

Learning About Eighteenth-Century Neapolitan Musicians

Eleonora Mazzucchi (April 13, 2008)



A preliminary night of the Neapolitan Music Society Sunday's concert at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò with Professor Robert Gjerdingen.

Behind every piece of music, every musical genre, there is a story. On the preliminary night of the Neapolitan Music Society's concert event, [Professor Robert Gjerdingen](#) [2] was on hand to bring one such story to an audience who was discovering, and hearing, for the first time what Neapolitan classical music is.



From the stage of an intimate concert hall at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, Gjerdingen, a professor of Music Theory at Northwestern University, explained how it was that Neapolitan music was overlooked by historians. Humorously he hinted that it was perhaps that those eighteenth-century Neapolitan musicians had "names that sound like pasta"-- in other words, that they were foreign and outside the frame of reference of mostly northern European music historians. But, as academics know now, it is very likely that those same forgotten musicians served as teachers and inspiration to the likes of Mozart and other Austro-German greats. In fact, as Gjerdingen pointed out, Mozart had himself referred to as "Signor Mozart" and Johann Schwartzendorf as "Jean Martini". These were typical efforts at Italianization because at the time, it was Italian music that was most prized.

Tracing back what this Neapolitan music was all about, it is critical to note how the musicians of the genre were formed. Inside 17th and 18th century conservatories, where the Neapolitan style itself was hatched, orphans were being raised into a musical army. Over 10 years of training-- during which, if they could not properly undertake the musical curriculum, they were thrown out on the street-- the orphaned boys learned basic compositional patterns (it was a mechanical process Gjerdingen described as "monkey see, monkey do"). As they progressed they added their own elaborations and flourishes to these foundations, analagous to a blues musician who creatively adds to his chords. The boys could fashion their own advanced pieces of music from an early age, and the result was generations of successful musicians who in, all probability, deeply impacted the history of music.

Prof. Gjerdingen delivered this lecture with passion and earnestness, using an onstage piano to illustrate the evolution of musical pieces over the course of the orphans' training. It seemed that, every time he touched the keys, or played a lovely Romanesca, the audience became moved. Visibly, they were ever eager to hear more.

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