

The Chapel Choir, Oriel College, Oxford

Director of Music: David Maw
Organ Scholar: William McDonald
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Giampiero Innocente is no stranger to social media. Even before we set foot in the plane to head off for Italy, his name was legendary in Oriel College. By the time of our return five days later, we all understood exactly why. Our 2017 tour to Lombardy will go down in the choir's annals as an exceptional one: meticulously organised, socially congenial, musically successful. This was all thanks to Giampiero's skill and industry in organising and galvanising musical events.

The tour began with a breakfast rendez-vous at Gatwick Airport on Tuesday 27th June. It was eventually apparent that all who needed to be were present and we headed towards the plane. Travel was efficient, and we were on time at Milan Linate, where we were met by Giampiero and escorted to Lodi. Our accommodation for the five nights was in the Collegio S. Francesco. We enjoyed the cloistered calm and many of our number acquired a taste for the lemon tea served at breakfast. An initial rehearsal reawakened the vocal chords and set us on good form for the days to follow.

We brought with us an eclectic repertory drawn from the music we had sung for services in Chapel through the year. A first part contained music in Romantic style: Sir Charles Villiers Stanford's brilliantly scored Ascensiontide motet for double choir, 'Coelos ascendit hodie'; Josef Rheinberger's nostalgic *Abendlied*; and two pieces by Felix Mendelssohn, 'How lovely are the messengers' from his Oratorio *St Paul* and 'O, for the wings of a dove,' the celebrated soprano solo from the second half of his anthem 'Hear my prayer,' with Elizabeth Searle as soloist. The central part was devoted to music from the Renaissance and Baroque. A sequence of Christmas pieces began with Tomas de Victoria's 'O magnum mysterium', capturing the mystic awe of the nativity scene, and was followed by two Epiphany anthems, Luca Marenzio's contemplative 'Tribus miraculis' and Orlando di Lasso's effulgent 'Omnes de Saba', in which resourceful scoring for two choirs conveys a sound-image of the Magi's procession. Then there was a trans-European sweep: from the Iberian intensity of Francisco Guerrero's 'Dulcissima Maria' through the Roman swagger of Giovanni Anerio's *Magnificat octavi toni* to the Austro-Bohemian eclecticism of František Tůma's *Canticum Simeonis*, which treats the *Nunc dimittis* as a miniature cantata. The quincentenary of Monteverdi's birth was marked by a lively pair of psalm settings: 'Cantate Domino' and 'Beatus vir'. The final section explored music from the Anglican tradition, initially the earlier end of this. Henry Purcell's joyful symphony anthem, 'Rejoice in the Lord', was a showcase for soloists Malcolm Kittle, Matthew Woolley and William Pickering. William Byrd's 'Senex puerum portabat', from *Gradualia I*, picked up the lambent tone of Candlemas in a closely woven contrapuntal texture. Two twentieth-century works for double choir finished the programme: Sir William Harris's double-choir masterpiece, 'Faire is the heaven', a beautifully sustained setting of words from Sir Edmund Spenser's 'A Hymne of Heavenly Beautie'; and Sir Charles Wood's setting of the Candlemas canticle, *Phos hilaron*, 'Hail gladdening light'. The work has an Oriel connection through John Keble, one-time Fellow at the College, whose translation it sets.

Wednesday 28th June had us on an early departure for Milan. We were generously hosted there by the Università Cattolica. After lunch we rehearsed for the concert in the university's Aula Magna. The concert itself took place in the evening and was well attended despite heavy rain outside. For the Monteverdi pieces we were joined by Giampiero's own choir and a small orchestra of strings and continuo. On this occasion, we added to the set the setting of the hymn *Ave maris stella* from the Vespers of 1610. We were received by a characteristically warm ovation.

Thursday 29th June was a free day. Members of the choir engaged in a temporary diaspora in search of the soul of Italy. For some this was to be found in Milan; others tried Cremona or a lake. It is rumoured there was an excursion to the sea; but some stayed in Lodi seeking out the spirit of Franchino Gaffurio.

Further evening concerts followed on Friday and Saturday. The first of them was adjacent to our accommodation, in the church of San Francesco. A dinner was offered beforehand by the Associazione 'Mons. L. Quartieri', Lodi; and the concert was followed by a drinks reception in the cloister. Once more Giampiero's impresarial genius was in evidence. The church was full and the audience appreciative.

On Saturday we took a coach to Crema. Giampiero was punctilious in explaining to us the meaning of the name Crema and allowing us to appreciate directly its relevance to the local production of ice cream. The Concert in San Bernardino was as well attended as that in Lodi and followed by a reception offered by the Collegium Vocale di Crema. Playing now on home turf, Giampiero excelled himself. It was the highlight of the tour.

Sunday, the final day of the trip, seemed to come too soon, with so much left still untried. We bade a regretful farewell to Lodi and set off by coach for Milan. We were to sing midday Mass at the Basilica San Marco. Movements from Palestrina's *Missa Aeterna Christi munera* were interpolated with motets from the concert programme. With Giampiero on hand to prompt our beginnings, we managed to work our way through the Mass. After the service, we had scarcely enough time to say fond farewells to him and his family before heading for the airport, leaving only a computer and an alto (the latter intentionally) behind.

At the end, all involved felt delighted with their Italian experience, even if so brief a trip inevitably left much for further exploration on cultural, musical and interpersonal levels. The yen to return has remained with us. I am grateful to Marcel Stolz and Yi Yun Soo for their assistance with the organisation of the tour; and to William McDonald for his work on the accompaniments. The hero of the trip inevitably remains Giampiero. Aside from all the time he put into setting everything up for us, he succeeded in channelling a characteristically Italian passion for life, and this inspired our music-making. We are very grateful to him.

David Maw