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Ferdinando Sebastiani and The Neapolitan School of Clarinet

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Ferdinando Sebastiani

Unjustly remembered for being the founder of the “Neapolitan School of Clarinet,” Ferdinando Sebastiani (Capua, 1803–Napoli, 1860) is an example of that important character of performer-composer able to collect in himself all those elements of technical-expressive nature that allowed him to become popular in the Italian 19th-century scene.

He was born in Capua on the May 30, 1803, in a family of musicians¹; he studied in Naples at the *Collegio di Musica di S. Sebastiano* with Michele Rupp (clarinet) and Fedele Fenaroli (counterpoint).

As soon as he finished his studies, he became so popular on the Neapolitan music scene, to be soloist clarinet for more than 30 years (1828–ca. 1859) in the orchestras of *Real Teatro S. Carlo*, *Teatro del Fondo* and *Real Cappella Palatina*. In this role he gained an exclusive fame in the orchestral hierarchies and a good fortune, which allowed him, in the Forties, to be one of the members of the enterprise running the Royal Theatres. His bravura as an orchestra player was often noted by the local press. In 1848, for example, the day after the Neapolitan premiere of *I Lombardi* by Giuseppe Verdi, the critic and com-

poser Lauro Rossi wrote in the n° 72 issue of *L'Omnibus*, October 11: “Chiaroscuro, vigour, right tempo, accuracy, all this is found in the whole and particularly in the orchestra, where the prima donna of the S. Carlo excels, Sebastiani’s clarinet [...]”.

Not only an orchestra player, as a soloist he played many concerts in Italy and abroad.

He himself reminds us in a letter of November 6, 1841, about some problems regarding the intonation of the orchestra, sent to the Superintendent of the Teatro S. Carlo: “The undersigned after 30 years of profession not only in Italy but also in France, England and Germany, had to acquire some knowledge about his profession, and to argue with very estimable Maestri and Artists about many aspects of Music [...]”.

In December 1853, after his participation in an academy, the *Gazzetta di Musica* of Naples wrote, “We had the pleasure to listen to Sebastiani in his nice fantasia on the *Semiramide* for clarinet, dispassionate and elegant interpretation of the Pesarese’s sublime music [...]”.

As remembered by the composer Angelo Catalani (1811–1866) in his autograph memoirs, Sebastiani was a friend and a frequent visitor to Donizetti’s home during his stay in Naples: “[...] the small Donizetti’s house became a meeting point for friends, and it was so nice being there. Some musicians used to come there, between them Sebastiani [...] and others came to say good morning to the dear Maestro.”²

He was also highly esteemed by the most important Italian composers of the time, such as Saverio Mercadante, Valentino Fioravanti, Gioacchino Rossini (who named him “*le père des clarinettes*”) and Giuseppe Verdi. The latter composed for him the solo for the *Luisa Miller* overture. But it was not only a professional relationship, because the name of Sebastiani is found even in Verdi’s correspondence. In a letter from Paris, dated December 4, 1853, the Maestro was very affectionate toward him: “A great kiss to Sebastiani [...]”.

Italian 19th-century composers, who were mainly composers of operas, never wrote concertos or sonatas for Sebastiani, like Spohr and Weber did, but all the Soli for clarinet included in the op-

eras performed in the *Real Teatro S. Carlo* in Naples between 1828 and 1859, were composed having in mind the significant expressive ability of Sebastiani.

The only exceptions are the composer and orchestra conductor Giuseppe Festa (1771–1839) who composed three *Duos* for him and the clarinet player Ernesto Cavallini (1807–1874). He dedicated in 1843 his *Fantasia* on Bellini’s *Sonnambula* tunes to Sebastiani, who, in gratitude, gave to one of his children born in that year the name of Ernesto.³

An honorary member of many Philharmonic Academies, Sebastiani taught clarinet for about 30 years at the *Collegio di S. Sebastiano*.

He died in Naples on March, 7 1860.

His Teaching

Sebastiani was between the first Italian teachers who preferred the clarinet mouthpiece with an upward reed, thinking that for the position of the tongue between the end of the mouthpiece and the end of the reed, it could give a wider range of colors in the articulations and, above all, a quicker and more precise staccato: “Some people play with their teeth on the mouthpiece, but this is a big mistake[...]. I decided to play the clarinet with the upward reed, and for very important reasons [...] the movement of the end of the tongue, which jumps more easily up than down: so if the reed were down, the tongue could touch only the end of the mouthpiece[...]. For this reason with the reed placed downward it could be possible to have only the battuto, not the picchettato, nor the staccato and other colors which make the value of the clarinet.”⁴

This type of mouthpiece,⁵ thanks to his teaching, spread quickly all over southern Italy and, supported by a very difficult technical virtuosic study, helped in the creation of the so-called “Neapolitan school of clarinet,”⁶ as it was called in Italy and the rest of Europe,

In the third of the 24 studies for the clarinet, included in his *Method* (1855), Sebastiani gives us an examples of his didactic-virtuosic requests. Through staccato jumps of octave between the lower register (chalumeau) and the higher one, he forces the clarinet player until the highest possible notes of the clarinet, and in between he has to play some ornaments on the lower register. As a part of the didactical work by Sebastiani, this study is a proof of the virtuosity that his pupils could achieve. And Sebastiani was proud and aware of it because he wrote, in the preface of his *Method*, “My pupils showed, in public and

private performances, that the school of clarinet in Naples is as perfect as it is in the other European Conservatories.⁷⁷

As a matter of fact, some of the best Italian clarinet players of the 19th century were Sebastiani's pupils. These included Francesco Pontillo⁸, Romano Aniello Fucito⁹, Francesco Maria Scala¹⁰, Raffaella Gori¹¹ and Palumbo.¹²

Pieces for the clarinet

Playing the role of the virtuoso and busy between theatres and music salons, Sebastiani used to play the clarinet without being influenced by a clarinetism and symphonism of German and French origin. Following the taste of an audience who loved operas, Sebastiani can be considered a typical man of his time. He always put in his compositions a kind of lyricism and inclination to melody, avoiding any complexity and cerebralism, using mainly two forms, the fantasia and the theme with variations and giving life to a technique and a virtuosity appreciated by the public but often opposed by some music critics of his time.¹³

All of his compositions, mostly manuscripts, are kept in the library of the *Conservatorio S. Pietro a Majella* in Naples, unless differently stated, and include:

2 *Fantasia*, Op. 2 for clarinet and orchestra
Concerto, Op. 3 for clarinet and orchestra
Fantastico Concerto for clarinet and orchestra

Rossiniana, *Fantasia* for clarinet and orchestra

Pezzo for clarinet and orchestra
Cavatina di Romeo, by Bellini, arranged for clarinet and orchestra

Adagio e Polacca for clarinet and orchestra
Fantasia Belliniana for clarinet and orchestra

Fantasia sull'opera Semiramide for clarinet piano

Piccolo Fiore for clarinet and piano
Variazioni for clarinet and piano (published by Edizioni Ricordi, Milan)

Cavatina di Norma, nell'opera del M.^o Bellini arranged for clarinet and piano (published in 1838 and reprinted in 1858 by Edizioni Ricordi, Milan)

Fantasia for clarinet and piano (Naples, Girard)

3 *fantasie su motivi d'opera di Rossini e Paer* for clarinet and piano (Paris, Pacini)

Tre Duetti Concertanti for two clarinets
Metodo per clarinetto (published in 1855 by Stabilimento Musicale Partenopeo di Napoli)

Principi Elementari di musica.¹⁴

END NOTES

- Clarinet players were even his brothers Andrea, Enrico and Pasquale, who played in the first half of the 19th century in the orchestra of *Teatro del Fondo di Napoli* (C. Corsi, *Un' Armonia competente: l'orchestra dei teatri reali di Napoli nell'Ottocento*, taken from "Studi verdini" n° 16, Parma, Istituto nazionale di studi verdini, 2002).
- L. F. Valdrighi, *Cataloghi della musica di composizione e proprietà del M° Angelo Catalani preceduti dalle sue memorie autobiografiche*, ristampa anastatica, Bologna, A. Forni Editore, 1980, p. 20.
- Ernesto Sebastiani (Naples, 1843 — Marseille, 1884). He studied piano and composition at the Conservatory of Naples and later was composer and orchestra conductor. In 1868 he moved to Tunisia where he lived for many years. He composed two operas and many piano pieces (DEUM, *Le Biografie*, vol. VIII, p. 210).
- F. Sebastiani, *Metodo per Clarinetto*, Napoli, Stabilimento Musicale Partenopeo, 1855, p. 7.
- For a long time supported by clarinet players of the Neapolitan School, until Arcangelo Picone (1863–1939), it was abandoned only in 1933 when Antonio Micozzi (1886–1948) from Rome was designated as the new teacher of clarinet at the Conservatory of Naples (R. Meucci, *Produzione e diffusione degli strumenti a fiato nell'Italia dell'Ottocento*, in "Accademie e Società Filarmoniche: Organizzazione, cultura e attività dei filarmonici nell'Italia dell'Ottocento." Atti del Convegno di Studi, a cura di Antonio Carlini, Trento, Provincia Autonoma di Trento — Accademia Filarmonica Trento, 1998, p. 112).
- The presence in Naples since the second half of the 18th century of many clarinet players of Austrian origin, among them Joseph Fetter, Ferdinand Sedelmayer and Michael Rupp, later teacher of Sebastiani — helps us to understand why the Neapolitan school of clarinet originated from the Austrian one. This hypothesis, supported even more by the presence of the 30 studies for the violin by Kreutzer transcribed and included in Sebastiani's *Method*, confirms that his teaching reference was influenced by the Austrian school and not, like the other Italian schools of clarinet, the French one.
- F. Sebastiani, op. cit., p. 4.
- Francesco Pontillo (1827–1890), he studied with Ferdinando Sebastiani at the Collegio di musica di S. Sebastiano in Naples. Like his teacher, he taught in the same Conservatory. Aniello Fucito, Rosario Punturi (1844–1890) and Giuseppe De-benedictis (1855–1933) were among his pupils. From 1862 he was a member of the *Società del Quartetto di Napoli*, playing in various concerts. The composer Raffaele Giannetti (1817–1872) wrote two fantasies for the clarinet for him. He composed for clarinet and piano: *Andante* by Thalberg (Milan, F. Lucca, 1878); *Attualità: fantasia sopra canti popolari napoletani* (Milan, F. Lucca, dep. 1878); *Fantasia sulla Traviata del M° Verdi* (Ms., 1864, I-Nc); *Fantasia su varj motivi dell'opera I Martiri di Donizetti* (Ricordi e fratelli Clausetti, 1860 ca.); *Fantasia su varj motivi dell'opera "Poltuo"* di G. Donizetti for clarinet and piano (Naples, Clausetti); *Fantasia sull'opera "Luisa Miller" for clarinet and piano* (unpublished); *Capriccio sull'opera "Virginia" for clarinet and piano* (unpublished). He also composed a *Fantasia* for clarinet and orchestra

(Ms., I-Nc) and a *Mazurka* for clarinet and band (ms. 1876).

- "Fucito is a young clarinet player who does ample justice to our College of Music. Already a pupil of Sebastiani, he completed his studies with Professor Pontillo. He is such a talented clarinet player that every orchestra should be happy for having him, and should give him the role of soloist[...]. As a matter of fact he played his two pieces like an artist, even presenting himself as an elegant composer and a fine connoisseur of his instrument." (See *Gazzetta Musicale di Napoli*, 24 Febbraio 1867, Anno XV, N. 4, p. 3).
- Francesco Maria Scala (1820 ca. –1903), after studying with Ferdinando Sebastiani at the Collegio di S. Sebastiano in Naples, in 1841, he enlisted as a clarinet player on the U.S. frigate Brandywine. Later in America, he made himself known as a composer and conductor of the U.S. Marine Band (1855–1871).
- After studying with Sebastiani, he played in many Neapolitan orchestras. He composed many pieces for band and some compositions for the clarinet, like the *Fantasia su vari motivi degli Orazi e de Curiazzi del Mercadante*, for clarinet and piano.
- "Very talented clarinet player and worthy pupil of the famous and lamented Sebastiani," he studied at the Collegio di Musica in Naples. Later he was first clarinet in the orchestra of the Teatro di Caserta and of the band of the 14th line Regiment. In 1860, in duo with the bassoon player Luigi Caccavaio, in Caserta he performed the duo *La sfida*, composed by the latter. In 1836, for the *Società del Quartetto di Napoli*, he performed the *Quintet for Winds* with the flutist E. Krakamp and other musicians, (see *Gazzetta Musicale di Napoli*, 1860–1863).
- An interesting review published was in the *Rivista Musicale di Firenze*, June 1, 1840, about a concert by the clarinet player Giovanni Bimboni (1813–1893): "Why would such a great artist play music which is a hotchpotch of arias for voice amplified by trills, chromatic scales, etc [...]. We recommend that Mr. Bimboni play real music in his concerts, and then he not only will receive the applause of who loves enjoying himself, but also the applause of who see and revere art in a great artist." (M. De Angelis, *La musica del Granduca*, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1978, p.122).
- It is very probable that this is the first writing from his famous *Method for the Clarinet*.

ABOUT THE WRITER...

Adriano Amore earned the Diploma of Clarinet with full marks at the Music Conservatory in Benevento, then he studied with Gervase de Peyer, Dieter Klöcker, Vincenzo Mariozzi, Ciro Scarponi (contemporary music) and Vladimir Krpan (chamber music). He gave concerts in Italy, Germany, U.S.A., Holland, Slovenia and Switzerland. He has recorded CDs for Sonar, Mea Sound and Folkest Dischi. He is the author of a *Method for the Clarinet* (Edizioni Santabarbara, 1999) and has edited many 19th-century scores and published essays about the musicians Nicola Calandro, Mike Mosiello, Giuseppe Manente and Benny Goodman.