

# The Future of Tradition

## The Choral Music of Domenico Bartolucci

*By Aurelio Porfiri, Choral Conductor, Organist and Teacher*

Today the word 'tradition' sounds strange for many people. This word is highly esteemed by some and equally highly disregarded by others. And when we speak of tradition referring to music we cannot forget the development that the musical language has undergone in the previous century, a development that in a certain way went against tradition. But indeed some voices, even in the tormented past century, stand to affirm a role for tradition and for music tradition. One of those voices is the one of Domenico Bartolucci, Catholic priest, composer and conductor, a protagonist in the world of church music not only for his music but also for his strong personality. His music, which would deserve to be better known, it is sung throughout the world, and he is still active in the musical world, despite his considerable age. Tradition for him is not a word to be ashamed of, but it means richness. For people like him that live as Catholic church musicians, tradition means Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony, the repertoires that the church has always considered an example of what liturgical music should be. I was his student for several years in the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music, and I still, even today, have the pleasure of visiting him and talking with him about these and other topics. I remember how he insists on safeguarding this repertory: he never advocates that we should stop there (as some people wrongly argued) but he affirms that this repertoire is a great model also for new compositions. And he has shown in his own music how this is true. Some people accuse his music of not being 'modern'. Now,

this would take us too far. But analyzing his music one may be surprised: indeed you can see that the dissonances and modern chords are there, but the wise treatment of these devices stops them being disturbing. When I pointed this out to him, he told me that this is because in his musical language there is a logic, so even that which is not consonant does not grate on the listener. He is a follower of the Roman school of choral music, so let's first say something about this.

### **The 'Scuola Romana'**

The Italian term 'Scuola Romana', meaning Roman school, can be applied to various artistic disciplines, such as the Roman school of painting, the Roman school of architecture. There is also a Roman school of music, or more particularly the Roman school of liturgical music which saw its days of glory in the Renaissance. In Rome, the Renaissance is particularly important: the presence of the Pope and the Papal court, indeed, attracted the best artists throughout the Catholic world. But what is the origin of this Roman school? We have to go way back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century when the Popes resided in Avignon. There, the singers began to weave the first polyphonies into Gregorian chant. It is quite fun to recall the bull of Pope John XXII's 'Docta Sanctorum Patrum' of 1324, in which he condemned his Flemish singers for their excessive experiments with polyphony. But, to be true, he never condemned the thing in itself. Only decades later would such experiments be encouraged. Now the Flemish art of counterpoint reached an unimaginably high technical level, although very often it was a mere display of virtuosity. These great Flemish singers moved to Rome with the Pope, came into contact with the great Italian musicians, who also became part of the Papal choir, many thanks to the Italianisation of the Papal curia. The Flemish art of polyphony interacted with typically Mediterranean singability, reaching its greatest glory in the

16<sup>th</sup> century. This is what we call the Scuola Romana.

The characteristics of this school are:

- high singability
- remarkable attention to each singer in the choir – there were only one or two to each part
- great attention to the text
- strict adherence to the liturgical rite (music was written with great respect for the spirituality and the requirements of each moment of the liturgy)
- great respect for tradition

The repertoires that embrace all these qualities are Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony. It is worth remembering that western music owes an enormous amount to the musical practice of the Catholic church, which gave birth to the very rich variety of musical forms, both sacred and profane, that mark the glory of our civilisation.

### **Domenico Bartolucci**

Domenico Bartolucci was born in Borgo San Lorenzo, a small town near Florence, in 1917. Just for historical context, let us take a look at the most significant events of that year. The First World War was still raging; on 6 April the US declared war on Germany. Towards the end of the year the October revolution broke out in Russia. Just one week after the birth of Bartolucci one of the most important apparitions in church history took place in a small Portuguese village known as Fatima. Italy in those years was still largely agricultural, as was the hometown of Bartolucci. His mother was a farmer and his father was a worker who sang in church

although not as a professional singer. Musical life was very rich even in very small towns; there were choirs, music groups, opera companies, and of course many musical activities related to the Catholic liturgy. Talking to me, he always remembers those times, when Italy was still a rural country and life, he keeps mentioning, was simpler and more beautiful. He said that music was 'in the air', you could breathe music everywhere. When he was still young, Bartolucci already experienced a double vocation: to be a musician as well as a priest. Having finished his primary education, Bartolucci entered the seminary at Florence, where he also dedicated himself to music by singing as a choirboy in the choir of the seminary. He began to study music with the choirmaster, Francesco Bagnoli. Studying the piano was not very easy at the seminary; the young Bartolucci eventually made himself a keyboard out of cardboard so that he could practise. At the age of 12, he composed a mass and an *Ave Verum* for 2 voices. Four years later, he wrote another mass, by now with better technique and very original musical themes. This mass, originally for 4 mixed voice parts, was revised years later and turned into a mass for 5 mixed voices enriched by an orchestra. This is one of the most impressive compositions by Bartolucci, known as *Missa Assumptionis*. Before his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, he had already written two of his most significant symphonic and choral compositions: the rustic *Symphony* and the Oratorio *La Tempesta sul Lago (The Tempest on the Lake)*. In 1939, at the age of 22, he obtained his diploma in composition and choir conducting at the Conservatory of Florence. This diploma really displays the very special gifts of the young master: he satisfied all the examiners in all the subjects, major and minor alike, in only two sessions of exams between July and October of the same year, which would require of most students ten years of study. He was ordained a priest in the same year. At the end of 1942, he was sent to Rome for further studies, especially for the study of the Roman choral tradition. In Rome he became the vice-choirmaster of the

Basilica of St John Lateran, the cathedral of Rome. But the Second World War made him return to his own town. In this politically dramatic period, he wrote other important symphonic choral works, such as *The Passion* (an oratorio) and a piano concerto in E. At the end of the war in 1945, he returned to Rome, where he obtained a higher degree in composition and choir conducting at the Academy of St. Cecilia under the direction of the famous Italian composer Ildebrando Pizzetti. He was also awarded a diploma of composition by the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in Rome. In 1947, he became the parish priest in a small town near Florence, but he continued to dedicate himself also to composition. The sacred poem *Baptisma* for soloists, women's choir and orchestra belongs to this period. In the same year, that is 1947, he was called to Rome to become choirmaster of the Basilica of St Mary Major (a position that he would hold for decades) and also professor of composition and polyphonic music at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music, where he taught until 1997. In 1952 he was appointed vice-conductor of the Sistine Chapel Choir – as the principal conductor Lorenzo Perosi had long been ill. Lorenzo Perosi dominated the scene of Italian sacred music in the first half of the last century. A very talented musician, Perosi was under the strong influence of late Romanticism which put him against the defendants of the pure Roman tradition. His music is still very popular, and he is the subject of many books and much research. He was conductor of the Sistine Chapel Choir for 59 years. After Perosi's death, Pope Pius XII made Bartolucci the Perpetual Master of the Sistine Chapel choir, a position he occupied until he retired in 1997. Bartolucci brought about a reform in the choir. He secured a budget, primarily thanks to Pope John XXIII. He introduced new voices and he replaced the falsettists with boy singers (known as 'voci bianche') for the top parts. It was a very ambitious undertaking. In 1965 he was nominated fellow of the Academy of St. Cecilia, a title which he shares with many internationally renowned musicians. Bartolucci gave many, many concerts with the Sistine Chapel

Choir both in Italy and overseas, and his catalogue of compositions became very fat: published in 40 volumes, they include motets, masses, oratorios, organ pieces and symphonic choral works as well as other compositions for piano, violin and ensembles. In 1968 one of his motets in six parts was chosen by the famous American singer Perry Como and recorded with English words by Ray Charles and a special musical arrangement. Since retiring in 1997, as mentioned, he continues to be very active as a conductor and composer. In November 2010, Pope Benedict XVI made him a Cardinal of the Catholic Church, a great honour in recognition of the huge achievements of his musical life.



*The new Cardinal Domenico Bartolucci*

### **The musical language of Bartolucci**

The 1920s, Bartolucci's formative years, are very important for the entire musical world. In those years, the age-old tonal harmony was dashed to pieces by Schoenberg in Germany. Even in France, musicians tried other ways to free themselves from the domination of tonality. Many composers tried new harmonies, often rediscovering modality as a possible new language. Ravel and Debussy often used modes, although not systematically. It would be useful to analyze Bartolucci's

music by comparing it to the changing musical language of that epoch. Such comparison will be meaningful only if we take into account the cultural atmosphere and the environment in which Bartolucci wrote his music.

## 1) Roman church musician

Let us note that Bartolucci as a musician is profoundly Christian and profoundly involved in liturgical life. Bartolucci belongs to the world of masses, prayers, cantors and organs. We can understand neither his person nor his musical language without seeing him in this perspective. His art belongs to the common people, in a sense that it works with a simple and spontaneous faith, and at times, it feels that to belong to the people is the sole reason for the existence of his music. This spiritual power, which he took from the people, will be transformed into notes and then returned to the people. The church singer connects the people with God through his art: s/he expresses to God the devotion of the people; s/he shows the people a little of the beauty of God. For this reason it is very important to learn the art as a craftsman would, learning by working near those who are more expert, by acquiring tradition.

There is a text in which he speaks about the function and the mission of a cantor: *"Let us consider what "Cantor of the Church" means. Cantor of the Church means herald of the Holy Scripture. One can also say that he is a minister who preaches by singing (...). Therefore the cantor in a liturgy is a real minister who should present, through the art of singing, a holy text: a text that is sung may reach the souls of the believers more effectively. Music in a church is not only there in order to decorate the liturgical functions. Its fundamental role is to add force, to extol, to vitalise the holy text, so that it may penetrate more efficiently the souls of the believers"*. Bartolucci has always been faithful to

these ideas in his long and prolific musical life.

There is a beautiful text by Guido Pannain, a famous Italian musicologist, written after a concert of the Sistine Chapel Choir conducted by the Master: *"Listen, in the performances of the Sistine Chapel Choir, listen to the voices of the boys, the voices that ascend freely and simply toward the sky of song, wandering as white clouds in the infinite heaven; listen to the male voices, how light these voices are, how sweetly they hover in the air like shadows, how that harmony without name – music – unfolds itself in the line that sounds and loses itself in musical waves, entwines and rejoices in itself; grieves itself and vanishes into thin air ...The performances of the Sistine Choir cannot be compared to what we usually call "concert". They are spiritual convocations wherein the music fulfils a rite and makes a feast"* (Il Tempo, February 23, 1963 in Cappella Sistina, Gennaio/Marzo 1964, pag. 19).

## 2) Sacred text

To understand Bartolucci's music thoroughly, just as to understand Gregorian chant and polyphony, one has to highlight the absolute importance of the text in his music. The text is not something to be inserted into the music, but it determines the form of the composition itself. In modern music there are various musical forms that regulate the use of texts. In liturgical music, however, the text is the lord of the composition, it determines the points of expansion and rest, it sets priorities. Even if a motet has its own form, it will never be as prominent as the form and meaning or even the syntax of the text, which is fundamental for a correct interpretation of any composition of that school. The composer, therefore, is an interpreter of the holy text, and indeed Palestrina has received the title 'the theologian musician'.



### 3) Modality

Bartolucci's choice of a harmonic language goes against the tide of his time: he has chosen to express himself in a modal language. It is a language that adopts the traditional scales on which Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony were based. What is a mode? A mode is a way of organising the tones and semitones of a scale. There can be an enormous number of modes.

The modality of great polyphony derives from that of Gregorian chant: *"Polyphonic modality originated in the application of the modes of plainchant to polyphonic music. Some of the modal characteristics of plainchant modality – notably melodic formulas, initial and cadential notes, and final – can be easily transplanted to polyphonic music"* (Frans Wiering, 'The language of the modes', New York: Ed Routledge, 2001, 10).

I think it will be useful to consider the concept of modes as defined by the famous scholar Harold S. Powers. In Frans Wiering's book which has already been referred to, this concept is compared to that of Bernard Meier, another famous expert on modality. Nevertheless the former is closer to the practice of the Roman school. Let us take a look at Frans Wiering's explanation: *"While Meier considered mode a natural property of Renaissance polyphony, Powers regarded mode first and foremost as a means of classification. Applied to musical works a posteriori, the modes do not necessarily have a place in the domain of composition. This place is taken by the tonal types, which represent three a priori choices of the composer: clefs, system and final. While Powers denies the universal pre-compositional necessity of the modes, he still sees them as an important element of the musical thought of the period, for example, in the ordering of publications, or as the "musical dogma" of the church. If a composer decides to write a composition in a mode, he is actually composing in a tonal*

*type that represents the mode. As Powers put it, a tonal type should "be thought of as having been chosen to 'represent' a mode, to stand as the embodiment of a traditional category". Powers also invoked the anthropological distinction of "ethic" and "emic". A phenomenon is called "ethic" if it is independent of culture; "emic" if it requires knowledge of the cultural context. In Powers's view, modes are emic and tonal types ethic" (ibid. p 10). Therefore the choice of a modality is the fruit of a specific cultural context. As we have said, the "lord" of a composition is the text and its literary rhetoric, and it is this text that will suggest also the modal character of the composition. It is not possible to understand Roman polyphony if we do not recognize the fact that it is not first and foremost a musical thing: before the music there is the connection with a text, with a liturgy, with a tradition, with a social environment: if this is lacking, the essence is missing.*

#### 4) Singability

Bartolucci's harmonic language does not aim at extreme dissonance; he seeks, above all, to intensify spiritual emotions by deploying the full potential of singing. This is related to the Italian cantabile, which works very naturally with the expression of a single cantor as the protagonist rather than the subordination of the cantor to the demand of a big choir, which is more common in the Anglosaxon tradition. With the beauty of his music, Bartolucci tends to amplify true and sincere feeling while avoiding to fall into banal sentimentalism by arousing superficial emotions.

#### 5) Attention to tradition

Bartolucci has a great respect for tradition, as we have seen, a respect for what we have inherited from the past. What is

tradition? Tradition is *tradere*, to hand down, it is a bridge between yesterday and today, it is a gift from the past to the future. This is the definition of the historian Eric Hobsbawm: “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (“Introduction: Inventing Traditions” in Terence W. Tilley, “Inventing Catholic Tradition”, Orbis Books: New York, 2001, 51). It is a communication process of a specific community, it is the persistence of the identity of this community.

Bartolucci's concept of tradition is strongly dependent on his concept of musical education, that is the same concept as maintained by the great Roman school. You can learn music by experience, you will learn by “doing” music. The experience, what we call *pratica*, is the basic element of learning; as it was for students of painting who learned their art working near the masters, in the same way as it was for the musicians that discovered the secrets of musical art in the choir. Bartolucci constantly repeats this phrase: “Music has to be studied with those who know music”. Those who know music must study music. It means that in academic institutions one can conduct advanced research on liturgical music but one cannot acquire the deep essence of this music at school or college. This essence comes only with the experience of liturgical life in the choir, at the organ, following traditional patterns. In a certain way we learn without realizing that we are learning.

The famous theologian Yves Congar offered this explanation: “Saint Basile, in the last decades of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, made some profound observations on the nature of tradition, saying that the tradition is *agraphos*, unwritten: in the same moment that written texts are transmitted, tradition adds, as its contribution, something else, a way different from the writing” (“La Tradizione e la vita della Chiesa”, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.,

Cinisello Balsamo (MI, Italy): Edizioni San Paolo, 2003, 27). This idea is often objected to by various scholars who only rely on books on musicology. Although these books offer a way to classify different theories, they are not always reliable concerning the living experience and performance of music.

The Italian movie director Ermanno Olmi, in his film inspired by the life of Jesus entitled 'Cento chiodi' [A hundred nails], included this scene: in a library many books are crucified. A rebellion against the written culture? Not really. The biblical scholar Gianfranco Ravasi (now Archbishop and president of the Pontifical Council for Culture) interprets this scene as follows: it is not a desecration of books, but a desacralization. The same Olmi in an interview said that very often we are too much bound by written doctrines, and we lack real life. Socrates did not write anything, neither did Buddha or Jesus. This is, I think, is the core of Bartolucci's message: beware of the written word, but be more aware of the spirit that gives life to this word; if words remain words (such as a treaty or a score) they lack life. Saint Paul says that "*we may serve in the newness of the spirit and not under the obsolete letter*" (Romans 7, 6). It is this spirit that is the soul of "tradition", the soul of the people throughout history. It is this tradition that has nourished our forefathers, the connection to whom we are losing. It is this tradition that will give us the true meaning of things and a better future.

All in all, the artistic life of Bartolucci is long and prolific, and much more will have to be said in the light of cultural and historical evolution. But what I can say now is that his music is a powerful way to bring the listener to the contemplation of the spirit.

*Edited by Irene Auerbach, UK*