

THE JOY OF THE SOUND

Venetian school from '500 to today

by Walter Marzilli

In occasion of *Europa Cantat* assembly in Venice in 2004, *Coro Giovanile Italiano*, conducted by Filippo Maria Bressan, presented an interesting project somewhere between “nova et vetera”, an articulated journey through the music of Venetian school and the suggestions that it evokes in new composers. Today, the live recording of this great event sees the light, keeping a promise once made: here it comes the first CD *Choraliter*, a further touchable commitment for choral music divulgation and, we hope, an appreciated gift for all our faithful readers.

The idea of the concert in Venice: ordering poly-choral and pluri-vocal compositions to be approached to the ancient ones from Venetian school. The structure: creating an internal division of the songs in three nucleus, *Contemplantes*, *Adorantes*, *Jubilantes Te*. Everything with the precious intervention of the organ played by Gaetano Magarelli and Roberto Loreggian, that wisely completes the picture by the most pertinent language and touch on the key. I would not hesitate to describe by this definition Filippo Maria Bressan's attitude and of his *Coro Giovanile Italiano*, the relevance of the vocal sound, the maturity of the phrasing and the depth of the extension: *the joy of the sound*. The ancient vocal scores by Claudio Monteverdi and Giovanni Gabrieli are given back to us with a bright look. The brave and amused phrasing are very fascinating. The voice, never still, gives the sound a liveliness that can hardly be heard in other discographic situations. In this record, Venetian school shows all its expressive potentialities and all the splendor of its melodic evolutions, bolder and more daring than the ones of the contemporary Roman school. The union between ancient and modern is particularly successful, because it is possible to recognize in current compositions trucks of the praxis, wisely mentioned. You just need to listen to *Tristis est anima mea* by Elena Camoletto and you can observe the elegant melodic cadency typical from '500 assigned to the first choir, to which the second one replies by imitation. Very meaningful, moreover, the incipit of the second choir that immediately puts the sound atmosphere within a responsory by Venetian school from the late Renaissance. The most chromatic and accidental passages are generally assigned to the first choir: an intelligent bi-fronted Janus who looks towards the future and back to the past in a coherent way.

It is possible, indeed, to write something extremely modern even through a reinterpretation of a very ancient language, such as *modality*. The melodic proceeding initially leans on a merely diatonic asset and this characteristic persists for the whole duration of the record. Moreover, the same initial theme that permeates and pervades the whole composition from top to bottom, like a leit-motiv. This connection with modality is much more than a quotation. We can imagine that the author wanted to link his inspiration to the style of previous music in a way or another. Despite this affected cultured setting, Zuccante's track is one of the most modern in the collection.

Giovanni Bonato purposes an exuberant approach to the choral music, with an easygoing, disinhibited vision, free from prejudices from several points of view (graphic, formal, stylistic and substantial), though without getting to an exasperated avant-garde situation. Apart from the continuously interrupted writing, the consequent fragmentation of the literary text, the peculiar layout, the attention to the reverberation due to the order of the entries, in addition to the spatialization of the choir expressively requested by the author, we want to give evidence to some tuned glasses, played by the singers through the friction of the finger on the rim. A fascinating coup de théâtre, coherent with the modern language and not useless, that contributes to improve the suggestion of the track.

Piero Caraba uses the dissonance of the harmonic interlude with a great effectiveness, inserting it provocatively, just in occasion of the most silken words (*amabilis, dulcis, pie, bone...*) getting so a surprising, refined softness. Always in perfect balance between the chastity of the ancient *lauda* and the radiant splendor of some extremely modern passages, Caraba's track stands on a deeply firm and mature structure, which allows the author to touch very different atmospheres, passing from one to

another with long breaks but without disturbing the rich homogeneity of the composition. Remarkable the sense of rhythmic fleetingness that Giuseppe Mignemi manages to get inside his track: thanks to very frequent changes of timing, the composer makes the phrasing and the discursive themes gradient and incorporeal, just as Lord's Spirit flows fluently and expands itself in the universe. Everything materializes and realizes in the resolute declarations that conclude the different phrases. His track is appreciable for the brilliance of some themes, for the elegance of some passages and for the greatness of the twelve voices.

All the composers show a relevant and careful attention to the voices. Each of them displayed the voices through all their rich sound facets, taking advantage of their colors, their charm and their possibilities, without preclusions and without violating their natural limits. In the five tracks, the sopranos (the ones who commonly have to reach the highest notes) touch only twice the la over the stave -and very quickly.

Moreover, it should be underlined how none of the five composers felt the need of affirming their own modernity through onomatopoeic and alliterative products, nor anything that reminded phonetic studies so fashionable since a few years. Although some passages provided a greedy occasion to introduce phonetic experimentalism, we are thankful to the composers who avoided them.

If on the one hand the authors might have dared something more on the experimental field, on the other hand, the balance between ancient and modern could mitigate extremisms, collecting the compositions within a viable vocal territory, with no absurd solutions. It does not make sense to look for abstruseness, suspected introspections, mental lucubrations: there are none. Yet, the tracks are not easy, the program is almost impossible to be faced by an amateur choir, apart from the high number of necessary voices. However, we should remember that this music did not have to be sung by any choir, but by Coro Giovanile Italiano.

Keeping and promoting. An apparent contradiction due to a secular project with no direct nor aware interest in holy music, that found itself to embody the main aim of holy music in the most effective way: keeping the heritage of the past and promoting the creation of new music.

CHORALITER

CUM GRANO SALIS

Interview with Filippo Maria Bressan

by Sandro Bergamo

In 2004 there were both one of the first stages of Coro Giovanile Italiano and the European baptism of the choir that sang at the Venetian Assembly of *Europa Cantat*. Where does the idea to dedicate it to Venice school come from?

Everything was born from the idea to suggest the choir an uncommon, important and difficult repertoire worth of the choral composition program studied at the atelier. Thinking about the great choral tradition of the past, it was obvious the choice between the two main schools: the Venice one and the Naples one; the choice of the Venetian school sounded more suitable to the juvenile choir in order to study more deeply the repertoire for double choir typical of this school. The coincidence of *EuropaCantat's* assembly rendered the choice even more appropriate.

Gabrieli and Monteverdi next to the new compositions by Italian living musicians: different styles and sonorities that certainly must have given some problems more in the study and in the execution.

Properly managing the rehearsal and the combination of the songs day by day, there were not many problems. It is true that the technique in studying contemporary music is completely different from that of ancient music, but is also true that the ductility of the singers allowed a serene and concentrated study.

How did the choir singers and the public react to this combination?

The singers' reaction was of curiosity and surprise time by time. I must admit that the public too showed to be pleased by the new compositions. Contemporary music is a fundamental resource and it is the expression of our times. Making the right distinctions, it is not true that contemporary music is so hard to be learnt, understood and listened to: everything stands in choosing the right composition according to the group who has to perform, to the public and to the global program of the concert, hopefully *cum grano salis*...

If you just look at some Italian and international challenges, you will realize, from the number of the songs and from the unsatisfactory performances, how Renaissance polyphony is more and more ignored by the amateur choirs, even if they had made of it one of their pilasters for decades, at least in Italy. Where does this disaffection come from?

I think it depends on the fact that lately musicology and philology have been spreading the knowledge that ancient music was played only by small vocal groups and not by numerous choirs, so that, already eliminated the madrigals since twenty years, there is common fear to get into philological critics, often exaggerated, also regarding the whole choral music. I would advise to leave apart the rigid assumptions due to a museum-like attitude in front of the musical execution which interests the interpreters and the interpretation, but to join Renaissance music every time it is possible (with the necessary stylistic awareness), because it is a source of never ending musical pleasure and extremely educative.

In your work experience there are a lot of contacts with the international scene -as conductor of the World Youth Choir and, among your last commitments, the workshop you manage in Utrecht, within *Europa Cantat 2009*, on the mass for double choir by Martin. From a European point of view how would you judge the situation in Italy, particularly respect to youth choirs?

Recently Italy has grown a lot: there are plenty of good choirs, the level of the singers is much higher; a stronger discipline and a certain awareness of "being choir" in an educative and social sense were added to a mere passion for music. To sum up, we are much more competitive. The level of the conductors has improved as well, especially in the youngest generation, as a result of various courses all around Italy thanks to the enthusiasm of new generations, powerful technologies, travels and communication, which allow fast exchanges and quick information.

We Italians have a taste for a warmer and more fascinating vocalicity that other countries dream to have, but this taste is sometimes difficult to manage. We don't have that social discipline of staying together yet (thus of singing together), which is on the contrary a prerogative of many other countries.

For what deals with young choirs, unfortunately I have to note that Italy suffers from a big disadvantage, particularly due to the lack of musical education in schools. We had a very bad reformation of the school and the government is not sensitive to considerate the culture of the youth as a resource that should be developed and supported as expression of Italy, thus of future art.

Abroad young people compete to join a choir, supported by every public and private structures, because they know they can find there training, education, culture, socialization, travels, important experiences... Conductors push their singers to live such experiences since they are aware that each artist's maturation can grow the whole choir. In Italy, conductors are afraid to lose their singers and they are worried that singers become big-headed and unbalance the choir. To sum up, they are afraid and they hide everything. On the other hand, pupils from conservatories are advised against choirs by their teachers who fear they might ruin their voices (!?!?!), so they do not dare, losing a great opportunity. We should really change our mentality, and in a hurry...

In your work as a conductor you lived and still live the dimension of both professional and amateur choirs. Are they opposed, complementary, linked?

I would say opposed. As I could learn from Jurgen Jürgens when I was his assistant, and on the basis of my own experience, they are completely different. Singers' behaviors, motivations and dynamics are totally different. Professional singers follow their agenda and make their own accounts; an amateur only sings for passion and after work and family commitments. A professional singer's availability mostly depends on payment and time-table. Enthusiasm can be very similar, but the

atmosphere is not. For instance, as Jurgen also used to say, when money starts to circulate inside a choir, there its ruin starts as well. An amateur choir joins the pleasure of making music together and everyone gives their best spontaneously, not because they have signed a contract or they have passed an audition. On the contrary, in a professional choir, despite a shared respect for the rules of collaboration, love for music and desire of a highest performing level, every singer knows that there is a contract to respect: absences must be justified, cut from the payment, etc.

Interweaving these two different kinds of choir is very harmful, unless it is a specific training project (but why? With which aim?).

Too often you find inner tensions and questionable results within amateur groups that employ professional singers in order to lead an ambitious, difficult program to its end decently: this decisions are usually taken by a conceited conductor or an organizer without scruples. This contamination dissatisfy everybody: professional singers, forced to sing among people seldom at their level, and amateurs who realize that they could not carry out the project autonomously and well. This is also true for those concerts and contests, in which choirs participate knowing they could not succeed by themselves (nor win a prize...).

I've been trying to fight these incorrectness and contamination for a long time, because, in addition to the rest, the presence of hybrid cheap groups steal work to the professional ones and perverts the purity and the beauty of amateur choirs.

Do not let the virus of vanity and excessive, unhealthy ambition infect you! Be true to your vocation whatever it is, professional or amateur, but pure and lasting.