**Goffredo Petrassi**

Peter Roderick

Goffredo Petrassi (b. 1904, d. 2003) was an Italian musician and composer who spent much of his working life in Rome. Alongside Luigi Dallapiccola and Giorgio Federico Ghedini he inhabited an ‘intermediate’ generation in Italian twentieth century modernism, spanning the gap between the flamboyant trio of Alfredo Casella, Ildebrando Pizetti and Gian Francesco Malipiero in the 1920s and 30s and the avant-gardists Luigi Nono, Bruno Maderna and Luciano Berio in the 1960s.

Petrassi grew up surrounded by the polyphonic heritage of the Italian renaissance, being born in the same village as Palestrina and studying as a teenager in Rome at the Scuola Cantorum of *San Salvatore in Lauro*; Weismann notes that ‘various manifestations of Catholic baroque art displayed on architecture, interior decoration and music … undoubtedly contributed to the formation of his taste’ (Weissmann, 3). His student days were spent at the Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia, where he studied with Bustini and Casella, and produced a flourish of remarkably mature works which combined extreme contrapuntal complexity with the harmonic language of Stravinsky. In addition, Petrassi’s ability to overcome the Italian aversion to the orchestral ‘set-piece’ (for instance, the *Partita* of 1932, the *Concerto for Orchestra* of 1933-4) led to fruitful international connections in Britain and Germany.

The advent of war in 1939 put these connections temporarily on hold, and certainly introduced a sombre, reflective hue to Petrassi’s musical and written utterances that had previously been hidden. Amidst the moral equivocation that marked his political stance under fascism (and his was hardly the only ambivalent and cooperative musical relationship with the regime) Petrassi emerged from the conflict somewhat in the vanguard of post-war renewal: Rome became a hotbed of musical radicalism through his leadership of the ‘Musica Viva’ group in the immediate post war period, and he later wrote passionately that he ‘thought in this chaos it was somehow necessary to save music’ (Petrassi, 324).

Petrassi’s work after the early success of the *Partita* tended to fall into discrete genre categories, with the next decade dominated by two interlocking lineages: the religious ‘sinfonico-corali’ works *Psalm X* (1934-6), *Magnificat* (1939-40), *Coro Dei Morti* (1940-1) and dramas such as *La follia di Orlando* (1942–3), *Il Cordovano* 1944–8, *Ritratto di Don Chisciotte* (1945) and *Morte dell'aria* (1949–50). This period can be considered an aesthetic transition for Petrassi, who described his theatrical works of the war decade as ‘experiments in which I have elaborated my ideas and techniques, seeking to increasingly broaden my vision of art and the commitment of man towards art’. (Petrassi, ‘Seminario di Composizione’ in *Scritti e Interviste*, 135.). These years also marked his most successful theatrical collaborations, that with the choreographer Aurel Milloss, who staged the first performance of Berg’s *Wozzeck*  in Italy and went on to work with Dallapiccola on *Marsia* and Petrassi on *La follia di Orlando* and *Ritratto di Don Chisciotte*.

The culmination of introspection produced during the war years was Petrassi’s most famous work, the dark and mysterious *Noche Oscura* of 1951. In it, the composer developed a number of innovative ways of ‘inhabiting’ a literary text, including using the transformation of already extant musical material to mirror the ‘transformada’ of lover into beloved; the dualist play of darkness and light in which (as St John’s words make clear) darkness is revealed as ‘more lovely than the dawn’; the musical secretion of knowledge deep within the musical fabric (especially in the guise of an ‘escala’); and the overall sense of a questioning of musical language itself, which Enrico Cascelli renders as a ‘language of crisis and crisis of language’ (Caselli, 505). The quasi-serial explorations in the work are largely subservient to the multiple other directions Petrassi pulls the listener, with octatonic/panchromatic harmony, an array of motivic deformations, all wrapped up in a neo-madrigalist choral language: Restagno writes that ‘stylistic directions pile up, interweave and erode one another’. The broader point is plain: during this crucial period, Petrassi was simultaneously attracted and repelled by modernist trends, eager to investigate their potential but anxious to try and somehow make them his own discovery. The effect is bewildering and breathtaking: a young Franco Donatoni was so impressed he asked to study with Petrassi on the spot.

After completing *Noche Oscura*, Petrassi turned voltè-face from texted music until the early 1960s and concentrated in the main part on completing his eight concerti for orchestra. In 1956 he taught composition classes at the Berkshire Music Centre in Tanglewood, Massachusetts, and throughout his career he toured widely as a conductor. In 1959 he became a professor of composition at the Academy of Santa Cecilia, a position he held until 1974, and numbered among his pupils Donatoni, Kenneth Leighton, Peter Maxwell Davies, and Cornelius Cardew. He continued composing into his late 80s, and writing beyond this point: remarkably, a recent collection of his essays contains pronouncements on both interwar theatrical music (from 1936) and the uses of the internet (from 2001).

In summary, it is perhaps unfair that our subject is often recalled simply as the unfamiliar half of the conjunction ‘Dallapiccola and Petrassi’ – a commonplace of many a music history. For a start the two composer’s artistic paths seldom crossed in any meaningful way. Tellingly, they had opposite responses to both past and future: both composers dallied with fascism in their youth, but Petrassi was later as open about the fact as Dallapiccola was secretive; and when it came to the mass conversion to serialism of the late 40s, Petrassi’s nonchalance towards the method stands against Dallapiccola’s standard-bearing position. But furthermore, Petrassi’s individualism and vibrancy stand him out from many of his peers, along with a touching optimism which sought to ‘renew the thread of a lost faith, to overcome the pessimism and infidelity that have eroded our freshest energies’ (Petrassi, 56), and which was often expressed musically. Such unique qualities ensured his place as one of the more intriguing twentieth-century Italian artists.

Select Works

Partita (1932), Orchestra

Introduzione e allegro, (1933)

Toccata (1933), Piano

Salmo IX per coro, archi, ottoni, percussioni e 2 pianoforti (1936)

Magnificat (1940) soprano, chorus and orchestra

Coro di morti (1941)

4 Inni sacri (1942)

La follia di Orlando (1943), ballet

Ritratto di don Chisciotte (1945), ballet

Il cordovano (1949), opera

Morte dell'aria (1950), opera

Noche oscura (1950-51), cantata

Quartetto per archi (1956)

Tre per sette (1967)

Béatitudines (1969)

Elogio per un'ombra (1971), violin

Orationes Christi (1974-75)

Sestina d'autunno (1981-82)

Sesto Concerto (1956), orchestra

Select Bibliography

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Stable URL for a collection of photos and resources on Petrassi:

http://web.tiscali.it/silvio-home/petrassi/index.htm

Stable Spotify Link to selected music by Petrassi: [Goffredo Petrassi](http://open.spotify.com/artist/7m43AIbMJZzOFRxYXQDD7e)