

## THE RECEPTION OF BACH IN FIN-DE-SIECLE ITALY: GIUSEPPE MARTUCCI'S TRANSCRIPTIONS OF THE ORCHESTRAL SUITES

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Even in nineteenth-century Italy, whose main musical interest was doubtlessly opera and which could fear (including for nationalistic reasons) the cultural colonization of German instrumental music, there were cities where Bach's music was appreciated and sometimes performed, particularly where the Bach cult was promoted by enthusiastic individuals. In Bologna, for example, the significant influence of the erudite scholar Padre Martini was sustained by his disciples; the library of the Liceo Filarmonico, a conservatory-like institution founded in 1804, became the recipient of Martini's extraordinary collection, partly directly after Martini's death and partly after it passed through the hands of his favorite student, Stanislao Mattei. Another librarian in charge of this collection, Gaetano Gaspari, was one of the first organ performers to regularly play Bach's works in Bologna and the surrounding regions.

Another Bach city was certainly Naples, where Francesco Lanza (1783-1862)—a former student of John Field—taught piano at the *Real Collegio di Musica*. Also crucial for the appreciation of Bach was the presence in Posillipo of Sigismund Thalberg, who taught, among others, Beniamino Cesi. In 1855, Thalberg had emphatically advised the students of the *Real Collegio* to systematically study Bach's fugues, giving a good example by opening his recital with one of them (Ferraris 2010: 9).

It is not by chance, therefore, that the life of Giuseppe Martucci substantially revolved around the two poles of Naples and Bologna. Born near Naples in 1856, he was a child prodigy with little formal education, until this same Beniamino Cesi convinced Martucci's father to send him to the local conservatory, where Cesi himself became his piano teacher. Even though Martucci did not complete his formal education and was soon withdrawn from his institutional studies by his family, eager that the young man could earn his living as a concert pianist and teacher, the mark of Cesi's teaching was indelible. Charles Gounod, who met the twenty-two-year-old pianist and composer in Paris in 1878, and who, upon listening to a two-part fugue composed by Martucci, reportedly said: "I see that you have studied a lot of Bach, Mr. Martucci, and I heartily congratulate you" (cited in Perrino 1992: 139).

In Naples, Martucci was soon among the well-known figures of the musical scene; it was a context where instrumental music was highly valued, both in public concerts and in the private circles of the local aristocracy.

In 1886, Martucci was invited to Bologna as the director of the Liceo Musicale, one of the most prestigious institutes for musical education in the country: furthermore, he took charge of the Cathedral Chapel of San Petronio and of the Symphonic Orchestra of the Società del Quartetto.

Under Martucci's directorship, the already lively appreciation for Bach at the Liceo of Bologna received further élan; he also frequently performed Bach's music both as a pianist and as a conductor.

Martucci's zeal for the dissemination of Bach's music is also evident in his activity as a performer, both at the keyboard and as a conductor. I have found no less than forty public concerts (but the number is almost certainly an underestimate) in which Martucci conducted or played works by Bach in some of the most prestigious concert venues in Italy (cf. Bertoglio 2019: 135).

Among his pioneering undertakings was an all-Bach program performed as a pianist at the Conservatoire of Milan (including a flute and a gamba sonata played on the cello), the opening choir of the *Matthäus-Passion* performed in Trieste in 1907 and a double performance of Bach's Cantata *Jesu, der du meine Seele* in Bologna in 1899.

One of his favorite works, however, was the *Air* from the Third Orchestra Suite by Bach, performed by Martucci at least on twelve occasions and sometimes combined with the *Gavotte*. Eventually, in 1896, Martucci conducted what seems to be (and was publicized as) the first integral performance of the D-major Suite in Italy. Starting in 1894, moreover, he included the C-major *Ouverture* in his programs and performed it very often between 1903 and 1906 (as a string quintet with two oboes and bassoon).

If we add up the documented performances of excerpts from the C-major and D-major orchestra suites, we obtain the impressive number of twenty-two concerts, which make up more than half of all documented Bach performances by Martucci (Bertoglio 2019: 135-136). It is no wonder, therefore, that in 1897 he undertook the transcription for the piano of the first three suites.

These were by no means the first or the only transcriptions created or published by Martucci; his catalogue numbers thirty-five collections of transcribed pieces, comprising nearly 160 individual items. Of these, exactly three fourths have the piano as their instrument of destination (Rita 2012).

Bach's orchestra suites, together with Haendel's Concerti Grossi, are exceptional among Martucci's transcriptions in their being complete and major works, as well as for the extreme technical demands they pose on the player. Martucci's first biographer, Fabio Fano, plainly termed them as "nearly unplayable" because, in his words, "the orchestral polyphony of the original works exceeds the possibilities of the instrument—at least in Martucci's system of transcriptions"; thus, Fano acknowledges these transcriptions have "great cultural importance" rather than the right to a place in the standard concert repertoire (Fano 1950: 120). Indeed, Martucci tends to maintain the rich texture of Bach's polyphony whenever possible, even resorting to frequent hand-crossings and complex voice-leading strategies. Not satisfied with preserving all the polyphonic lines, however, Martucci frequently adds imposing octave doublings, particularly (but not exclusively) in the bass; the effect is often reminiscent of organ registration, similar to what happens in Busoni's well-known transcription of the violin Chaconne.

Particularly in the slow movements, the result of Martucci's transcriptions is very majestic, solemn and gigantic to the point of an occasional elephantiasis. This is easily observed by comparing Martucci's transcriptions with those of the same suites realized by Joachim Raff, predating them by a couple of decades. In all likelihood, Martucci knew Raff's transcriptions well and used them as a basis and inspiration for his own work (interestingly, he conducted a symphony by Raff in the very same year when these transcriptions were produced); however, in spite of the undeniable analogies, the very different timbral choices of the two composers are immediately evident. Fascinatingly, the transcriptions by Max Reger for piano four-hands, published another two decades later (in 1911), seem to be indebted to Martucci's concept in their massive treatment of the octave doublings.

Another striking aspect of Martucci's "written performance" is his choice of the tempi, which are carefully indicated by metronome markings. If some of them, such as the *Badinerie* of the B-minor suite, are substantially in accord with those adopted by modern, "historically informed" performances, others are impressively at odds with today's sensibility. The stately pace of some pieces and the overall majestic impression produced by many of Martucci's interpretive choices fascinatingly coincide with many of the contemporaneous witnesses about his performance style. His Bach was defined as "solemn and almost hieratic" by one critic, "measured and stately" by another,

and “serious, nay, rigorous in intentions and means.” Through his performance the “sublime artistry” of Bach’s works was revealed thanks to his performed “analysis, fastidious investigation, order and precision.”

These scores thus represent an invaluable witness—and a very detailed one, even painstakingly so—of Martucci’s interpretive concept. Martucci, as mentioned earlier, was the first to conduct Bach’s D-major Suite in its entirety in Italy: from his piano transcriptions, we may therefore draw inferences as to how this masterpiece by Bach might have sounded to the ears of its first Italian listeners. Though the aural reality of Martucci’s performances has not been preserved in recordings, his transcriptions give us a glimpse on this lost interpretation, and on how the performer’s artistic ideal conditioned the very first reception of Bach’s orchestral suites in Italy.

## References

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