

Introduction

There are several possible sets of cultural icons with which a country can represent itself and be pictured by those observing it from the outside. Italy is a case in point: sets such as Venice-Florence-Rome, spaghetti-pizza-cappuccino, Michelangelo-Raphael-Leonardo (and many other less flattering triplets) are constituting elements of how we Italians perceive ourselves and how we are seen by citizens of other countries.

A quadruplet which certainly counts among those not to be ashamed of is Dante-Petrarch-Pergolesi-Verdi, i.e. cultural icons who have contributed to the creation of universal languages which are part of the heritage of humankind. Dante's *Commedia* has influenced innumerable other artistic and cultural creations, not only in the literary sphere: the poetry of William Blake or Th. S. Eliot, to name but two, is admittedly indebted to Dante, but references to the *Commedia* are found in such diverse fields as Rodin's sculptures or computer games.

Petrarch, and the legion of imitators of his poetry who took inspiration from his verses from the sixteenth century onwards, has possibly influenced the very conception of love, of courting and of its language, not only in Italy but throughout Europe.

The music of Pergolesi, though possibly less known outside the circle of classical music lovers, has equally been very influential for the creation of the language of opera buffa, a genre which took

Europe by storm during the eighteenth century and later, though obviously in different and constantly-evolving shapes.

Building upon the international spread of Italian opera, Giuseppe Verdi brought it to an even higher degree of popularity: some of his characters, of his arias and tunes are so widely known, even in abstraction from their context, that they have really reached all layers of popular culture.

For these reasons, I decided to elect these iconic figures as the protagonists of four case-studies, whereby their influence on classical music and culture is seen within a theological perspective. Dante's *Commedia*, as is well known, is a masterly artistic interpretation of a deep theological thought, whose framework is represented by the speculations of another great Italian thinker, Thomas Aquinas. Petrarch lent his language of love to the mystic and devotional poetry of entire generations, and his characteristic depiction of love as a paradoxical combination of joy and pain, pleasure and grief, was particularly apt for expressing a mystical desire for God.

Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* is one of the greatest masterpieces of classical music, and here too his contribution to the creation of a musical language of the affects should not be underestimated. But it is also a deeply moving contemplation of Mary's grief and, through this, of Christ's redeeming cross; it counts therefore as one of the highpoints of Christian music of all eras.

Verdi composed some unforgettable works in the sacred sphere in turn (the *Requiem* to name but one); however, the presence of transcendence in his output is by no means limited by the label of "sacred", and some memorable moments of prayer and contemplation are found in several of his greatest operas: his *Va', pensiero* is one of them.

The aim of this book is therefore to gather four case-studies in which the relationship between faith and music, in dialogue with Italian culture, is analysed and discussed. Music, of course, transcends the boundaries of language and also those of religion, though it is

not unrelated to culture and faith. And on two occasions, indeed, we will see how another of the greatest composers of all times, Johann Sebastian Bach, entered into a fruitful dialogue with styles and perspectives rather different from his own, but whose artistic value and spiritual content encouraged and fostered his own creative view.

Through the language of music, Petrarch's exquisite Italian poetry became a cultural framework for people living in other contexts and at different times; through music, a quintessentially Catholic prayer such as the *Stabat Mater* touched and moved to devotion Christians of other confessions, at a time when the ecumenical dialogue was not imaginable; music was the language which allowed Dante to signify a transcendence which no words could describe; and through music, the deepest feelings of thousands of exiled people, who lived the experience of persecution and ethnic cleansing, could find a form of expression. At the heart of one of the great tragedies of the twentieth-century, in the aftermath of World War II, Verdi's musical prayer gave voice to the grief of people who lost their homes, their land, their friends and their relatives, and channelled their feelings in such a fashion that they could eventually find a meaning in their experience of loss.

This book, I hope, will therefore accompany its readers in the discovery of some lesser-known stories and histories, at times narrated by music itself, at times focused on music; it will possibly also disclose some perspectives on Italian culture which could otherwise remain unnoticed; but it also aims at going beyond both Italian culture and music itself, to reach the universal plane where the infinite is contemplated. In my personal experience, the greatest works of art have frequently led me, through amazement, to prayer; in particular, Bach has gradually become a spiritual mentor for my itinerary as a Christian musician. Going beyond erudition, beyond academia and beyond data, true knowledge is attained when not only the intellect, but also the spirit and the heart are open; and all of the works discussed in the following pages are such masterpieces that

they will continue for centuries to direct our gaze toward a contemplative dimension.

This explains the choice of this book's title, whose theological meaning and significance will be further illustrated in Chapter Four: music is seen as an instrument for communicating and revealing truth, for letting the truth shine in its beauty and goodness, for allowing it to amaze, fascinate and attract us to God.

For this reason, I warmly invite my readers to take advantage of the multimedia section of this book, which will allow them to experience in its splendid aural reality the deep spiritual insight of the musical works under discussion. For me, these pieces are not only an object of study and research, but first and foremost artistic gateways to transcendence; moreover, they are frequently bound to my personal history and to those of my closest relatives. Thus, I wish to dedicate the pages which will follow to my mother and her deceased parents, who experienced the exile of the Istrian people, and to my brother and my sister-in-law, for whose wedding we recorded Bach's Cantata BWV 140. I hope that these works will soon become part of the lives of all who will read this book, as these pieces are an insuppressible part of mine.

Abbreviations and remarks

Abbreviations:

Inf. "Inferno", from Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*.

LW Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 65 volumes (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-1993).

Par. "Paradiso", from Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*.

PG Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Graeca* (Paris: 1857-1866).

PL Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina* (Paris: 1857-1864).

Purg. “Purgatorio”, from Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia*.
WA Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: American Edition*, 55 volumes
(St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986).

Remarks:

Throughout this book, where not otherwise indicated, Biblical quotes are taken from the New International Version.

A presentation about Verdi’s *Va’, pensiero* and the Istrian exiles can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/pQzHIP4JMz4> (it includes a fragment from a sung performance of the *Va’, pensiero* during a meeting of the Istrian exiles).

Our performance (recorded on November 17-18th, 2012 by Alessandro Cardinale) of Bach’s Cantata BWV 140 (see Chapter Four) can be listened to at [http://piu.effata.it/libri/9788874029006/lamore-sa-attendere/ file/cantatafinale.mp3](http://piu.effata.it/libri/9788874029006/lamore-sa-attendere/file/cantatafinale.mp3).

The individual movements can be found at:

BWV 140/1 – [http://piu.effata.it/libri/9788874029006/lamore-sa-attendere/ file/19-Wachet-auf-ruft-uns-die-Stimme.mp3](http://piu.effata.it/libri/9788874029006/lamore-sa-attendere/file/19-Wachet-auf-ruft-uns-die-Stimme.mp3)

BWV 140/2 and 3 – [http://piu.effata.it/libri/9788874029006/lamore-sa-attendere/ file/20-Er-kommt.mp3](http://piu.effata.it/libri/9788874029006/lamore-sa-attendere/file/20-Er-kommt.mp3)

BWV 140/4 – [http://piu.effata.it/libri/9788874029006/lamore-sa-attendere/ file/23-Zion-hort-die-wachter-singen.mp3](http://piu.effata.it/libri/9788874029006/lamore-sa-attendere/file/23-Zion-hort-die-wachter-singen.mp3)

BWV 140/5 and 6 – [http://piu.effata.it/libri/9788874029006/lamore-sa-attendere/ file/24-so-grh-herein-zu-mir.mp3](http://piu.effata.it/libri/9788874029006/lamore-sa-attendere/file/24-so-grh-herein-zu-mir.mp3)

BWV 140/7 – [http://piu.effata.it/libri/9788874029006/lamore-sa-attendere/ file/25-gloria-sei-dir-gesungen.mp3](http://piu.effata.it/libri/9788874029006/lamore-sa-attendere/file/25-gloria-sei-dir-gesungen.mp3)

Its performers are:

Rossella Giacchero, soprano

Massimo Lombardi, tenor

Enrico Bava, bass

Giovanni Bertoglio, solo violin (n. 3)

Donatella Pedico, solo oboe (n. 6)

Eufoné Chamber Choir – Choirmaster Alessandro Ruo Rui

Sursum Corda Chamber Orchestra

conducted by Chiara Bertoglio

Chorale BWV 140/4, which Bach had transcribed for the organ as BWV 645, can be also listened to in Ferruccio Busoni's piano transcription at [http://hz.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/b/bc/IMSLP297323-PMLP18790-Bach N. 1.mp3](http://hz.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/b/bc/IMSLP297323-PMLP18790-Bach_N.1.mp3) in my own performance.