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Brief History of the Polyphonic Competition of Arezzo

When the Polyphonic Competition dedicated to Guido d'Arezzo began, there was no polyphonic tradition in Italy. The treasures by Marenzio, Gesualdo, Palestrina and Monteverdi lay neglected or, even worse, misrepresented: a madrigal could be performed by groups of 40 or more voices; both performance tradition and skilled experts were lacking.

It was 1952, and spectres of the Fascist period and World War II still lurked. There were piles of ruins in various parts of the city (the Mancini Stadium is a well-known example), and Arezzo was preparing its transformation from an agricultural economy (and mentality) to an industrial way of life. Such a rapid and massive transition was summed up by Piero Magi in his famous phrase about the farmer from Arezzo who came home one night, leaned his hoe against the doorjamb, and went out the next morning on his motorscooter to work in a factory.

The Amici della Musica (Friends of Music) Association, then recently founded under the auspices of the Accademia Petrarca (its founding statute bears the date of January 14, 1950), was able to organize in 1952 the first Concorso Polifonico (Polyphonic Competition) -- prudently restricted to national level for that year and held on September 7, 8 and 9.

The founders were a select group of professionals chaired by a young magistrate with a passion for music, Dr. Mario Bucciolotti, with honorary members of the calibre of Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, of Prof. Francesco Severi, and of Father Vigilio Guidi (unfortunately deceased about that time). Artistic director of the event was one of the most illustrious musicians and musical organizers of the period, Luigi Colacicchi, who was assisted by Augusto Cortoni and by a group of worthy musicians from Arezzo, among whom was Bruto Tignani, German-

trained violinist and director of the Praticino Music School.

Encouraged by the success of this first edition, the founding committee were spurred on to a more ambitious project, and the second edition (1953) was international, with competing choirs from six nations, and five days of competition (June 25-29).

"A small spark, a great second flame," Dante admonishes: the 1954 edition consolidated the international character of the competition, even though only three countries besides Italy participated (Switzerland, Austria and Yugoslavia). The month of August was tried out and found optimal, so much so that the competition remained permanently in August until 2010, and in 2012 returns to August after a short September parenthesis that has proved unsatisfactory for various reasons.

The Concorso Polifonico has left its mark on the culture and customs of Arezzo, with grace and harmony: it demolished its own Berlin Wall in the early 1970s with choirs from East and West Germany that sang with brotherly enthusiasm, heedless of ideological barriers.

Even a President of the Republic (under whose patronage the Concorso stands) came to Arezzo for the Concorso's tenth anniversary in 1962: Antonio Segni, the only head of state who has ever attended the event. The years of the Concorso have been marked by slow but important and substantial improvements in Italian polyphonic practice, and finally in 1967 the Corale Coradini (just founded at the beginning of that year!) won in the Gregorian chant section under the direction of Maestro Fosco Corti, destined to become an unforgettable figure of the choral fête, and to leave an unfillable void with his untimely demise.

But to return to the chronological history: the organizers requested, and obtained wi-

thout difficulty, the official patronage of the President of the Republic Giovanni Gronchi -- proof of the prestige that the event had already achieved. The 1955 edition, fourth year from the foundation and third of the international competition, reaffirmed this prestige on a European level. There were seven nations participating: Austria, West Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Yugoslavia, France, and of course Italy. The organization was excellent from every point of view, and the jury featured some of the finest names in both European (Hans Hang, Hans Gilleserger) and Italian chorality, from Alfredo Bonaccorsi to Celestino Echer; from Lino Livibella to Achille Schinelli (who in the realm of choral music for Italian schools corresponds to Sapegno in the realm of Dante studies!); from Bonaventura Somma to Luigi Toffolo, to a musician like Mario Peragallo. Other legendary names include Nino Antonellini -- who took over from Colacicchi as director -- and Franco Abbiati. Of particular interest is the presence, from the event's beginnings, of W. S. Gwynn Williams, musical director of the Llangollen Choral Festival: proof that the Concorso was already looking toward Europe and the world.

And at last the political world and mass media realized the value that the Arezzo event could have for, quite simply, the nation's cultural growth. With the title "Voices from all over the world in Arezzo" the *Settimana Incom* (a newsreel) featured the third Concorso Polifonico Internazionale in a brief but effective and incisive report: one of the first times that Arezzo appeared in national news not for politics, art, or literature, but for purely musical reasons, and what is more, connected to its most illustrious son in the field: the monk Guido!

In the newsreel one can see the packed hall of the Teatro Petrarca during Undersecretary Brusacca's inauguration of the Concorso. The camera rests briefly (but not so briefly that one does not notice artistic and spectacular characteristics: shooting was professionally impeccable) upon five groups, among which the choir from Arezzo that -- outside of competition -- brought the city's greetings to its foreign guests. This was the

Corale Guido Monaco, directed by Maestro Tommaso Stendardi, a true choral expert, whose untimely passing was a great loss to the city's musical life.

Finally, it is with emotion that one views at work (in the last sequence of the newsreel) a young maestro who in later years was to become one of the legendary figures of the Polifonico: Milton Babic, intense and already charismatic director of the Yugoslav choir.

At this point let us take a step backward, for a flashback of the Competition's genesis. When the Amici della Musica invited the Coro Polifonico of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia of Rome, directed by Bonaventura Somma, to give a concert in Arezzo on May 21st, 1950, none of the board members suspected the real significance of the event!

The concert, as a matter of fact, aroused great interest among the general public, who flocked to the Basilica di San Francesco. Everyone realized that there existed a treasure chest with the forgotten family jewels: the immense heritage, then unexplored and unappreciated, of Renaissance polyphony.

Mario Salmi -- who as president of the Accademia Petrarca had served as godfather to the Amici della Musica -- did not wish for the Roman ensemble's concert to remain an isolated occurrence: this gave rise to the idea of establishing in Arezzo a national polyphonic competition, which (as already stated) took place in September 1952. Thus the right path was entered upon, and the Concorso was like ripples from the classic pebble thrown into a pond: the right idea at the right time.

That idea was benevolently welcomed by the Ministry of Public Education and immediately transformed into reality: a small group of enlightened persons knew at that time that our country lacked a polyphonic tradition because of the extraordinary growth of opera during the 1800s, which -- though it gave rise to unquestionable masterpieces and a great tradition -- also had the effect of stifling all other musical genres.

Ever since that time, the Polifonico continued growing until Arezzo asserted its leadership in polyphony in the "global village":

the trail blazed in Guido's city has become the highway leading to the establishment of similar events all over Europe, from Gorizia to Debrecen, from Tours to Toulouse.

And so, beginning with the first edition in 1953, the ship of the Polifonico had the wind in its sails, and its spirits sky-high. Those first years saw the development of a decidedly winning formula: to realize this, one has only to glance through the national and foreign musical press of that period, from articles by Giulio Confalonieri (*Epoca*) to those by Guido Pannain (*Il Tempo*).

Important national and international cultural personalities were enthusiastic about the Polifonico: there was a celebrated vignette by Venturino Venturi for the readers of Arezzo's *Giornale del Mattino* (where can it have got to?); and one must not leave out the visit of Emanuele Bondville, director of the Paris Opéra. As early as 1958 the BBC transmitted a program in English and Welsh, and a New York network put together a program that was seen all over the United States. An illustrious Swiss jury member, Lebrecht Klohs, organized an international meeting of choral societies in Lübeck and invited the Società Corale Guido Monaco from Arezzo; while César Geoffray, in the wake of Arezzo's Polifonico, organized the *Olympiques du Chant* in Paris.

In 1959 began the fashion of what this writer called "cornice" (frame), or collateral events, in reviews written for the Florentine newspaper *La Nazione*. For the bicentennial of Handel's death Gwynn Williams directed excerpts from *The Messiah*, meeting with the predictable enthusiasm for the "Hallelujah Chorus". Luigi Colacicchi declared: "The Polifonico is a means, not an end: the means to make known and to circulate the greatest possible amount of polyphonic music."

But there was also attention for music in schools. A gap had been noted between schools and music (especially choral), and when the Ministry had been made aware of this, it responded with an interesting and rather successful experiment: the founding at Serravalle di Bibbiena of the first three-year course in choral singing for elementa-

ry-school teachers.

Arezzo was having the musical season of its dreams, thanks to (among other things) the presence at the same time of the master piano performance courses taught by Benedetto Michelangeli (who later voluntarily exiled himself from Arezzo and from Italy after conflicts with the Italian Treasury): in 1960 Michelangeli opened his course to the authorities of the Polifonico. But 1960 also remains in the annals of the Polifonico for the first Italian performance of Benjamin Britten's *Missa Brevis*, with Colacicchi as promoter and conductor (and it is good to remember the late lamented Father Athos Bernardini at the organ). The performance had enormous success, and Britten himself thanked Colacicchi for the "splendid send-off" of his work and for the performance "so excellently" cared for.

In 1962, as already stated, for the tenth anniversary of the competition the President of the Republic Antonio Segni visited Arezzo in the company of then Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani. That was a memorable edition (experienced by this writer with special intensity for the first time from the inside, as accompanist): the "cornice" included a concert conducted by Nino Antonellini (Coro Polifonico of Rome) and a performance by the Collegium Musicum Italicum (director Renato Fasano). Victorious in the mixed section was an American choir from Arkansas, but the "Tartini" from Trieste also placed well, marking the beginning of a positive trend for Italian choirs that has continued (with its ups and downs) to the present.

Pope John XXIII stated to the UNESCO conference, with reference to the Polifonico of Arezzo: "Music makes men humble and generous, not by uniting them in a transient manner, but by instilling in them the great idea of brotherhood."

From the *Amici della Musica* the baton passed on, in 1985, to the *Fondazione Guido d'Arezzo*¹ which -- while keeping intact the fascination of a vocal/instrumental event exemplary of the highest European and world professionalism -- has been able to transform itself into a true crucible of high-

level musical activities including research, organization of conferences, publication of the journal *Polifonie* (one of the few which provides an English translation along with every article, thus immediately reaching the international audience), management of musical collections, and (last but not least) ordering of the archives, financed by the Tuscan Region, which also supports teaching activities for the training of chorus masters. In spite of continually recurring financial difficulties, the Fondazione has been able to manage its immense moral and artistic heritage from the Amici della Musica, while continuing to honor the tradition of the “cornici”: from Boris Bloch’s memorable concert in San Francesco (the organizers had hoped in vain to bring Benedetti Michelangeli back to Arezzo), to the world premiere of the *Passio Iesu Christi secundum Ioannem* by Paolo Aretino during the Polifonico dedicated to him, to the organization of round tables and conferences, to running the Master Course for Choral Conducting.

In 2002, on the occasion of the Competition’s fiftieth anniversary, a decidedly striking event took place. Francesco Luisi invited Roberto Gabbiani, newly appointed director of the chorus of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia, to hold the “cornice” concert (remembering his excellent work in Arezzo). Gabbiani accepted enthusiastically and presented, in the Basilica di San Francesco, a splendid Palestrina program which met with well-deserved success. Strangely enough, neither Luisi nor anyone else realized that it was this same celebrated Roman ensemble that fifty years earlier had given the concert that inspired the founding of the Polifonico, and that a symbolic half-century ring had been closed: it was this writer’s privilege to note the singular circumstance in the columns of *La Nazione*.

Certainly each successive superintendent at the helm of the Fondazione has left a mark, but that of Francesco Luisi is perhaps the most pronounced: he is responsible for, among other things, the “Guidoneum” project.

In conclusion, no one knows exactly where Guido was born -- perhaps Arezzo, perhaps

Pomposa, perhaps Talla -- but it matters little: the world knows him as Guido d’Arezzo, and the city has proved to be fully equal to a name that has greater worldwide appeal than even that of Piero della Francesca!

NOTA N. 1

The Associazione Amici della Musica of Arezzo founded in 1952 the International Polyphonic Competition, and in 1974 the International Composition Competition.

On August 25, 1983, the Fondazione Guido d’Arezzo was set up jointly by the Tuscan Region, the City and the Province of Arezzo, and the above-named Associazione Amici della Musica, and it was granted private legal status by order of the President of the Tuscan Regional Council on July 25, 1984. The Fondazione began its activity in 1985, linking up with the preceding activity and initiating further cultural events connected with international chorality.

Beginning with 1953, the Concorso Polifonico Internazionale Guido d’Arezzo represents the most important stage for worldwide choral expression: an unparalleled array of repertoires, styles, and composers. Because of its objective and rigorous artistic and organizational criteria and its organic selectivity, the Concorso Polifonico gives valuable stimulus to strictly philological interpretative research. Alongside the Polifonico, the annual Concorso Internazionale di Composizione Guido d’Arezzo is now its integrative and interactive corollary, giving important stimulus to contemporary composers for the enrichment and quality of choral repertory. Thus far the Fondazione has received over two thousand works by composers from all over the world.

Taking inspiration from the Guido d’Arezzo Millennial Celebrations organized by a Cultural Ministry national committee, the Fondazione Guido d’Arezzo inaugurated in 2000 a Center for Guidonian Studies, with cultural, research, editorial, and conference activities.