

LUIGI DALLAPICCOLA

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I am indebted to my friend, Reginald Smith Brindle, who has allowed me to quote from his writings up to 1954.

Luigi Dallapiccola was born on 3 February 1904 in Pisino d'istino, now Pisin in Croatia. His father was the headmaster of an Italian language school who was regarded as a subversive and political activist and so the family were interned in Graz.



I was surprised at the appearance of the book *Dallapiccola On Opera* written by the composer. Dallapiccola did not come across as interested in opera; his appreciation of it was rather limited; his conversation on this subject with both myself and Reginald Smith Brindle, was meagre.

To add to this, Dallapiccola was not an orchestral composer either. When an American orchestra asked him for a new orchestral work, he produced his *Variations* which were an arrangement of piano pieces for his daughter which he had written two years earlier in 1952 with the title *Quaderno Musicale di Annalibera*. I often wondered what became of *Annalibera*; she was particularly interested in archaeology at the time.

The most interesting thing about this book is the autobiographical content. As already mentioned, although Italian, Dallapiccola was born in that part of the country which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was transferred to Italy in 1918 and is now part of Croatia. A year earlier, the family had been forcibly transferred to Graz as Luigi's father was deemed to be a dangerous nationalistic agitator. Hence the boy lived in a state of confusion and all his life and had this fixation about imprisonment as shown in his *Canti di Prigionia* (*Songs of Imprisonment*) (1938 - 41) and his outstanding opera, *Il Prigioniero*.

Because of his unhappy childhood, he was limited in many other ways. He took his piano degree in Florence in the 1020s, In the 1930s he joined the Cherubini Conservatoire where he had studied some ten years earlier with Frazzi. As a professor, Dallapiccola only taught up to grade 3 piano but obstinately stuck at this limited task. By now he was steeped in German philosophy and was also a classics scholar. His mind was preoccupied with Greek myths which explains his last opera *Ulisse* which was completed in 1968.

He was a stiff, rigid authoritarian and not an easy man to deal with. He was a great intellectual but always uncertain of his direction and, as in the case of Elgar, he had a wife who was a major influence upon him although Dallapiccola did not become either a toady or pompous. Mrs Dallapiccola had a strange protective attentiveness towards her husband. She was a Jew, Laura Luzzato and, as Mussolini agreed with Hitler's evil attitude towards the Jews, this created problems for the Dallapiccolas who went into hiding several times. Dallapiccola gave recitals but not in countries occupied by the Germans.

His early work has admirable qualities all of Italian descent. First, there was a hint of Puccini's verismo and a clear melodic line; second, his vocal works were almost like Gregorian chant and, third, his choral works had a retrospective renaissance feel about them. These Italian trends are seen in his best work.

Then there came the time when he embraced serialism and he thought he knew all about twelve-note music but, when studying Webern, he realised that he was also very limited. His work fell into great

decline and, again, he was a prisoner of personal failure. He was not a great composer as Webern was. It takes a real genius to successfully write music in small cells. Instead, his music is often sparse and skeletal and not very inspiring. To add to this, he suffered from another serious handicap experienced by composers, namely the blight of politics. Everyone has a right to their own beliefs but when it soils their artistic output one has to question the whole concept of politics in music.

And yet putting Dallapiccola into a music context, he was a fascinating man, a man of great compassion. He did not suffer from Edwardian arrogance or post-war avant-garde superiority. And, yet, in this welcome book, he writes with some enthusiasm about his operatic works but with less interest about Mozart or Verdi. But what comes through is a personal identity crisis. It is almost as if he is a tragic displaced musician and one can only muse as to what he could have been. History and circumstances can kill the creative ability as can fashion and prejudice.

For many years, I did not warm to the music of Dallapiccola but while studying the subject of the character of the composer is often found in his music, which some dispute, I found that this subject was substantiated and certainly in the music of Dallapiccola. He witnessed the persecution and humiliation of his family when he was a child and they were forcibly moved to Graz. Then there was the Fascist race manifesto of 1938 and the German occupation of Florence during World War II. He was opposed to the Abyssinian campaign and Italy's involvement in the Spanish Civil War and he detested Mussolini. The subject of freedom and liberty became even stronger in Dallapiccola's life. His interests in literary work lead him to compose much vocal and choral music which he felt was the best means of expressing himself and led him away from neo-classic instrumentation.

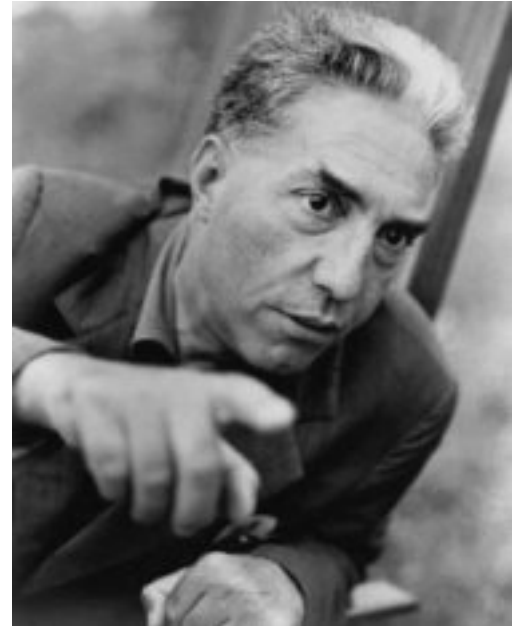
The other great influence in his life was the revelation of the music of Schoenberg which occurred after his hearing *Pierrot Lunaire* in 1924. Information and scores of this music was almost impossible to acquire and for twenty years Dallapiccola pursued this goal. Performances of Schoenberg's work was positively discouraged but here was a new and remarkable way of expressing oneself without the limitations imposed by diatonic and tonal music.

His first work of importance was the orchestral *Partita* of 1932 which has no atonal or dodecaphonic tendencies and may be deemed as neo-classical. It uses orchestral colour to denote emotion. The *Duo cori di Michelangelo Buonarroti di Gavone* for unaccompanied choir of 1933 are amazing pieces. The first, *Il coro delle malmaritate*, is quite superb. The *Three Studies* of 1932 and *Rapsodia* of 1933 are both for voice and chamber ensemble. The *Divertimento* for voice and five instruments of 1934 seem to take the first step on the road to serial music and there followed the third series of the *Sei cori di Michelangelo Buonarroti di Giovanni* of 1936 for chorus and orchestra which creates atmosphere most successfully. The *Tre Laudi* of 1936-7 were written as studies for his opera *Volo di Notte* and are more adventurous pieces testing the possibilities of melodic lines with serial technique. The opera of 1937-9 develops these ideas although the harmonic construction is basically tonal. The opera has an unusual theme Night flying over the Andes. The *Piccolo concerto per Muriel Couvreur* of 1939-41 for piano and chamber orchestra does not show any progress in the composer's development. Rather it is a retrograde step although the treatment of canon is displayed with excellent skill. It has a strange finale with music that suggests a Slav-melody and a rhythm foreign to Dallapiccola's style.

The *Canti di prigionia* of 1938-41 is an expression of the composer being against the race manifesto of 1938. It is a plea for freedom and defiance against the oppressors and if the physical body is imprisoned the spirit can be free. Some of the texts come from Mary Stuart and the scoring is for mixed chorus, two pianos, two harps, timpani, xylophone, vibraphone, bells and a large percussion section. The composer produces an atmosphere of fear and captivity and this is another proof that the man is in his music.

The only orchestra work, which excludes the voice or a solo instrument, is the ballet *Marisa* of 1942-3 in which the composer seems uneasy since the composer preferred to write in an atonal style and that this work belongs to the past and not the present or future. His attitude was reviewed with his

Sonatina canonica on a caprice by Paganini and in the three sets of Greek lyrics for voice and chamber orchestra. The Cinque fragments di Saffo of 1942 comprise constantly of varying material with a freely atonal accompaniment. In Sex Carmina Alcaei of 1943, there is one note row or series presented in various canonic forms. This rigidity is relaxed in Due Liriche di Anacreonte of 1946, the serial writing being more flexible. The Three Poems of 1949 for voice and instruments are poetic and logical in their slow lyrical construction of delicacy which more than suggests his dissimilarity to the Viennese School.



Thereafter, Dallapiccola began his greatest work the opera, *Il Prigioniero*, of 1944-8 in which he seems to deal with the torture of the spirit. The prisoner is constantly fed on hope from his gaoler who eventually allows him to escape but he is led to the gallows and the gaoler is the Grand Inquisitor himself. This is work of great poignancy, expressive beauty and humanitarianism in an atonal style which proves that serial and modern music can be very beautiful. I could dwell on the twelve note series but it is sufficient to state the obvious that this is a powerful piece, an amazing work and quite extraordinary

The sacra rappresentazione *Job* of 1930 is constructed from one note row series and the choral writing is less atonal and the orchestral part is less thematic. In 1951, the composer made this last contact with tonality in *Tartiniana* for violin and orchestra in *Quaderno musicale di Annalibera* for piano of 1952 he is taken with pure dodecaphony and often the music is quite beautiful which contradicts the nonsense that serial music is only a method and can never be anything else. The prejudice and hatred of modern music is born of ignorance and lies. The *Goethe Lieder* of 1953 for voice and three clarinets includes the polyphony of pure dodecaphony. The next work, which again deals with the them of liberty, is the *Canti di liberazione* for chorus and orchestra.

After the War he went regularly to America ... for example Tanglewood in 1951 and 1952 and he taught at Queens College New York from 1956. His opera *Ulisse* of 1968 which took eight years to write was a major achievement, after which the rest of his life was quiet. He composed little at this time but did write *Sicut Umbra* for mezzo and 12 instruments in 1970 which our greatest contralto, the late Sybil Michelow, performed.

Dallapiccola died in Florence on 19 February 1975 from a lung condition.

This essay has proved again that the man is in his music but not necessarily in all of it; that modern music including serial dodecaphonic music is often very beautiful and that the people who condemn modern music are both ignorant and shallow. It also shows, as in my case, that one can be wrong about both music and composers and that some people are so intransigent that they will not admit that they are wrong.

(1852)