

ITALY TODAY

BY GUIDO M. GATTI



It is not easy in the space of a short article to characterize the tendencies of contemporary Italian music for two reasons: the mobility of its orientation, which cannot as yet be certainly defined, and the multiplicity of temperaments that are its exponents and which are difficult to classify.

When we speak of modern Italian music, one must not conceive of a school of musicians or even a compact group of artists who follow about the same form of aesthetics. Although the term "school" has been accepted in nearly every country, in Italy it has never corresponded to reality. Today there are many Italian musicians of whom only a few are clearly defined personalities strong enough to emerge among the leaders of international contemporary music, but every one of them has chosen his own way, along which he proceeds with more or less good fortune.

Out of this diversity of aesthetic principles are born discussions and passionate debates whose echoes are frequently heard in the daily press and in the reviews. But we must not believe that these discussions and debates always engage two large groups, to be approximately described as Traditionalists and Modernists; among the latter as among the former are those individual artists of a higher culture, who possess an understanding of art's ultimate purposes, and who can nourish their polemics with intellect and passion.

In this diversity and these antagonisms lies the force of Italian music today, indeed this very diversity is the cause of our profound conviction of the present importance and still more evident future of Italian music. Recent musical history confirms us in the opinion that when a period is dominated by an imposing personality around whom satellites are grouped, intent on imitating his mode of thought and expression with

certain individual variations,—such a period is followed by a phase of decadence and creative weakness. Once the hero has disappeared or his productive capacity has been reduced to a repetition of stylistic idiosyncracies that finally crystallize into mannerism, a period of uncertainty and delusion begins which does not bring forward any work of the first order. In Italy to-day there is not a musician who cannot be matched with another as significant and individual. We have masters among our composers but almost no disciples. How, therefore, can we speak of a school?

Nor must we confine the search for the sources of our revival within the contemporary epoch. For even if the masters of the past century have left almost no traces in Italian music of to-day, this latter is something purely Italian, something new which is nevertheless linked to a more remote music, the music of centuries earlier than the nineteenth, music that has rested for a long time in unmerited obscurity.

If we wished to explain the characteristics which make themselves felt as Italian in music written today the task would be neither easy nor short and we might never succeed in transmitting to a foreigner, who does not know Italy in its various manifestations—not only of art—the sense of our intuition. We must therefore limit ourselves to the indication of certain lineaments which may be discerned more or less clearly in the diverse works of even our more diverse musicians.

(a) A decided tendency towards horizontal line and to the exploitation of melody. It is superfluous to add that by melody is not meant that element which, known as “Italian melody”, was the delight of the “parterre” twenty years ago, but rather a musical idea realized in its melodic and monodic form.

(b) But this melody, when it is not facile or banal, always has the character of vocalization, in that it is a melody which sings. Also when the melody has an instrumental purpose we feel that it has come into being like a song, that it is, I might say, the musical-verbal form of a sentiment. For that reason it is nearly never made of sharp angles but, on the contrary, has great plasticity and relief.

(c) The composition tends in general to be definite. The sense of order and of harmony is innate in Italian nature.

Everything tends to a state of equilibrium and music needs its points of security. It is not an imposed symmetry or a discipline adopted beforehand, but an instinct of order and formal logic.

(d) This tendency explains the sympathy for ample forms and, on the other hand, the slight production of fragments, small lyrical pieces, epigrammatical pages, *petites pieces*. It is an indication, this, of the superior conscience of the artist toward his art and labour, for whom the bibelot may be as beautiful as possible but remains always a bauble which has not aroused in the creator a profound and human emotion, and will therefore not arouse it in those who listen.

To be human is the first article of faith which, it seems, all Italian artists of today obey.

Given these premises and the admitted existence of an Italian musical physiognomy enduring over a goodly number of years, it is easy to understand why foreign influences, especially those of racial characteristics, have been of little avail and short duration. By this statement I do not mean to undervalue the stylistic-technical contributions by which other aesthetic ideas have rendered our present-day music more concrete. I mean only to state this fact—that Italian music, even that of the less solid and individual composers, has never been either of the style of Debussy or in the form of Wagner or Brahms. Here and there we may find traces of Debussy or Wagner, but one force is always dominant in opposition to theirs, to such an extent that their influence is not lasting but is rather localized and soon entirely disappears.

By way of analogy with chemistry one might say that the various foreign aesthetics have operated in the development of contemporary Italian music like a catalysis—through their presence but without appearing in the compound. The remaining product does not bear traces of the agent.

The cultural reaction which preceded the revival of today is largely the result of the revolution against the predominance of opera in the late nineteenth century. This undoubtedly served to prepare the actual ground but, with some few exceptions, it bequeathed us no great works. On the other hand it is curious to note how theatrical music—the kind of music which in the eyes of the more determined opponents of the last century is most contaminated—is precisely the form to

which the new musicians largely dedicate themselves, with, however, a mental attitude widely differing from that of their forerunners. We have a rich production of symphonies and chamber music, but there is no musician who has not to his credit one or more operas, or who is not writing one.

In order to comprehend the style of some musicians it is sufficient merely to examine their operatic creations even when they have composed in other forms. I speak especially of those who seem best to represent young Italy: Franco Alfano, G. Francesco Malipiero, and Ildebrando Pizzetti. The first began as a writer of opera, having produced a melodrama when a little over twenty, influenced by the writers of yesterday. The other two have been linked to opera for a long time, as well as to various experiments in other forms; but today they dedicate their activity chiefly to the music drama, each one with a clear vision strengthened by long study and a critical spirit of the first order.

Franco Alfano has conceived his melodrama in the spirit of music; his is a rich and fluent inspiration and the exuberance of his southern temperament overflows in a fervor of color and a diversity of rhythm and harmony which are at first difficult for his audience. This is especially true of *L'Ombra di Don Giovanni*, in which one can still observe the composer's uncertainty in a critical phase of technical and formal evolution. But, this aside, his essentially lyrical conception of the opera is well defined; and in the *Leggenda di Sakuntala* it becomes concrete in a more luminous and satisfactory way. The voice of Alfano's opera, for all that it obeys the necessity of poetical accent, is felt to spring from an impulse which has its roots beneath the words, even when it is not concerned with the development of a sentiment for itself. (One might say that the music of Alfano realizes Nietzsche's ideal of the Dionysian spirit.) The orchestra of his opera, rich and refined, is not the foundation from which the intoned words emerge and affect us, but the atmosphere in which they exist as the part of a whole, expressing life in a continuous evolution.

Pizzetti, on the contrary, tends toward a musical-verbal expression which does not allow any dominance either to one or the other of the constituent elements, but which has the character of a new element, called by the composer *dramatic*,

and to whose demands everything must be subordinated. For Pizzetti, opera has no significance unless there is established a continuous and intimate fusion, almost syllable by syllable, between words and tones, unless it becomes impossible to distinguish melody, rhythm, harmony, etc., so that a musical dramatic language emerges with its own vocabulary. Hence his orchestra, which always underlines the voice (we speak here of voice and not of continuous declamation in the Wagnerian sense), and in which the instruments are often individually treated with a tendency to characterize the themes by their "timbre" without ever resorting to doubling. A point of contact between these two musicians is their love of subjects largely human, of universal significance, elemental in idea, which they take either from legends or from biblical episodes. For example, Pizzetti has given us after his *Fedra* set to the poem of Gabriele d'Annunzio, *Debora e Jael* from the Book of Judges; while similarly Alfano after his Indian Legend prepares himself for an opera of great sweep, whose subject will be taken from the legend of *St. Julien l'Hospitalier* by Flaubert.

Malipiero in his operas stresses the visible element. Benefiting by the experiences of Strauss and Debussy, he has created a type of theatrical representation with musical gestures, as one might put it, in which the actor is often only a mime and uses a language which is a medium between the word and the song (especially in the three comedies of Goldoni). But what further characterizes Malipiero's works for the theatre is an effective synthesis which reduces drama to an elementary scheme of contrast, in which all episodic material is abolished. The music which Malipiero has written for his *dramatic expressions*, as he calls them, is of an essentially melodic, rhythmic nature: short phrases, incisive and strong accents which are clearly defined at their first appearance and which the composer never develops and even seldom transforms; so that his musical page has the sequence of thought expounded simply, the momentum of drama, and a ruggedness which makes one think of Moussorgsky and in general of folk-art, of music which flows directly from a primitive temperament. The most interesting and successful evidence of this tendency to-

ward simplicity and folk music are the two string quartets—*Rispetti e strambotti*, and *Stornelli e ballate*.

I have said before that the three musicians, Alfano, Pizzetti, and Malipiero reveal the main outlines of their artistic character in their operatic work. But we must not therefore overlook their production in the field of symphony and chamber music. Franco Alfano, who is a very clever constructor of sonorous edifices, has given us a symphony in E which is one of the first symphonic works that modern Italian music can claim (this one is dated 1912), and a sonata for violin, both admirable for their mastery of form and interesting workmanship.

Pizzetti has devoted himself particularly to chamber music and has achieved perfect form in his two sonatas for violin, and violoncello (two of the most precious works of contemporary Italy), and in lyrical works for voices.

Malipiero on the other hand is known for numerous symphonic works, which demonstrate the instinctive and sure hand of an orchestrator—as in the three suites, in *Impressioni dal vero*, and in *Pause del silenzio*.

Then there are those composers especially notable for their symphonic and chamber music. First of all these is Ottorino Respighi, master of symphonic style, the Italian musician who is perhaps the best known today in other countries. Respighi is one of the most fertile of composers. Let us mention only some of the most important works: the symphonic poems, *Le Fontane di Roma*, *La Ballata delle Gnomidi*, the small poems for voice and orchestra, *Aretusa* and *La Sensitiva*, the Gregorian concerto for violin, the sonata for violin and piano and the lyrics for the voice, some of which are small works of great perfection.

Next to Respighi, not because of affinity of temperament but rather for contrast, it pleases me to place the name of Alfredo Casella, pianist and composer of the *avant-garde*. He has a vivid mind which drives him to seek new art forms capable of expressing the complexity and subtlety of the modern soul. However one may disagree with him, the author of pages such as the *Notte di Maggio* for voice and orchestra and the five pieces for string quartet cannot be overlooked. In Rome also we find a fantastic musical poet, Vin-

cenzo Tommasini, who loves to portray in music delightful nocturnes and to evoke melancholy and nostalgia in works, such as *Chiari di Luna* for orchestra. His name makes me think of two others: Vincenzo Davico, author of short compositions for piano and orchestra, full of evocation and charm; and Vittorio Gui who, besides being an excellent conductor, is the composer of fine lyrics and chamber music.

With Pizzetti two musicians are working: Mario Castelnuovo Tedesco and Fernando Liuzzi, who although not absolutely free from his influence have each a characteristically individual style.

Castelnuovo is, above all, the composer of chamber music for which he draws inspiration from nature and the Tuscan landscape, pieces which from the point of view of form are absolutely remarkable. Castelnuovo is the youngest of all the musicians I have named. Liuzzi has to his credit among other works, a sonata for violin and piano which is full of freshness and grace.

Despite the rapidity of this excursion to gain a bird's-eye view of the musical life of contemporary Italy I do not altogether despair of having created a general impression. For foreigners it is indeed not easy to overcome the distrust which is the consequence of twenty-five years of commercial operatic production. But in our effort to progress from the dead level of our artistic life—an effort which has already been crowned with the best results—one may recognize an importance to which its seriousness and endurance contribute. No student who appraisingly examines the best works of our composers to-day may accuse us of presumption or an excessive valuation of our forces.

