

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By Steven Blier

All NYFOS programs become a journey of discovery for me. But some journeys are more unpredictable than others. Programming *Brava Italia* took me into more uncharted areas than most recent concerts, and led to one surprise after another: songs in five languages, many styles, and a raft of composers whose music I had never played onstage.

No one who accompanies classical singers can remain a stranger to Italian vocal music for long; from the 24 *Early Italian Songs* which everyone is assigned when they are first studying voice, to the Verdi and Puccini arias all singers aspire to, Italian style virtually colonizes the vocal chords of every classically trained singer. But a large portion of Italy's non-operatic vocal music remains unknown to the general public. We are familiar with her Baroque music (thanks in great part to the efforts of Cecilia Bartoli), and we hear the *composizioni da camera* by bel canto giants Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, and Verdi with some regularity. Those ubiquitous Neapolitan songs work their wiles on us whether we want them to or not; and in the hands of great singers like Carlo Bergonzi or Renata Tebaldi, the lightweight salon pieces by Paolo Tosti can unfurl industrial-strength charms.

But Italy also has a repertoire of art song that began to emerge after the country was unified in 1871. Spurred on by many of the composers on tonight's program, the *liriche da camera* sought to rival the traditions of German *Lieder* and French *mélodies*, which were reaching great heights in *fin de siècle* Europe. Italian composers began to take pride in their country's history while seeking to explore the newest musical trends that were rocking the musical world to their north. But they met with an obstacle that they should have been able to predict: the preference of native singers for old-fashioned *cantilena* and for simple music with obvious audience appeal. Italian singers are more conditioned to the broad gestures of the opera house, and of the small subset who sang in recital, only a few had the musical curiosity to program the piano-and-voice tone poems of Pizzetti, Castelnuovo-Tedesco, and Alfano. In my experience, only Cesare Valletti and Renata Scotto began to make any serious exploration of the *lirica da camera*. Why bother, when the audience was satisfied with the simpler melodies of Donaudy and Luigi Denza?

Admittedly, finding the best Italian art songs takes a bit of dedication, and these subtle works will certainly never glean the bravos a singer could earn with a solid rendition of "Di quella pira" or "Un bel dì." But the musical rewards are great, and the delicacy of invention can be breathtaking. Tonight we'll sample Italian culture—music and poetry—as it bids an earthy farewell to the Romantic era and puts its own stamp on Modernism.

When I told one friend I was including Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) on tonight's offering, he murmured, "Well, it's hard for me to think of Busoni as *Italian*." That is because Busoni's mother was German, and he spent most of his adult life in Germany, basing himself in Berlin. Most of his famous works are in German (like his opera, *Doktor Faustus*), and his Leipzig education imbues his musical language at almost every turn. But Busoni was born in Tuscany, and he longed to reconcile his Italian and German heritages. In 1913, he accepted a job as the director of the Liceo di Rossini in Bologna and worked assiduously to elevate Italian musical culture, which was in serious need of overhaul. Ultimately, Italy was not quite ready for Busoni's brand of intellectual progressivism, and after two seasons the composer returned to Zurich and Berlin. Still, Busoni's passion for his fatherland remained integral to his psyche, and his vision of music as a liberation of the spirit had a great deal to do with his Latin nature. Busoni did write some lovely songs in Italian, but we chose a couple of German *Lieder* to represent him tonight: an early work, "Wer hat das erste Lied erdacht," which is infused with a Schubertian *bel canto*, and a song from his last years, "Zigeunerlied," which gives us a sense of this composer's unique sardonic edge.

Busoni may not have had the immediate galvanizing effect on Italian music that he desired, but his brief presence in Bologna ultimately helped coalesce the creative energies of many native composers who followed him. Notable among them was Ildebrando Pizzetti (1880-1968), who sustained an important career in the conservatories of Florence, Milan, and Rome. From these vantage points he was able to promote his musical ideal: a deep respect for Italy's musical roots, from Gregorian chant and the Florentine *camerata* to the music of the early Baroque era. Out of these sources he forged a modern idiom, neo-classicism filtered through a late-Romantic sensibility. His best songs have an understated elegance and a beautifully sustained arc. Pizzetti's effects are subtle and diaphanous—a sensuous use of time-honored church modes, culminating in gentle but deeply felt climaxes. He's a masterful songwriter.

Pizzetti built a conservative musical language out of his love of Italy's past. Luigi Dallapiccola (1904-1975), a true disciple of Busoni, delved enthusiastically into the new sounds of the twentieth century, especially the transparent delicacy of French impressionism, and the intense chromaticism and twelve-tone writing prevalent in Germany. It comes as no surprise that Dallapiccola was friends with Alban Berg; their music has much in common. What the modernist Dallapiccola shared with the classicist Pizzetti was a predilection for soft textures, a contemplative spirituality utterly at odds with the firecracker vehemence of Italy's *verismo* composers. Dallapiccola's music was also fueled by his strong anti-Fascism, most clearly seen in his political opera *Il prigioniero*, a protest against the cruelties of totalitarianism. Dallapiccola once wrote, "If one side of my nature demanded tragedy, the other attempted an escape towards serenity." In the *Quattro liriche di Antonio Machado* we can sample both the passion and the other-worldly contemplation of this unique composer.

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936) also fell under the sway of Ferruccio Busoni—not during the latter's brief stay in Bologna, but during his years in Berlin. Because of his proficiency as a violinist, Respighi was able to travel with Italian orchestras, enabling him to study in Russia with Rimsky-Korsakov, and then in Germany, where both Busoni and Max Bruch made a deep impression on the young man. He had his greatest early successes in opera, but today he's mostly remembered for his symphonic works like *The Pines of Rome*, in which one can hear just how much he learned from Rimsky about orchestral color. He was a prolific songwriter as well—more than sixty works for solo voice. Singers are inclined to program his languorous early songs, which are graceful and tonal. Pieces like "Invito alla danza" fall easily on the ear and are a delight to

sing. But Respighi's later songs inhabit a denser, more complex musical landscape, filled with polytonality, chromaticism, and strong rhythmic energy. We'll hear two examples of this later style, drawn from his cycle *Deità silvane*, "I Fauni" and "Musica in horto." In these songs he uses the piano like an orchestra, brimming with evocative sonorities and unusual textures.

While Franco Alfano (1876-1954) was not a direct disciple of Busoni, their paths ran parallel courses: Alfano also studied in Germany, and began his career as a pianist in Berlin. Later on, in 1918, he became director of the Bologna Conservatory where Busoni had recently spent two frustrating seasons. During his lifetime, Alfano's works were well received, especially his operas *Resurrezione* and *La leggenda di Sakiuntala*. Nowadays, of course, he is most remembered (not always fondly) as the man who "tacked an ending" onto Puccini's final, unfinished opera *Turandot*. His true contribution to Italian music was his devotion to improving the orchestral playing in his country. Like Busoni, he scored his operas using symphonic principles, relying on counterpoint and more complex textures than had been heard in the popular works of Mascagni or Giordano. Sometimes his writing is strikingly evocative; sometimes it is bloated and unfocused. But Alfano did make a lasting contribution to the orchestral possibilities of Italian opera. He devoted his talents to the emerging field of Italian art song as well, with over fifty *liriche*. More than half of them are set to poems by the Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore, who enjoyed tremendous popularity in the first half of the twentieth century. Tagore's rapt spirituality proved fertile ground for Alfano.

Among the most fascinating of tonight's composers is Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1895-1968). Born in Florence of Jewish parents, he studied composition with Ildebrando Pizzetti. In 1939, when it became too dangerous for Jewish families to stay in Italy, Castelnuovo-Tedesco fled to the United States—living first in Larchmont, and relocating soon after to Los Angeles. There he became an American citizen and accepted a position at the Los Angeles Conservatory. As a Los Angeles resident, he did what came naturally: he wrote film scores, though often under a pseudonym. He was chosen by the great director René Clair for the soundtracks of three of his movies, including *And Then There Were None*. Castelnuovo-Tedesco also became the musical mentor of many of America's best-known film composers and arrangers, including Henry Mancini, André Previn, Nelson Riddle, and John Williams. His passions were multifarious: the works of Shakespeare, including an opera (*The Merchant of Venice*) and thirty-three songs; Jewish music, including a beautiful set of Sephardic melodies and several biblical oratorios; and Tuscan folk poetry. He also wrote art songs in English and orchestral works in celebration of his adopted homeland. Much of his music remains unpublished. Judging from what I have heard, he is an artist who deserves to be celebrated and heard with greater frequency.

Busoni had an Italian father and a German mother; Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari (1876-1948) reversed the equation, with a German father and an Italian mother. Though Wolf-Ferrari may have lacked Busoni's consummate intellect and musical vision, he too grappled with his dual nature, half Teutonic, half Latin. Some of his music, particularly his chamber music, is clearly born out of German traditions reaching back to Brahms and Bach. Other works, like his comedies *Il segreto di Susanna* and *I quattro rusteghi*, emerge from the lineage of classic Italian *opera buffa*. His art songs also come in two colors: muddy grey-brown (German) and designer tangerine (Italian). The turgid quality of Wolf-Ferrari's *Lieder* don't have much appeal for me, but his Italian songs—brief settings of Tuscan folk poetry called *Rispetti*—are often delightful. In just a few pages he can evoke Italian sunshine, optimism, and the promise of a new romance.

It would be a mistake to leave out a few examples of pure *cantilena* in tonight's Italian songbook. Beautiful vocal melody is Italy's great gift to the musical world. In this spirit, we offer songs by Licinio Refice (1883-1954), Ruggiero Leoncavallo (1857-1919), and Alfredo Catalani (1854-1893). Refice devoted most of his creative life to church music; his most famous work is probably the 1923 oratorio *Cecilia*, popularized first by its creator Claudio Muzio, and later by the two great Renatas, Tebaldi and Scotto. Refice wrote "Ombra di nube" for Muzio, whose emotional depth and eloquence seem to have become part of the fabric of Refice's song. Leoncavallo and Catalani don't need much introduction to music lovers, who have been known to hum along with arias from *I pagliacci* ("Ridi, Pagliaccio!") and *La Wally* ("Ebben, ne andrò lontana," used to great effect in the movie *Diva*). All three men wrote a smattering of songs, the best of which highlight the inestimable value of a good tune.

We're complementing the music of Italian-born composers with a smorgasbord of songs by Italian-American musicians. Each of them has his own distinctive voice—after all, America is a melting pot of many different musical styles. But heard in the context of the music of their compatriots the inherent Latin warmth of their songs comes through. Certainly this is true of New York-born Norman Dello Joio (b. 1913), who was counseled by his teacher, Paul Hindemith, to stay true to the natural lyricism of his musical gift. Dello Joio grew up listening to Italian opera and the popular music of the jazz age; he also was indoctrinated into Catholic church music by his uncle, Pietro Yon, who gave him organ lessons. These early influences remained the essential elements of Dello Joio's composition throughout his life. The piano voicing in "There is a lady sweet and kind" reminds me of liturgical modes, while the grace of the melody would have suited George Gershwin just fine. Dello Joio wrote the song in 1948, and dedicated it to his wife; it became a specialty of the beloved Italian tenor Cesare Valletti.

Dominick Argento (b. 1927) was awakened to his muse when he heard George Gershwin's music in his childhood. His parents were Sicilian immigrants, but his music is that of a citizen of the world, freely mixing many sounds and styles. He had many American musical mentors, including Alan Hovhaness and Hugo Weisgall, but his studies eventually led him to Florence, where he worked with Luigi Dallapiccola. Argento's early connection to that city has remained a deep anchor for him during his life. Two Guggenheim Fellowships brought him back there, and since the mid-1960s he has spent most of his summers composing in Florence. Italy has also remained a *locus classicus* for many of his compositions—the song cycle *Casa Guidi*, and the operas *Casanova's Homecoming*, *The Dream of Valentino*, and *The Aspern Papers*. Argento is familiar to recital audiences because of an imposing series of song cycles (*The Andree Expedition*, *The Diaries of Virginia Woolf*); his *Elizabethan Songs* are a perennial favorite, Argento at his most charming.

How do you like your John Corigliano (b.1938): angry (Symphony # 1, "Of Rage and Remembrance"), popular (the soundtrack for the movie *The Red Violin*), playful (Act One of his opera *The Ghosts of Versailles*), brooding (Act Two of his

opera *The Ghosts of Versailles*)? There are still more John Coriglianos for that list—the witty cabaret song composer, in partnership with his companion Mark Adamo; the far-out experimenter who wrote *The Pied Piper Fantasy* for flute and orchestra; the aleatoric note-cruncher who composed the score for *Altered States*. Clearly, Corigliano's music runs the gamut, but in the midst of even the most complicated passages there often is a sweet lyricism waiting in the wings. That lyricism is laid bare in the beautiful duet from *Ghosts*, one of my favorite modern operas. Continuing the story of *The Marriage of Figaro*, Corigliano's librettist, William M. Hoffmann, spins the audience through past and future, earthly misery and heavenly bliss. Corigliano is the right man for the job, with music that morphs from frothy comedy to deepest tragedy to pure fantasy.

Brooklyn-born John Musto (b. 1954) has been a close friend for over two decades. It has been very gratifying to watch his steady progression as a composer. Like many classical musicians, he burst onto the scene with small-scale works: some exquisite piano rags and a couple of song cycles (*Shadow of the Blues* and *Recuerdo*) that became instant classics. He wrote the latter for William Sharp and me in 1987 when we took first place in the Carnegie Hall Competition. Soon everyone was including John's songs on their programs, and my Juilliard students would show up asking if they could coach "the Musto" with me. (Composers know they have made it when people begin to attach a definite article to their names.) John gradually moved into larger forms, including some notable chamber works and orchestral song cycles, a very successful first opera, *Volpone* (hailed as a work of genius by the Washington Post), and a brilliant piano concerto that he premiered last summer at Caramoor under the baton of Michael Barrett. John's early musical influences are not very different from those of Norman Dello Joio and Dominick Argento: American popular song and Italian music of all kinds, from "Mambo Italiano" to *Cavalleria rusticana*, plus a ravenous appetite for the entire classical canon. His music melds the lyricism of Italian song with the ache of blues and ragtime, in tandem with an abiding passion for counterpoint and a broad range of musical structures. I often think John's musical personality is an expression of three things: his world-class skill as a virtuoso pianist, which lends special brilliance and color (and unusual technical challenges) to his keyboard writing; his deep understanding of singing and vocal repertoire, fostered by his marriage to the gifted soprano Amy Burton; and his unique intelligence and sense of humor. John is simply one of the smartest guys I know, a devastating mimic, and a great heart. Playing his music is a joy—no matter how daunting its challenges.

It's a pleasure to welcome Tom Cipullo (b. 1960) back to NYFOS. We featured the music of this Long Island native in our early days at the Greenwich House Music School. Since then Cipullo has gone on to become a gentle, pervasive force in contemporary song, commissioned by everyone from Mirror Visions (who gave us tonight's song, *The Dogwoods*) to I Cantori di New York, Joy in Singing, and Sequitur. He is a founding member of Friends and Enemies of New Music, an organization that has presented over sixty concerts featuring the music of more than 175 American composers. Cipullo's deep love of poetry and his easy lyricism have created a lovely canon of art songs. He's also at work on an opera, *Glory Denied*, which was recently workshopped in New York to great effect on the series Vox 2004: Showcasing American Composers. Cipullo can draw the listener into a unique, elegiac world with his subtle command of melody and texture, but he's also capable of being tough and confrontational when he needs to be. He also finds some of our best titles for modern American song; who could resist a piece called "*Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House*"?

If you're wondering, "Who is Harry Warren, and what in God's name is he doing on this program?," you're not alone. The great Brooklyn-born songwriter was cursed throughout his life with an odd anonymity. "Even my friends don't know who I am," he used to say. Yet his music has virtually become part of the DNA of almost every American who has ever gone to the movies: "I Only Have Eyes For You," "Chattanooga Choo-Choo," "Lullaby of Broadway," "Jeepers Creepers," and the entire repertoire of Carmen Miranda came from the fertile imagination of this self-taught composer. His parents were Italian immigrants; it was his sisters who changed his original name, Salvatore Guaragna, to the American-sounding Harry Warren when he started school. Warren quickly went from humble song plugger to sought-after hit songwriter during the 1920s. On Broadway, Fanny Brice, Al Jolson, and Ed Wynn were all clamoring for his songs. Soon Hollywood heard about this young man and beckoned him out west to write for the talkies, the latest innovation to revolutionize the film industry. Warren's breakthrough came early, with Busby Berkeley's *42nd Street* in 1932. Decades of movie success followed, along with Academy Awards and records that sold by the millions. But Hollywood has never been as generous to its composers as Broadway, and Harry Warren never became a household name like Gershwin, Berlin, or Porter. Warren gave himself his own nickname—"Harry Who." Even when Warren finally made it back to Broadway in the early 1970s with the stage production of *42nd Street*, his name was not listed on the poster: that honor went to the producer, David Merrick, who cruelly saw to it that "Harry Who" would retain his relative anonymity until his death. Song mavens, however, have long appreciated this wonderful composer whose humor and lyricism link him to his Italian-American colleagues Musto, Corigliano, Cipullo, and Dello Joio.

Starting this program, I thought I'd be in for an evening of high drama and broad melody. We're not short on either of those things. But the breadth and variety of Italian culture was a lovely discovery: sexy twelve-tone music, delicate impressionism, broad tone poems, and a few German *Lieder* became welcome companions for the expected "arias and barcarolles." Brava Italia indeed!