

GOFFREDO PETRASSI

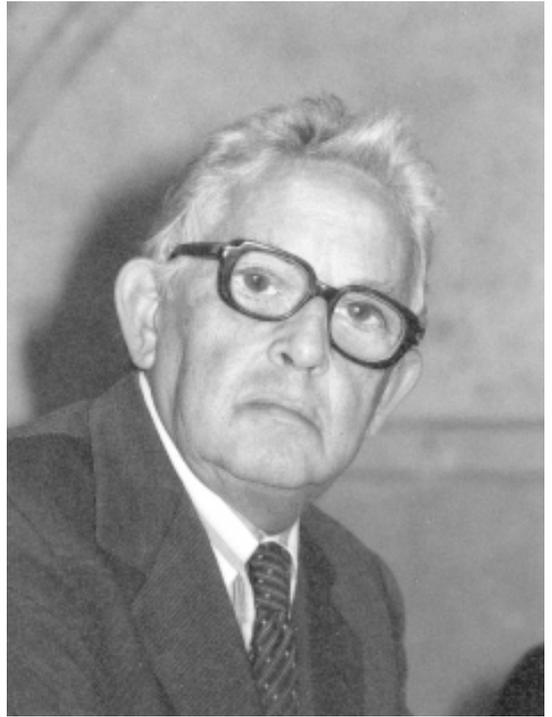
David C F Wright

I am indebted to my friend, Reginald Smith Brindle, for allowing me to quote from his notes up to 1953.

Goffredo Petrassi was born on 16 July 1904 in Zagarolo, a farming village, and was a chorister of the Schola Cantorium of San Salvatore in Lauro, and later studied at the Saint Cecilia Conservatory under Bustini graduating in 1931. The previous year he had completed his Divertimento in C for orchestra as part of his conservatory studies.

Petrassi's early work may show some influence of Casella, Hindemith and the neo-classical school, but this Petrassi repudiated.

His first major work was his prize winning Partita for orchestra of 1932 which shows an incredible maturity and affirmed his individual personality. The work won deserved renown both in Rome and the ISCM Festival in Amsterdam. The work is in three dance movements and has bold, thematic material, resolute contrapuntal lines, vigour which all urges forward by an inexorable rhythmic drive typical of his early work. The harmonic and melodic idiom is diatonic, and weak semitone formations are discarded. He creates bold diatonic clashes or brief linear excursions setting him up with an original voice which many 'famous' composers never had.



His next work was the Introduction and Allegro for violin and eleven instruments which develops the style of the Partita. The Toccata for piano (1933) is a splendid work and it must be remembered that many composers find writing for the piano their Achilles heel. The Concerto no 1 for orchestra has an extrovert boldness, quite at odds with Petrassi's character. It is indeed bold, extrovert, powerful and well written. This extrovert quality diminishes with his religious works which has a tendency to withdraw from introspection towards a great humanity in spite of their cold and uncompromising idiom.

Psalm IX of 1936 is his first big choral work, an indisputable masterpiece with the fusion of strident rhythms and tonal conflicts in the orchestra and a vast choral fresco with what might be called Palestrinian polyphony revealing Petrassi's upbringing as a chorister with its contemplative atmosphere and, in the orchestra, there is the opulence of Roman baroque.

The Piano Concerto was written between 1936 and 1939 and is an impressive work, vastly superior to many Romantic and Impressionistic concertos. This concerto is not full of clichés or gymnastics but is absolute music. Petrassi taught himself the piano and his Eight Inventions for piano of 1942-44 is another worthy piece.

His Magnificat of 1939-40 is not a four minute work sung at Evensong, but a 30 minute work for soprano, chorus and orchestra of beauty, space, skill and exceptional quality. The Quattro inni caca dates from 1942 and has two hymns for tenor and the other two for baritone, all with orchestra.

But it is the Coro di morte of 1940-1 which is Petrassi's most outstanding choral work and has nothing of the baroque. It shows a tremendous advance from Psalm IX and takes us into the world of modern sensibility. If Psalm IX is a masterpiece, and it is, this work is an ultra-masterpiece. The subject matter

gives way to a cold, unemotional idiom and the orchestration is original with three pianos, brass, percussion and double basses. The choral part is mainly modal, the brass is confined to tonal and polytonal worlds, while the pianos freely move into the atonal sphere but these diverse elements are expertly welded into stylistic coherence by a rigorous and logical construction. Some have said that these works have an affinity with Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* and *Les Noces*. They may be, but we do have in Petrassi an individual voice.

This work was the turning point in his career and, during the war, he concentrated on stage work such as the two ballets, *La follia di Orlando* of 1943 and *Ritratto di Don Chisciotte* of 1945, and the opera, *Il cordovano*.

With *Coro di morti*, we have the greatest choral for a century and this was only challenged by Fricker's *Vision of Judgment* of 1956, undoubtedly the finest British choral work for a century.

To return to Petrassi, his cantata *Nochue Oscura* of 1952 has no trace of the sumptuous baroque religion of Psalm IX, or the texture of the inflexible introspective *Coro di morti*, but here we have the oscillating, fluctuating melodic lines and harmonic planes emanating from semitonal material which is the very antithesis of his early diatonicism. The style is now handled with a new technique, that of Schoenberg's tone row composition method, which ignorant people still despise. The use of diatonic tonal melody has surely been exhausted to a very large extent if not a complete extent. Is it possible to write a tonal melody today which is clearly original and never been used in part or the whole before?

It takes a truly great composer to write in the serial style whereas almost anybody can write uncomplicated and perhaps ordinary music. The fact that some condemn serial music tells us more about these objectors and nothing about the tremendous skill and discipline serialists have to employ.

Petrassi handles this system with certain freedoms and maintains his own characteristics. About this time, he wrote another opera, albeit brief, *Morte dell'aria* and the *Second Concerto* for orchestra which does not show any development of the serial style but in *Recreation Concertante* (his *Concerto for Orchestra* no. 3) completed in 1953, this demanding discipline is absorbed into his own characteristic orchestral style.

Petrassi's *Concerto for orchestra* no 4 of 1954 is scored for string orchestra and has an angular beauty and ethereal quality. The melodic lines are choice and there is a glow about this work. Its language is original; it does not sound German or even European and certainly not like Tippett or Elgar. The music now embraces a sort of mysticism and eeriness and there are some exciting and rugged moments especially in the finale. The *Fifth Concerto* of 1955 is often impressive and perhaps, a little introspective, but it is the product of a continuing evolving style. There are far too many composers who do not vary their style but whose music remain predominantly the same. Sibelius and Britain's finest tonal symphonist, Vaughan Williams, did evolve and did not remain in a rut. The fifth *Concerto* of Petrassi has some tremendous moments for woodwind.

The next *Concerto*, number 6, is truly amazing. It is subtitled *Invenzione concertata* and that is what it is. It has an original modernism which is very strong and coherent and, as with all his orchestral works, the orchestration is flawless. Some people, lacking in the understanding of music, may find this masterpiece somewhat tough but it is dramatic and compelling. It is brave music, real concertante music and, as the title suggests, it is inventive and concertante. Some of the high string writing has an almost unbearable beauty and the work has a terrific conclusion.

The years 1961 to 1964 were taken up with the *Concerto for Orchestra* no 7, which progresses from its predecessor. It has a heightened atmosphere and is somewhat tragic, perhaps epic. It is, at times explosive, and the timpanist has a field day. There is a long solo for tuned percussion and the music is often terrifying.

The final concerto, number 8, continues in this complex style and, in the middle, becomes somewhat static. Tuned percussion takes a prominent part and the final section comes alive with devastating effect. The work has to be understood realising that the composer was angry at the prospect of losing his eyesight. His last major work was the large choral work, *Orationes Christi* of 1974-5, which is beyond the powers of all but a few highly skilled choirs. From his humble beginning to working at a music shop from 1919, Petrassi became an excellent teacher and taught composition at Saint Cecilia Academy and from 1937-1940, he was the director of Teatro la Fenice in Vienna. He taught Kenneth Leighton, Peter Maxwell Davies, Gordon Crosse and Cornelius Cardew.

I will not comment on his chamber works as I do not know them well enough.

Petrassi married Rosetta in 1962 and they had a daughter. He died on the 2 March 2003 in Rome.

The nonsense that people talk about modern music and that music without tunes is not music at all reminds me what the Danish composer Vagn Holmboe wrote, "Music is part of our culture and demands our efforts since culture will die if there are no new challenges. The most beautiful things are those we do not understand and we ignore them at our peril."

(1435)

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