



Giuseppe Pennisi
(1942-2023)

Classical Music Daily

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ECHOES OF OBLIVION — PER GIUSEPPE

Robert McCarney: Classical music, at least until it started to develop in new directions in the New World and beyond, has been one of the most extraordinary and overt manifestations of Pan-European history. For me, as a European, I doubt if there is any more impassioned, enlightening and enriching means by which to get to grips with the immense and fascinating richness — across space and through time — of the motley tapestry of peoples, customs, climates, languages, landscapes, faiths, philosophical ideas, artistic means of expression and experiments in living and dying that we call Europe, than classical music and vice versa.

As such, in this age of online magazines, blogs and forums where everybody seems to think their opinion is worth reading, it is extremely disappointing and saddening to encounter so much writing about classical music in English that is extremely ignorant of and/or indifferent — and what's worse blithely so — to this very same incredible motley tapestry. I am reminded of an anecdote of George Steiner's about how an eminent colleague of his from Cambridge asked him perplexedly 'What have concentration camps got to do with English Literature?'

This being the case one of the most attractive aspects of *Classical Music Daily* for me — and why I was very happy to have anything I write welcomed here — is the fact that it isn't yet another Anglocentric smug exercise in navel-gazing. Not another members' bar in a male only monoglot golf club. Although the medium here is obviously English, there are contributors here who are mercifully and gratefully from outside the English-speaking world. I wish there were more and I wish there were more women but beggars can't be choosers, unless you are Smokey Robinson. Contributors who have a perspective on music — and more — from outside the English language, ie the same perspective as the vast majority of composers and musicians who have made classical music what it is over the centuries.

There was no greater example of this here for me than our recently departed and very sadly missed colleague **Giuseppe Pennisi**. When it came to writing about classical music Giuseppe set the bar very high, as it should be. I felt proud to have anything I wrote published alongside his wonderful concert and CD reviews. Giuseppe, writing in his second or maybe third language, wrote better English than most native speakers. [READ MORE](#)

Echoes of Oblivion is Robert McCarney's regular Sunday series of features about little-known twentieth century classical composers.

Recent issues include *The home country grown strange*, *Looks like we got ourselves a reader*, *A spot of circumnavigation on a Sunday afternoon*, *Behind the Wall of Sleep*, *Randomness Run Riot*, *The Departed*, *Champions of Oblivion* and ...



WANTED: DIGITAL OR ANALOGUE

Read Robert's features to find out about composers you may not have heard of, including Raffaele d'Alessandro, Gustavo Becerra-Schmidt, Erik Bergman, Antonio Bibalo, Anne Boyd, Constança Capdeville, Nektarios Chargeishvili, Yvonne Desportes, Zhu Jian Er, Jovdat Hajiyev, Pierre Hasquenoph, Konstantin Iliev, Betsy Jolas, Willem Kersters, Roman Ledenev, Arthur Lourié, John Blackwood McEwen, Ljubica Marić, Tauno Marttinen, Richard Meale, Finn Mortensen, Teresa Procaccini, Éliane Radigue, Alice Samter, Zdeněk Šesták, Fartein Valen and Felix Werder.

[MORE FROM 'ECHOES OF OBLIVION'](#)

MARCH AND APRIL 2023 OBITUARIES

Some of the other people the classical music world said goodbye to during March and April 2023 include James Bowman, Serghei Ciuhrii, Valter Dešpalj, David Ellis, Christopher Gunning, Marek Kopelent, Oleksandr Kozarenko, Pierre Lacotte, Pedro Lavirgen, Andreas Meyer, Kenneth Montgomery, Jocelyn Morlock, Sergio Rendine, Nicolas Reveles, Nicholas Snowman, Sverre Valen and Virginia Zeani. May they rest in peace. [READ MORE](#)

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CLASSICAL MUSIC NEWS — NICOLO UMBERTO FORÒN

Twenty-five-year-old Italian-German conductor Nicolo Umberto Foròn has won the 2023 Donatella Flick Conducting Competition.

Andrew Parrott's recent book *The Pursuit of Musick* explores some six hundred years of musical activity in Europe, from the first troubadours to the emergence of the pianoforte.

Béla Hartmann has published a volume of piano pieces, *Big Pieces for Small Hands* and *Two Paraphrases on Songs by Brahms*, both published by Goodmusic Publishing.

Nimbus Music Publishing has published *Dance Foldings* for orchestra by American composer Augusta Read Thomas.

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ENSEMBLE — GIUSEPPE'S LAST CONCERT REVIEWS



Thomas Adès conducting in Rome. Photo © 2023 Musacchio, Ianniello & Pasqualini

Giuseppe Pennisi: Fifty-two year old **Thomas Adès** is one of the greatest contemporary composers. With **George Benjamin**, his compatriot, he is one of the two greatest British living composers. He is also a well-known pianist, conductor and an airplane pilot as well.

At forty-one, Adès earned a place at the National Portrait Gallery in London where his portrait peeks out from among those of Benjamin Britten and Edward Elgar. He came to international prominence at the age of twenty-two with complex works for large orchestra. He caused a scandal when, at twenty-four, he composed and produced a chamber opera, *Powder Her Face*, unusually long — two hours and twenty minutes of music — on the sexual exploits of the Duchess of Argyll, called 'The Dirty Duchess' and at the center (because of her adventures) of various trials.

The work, performed for the first time in Great Britain (with great success) in 1995, arrived in Rome in November 2002 on the initiative of the Accademia Filarmonica Romana and the Istituzione Universitaria dei Concerti. Then it was called 'porno-opera' because of the 'fellatio' aria in full Baroque style. (In fact, the seventeenth century *La Callisto* by Giovanni Cavalli, in the edition by Herbert Wernicke, presented in the 1980s at La Monnaie in Brussels and available on DVD, is sexually even more explicit.)

Adès' most recent opera, *The Tempest* — based on William Shakespeare's last stage work — was commissioned by Covent Garden and has already been seen in Copenhagen, Strasbourg, Santa Fe and Lübeck, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York and at Quebec Opera. *The Tempest*, acclaimed as the *Peter Grimes* of this first glimpse of the twenty-first century, arrived at La Scala in November 2022 and was successful.

In 2012 the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia presented a synthesis of *The Tempest* : some particularly eloquent scenes both at the beginning and at the end in a concert (repeated three times) directed by Adès in person, and preceded by a seminar meeting at Maxxi (the museum of contemporary art) together with a projection of the work — there is a DVD on the market. The concert also included *Asyla* — a four-part Adès symphony commissioned by the Berliner Philharmoniker.

On 18 March 2023, Adès presented in Rome, as part of the symphonic season of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, of which he will be artistic director for the next five years, a diptych that could be considered as the opposite of *Powder Her Face* — *Celestial Spheres*.



Thomas Adès conducting the Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome. Photo © 2023 Musaccio, Ianniello & Pasqualini

The first part is a series of portraits by **Gustav Holst** (1874-1934) on *The Planets*. The second is one of Adès' compositions for ballet: the third part (*Paradiso*) of the Dante Ballet, a composition inspired by the *Divine Comedy*.

I have known Adès since, in Aix-en-Provence in 1998, he alternated with Claudio Abbado for *Don Giovanni* directed by Peter Brook which he toured for various theaters and was a great success. About twenty-five years have passed since then. Adès has gained a few pounds and his hair has turned gray. However, he remains a great concert performer and as such treats Holst and himself very differently. [READ MORE](#)

Giuseppe Pennisi: On the centenary of **Franco Zeffirelli's** birth, Teatro dell'Opera di Roma has chosen to remember him with one of its most beloved productions: *Pagliacci* by **Ruggero Leoncavallo**. The revival, staged from 12 to 19 March 2023, was created in 1992 for Opera di Roma and since then it has always been revived with great success. I was in the theater on 12 March 2023. At the end, there were long ovations and requests for encores.

The extreme passions of love and hate of Leoncavallo's masterpiece are entrusted to the reading of Daniel Oren, who returns to direct the opera house orchestra after thirteen years of absence. Much loved in Rome, where he has conducted more than thirty operas since 1979, Oren was also on the podium at this revival. Oren was also on the podium at the first of this take. The direction by Franco Zeffirelli, who also signed the sets, is taken up by Stefano Trespici. The colorful costumes are by Raimonda Gaetani, while the lighting is by Vinicio Cheli.



Nino Machaidze as Nedda-Colombina in Teatro dell'Opera di Roma's *Pagliacci*. Photo © 2023 Fabrizio Sansoni

Pagliacci is a 'voices opera', in which the singers (and the choir) have a central role. In the sensual part of Nedda-Colombina, Nino Machaidze and Valeria Sepe (16 and 18 March) are engaged in this revival.

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QUALITY OR TASTE? — BÉLA HARTMANN INVESTIGATES

Béla Hartmann: Recent years have seen increasing controversy around the concept of quality in the Arts, both in terms of where it can be found and what it actually is. Many long held canonical assumptions have been attacked or overthrown on various grounds from racial and gender imbalance to cultural shifts in the wider populations. In classical music this has been particularly noticeable in the rediscoveries and promotion of music by female or black composers, but also in the increasing marginalization of classical music itself. These developments inspire many questions about the nature and purpose of Art, and the concept of quality, some of which I would like to explore here.

From the dawn of philosophy there have always been attempts to clarify the relationship between quality and taste, between the assumed objective hierarchy among works of art and the personal likes of the individual. We learn to appreciate certain things as particularly successful whilst remaining free to enjoy anything we want, and also to disagree with such assumptions, albeit while accepting their authority. We 'know' that Bach is a great composer, but might actually prefer to listen to Telemann. We might find that Weber is overrated, or that Rachmaninov is underrated for very specific reasons. We might suspect that certain composers are undervalued because of where they come from or who they were — in short, we might accept that there is a premier league of composers but that the placings are something we can debate and change with time and the changing of values.

We can also refute the very idea that one composer is better than another, and instead argue that our personal preferences are all that matter, and that there is nothing else. No authority should be able to tell us what is better or worse, and there are no criteria valid for judgement other than our likes and dislikes. In the world of liberal democracy this notion is very attractive and probably ultimately inescapable — if I am free to choose my own God, Gender and Government I must presumably be free to choose which composers I value most. The very idea of some group of people telling me that something is better, especially something that I am not especially familiar with and that sometimes feels like hard work, is absurd. In our egalitarian world how could we possibly posit that some things are better than others?

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A LITTLE MEMORY, A LITTLE OVERVIEW AND A LITTLE COMMENT



Ronald Stevenson introducing his 1974 documentary about Busoni

absorb its meaning. Needless to say, the *Passacaglia* has also undergone similar ongoing and long term study. [READ MORE ...](#)

I'm not sure what I was actually looking for on that day in the mid-1970s as I wandered the bookshelves of the University library. But, what I found was the *Passacaglia on DSCH* by **Ronald Stevenson** (1928-2015). I opened that music and my situation altered utterly. I ordered my own copy shortly thereafter and it has been either on my piano desk or next to my piano ever since. I have consulted it hundreds — no, thousands — of times.

Now by an odd circumstance a short time later I was browsing the music scores at a small shop and what should I find, but a copy of Ronald Stevenson's *Prelude, Fugue and Fantasy on Busoni's Doctor Faust!* Needless to say I bought the music and spent countless hours playing through it, studying its ideas and doing my best to

PROFILE — BIG ROLES



Michelle Bradley. Photo © Dario Acosta

Ron Bierman: **Puccini** is one of Michelle Bradley's favorite composers, and she's in San Diego to sing his *Tosca* for the San Diego Opera company. We were originally scheduled to talk in person, but a rehearsal change meant *Zoom* was going to work better for an hour discussion.

'I'm happy to be back, and I know that everyone's happy to have me back because I've been treated warmly as always. They check up on me making sure I'm okay, and Southern California feels like a working vacation. After rehearsal I can have a nice walk any time of day. The ocean's close, the mountains, beautiful views. I've made some great friends, and it's a wonderful relationship to have. They seem to think I'm a star.'

Maybe that's because she is. Her rising career will reach a special peak in April when she sings **Verdi's** *Aida* at the Met. It's her favorite role by her favorite composer. Bradley credits what she's achieved to the guidance and help of family, friends, teachers, and a good agent. I'd add, a lot of hard work.

As I watched one of her online interviews in preparation for our discussion, the praise and encouragement of the written comments rolling across the bottom of the screen was extraordinary, and more than half of them came from family and friends.

'I'm very blessed and lucky to come from a very good family. We love each other. I remember going home saying, 'I know what I want to do. I want to be an opera singer.' And they were like, we don't know what that is. But all right, you love singing, so let's do it. And now they fly to my performances. They'll come see me in *Aida* next month. The San Diego schedule didn't work out, but they heard me do *Tosca* in Chicago. And I think I've even sparked an interest in opera. They love to go even if I'm not singing. That's the best for me, bringing more people to it. [READ MORE ...](#)

Also available is the second part of Ron Bierman's interview with the recently departed **Nicolas Reveles**, and Ron's review of Reveles' *Ghosts*. [MORE FROM RON BIERMAN](#) [MORE INTERVIEWS, PROFILES & TRIBUTES](#)

CD SPOTLIGHT — MUSICIANS ON THE ROAD — GIUSEPPE'S LAST CD REVIEW



'The interpreters, Philippe Jaroussky and Christina Pluhar's L'Arpeggiata, are excellent.'

Giuseppe Pennisi: What is the passacaille, the key subject of this CD? The passacaglia — in French *passacaille*, from the Spanish word *pasacalle*, in Italian also anciently *passacaglio*, *passagallo*, *passacagli*, *passacaglie* — is a musical form, of Spanish origin, based on the continuous variation on a theme. The name derives from Spanish and means to pass *la calle*, that is the road, a term that reveals the popular origin of wandering musicians. It is a well-determined derivation of the chaconne, with which it has great affinities. The passacaglia provides a melodic line, normally enunciated the first time alone. It can act alternately as a bass: in this case, it suggests harmony, as singing (and therefore can be harmonized in different ways) or as an internal part of a more elaborate composition. The chaconne, on the other hand, provides for a series of variations on a bass and is subject to an iron rule. It moves from tonic to dominant, with ascending or descending, chromatic or diatonic motion, but all with due and justified exceptions, and proceeds from its beginning to the end as a whole, following a univocal direction and considering the variations as an

integral part of the entire composition.

The passacaglia later becomes a sort of folk dance, but in the Baroque period, it was practically monopolized by classical music, becoming a form widely used in the most disparate contexts. A famous passacaglia — *La Folie d'Espagne* — became one of the most popular themes throughout Baroque Europe.

Up to modern times, many composers have ventured to set it to music — for example Antonio Vivaldi, Arcangelo Corelli, Alessandro Scarlatti, Jean-Baptiste Lully, Francesco Geminiani, Marin Marais, Johann Sebastian Bach, Georg Friedrich Händel in the famous Sarabande, Antonio Salieri, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Liszt, Sergei Rachmaninov, and also famous virtuoso guitarists of the nineteenth century, such as Mauro Giuliani, Fernando Sor or even Ferdinand Rebay.

In addition to being a form in its own right — masterpieces of the genre are the Passacaglia in C minor, BWV 582, by Johann Sebastian Bach and the Passacaglia in D minor BuxWV 161 by Dietrich Buxtehude — the passacaglia can be a constitutive and integral part of other musical forms. For example, Bach himself uses it in the Crucifixus of the Mass in B minor, while Johannes Brahms uses it to finish the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* and in the fourth movement of the Symphony No 4 whose passacaglia is built on thirty-five variations on the theme of the cantata BWV 150 by J S Bach. Also noteworthy is the passacaglia that opens Act V of *Armide*, the *tragédie en musique* by Jean-Baptiste Lully. In the twelve-tone field, Hanns Eisler uses the passacaglia in his *Vierzehn Arten den Regen zu beschreiben*, as a form for No 10, 'Soon etude'. This form has had great success with many composers of all ages.

As for the twentieth century, we should remember the famous Passacaglia for orchestra Op 1, the official compositional debut of Anton Webern and the third movement of Shostakovich's Concerto No 1 for Violin and Orchestra, Op 77.

I consider it useful to provide this background information because the booklet of this CD focuses on the passacaglia during the troublesome period of the succession, in France, from Louis XII to Louis XIV and on the passacaglia as 'courtly song' in those decades rather than on the music origin and style.

The CD includes sixteen different pieces and provides for an excellent anthology of French passacaglia. In short, it features all the main French composers who wrote *airs de cour*. The protagonist is Philippe Jaroussky, one of the main and most appreciated countertenors available internationally. He is accompanied by a specialized ensemble, l'Arpeggiata, which works with period instruments. The ensemble is conducted by Christina Pluhar.

I would suggest to start listening from track 6, *Yo soy la locura*, one of the two Spanish pieces on the CD and reportedly that which gave origin to the passacaglia as well as the title of the album.

Then, I would go to track 13 to compare passacaglia with a ciaccona (by Robert De Visée).

I would, then, juxtapose a highly dramatic passacaglia — *Non spero pietà* by Étienne Moulinié on track 3 — with a happy and brilliant one, also by Moulinié: *Concert de différents oiseaux* — on track 14.

This would give a listener in a hurry a good overview of the passacaglia in France during a period when the Court enjoyed music whilst complex (and cruel) succession plots animated politics.

The interpreters, Philippe Jaroussky and Christina Pluhar's l'Arpeggiata, are excellent.

[READ MORE BY AND ABOUT THE LATE GIUSEPPE PENNISI \(1942-2023\)](#)

We also have recently published CD reviews by [Gerald Fenech](#), [Geoff Pearce](#), [John Dante Prevedini](#) and [Paul Sarcich](#).

Our CD reviews are worth exploring in more detail than shown here. They are all illustrated with short sound samples, usually chosen by the author of each review, and each review has a detailed information page about the album under scrutiny. We also publish a long list of new releases, normally once each month.

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