi musicali originali*, (Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae Corpus Manuscriptorum Musicalium. Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 2013), Vol. 4, 1938-51.

³³ Ibid., 1944.

³⁴ Leonardo Ciampa, *Don Lorenzo Perosi*, (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2006), 227.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "The Madness of Perosi," *Time Magazine*, Accessed March 1, 2019,

<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=adwLAQAAIAAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.RA2-PA18>

³⁷ Leonardo Ciampa, *Don Lorenzo Perosi*, (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2006), 229.

MUSIC

The Madness of Perosi

Dispatches from Italy announce that Don Lorenzo Perosi, head of the Vatican Choir, has been judged insane by the Italian courts, and has been placed in the custody of his brother. This is the culmination of series of extraordinary episodes, which, curiously have found little space in the American press.

Perosi ranks as the world's foremost composer of ecclesiastical music. While a young priest, his oratorios and pieces of ritual music attracted the enthusiasm of the highest church dignitaries. He became the friend and protégé of several successive popes, was elevated to the leadership of the Sistine Choir, and received such success and honor as come to few musicians.

But a strange trouble came upon Don Lorenzo. He began to feel that all who came near him were hostile to him. He imagined at his triumphal concerts that the audiences were filled with anger against him, that their tumultuous applause was ironical. This convinced him that his compositions were bad—that was why the people were aroused against him. He said he was going to rewrite all he had written. He had a large volume of manuscript composition. He hid this away jealously, and worked, re-writing piece after piece, but the re-writing pleased him no more than the original work.

During the war he accused himself. He could not fight. He was doing nothing for his country. He tried to make amends by aiding war sufferers. He gave money to everyone who seemed to need it. A flock of beggars beset him. He gave to them all. They besieged his house, followed him wherever he went. Soon all his money was gone, all of the large fortune that he had earned from his compositions. The beggars continued their demands. When he could not give, it filled him with a sense of guilt. He sank deeper and deeper into self-accusation.

He came to the idea that his whole life had been wrong. He turned against everything that formerly he had held beloved. He, priest and friend of popes, conceived this singular notion—that the Catholic Church was secretly in league with the Free Masons. That turned him against the Church, and he announced that he was going to become a Protestant. A Calvinist congregation in Rome received the head of the Vatican Choir with some enthusiasm, but soon found embarrassment in Perosi's fantastic ideas. The Vatican under-



LORENZO PEROSI
His insanity has been proved

stood that the unfortunate musician was mad. They did not depose him from his leadership of the Sistine Choir. The chief concern was to get his manuscript compositions from him, so that he could not destroy them.

And now Don Lorenzo has been legally pronounced insane, and his belongings placed in the custody of his brother, who, like himself, is an ecclesiastic.

A Prospectus

Gatti's Last. The Metropolitan Opera Company announced its program for next season. The list is praiseworthy, but not exciting. *Die Meistersingers* and *Siegfried*, two of Wagner's greatest works, will be revived. *Der Freischütz* will reappear after a long absence. It will come with considerable needed editing at the hands of the scholarly conductor, Mr. Bodansky. The simple, pretty and pale *Martha* will raise its familiar tune for the pleasure of those who like what they know and know only a little. Mr. Gigli may be counted upon to do some pretty singing. He is brave to essay *Martha*, not that the tenor rôle demands any great genius for acceptable performance, but he will have to meet the competition of the dead Caruso, who found in the opera a chance to display the beauty of his voice when the music had little else to display. It was rumored that Mozart's *Don Giovanni* would be given, but after the announcement, the rumor turns into this—that nobody in the com-

pany would essay to sing the title rôle. The part is, truly enough, one that has been traditional for more than a century as extremely difficult. Yet the Metropolitan is exceptionally well provided with good basses. There were Mr. Bender and Mr. Rohrer, who made their debuts during the season just closed, and there will be Mr. Schorr, who will appear next season. Certainly between these three first rate artists one would have given odds that a Don Giovanni could have been discovered.

New Operas. But the main interest in an operatic prospectus lies in the new operas to be given. For last season Mr. Gatti announced two new operas—*Monsi Lisa* and *Asina Allegro*, both recently composed, one German and the other Italian. That was provocative of a thrill for the devotees of opera. The thrill lasted until the operas were performed. *Monsi Lisa* was musically as flat as the beer that is sold legally, and that of *Asina Allegro* was little better. The promise for next season is very tame. Two new operas are to be given, *Le Roi d' Lahore*, a piece of ancient vintage by Massenet, which doubtless will be quite as tepid as most of Massenet, and *La Hobbesse* by Raoul Laparra. This latter was composed 15 years ago, is mildly in the modern vein, and stirred no tempest when given some years ago by the since defunct Boston Opera Company. It will make a good show and no more.

American Compositions. It has been generally remarked that no American operas are listed on the Metropolitan announcement. That is not astonishing. Mr. Gatti, yielding to more or less patriotic demand, did, for half a dozen seasons of the recent past, give one or more American operas each winter. But, in spite of any possible nationalistic feeling on the part of critics and public, these American works were badly received. They drew neither praise in public prints nor patronage at the box office. They were unquestionably very bad, running a close race in unworthiness with the worst of the French operas. About the best of them was Victor Herbert's *Nation*—and Victor Herbert was never supposed to be any Verdi. Nor will Mr. Gatti have any of his operas sung in English. That does not arouse as much protest among forward-minded people as such omissions did a few years ago. The war gave Opera in English a severe blow. It was very and when the exigencies of international politics made the Metropolitan give certain operas in English. There was a general chorus of relief when *Tristan*, *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal* were put back into German.

Fig. 5 - Time Magazine, May 1923, p. 18: *The Madness of Perosi*³⁸

This alone would have certainly caused the Catholic tribunal to question his sanity. Mussolini, who knew of Perosi's alleged malady, is quoted as stating the following in response:

³⁸ "The Madness of Perosi," *Time Magazine*, Accessed March 1, 2019, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=adwLAQAAIAAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.RA2-PA18>

“No, Maestro. *L'Italia sarà riformata politicamente, ma non religiosamente.*”³⁹ The remainder of 1922 held a flurry of legal proceeding attempting to determine his mental state. Unfortunately, Perosi did not help his case as he refused to comply with ordered mandates to appear in court. Considering one of many instances, Sacchetti recounts the events and dialogue on the twelfth of October. Here, Perosi placed himself in contempt of court by failing to appear that day, and declared that he needed to study until 2:45pm and that he made a daily pilgrimage to his mother's grave. Furthermore, when asked when he *would* comply, he offered this as his response to the Roman legal tribunal: “*Oggi siamo nel settembre del 1922, ci vedremo nel 1926.*” Translated, “Today we are in September 1922, we shall see one another in 1926.” As a result, on December 15, 1922, the *Regio Tribunale di Roma: Sezione civile* pronounced the sentence of interdiction which placed Lorenzo in the care of his brother Carlo and declared that Lorenzo was forbidden to celebrate mass.⁴⁰ This decree caused his mental state to further decline (Figure 6), and he wrote in his personal letters, “*Io ero Lorenzo Perosi; ora sono stato interdetto, dunque non sono piu quello di prima, ma semplicemente Pietro Piolti*” and thus rationalized the continued use of bizarre pseudonyms.⁴¹

Despite the tremendous upheaval and attack on his character, Perosi continued to compose and received constant support from his peers and those who adored his music. With the support of Mascagni and others, the interdiction was officially lifted on October 23, 1930.⁴²

³⁹ Antonio Giangrande, *Il Comunista Benito Mussolini. L'Italia del Trucco, l'Italia che siamo: Vol. 150*, (Giangrande, 2017), 210. Translated, “No, Maestro. Italy will be politically reformed, but not religiously.”

⁴⁰ Mario Rinaldi, *Lorenzo Perosi*, (Rome: 1967), 283-84.

⁴¹ Ibid., 284. Translated, “I was Lorenzo Perosi; now I have been forbidden, so I am no longer the same, but simply Pietro Piolti.”

⁴² Arturo Sacchetti, ed., *Catalogo ragionato delle composizioni di Lorenzo Perosi (1872 - 1956) con esempi musicali originali*, (Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae Corpus Manuscriptorum Musicalium. Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 2013), Vol. 4, 1956.

THE SACKBUT

LORENZO PEROSI

By ADELMO DAMERINI (ROME)

English by Dr. G. A. PFISTER

PEROSI, who for several years remained silent and lived in austere seclusion, has quite involuntarily caused a stir in musical circles and in the world in general, for a few months ago he tried to break his vows as a Roman Catholic priest and enter the reformed Valdese church. Some said that this was due to a deep spiritual crisis, others attributed it to a regrettable mental derangement. Many newspapers treated him simply as a lunatic, and I know personally that this affected his highly sensitive mind very deeply; it is not the place here to reopen this discussion, but it may be stated that there is little doubt that besides a physical breakdown due to his hard struggles and his intense work, his exquisite Christian soul had undergone a profound change, after having been in close contact with the imperialism of Roman Catholicism and the pomp of the Vatican. Having stated this much, let us leave the question to itself and examine shortly the work of Maestro Perosi, trying to establish its characteristics so that his artistic self may stand out clearly.

Fig. 6 - The Sackbut, Mar 1923; 3, 8⁴³

The remaining years of his life, Perosi would continue a rigorous schedule of composing and guest conducting throughout Europe. Upon his 80th birthday in 1952, the entire country celebrated with him and Pope Pius XII created a special collection, "*Il Perosiano*," in the *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* which contains all of the personal papers and scores of the composer. That same year, Perosi named his successor at the Sistine Chapel, Monsignor Domenico Bartolucci, but continued to serve as *maestro perpetuo* at the Sistine Chapel until his death on October 12, 1956.

⁴³ Adelmo Damerini, "Lorenzo Perosi," *The Sackbut*, III, 8, (March 1923): 225.

Profane Choral Compositions

Upon first discovering the music of Lorenzo Perosi, I too was initially captivated by his massive oratorios, their relative unfamiliarity, and the scale and speed at which he created them. However, upon receiving the complete catalogue of works compiled by the Vatican Apostolic Library under the curation of Arturo Sacchetti, I was immediately stunned to see a collection of twenty “composizioni profane” works included in volume four of the catalogue. While a small percentage of Perosian works remain published through traditional music publishing houses across Europe, namely Ricordi, most of his works are held within private collections. While abbreviated repertoire lists had been attempted by biographers such as Rinaldi (1967), no complete catalogue had existed until this 2013 publication from the Vatican. Certainly, there is no mention of secular works within Rinaldi’s list, so this is the first occasion in printed form that one may find these twenty compositions. Unfortunately, none of the four volumes contain full representations of any the compositions as the full collection would be enormous and liken unto that of Bach or Mozart, and I assume that the Vatican publishing house has not undertaken the engraving of their complete library. However, the volumes do include brief excerpts of varying length that provide a basic understanding of instrumentation, key, tempo, texture, and text. Therefore, I was immediately struck with curiosity about their creation, let alone their inclusion, and wanted to know more about these profane works by a primarily sacred composer.

The twenty profane compositions are designated as such because they do not include a direct quotation of text from Biblical scripture from the Old Testament, Psalms, Apocrypha, or New Testament. Therefore, while some of the texts utilized by Perosi may be remotely sacred in nature and context, they remain included here because they do not adhere to the common

Catholic definition of sacred text as purely scriptural while everything else is ascribed “profane” whereas one might more commonly refer to this music as “secular.” This alone makes one contemplate when and why he wrote them given the history of his relationship and dedication to the church while also considering his brief period of ambivalence as a devoted Roman Catholic. Nonetheless, it remains fascinating that of the complete oeuvre of 1,368 works, only 20 are profane. Thus, this document seeks to explore a selection of five of these compositions specifically as they display unique harmonic language, accompaniment, and voicing that are foreign to the compositional voice that one sees in his other compositional work. These profane works include the following: *Ahi, quanto sa di sale lo pane altrui*; *Evviva Tutti, evviva noi*; *Lieti dell’eta nostra*; *O sovrana fra le opere belle*; and *Quisquis es in mensa*

The first work of mention is a setting of text from Dante Alighieri’s *La Divine Commedia*, found in the Paradise chapter, Canto XVII lines 58-60: *Ahi, quanto sa di sale lo pane altrui*. Scored for a baritone or bass soloist and piano, Perosi begins with an almost Schubertian accompaniment from the pianist. Figure 7 provides a score for the opening; the *adagio* yet frolicking sixteenth-note arpeggiation of the opening D minor chord establishes the key center, and illustrates the hardship expressed in the text as the soloist sings about comparing his own journey to another man’s journey. The baritone part, like nearly all of Perosi’s writing, is highly lyrical with diatonic, stepwise motion and predictable cadences within the key. However, the piano harmonies quickly deter from D minor as early as the first beat of the fourth measure when an anticipated i^{64} is replaced by a G major 7 chord. This brief deviation foreshadows the upcoming direct modulation to C# minor in measure 6. The tonicization is short lived, however, as the lowest C# of the C# minor cadence in measure 9 is used as the third of an A⁶ chord in measure 10, serving as a common tone modulation back to D minor in measure 14. Additionally,

the vocal part features an ascending, chromatic line through this unstable modulation, depicting the text as one “ascends” and “descends” the stairs of another. As a dramatic finish to the piece, Perosi sets the final statement by the baritone soloist by outlining an ascending arpeggiation of a fully diminished B chord followed by a drastic descent of a twelfth from a D4 down to a low A2, the tonic of an A major chord (V).

The image displays a musical score for the opening measures of the piece "Ahi, quanto sa di sale lo pane altrui". The score is written for a baritone soloist (basso) and a piano (pf). The music is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The vocal line is characterized by an ascending, chromatic line, while the piano accompaniment provides a steady, rhythmic foundation. The lyrics are written below the vocal line, and the measures are numbered 1 through 10.

Measures 1-3: The vocal line begins with a rest, followed by the lyrics "Ahi, quan - to". The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.

Measures 4-6: The vocal line continues with the lyrics "sa di sa - - - le lo pa - - -". The piano accompaniment maintains the eighth-note pattern in the right hand and the bass line in the left hand.

Measures 7-9: The vocal line continues with the lyrics "-ne al - - - - - trui,". The piano accompaniment maintains the eighth-note pattern in the right hand and the bass line in the left hand.

Measure 10: The vocal line concludes with the lyrics "e co-me du - ro cal - - le lo scen-de-re'l sa - lir per". The piano accompaniment maintains the eighth-note pattern in the right hand and the bass line in the left hand.

Fig. 7 - Opening measures of *Ahi, quanto sa di sale lo pane altrui*

This unrelenting piano accompaniment paired with an unpredictable harmonic modulation and a clear attempt at text painting through the use of intervallic leaps in the vocal part (in an otherwise lyrical melody) make this particular profane composition stand out from the others. Although this composition does not have a date of composition in the autograph score, one might wonder if the text points to the period when he frequently used pseudonyms and expressed feelings of dual personalities as he considered the path of another as expressed in the libretto.

Evviva Tutti, evviva noi is a short celebratory work written on May 2, 1908 and scored for three treble voices unaccompanied. Set in 6/8 in G major and to a lively *allegretto grazioso*, the entire brief text, “*La, la, la, [etc.], Evviva tutti, evviva noi,*” is set in an ABA form with coda. Both A and B sections are musical periods, consisting of a four-measure antecedent ending in a half cadence and a four-measure consequent finishing with a perfect authentic cadence. The seven-measure coda contains the only text other than “*la, la, la.*”



Fig. 8 - Opening measures of *Evviva tutti, evviva noi*

The date inscribed on the piece is rather peculiar as 1908 had no particular celebration that Perosi mentions, and the previous year was rather dire given the recent failure of his *Salone Perosi*. Nonetheless, this spritely work sheds light on the jovial side of this mysterious and rather reclusive composer.

A mere nine measures long and more of a fragment rather than a complete composition, *Lieti dell'eta nostra* is a brief setting of an equally brief four-line poem. The text depicts a

communal message through its plural grammar, and thusly Perosi creates a polyphonic setting for two, a cappella treble voices in E major. The lower voice, ascribed to second sopranos, begins with what seems like the subject of an unfinished fugue (Figure 9).



Fig. 9 - Measure 1, second soprano part, *Lieti dell'eta nostra*

The first soprano responds with a counterstatement that suggests a I-IV-I progression that, ultimately, reveals the extent of the harmonic language utilized in its nine total measure of music. It remains puzzling why the setting is so brief as both the profane text coupled with its ironic brevity (considering the text celebrates the future and growing older) make it practically unusable for performance. I include its mention here because it is yet another oddity and an opportunity for speculation in further research.

O sovrana fra le opere belle, dated 1937, deserves inclusion due to its dedication in addition to its musical merits. The autograph score states: “*A SUA MAESTA LA REGINA ELENA PETROVIC IN SAVOIA.*” The fact that Perosi dedicates this work to a woman should not be that interesting were it not for the text and librettist. The poem was authored and signed by “Parole di Giuseppe Perotta vegetariano,” a previous alias of the composer himself, and I include the full translation here for a better understanding of the implication:

O sovrana fra l'opere belle,
 sant'infanzia prodiga d'amor,
 più che sole, che luna, che stelle,
 tu diffondi celeste splendor.

*O sovereign among the beautiful creations,
 holy childhood lavished with love,
 more than sun, than moon, than stars,
 you spread heavenly splendor.*

With a permissible amount of supposition, it is easy to wonder if Perosi - a clergyman who had expressed his dismay regarding celibacy - may have held romantic affection for Elena Petrovic and penned this short composition in response toward the latter part of his career. Perpetuating the feeling of unrequited love, the piece is set in a melancholy E minor and is characterized by a falling chromatic line in the first two measures of the left hand of the piano accompaniment. Similar to the aforementioned profane works, *O sovrana* is also short (ten measures) as it does not repeat any of the text nor does it include any melismas from the singer whose voice categorization as a treble or bass singer is notably excluded. Perosi offers some lovely text painting in his setting of “*piu che sole*” as the soloist makes a dramatic leap to the highest note of the work (F#6) and later upon the final word “*splendor*” via a deceptive cadence upon a dominant VI chord. Yet, that unrequited passion is further bemoaned in the final coda in the piano accompaniment as it makes one final chromatic descent from the penultimate chord in F major to the final chord in E minor.

Moderato

Canto

O so - vra - na fra l'o - pe - re bel - le, san - t'in - fan - zia pro -

Pf

4

di - ga d'a - mour, piu che so - le, che lu - na, che stel - le,

7

rall.

tu dif - fon - di ce - le - ste splen - dor.

Fig. 10 - *O sovrana fra l'opere belle*

The final profane work that I submit for discovery is *Quisquis es in mensa*, a madrigal for TTBB divisi chorus a cappella. According to the testimony described in the Sacchetti volumes,⁴⁵ Perosi was said to have been sharing lunch with Arcangelo Paglialunga during his stay in San Remo for a performance of his *Il Sogno interpretato*. He requested paper from the wait staff, and in a manner of minutes created a “scherzo musicale” and invented a macaronic Latin text. This latter statement sought to make light of the occasion of their lunch.

⁴⁵ Arturo Sacchetti, ed., *Catalogo ragionato delle composizioni di Lorenzo Perosi (1872 - 1956) con esempi musicali originali*, (Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae Corpus Manuscriptorum Musicalium. Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 2013), Vol. 4, 1561.

Aside from the entertaining story regarding its creation, *Quisquis es in mensa* certainly deserves particular mention due to its bizarre ostinato outlined by the second basses:

Moderato scherzando

The musical score shows four vocal parts. The Tenore and Tenore II parts are in treble clef, while Basso and Basso II are in bass clef. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo/mood is 'Moderato scherzando'. The lyrics are 'Quis- quis es in men- sa,'. The Tenore and Tenore II parts are in treble clef, while Basso and Basso II are in bass clef. The Basso II part features a repeating eighth-note ostinato pattern.

Fig. 11 - Opening measures of *Quisquis es in mensa*

The TTBB voicing appears to demonstrate a strength and preference of the composer due to his lengthy career working with and composing for mostly male (suboctave and bass clef) singers and while the ostinato presents a peculiar sound, the vertical homophonic voicings are quite natural and remain representative of Perosi's melodic style. However, the harmonic progression outlined by the baritone and tenor voices paired with the repeated bass line creates a rather eerie and ominous sound, such as the Gm^6 chord on the downbeat of the second measure while the bass line continues to undulate. This legato movement of the upper voices against the buoyant ostinato continues for the remainder of the short composition, only to find closure in the final unison declamation of "*pensa*" at a pianissimo dynamic upon a C3, the IV of G minor. While posed as a musical joke and purportedly quickly written at a lunch table, this composition sheds

light on the musical ideas held within the Perosi's imagination and his ability to instantly transmit those ideas into a written form for public consumption.

Conclusion

Despite a prolific compositional output, strong leadership toward the restoration of Gregorian chant to the Roman Catholic liturgy, the elimination of castrati voice from the Papal choirs, and an overall incredible success at the turn of the twentieth century, Monsignor Lorenzo Perosi remains a forgotten figure in choral history in part due to the escalation of news concerning a brief period of personal depression and friction with the Roman Catholic Church during a decade full of turmoil. His fusion of Renaissance polyphony and melodies from Gregorian chant with grandiose orchestrations and compositional technique of the Italian *Giovane Scuola* revitalized the dying genre of the Italian oratorio, and redefined it as a new and popular medium for the next century of large scale, sacred choral-orchestral performance. His accomplishments as a young composer promoted him to international fame and would eventually earn him two of the most prestigious choral positions at St. Mark's, Venice, and at the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican where he would serve as *maestro perpetuo* for 53 years. His complete oeuvre provides a wealth of repertoire of various lengths and voicings worthy of rediscovery for the modern choral ensemble, and the recent finding of his so-called profane works reveals yet another facet by which one might approach the composer's works for consideration. Lorenzo Perosi should be reintroduced into the lexicon of famous composer names and included as one of the great choral musicians of the late Romantic era, worthy of study, appreciation, and performance.

Appendix I: Complete List of the Profane Compositions

1. Ahi, quanto sa di sale lo pane altrui.
2. Inno 'Allegri compagni leviamo la fronte'
3. A Mezzanotte
4. Canzone del grillo
5. Di pace i cavalier
6. Dovunque il guardo io giro
7. É fresco il valor di Franchi e Mori
8. Evviva tutti, evviva noi
9. Inno 'Orfani dei Marinai'
10. Inno dei mutilatini
11. Inno della Democrazia Cristiana
12. Lieti dell'età nostra
13. O sovrana fra le opere belle
14. Quisquis es in mensa
15. Rataplan
16. Rondinella pellegrina
17. Sera d'ottobre
18. Sole e amore
19. Successa è una disgrazia
20. Trionfa, o sole!

APPENDIX II: Poetic Texts of Selected Profane Compositions

1. Ahi, quanto sa di sale lo pane altrui

Lyric poem; Baritone and piano

Dante ALIGHIERI (1265 – 1321)

Ahi, quanto sa di sale
lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle
lo scendere e 'l salir per l'altrui scale.

*Oh, how bitter the taste of another man's bread is,
and how hard it is to descend
and climb another man's stair.*

2. Evviva tutti, evviva noi

Recreation Song (form attributed by A. Sacchetti); SSA a cappella

Anonymous

La, la, la, la,
Evviva tutti, evviva noi.

*La, la, la, la,
Hooray to everyone, hooray for us!*

3. Lieti dell'età nostra

Recreation Song (form attributed by A. Sacchetti); SA or TB a cappella

Anonymous

Lieti dell'età nostra,
fidenti all'avvenire,
pieni di vita e ardire,
noi al lavor saremo.

*We look forward to our faithful age
And to the future,
full of life and daring,
we at work shall be.*

4. O sovrana fra le opere belle

Lyric Poem; voice and keyboard

Giuseppe PEROTTA (1872-1956) - pseudonym of Lorenzo PEROSI

O sovrana fra l'opere belle,
sant'infanzia prodiga d'amor,
più che sole, che luna, che stelle,
tu diffondi celeste splendor.

*O sovereign among the beautiful works,
holy childhood lavish with love,
more than sun, that moon, what stars,
you spread heavenly splendor.*

5. Quisquis es in mensa

Madrigal; TTBB a cappella

Guido ANICHINI (1874-1957)

Quisquis es in mensa
primo de paupere pensa;
nam cum pascis eum,
pascis amice Deum.
Nescit homo plenus,
quam vita egenus;
quisquis es in mensa
primo de paupere pensa.

*Whoever you may be at the table,
First feed the poor.
For as you feed a friend of God,
God knows fully this life of poverty.*

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