**Dallapiccola, Luigi** (1904-1975)

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Luigi Dallapiccola was the leading Italian composer of the middle half of the twentieth century, contributing much to the development of musical modernism in Italy as well as writing some of the most famous and widely-performed music of his era.

**Early life and works, 1920-39**

It is common to note the circumstances of Dallapiccola’s birth. He was born in Pisino in modern-day Croatia; his Istrian background and the changing political ownership of his hometown are often cited as the root of many of his later musical and aesthetic directions. However it could be claimed that his more crucial relationship with place occurred in Florence, where he re-located in 1922 as a burgeoning compositional talent to study with Ernesto Consolo and later the modernist Vito Frazzi. He never left, finding the city of Dante, Botticelli, and Boccaccio to be a perpetual artistic muse. Early works demonstrate a twin heritage, that of mediaeval modal music (see, for instance, *Due Laudi di Iacapone da Todi* from 1929) and the unconventional brilliance of Busoni. As the 1930s progressed, Dallapiccola began to distinguish himself from many of his contemporaries by forging a musical language that promised a future beyond the neo-classical, anti-operatic world of Casella and Malipiero. A case in point is the 1937 piece *Tre Laudi* for voice and chamber orchestra, where the angular gestures and rhythmic compulsion of Stravinsky meet with a particularly beautiful vein of harmonic and textual symbolism which was to become familiar in all Dallapiccola’s later works. It was also the first occurrence of the serial technique in his music, and much of the work was incorporated into his first opera, *Volo di Notte*, a semi-futurist drama about and aeroplane crash, which premiered Florence in 1940. By the end of the 1930s, Dallapiccola had been firmly established as Italian music’s principal pioneer, and was known overseas as a vocal supporter of musical internationalism through the International Society for Contemporary Music.

*The Second World War and its ramifications*

The war turned out to be a personal, musical and reputational ‘hinge’ for Dallapiccola upon which an understanding of his legacy rests. In 1938, recently installed as Professor of Composition at the Florence Conservatorio, Dallapiccola had married Laura Coen-Luzzato, who was half Jewish, and thus their family suffered firstly under Mussolini’s racial policies of 1938 and, more damagingly, under the Nazi occupation of Florence in 1943, from where they were forced to flee and lie low in the Tuscan countryside between Christmas 1943 and the middle of 1944. During the conflict, Dallapiccola increasingly turned to themes of liberty and suffering in his music, and the *Canti di Prigionia* of 1941 (premiered under Fernando Previtali at the *Teatro dell’Arti* in Rome on the day of Mussolini’s war declaration) set words by historical figures imprisoned for heresy: Mary Stuart, Severinus Boethius, and Girolamo Savonarola. The work is a sophisticated juxtaposition of old and new, using multiple modes and other medievalisms within a serial framework and a proclamatory vocal style, permeated by the doom-laden *Dies Irae* chant. The sheer ambition of its musical and dramaturgical synthesis is powerful; however, when considering the progress Dallapiccola was making in mastering serialism, the triptych *Liriche Greche* of 1942-5 is a more thorough exploration of twelve-tone music, perhaps constituting Dallapicolla’s Italianate version of Schoenberg’s *Harmonielehre*, a book he loved dearly.

*Later routes on the modernist path*

The most important event of the immediate post-war years for Dallapiccola was the premiere of his 1948 opera *Il Prigioniero* in 1950 in Rome. The work occupies a major place in any discussion of Dallapiccola’s life and work, and is one of the only Italian operas to enter the international repertory since Puccini. Having been started whilst Dallapiccola was in hiding from the Nazi authorities it carries a great degree of significance in the history of operatic sociology; if *Il Prigioniero* is not the only opera about a political refugee, it is possibly the only opera by a political refugee. It takes its text from a short story by Count Villiers de L’isle Adam, set during the Spanish inquisition and entitled ‘La Torture par l’esperance’. A political prisoner is captured, promised the possibility of hope by the jailer, led on to believe that escape is possible, and then is cruelly let down as he walks out in apparent freedom to find instead that execution awaits. The music, fully serial but searing with lyricism, is intense and complex.

Into the 50s and 60s, the architecture of Dallapiccola’s music contracted somewhat, and comparisons to the expansive and extroverted music of one Viennese master, Alban Berg, gave way to the influence of another, Anton Webern. Many of the works from these years (the *Quaderni Musicali di Annalibera* of 1952 the *Goethe Lieder* of 1953) are compact, delicate and intricately constructed. These years were also dominated by the composition of Dallapiccola’s final opera *Ulisse*, in which themes of journeying and returning combine to form what the composer considered his *opera summa*. He remained at the forefront of Italian musical life into the 1970s, and died aged 71 with a half-finished manuscript at the piano.

*Politics, philosophy, legacy*

Dallapiccola was a prodigious essayist, and at one point in the mid-forties was on the margins of a Florentine literary circle that included the poet Alessandro Bonsanti and the critics gathering around the left-leaning paper *Il Mondo*. Bonsanti engaged Dallapiccola as a music writer, and through regular columns the composer found a readily available outlet for his musico-political views. Dallapiccola also had a strong relationship to literature, setting the texts of over 30 writers ranging from Oscar Wilde to Bruno Lattini. He also worked well in conjunction with other artists, such as Salvatore Quasimodo and Aurel Milloss.

The political aspect to Dallapiccola’s career has been much discussed. Whilst *Il Prigioniero* – and similar ‘protest-works’ works and writings – are undoubtedly a form of reaction to the horror of war, they are also one composer’s verdict on that war, and an attempt to write history in order to find himself on the right side of it. And the historical record shows that this took a certain amount of obfuscation: Dallapiccola was in fact rather enamoured with Mussolini during the 1930s. He was with the majority of Italians in this regard, and most of them tried to hide it when the war was over. Dating his precise turn from Fascist ideology is difficult, but Dallapiccola saw through the regime’s veneer of respectability comfortably prior to many of his colleagues. Yet he remained a very prestigious composer right up until the fall of Mussolini, and to imagine that his opera and other companion ‘protest-works’ were literally etched (Solschenizyn-like) onto the walls of a dungeon is to simplify the case markedly.

Acknowledging such ambiguities may provide nuance to an assessment of Dallapiccola’s legacy, but they do not detract from the power of his music nor its ability to ask challenging questions about the relationship between politics, modernism and the musical act. Certainly, the integrity, vitality and language of Italian music in the later twentieth-century owes much to his genius.

Selected works

*Tre laudi* (1936-7), for voice and 13 instruments

*Volo di Notte* (1938), one-act opera

*Canti di prigionia* (1938-41), for chorus, two pianos, 2 harps and percussion

*Liriche Greche* (1942-5), for voice and various chamber combinations

*Marsia* (1943), ballet

*Il prigioniero* (1944-8), opera.

*Quattro liriche di Antonio Machado* (1948), for soprano and piano

*Tartiniana* (1951), for violin and orchestra

*Canti di liberazione* (1951-5), for mixed chorus and orchestra

*Quaderno musicale di Annalibera* (1952), for solo piano

*Goethe-Lieder* (1953), for mezzo soprano, piccolo clarinet, clarinet, and bass clarinet

*Cinque canti* (1956), for baritone and 8 instruments

*Ulisse* (1960-8), opera

*Tempus destruendi/tempus aedificandi* (1971), for chorus

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Stable URL to a photo and resources on Dallapiccola:

http://www.esz.it/en/extra/autore/luigi-dallapiccola

Stable Spotify Link for Dallapiccola’s select works: [Luigi Dallapiccola](http://open.spotify.com/artist/55ey4I8qx9nDDuGg17sbAC)