

GIOVANNI SGAMBATI

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I suppose my interest in this composer stems from the fact that my great uncle, Sir Ivor Atkins, gave British premieres of this Italian composer's work at The Three Choirs Festival much to the annoyance of Elgar who believed that only his works were of any value and that this festival should be exclusively of his music.

Sgambati had an English mother, the daughter of the sculptor, Joseph Gott, and an Italian father, who was an advocate, and my great uncle felt that his music should be performed in England.

Giovanni Sgambati was born in Rome on 25 May 1841. He rose to being a good pianist being a child prodigy who had piercing blue eyes. His father died in 1849 and the family moved to Trevi in Umbria and his mother remarried. Later, Giovanni became a conductor and composer. At the age of twenty he became a pupil of the great Franz Liszt who entrusted the premiere of his Dante Symphony to him.. They not only played the piano together but were keen card players. In 1866 Sgambati founded a chamber orchestra in Rome and introduced Italians to a varied repertoire including the German classics. Both as a pianist and conductor, he toured Russia, Germany, France and England where he met Sir Ivor. Queen Victoria requested a private recital as did Queen Margherita who persuaded him to form a Royal Court Quintet. He was renowned for giving lessons to pupils who were poor. At one time Anton Rubinstein wanted Sgambati to become a professor at the Moscow Conservatory.

He enjoyed friendships with Tchaikovsky and Brahms but he failed to make an impact in Italy as the Italians were immersed in opera and Sgambati was not. Other composers said that Sgambati suffered from provincial narrowness. Italy under Umberto I did suffer from provincial monotony and easy living

Sgambati felt he should interest the Italians in music other than opera. And so he founded his chamber orchestra, the Liceo Musicale in Rome.

He was befriended by Wagner who saw the value of his compositional work and persuaded Schott's, the music publishers, to publish Sgambati's two piano quintets. The Piano Quintet no. 1 in F Minor Op 4 has some material to commend it but it is probably overlong and the promising quick finale descends into a slow wallow before a lively coda. However the piano writing is good, far better than in the Piano Concerto. The Piano Quintet no 2 Op 5 is even better containing some fine music but, again, the material is not memorable and this makes the work too long to sustain its content.

Italy in his time was obsessed with opera and yet Sgambati, although writing two operas, was predominantly an instrumental composer. He wrote a piano concerto, two string quartets, songs, a vast amount of piano music and Requiem, Op 38, premiered in Rome in 1901 which was written in memory of Umberto I who was murdered in 1900.

Sgambati wrote three symphonies, the third being known as the Sinfonia Epitalamio referring to the wedding of Amedeo di Savola, a member of an illustrious family who supported Sgambati.

The Symphony no. 2 is set mainly in E flat and has four movements and written in 1883 and premiered in March 1885 at the Palazzo Caffarelli in Rome. It was given in Cologne in 1887 but further performances did not come about as Sgambati was slow to send the score and parts to would-be performers.. It is in four movements: Andante leading to an agitato, Allegro vivace assai, andante con moto and an allegro. It plays for about 34 minutes and has some good moments but it never seems to rise above the ordinary. However, it received a good review from Busoni.

The Symphony no. 1 was completed when the composer was forty and was successful so much so that Sgambati began work on his second symphony almost immediately.

His Piano Concerto Op 15 was performed on his first visit to England in 1882. It is a work probably not worth promoting being overlong and containing no memorable material although there is one good tune in the opening G minor movement. The work is anaemic and the introduction to the opening movement has a slow four minute orchestral introduction which is tedious.. A lot of the music is slow and pedestrian. The middle movement, Romanza, is simply awful, painfully slow and suffering from Chopinesque tinkly music. The finale is banal and I have heard better tunes on ice cream vans.

There are annoying complications with regard to his opus numbers. Grove says that his Piano Concerto is Op 10 whereas the printed score says it is Op 15. Grove says that an Intermezzo for piano is Op 16 whereas others say his opus 16 is his Symphony no. 1

He died in Rome on 14 December 1914.

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