Don Lorenzo Perosi

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Source: *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 40, No. 673 (Mar. 1, 1899), pp. 167-168

Published by: Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3365728>

Accessed: 27-04-2016 07:41 UTC

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DON LORENZO PEROSI.

LESS than a year ago only a few persons here and there in Italy were aware of the fact that a young abbé, *maestro di capella* at the Basilica of Saint Mark, Venice, was successfully occupying himself during his leisure hours with the composition of masses, hymns, and other church music. Since that time the name of Perosi has become known in other parts of Europe, and from America the most tempting proposals have reached him for the production there of his oratorios under his own personal direction. Don Perosi is shortly to make his appearance in Paris, where he will conduct some of his works, while later on he will also introduce some of his oratorios to English audiences. Under these circumstances, a few biographical details, gathered from authentic sources, will doubtless be of interest to our readers.

Lorenzo Perosi was born at Tortona, in Piedmont, on December 20, 1872. His father was then, as he is now, *maestro di capella* of the Cathedral in that little town. Himself a musician of considerable attainments, an able organist, and appreciated as a composer, the father was well qualified to discern at an early period the talent of his child, and he laid himself out to undertake its proper development. Indeed, without the intelligent guidance and solicitous care bestowed upon him by the *Maestro* Giuseppe Perosi, Lorenzo would scarcely have been able to achieve such brilliant success. The Pope has recognised the father's merit by personally conferring a decoration on him during his recent stay in Rome.

The surroundings in which little "Renzo" (as he is still called in his old home) passed his childhood were most peaceful and tranquil, and far removed from all turmoil and strife. At the age of six he received his first lessons on the pianoforte, being grounded in the "school" of Liebert and Stark, at the same time studying also Bertini, Moscheles, and Cramer, and mastering the difficulties of Clementi's "Gradus ad Parnassum." He was early drawn to the classical composers—Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven being his favourites. When scarcely ten years of age he began to study the organ, on which instrument he was soon able to play the most difficult sonatas of all epochs, from Frescobaldi to the modern masters. For the great composers of church music, however, he showed a marked preference. He delighted in the study of Palestrina, Vittoria, Jomelli, Scarlatti, Carissimi, Handel, and Haydn. His father instructed him in the rudiments of composition, and when only twelve years of age his improvisations were wont to astonish all those who heard them. All the Piedmontese ladies who had met Lorenzo at the *salons* of the Countess San Giorgio de Tornaforte and the Barons Cavalchini talked about him as being the eighth wonder of the world!

In June, 1888, the young musician passed his examinations at the Musical Lyceum in Rome. He was highly complimented by the committee, who predicted a brilliant future for him. Not content with the diplomas he had there obtained, Lorenzo continued his studies under Professor Saladino, of the Milan Conservatorio, and afterwards at the famous monastery of Monte Casino. For the special study of sacred music he entered, in 1893, the celebrated school for church music at Ratisbon. From being a pupil he would soon have been appointed to a professorship of the organ, but for the fact that the Bishop of Imola had meanwhile entrusted him with the foundation of a *Schola Cantorum* in that town. To this sphere of work he devoted himself with enthusiastic zeal, and in less than a year the newly constituted choir was able to

give an admirable performance of the "Missa Papæ Marcelli." It was at Imola also that Perosi began the study of theology and decided upon taking orders. At Venice, where, at the age of twenty-two, he was appointed chapel-master of Saint Mark, he was ordained a priest. Don Lorenzo is much esteemed by the people of Venice, not only by reason of his talent, but for his simplicity of manner and his unassuming kindliness of disposition. The venerable Cardinal Sarto has a fatherly affection for him and insists upon his residing at the Curia, while entire evenings are spent by the young abbé in improvising on the organ and in composing.

Perosi works incessantly. Although he is only twenty-six he has composed no less than twenty-five Masses, a *Te Deum*, an enormous number of Hymns, Psalms, Motets, Preludes, &c., as well as chamber music. His productivity is marvellous. His popularity and celebrity as a composer are, however,

derived chiefly from his oratorios. The first one of these is the "Passion of Christ," a trilogy, the first part of which was performed at Venice at the beginning of August, 1897, while it was produced in its entirety in December of the same year, at the Chiesa delle Grazie, in Milan. This was followed in rapid succession by the "Transfiguration of Christ" (produced in Venice, March 20, 1898), the "Resurrection of Lazarus" (Venice, Theatre la Fenice, July 26, 1898), and the "Resurrection of Christ" (Rome, last December), which will ere long also be heard in London. These oratorios form part of a projected cycle of twelve similar works, illustrative of the life of the Saviour. Rumour has it that the cycle is to be complete in two years' time.

G. FRANCHI-VERNEY.

Don Lorenzo Perosi's "Passion of Christ" is entitled a Sacred Trilogy; his later works, the "Transfiguration of Christ" and the "Resurrection of Lazarus," are, however, called "oratorios," although in general form and character they are all

much alike. The term "oratorio" at once calls to mind Handel, Spohr, and Mendelssohn; but with their works which bear this name, those of Perosi have little or nothing in common. A comparison with the oratorios of Carissimi and the old Passions, making all allowance for the development of musical art since the seventeenth century, would be much more to the point. There are two composers who seem, and very naturally, to have strongly influenced Perosi—the one is Bach, the other Wagner. There is a good deal of fugato writing in Perosi's *Preludes*, also in certain instrumental episodes—special features of the works under notice; the one entitled the "Resurrection of Lazarus" may, indeed, be named as one of the most interesting and characteristic. The composer not only employs Bach methods, but he borrows at times even his phraseology. With all that, nineteenth century effects make themselves felt, and prevent one from regarding Perosi merely as an imitator of the old master.

The influence of Wagner shows itself in the use of representative themes, though of these the Italian Abbé makes extremely moderate use: one of the most marked instances occurs in "Lazarus," in which a "Resurrection" theme is introduced at salient points of the sacred narrative. Further, there is the chromatic character of much of the music, also particular phrases, which recall the music-dramas of Wagner; at times, however, Perosi expresses himself in archaic, ecclesiastical style.

Then, again, the absence of any break in the parts into which the "Passion" and oratorios are divided, and the general avoidance of definite forms, give quite a Wagner *cachet* to these works. One may say roughly that Perosi's music, which shows feeling and skill, is a clever compound of various styles, *ergo* not possessing as yet strong individuality.

J. S. S.

A FOLK-SONG FUNCTION.

A MAYFAIR mansion was the scene of a brilliant gathering on the evening of the 2nd ult., when the first general meeting of the Folk-song Society was held under the hospitable roof of Mrs. Beer at 7, Chesterfield Gardens. Amongst the large company present were Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Sir Hubert Parry, Mr. Fuller Maitland, Mr. Barclay Squire, Mr. Edward Elgar, Mr. Alfred P. Graves, Mr. Edgar F. Jacques, Mr. Spencer Curwen, Mr. A. Kalisch (honorary treasurer), and Mrs. Kate Lee (honorary secretary). The question might naturally be asked "What is the Folk-song Society?" The best answer is that furnished by one of its rules—viz., "The Society shall have for its primary object the collection and preservation of Folk-songs, Ballads, and Tunes, and the publication of such of these as may be deemed advisable." The Society was only started in January last year by Mrs. Kate Lee and Mr. Alfred Percival Graves, with the kind advice and help of Mr. Fuller Maitland; it was fully inaugurated June 16, 1898. Another object of the Society is "the holding of periodical meetings at which folk-songs will be introduced and form the subject of performance, lecture, and discussion." Such an occasion was that under notice, and which proved to be a most successful and enjoyable gathering.

The general proceedings, under the genial chairmanship of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, commenced with the inaugural address delivered by Sir Hubert Parry, a vice-president, whose remarks were of that essentially *brainy* nature so characteristic of his utterances. His reference to the popular songs of the day as "snippets of musical slang" was one of the many

good points in an address of which the following is a report:—

SIR HUBERT PARRY ON FOLK-MUSIC.

I think I may premise that this Society is engaged upon a wholesome and seasonable enterprise. For, in these days of high pressure and commercialism and that little smattering of the science of heredity which impels people to think it is hopeless to contend against their bad impulses, because they are bound to inherit the bad qualities of countless shoals of ancestors, the tendency is to become cynical; and the best remedy is to revive a belief in and love of our fellow creatures. And nothing has such a curious way of doing this as the study of folk-music. There is nothing in folk-music common or unclean; and this fact is worthy of the serious consideration of some future philosopher. How has the unregenerate public arrived at such a perfect result that in this folk-music there is no sham, no got-up glitter, and no vulgarity? But these treasures of humanity are getting rare, for they are written in characters the most evanescent you can imagine, upon the sensitive brain fibres of those who learnt them, and have little idea of their value. Moreover, there is an enemy at the door of folk-music which is driving it out—namely, the popular songs of the day—and if we compare the genuine old folk-music with the songs that are driving it out, what an awful abyss appears! The modern popular song reminds me of the outer circumference of our terribly overgrown towns, where the jerry-builder holds sway, and where one sees all around the tawdriness of sham jewellery and shoddy clothes, the dregs of stale fish, and pawn-shops, set off by the flaming gin-palaces at the corners of the streets. All these things suggest to one's mind the boundless regions of sham. It is for the people who live in these unhealthy regions, people who have the most false ideals, who are always scrambling for subsistence, who think that the commonest rowdism is the highest expression of human emotion; for them popular music is made, and it is made, with a commercial object, of snippets of musical slang. This is what will drive out folk-music if we do not save it. The old folk-music is among the purest products of the human mind. It grew in the hearts of the people before they devoted themselves assiduously to the making of quick returns. In the old days they produced music because it pleased them to make it, and because what they made pleased them mightily, and that is the only way in which good music is ever made.

In this country we have not, until recently, had any idea of concentrating our attention on the collecting of our folk-music, and even now what difficulties beset us! Some people seem to think that they have but to walk out into the byways and hedges and pick them up; but the collecting of folk-songs really requires the most extraordinary faculty of accurate attention, of accurate retention, of self-criticism, as well as practice, to distinguish what is genuine from what is corrupt or emasculated. We have among the members of the Folk-song Society several who have already practised the art, and have developed a wonderful gift in that direction. I hope that, with their assistance, we shall preserve much precious folk-music from being lost, and I trust that before long we shall find England more satisfactorily represented by folk-song collections than has hitherto been the case. The rapidity of our commercial development is partly responsible for the fact that England is not yet in possession of any great collection. In the neighbouring countries of Ireland and Scotland town civilisation is not so rife, and in out-of-the-way places old things survive much longer. But it is also partly because English folk-music has not such extremely characteristic intervals as that of Scotland and Ireland that it has not been so successfully recorded. Still, we have no need to be ashamed of it. It is characteristic of the race—of the quiet reticence of our country districts—of the contented and patient and courageous folk, always ready to meet what chance shall bring with a cheery heart.

Moreover, it is worth remembering that the great composers of other countries have concentrated themselves upon their folk-music. The true test of style must lie in folk-music, for style is national. True style comes not