

# Lorenzo Perosi's Mystery, Celebrating a great master 60 years after his death

*by Aurelio Porfiri, composer, conductor, writer and educator*

The world of Church Music has seen several turning points between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most readers will probably know of the reforms following the Second Vatican Council that have deeply affected the music we hear in Catholic churches. But indeed the first turning point was on November 22, 1903. On that day Pope Pius X issued a Motu Proprio (meaning a document done on his own initiative, without going through the offices of the curia).

This Motu Proprio was concerned specifically with Sacred Music, and had the intention of reforming the practice of Church Music by implementing a “purification” from the strong influence of the opera style in the temple of God: *“It is with real satisfaction that We acknowledge the large amount of good that has been effected in this respect during the last decade in this Our fostering city of Rome, and in many churches in Our country, but in a more especial way among some nations in which illustrious men, full of zeal for the worship of God, have, with the approval of the Holy See and under the direction of the Bishops, united in flourishing Societies and restored sacred music to the fullest honor in all their churches and chapels. Still the good work that has been done is very far indeed from being common to all, and when We consult Our own personal experience and take into account the great number of complaints that have reached Us during the*

*short time that has elapsed since it pleased the Lord to elevate Our humility to the supreme summit of the Roman Pontificate, We consider it Our first duty, without further delay, to raise Our voice at once in reproof and condemnation of all that is seen to be out of harmony with the right rule above indicated, in the functions of public worship and in the performance of the ecclesiastical offices. Filled as We are with a most ardent desire to see the true Christian spirit flourish in every respect and be preserved by all the faithful, We deem it necessary to provide before anything else for the sanctity and dignity of the temple, in which the faithful assemble for no other object than that of acquiring this spirit from its foremost and indispensable font, which is the active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church. And it is vain to hope that the blessing of heaven will descend abundantly upon us, when our homage to the Most High, instead of ascending in the odor of sweetness, puts into the hand of the Lord the scourges wherewith of old the Divine Redeemer drove the unworthy profaners from the Temple”.*

Despite the somewhat diplomatic words of the Pontiff, the theatrical style had entered the repertoires of countless organists and choirs and so the task of restoring authentic Church Music (whose supreme models are the Gregorian Chant and Renaissance Polyphony), despite the help of men of the (Caecilian) societies, would not be an easy one. The Pope certainly needed a man who would help to renew the repertoire, offering those choirs that would struggle with Chant or the complex polyphony of Palestrina, something more accessible but still in tune with the dignity of the Temple. Or even offering to good choirs some modern compositions that are not unworthy of those of ancient times.



Pio X, the Pope who issued  
the Motu Proprio

When Pope Pius X was still the Patriarch of Venice, his Choir Master was a young priest whom, in 1898, he would suggest for the position of Choir Master in the Sistine Chapel Choir. This very talented man, who would encounter the Patriarch again at the time of his accession to the Pontificate, was Lorenzo Perosi. He was born in Tortona (Northern Italy) in 1872. His father, a Choir Master himself, gave him his first musical instruction. He then studied at the Milan Conservatory and at the Sacred Music school in Regensburg (with the famous teacher Franz Xavier Haberl).

From a very young age he had felt the necessity for the reform in Church Music and he would go on to contribute to this aim with his own compositions. He also became a priest in 1894. After serving with some choirs (among these the famous choir in Saint Mark in Venice), in 1898 he was called to be Vice Master at the Sistine Chapel in Rome. In 1902 he became the Master. He held this position until 1956, the year of his death, but not without big struggles, the main one being his mental disorders that made him sometimes unable to perform his duties properly. Certainly he was, in his time, hugely popular, and indeed his music entered the repertoires of countless churches around the world. Still today his music is

widely performed by choirs internationally. He was a great composer of Oratorios (*Il Natale del Redentore*, *La Risurrezione di Cristo*, *Transitus Animae*, *L'Entrata di Cristo in Gerusalemme* etc.) that gave him a huge following among singers, organists and choir conductors. But certainly, besides the Oratorios, the liturgical music was the key to his success. Masses, Motets, Responsories and countless compositions serving the Catholic liturgy, these compositions gave him a status in Church Music that even today is almost unparalleled.



A young Lorenzo  
Perosi

Dr. Michael Dubiaga Jr. remembered him in an essay in the journal *Seattle Catholic* (November 30 2005): "Lorenzo Perosi was a youthful musical prodigy whose remarkable talents and personal piety brought rapid advancement at an early age. Known and respected throughout Europe, Don Perosi was frequently sought out by musicians traveling to Rome. Of his multi-dimensional activities, his prolific compositions are remembered today by enthusiasts from many countries. His output seems staggering – more than a dozen oratorios for soloists, choir and orchestra, perhaps thirty Masses, hundreds of motets, psalms and hymns, orchestral suites, concertos for violin, piano and clarinet, dozens of string trios, quartets

*and quintets, and sundry occasional pieces as well. He maintained a multilingual correspondence throughout his life, which has been preserved in the Vatican Library. Few individuals have had as great an influence on the course of Catholic sacred music in the first half of the twentieth century".*

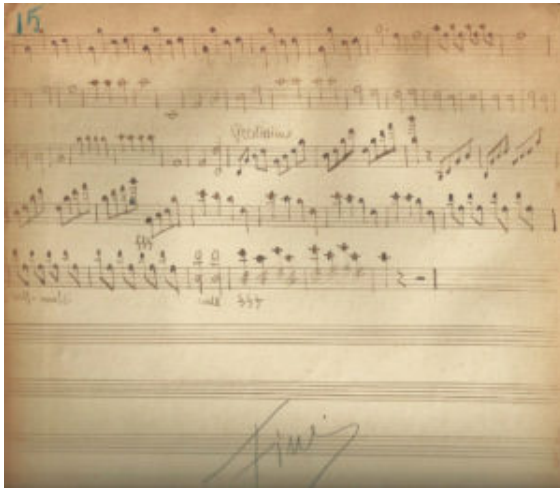
So, what was the secret of his success? Why do I refer to him as a mystery? Indeed his detractors notice an excessive simplification of musical means in some of his pieces, accusing him of not being technically up to the standard required. This, according to his detractors, would lead to a decline in the necessary "goodness of form" (as requested by St. Pius X, *Motu Proprio*) introducing elements of banality in the sacred realms of Liturgical music. Some of this may be true. It is also true that he was intending, as noticed before, also to serve choirs that were not advanced. But the danger denounced by his detractors had a real dimension, because his many imitators started to produce similar compositions but without the inspiration that is present in the Perosi's works. This was a mystery for me, in my many contacts with the music of this Master: in his music there is a mysterious quality that, in the end, "saves the day". You feel that even if the technique is not always as it should be, everything is supported by a sort of "spiritual magic" that makes his music full of a prayerful atmosphere. If we think of the simple motets like *Ave Maria*, *Iubilate Deo*, *Ecce Panis Angelorum* and many others, we cannot avoid being struck by their simple beauty and huge effectiveness. Anyone who wants to try something more challenging, besides the hugely popular Masses (*Prima Pontificalis*, *Secunda Pontificalis*, *Te Deum Laudamus*, *Benedicamus Domino*, etc.) can turn to his *Magnificat* for mixed choir and organ, where melodic inspiration and an instinctive sense of musical form is present in every bar. Or the beautiful *O Sanctissima Anima*, a mesmerizing motet for

mixed choir whose spiritual quality is so preponderant that you would prefer to listen to it while kneeling.



A bust of Lorenzo Perosi in the park of the Pincio in Rome

Today, when we are celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, what remains of him? Certainly he is still very popular and not only in Italy. Many choirs around the world still perform his music but certainly less than before, due to the crisis that Catholic Church Music is undergoing in general. I do not think his name will ever disappear from the repertoires, but certainly his influence is weaker than before. Let us hope for a rediscovery on an international level of the contribution to Church Music of this humble priest, a thorough study to define the “mysterious” quality of his music, the sources of his inspiration and his place in music history.



The manuscript of 'La  
Resurrezione di Cristo' by  
Lorenzo Perosi

Score Extract Lorenzo Perosis Mystery

*Edited by Caroline Maxwell, UK*