

The Jewish composer Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco was forced to leave his native Florence as a result of Mussolini's 1938 racial laws and settled in Beverly Hills where he remained until his death. In addition to orchestral music, works for classical guitar and film scores, Castelnuovo-Tedesco's catalogue reflects his predilection for the art song, especially for Shakespeare's poetry. He set 33 songs from his plays and 32 sonnets. He also set poems by Dante, Musset, Leopardi, and E. Barrett Browning. In 1936 he composed a song cycle on poems from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. His operas include *La Mandragola* to his own libretto after Machiavelli's comedy.

## 1. *From Primavera Fiorentina to Exodus*

These chapter titles from Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's autobiography, *Una vita di musica*, epitomize the first part of his life.<sup>[1]</sup> He was born into a family of Sephardic Jews. His ancestors left Spain in 1492, at the time of the mass expulsion, and settled in Tuscany. Their family name was originally Castilla Nueva, after the Spanish region they came from. The second name was added by Mario's grandfather in compliance with a legal requirement in order to inherit the property of his sister and her husband, Samuel Tedesco, who died heirless. Both the Castelnuovos and the Tedescos were bankers.

Mario studied piano with Edgardo Del Valle de Paz and composition with Ildebrando Pizzetti at the Cherubini Conservatory in Florence. He wrote his first piano piece, *Cielo di settembre*, when he was only fifteen and later arranged it for a large orchestra. It was premiered at the Politeama Fiorentino under the baton of Pizzetti himself in 1917. Success came early, thanks to his skill as performer and composer and the support of Pizzetti, Alfredo Casella and the short-lived Società Italiana di Musica Moderna.

In the years between the two world wars, many of his compositions figured in the programmes of Italian and other European orchestras and chamber ensembles. His works were regularly published and performed by prestigious soloists like violinist Jascha Heifetz and guitarist Andrés Segovia. In 1930, Castelnuovo's *Variazioni Sinfoniche* (1928) were his first work to be performed in the United States thanks to Arturo Toscanini conducting the New York Philharmonic. A keen promoter of Castelnuovo's music, Toscanini would conduct other major works such as his *Concerto Italiano* for violin with Heifetz as soloist in 1931, and, two years later, the world premiere of the second violin concerto, *I Profeti*, which Castelnuovo dedicated to his Jewish friend Heifetz who commissioned and performed it.<sup>[2]</sup> In 1935 Toscanini conducted one more world premiere at Carnegie Hall: Castelnuovo's Cello Concerto dedicated to and performed by Gregor Piatigorsky.

Castelnuovo was also very active as a music critic. A recent book, *La penna perduta*, contains all his articles and reviews which appeared in major Italian music journals between 1919 and 1936.<sup>[3]</sup> While writing music and reviewing his colleagues' works, the young composer started a family marrying Clara Forti in 1923. Their first son Pietro was born in 1925 (Fig. 1) and another boy, Lorenzo, followed in 1930.



Fig. 1- Clara, Mario and son Pietro

So, in the 1930s, Castelnuovo was a happy family man and a successful musician with a promising future in his Florence and in Europe. But, in those years, the escalation of fascism and the alliance of Italy with Nazi Germany created dangerous conditions for the Italian Jewish community. In 1938, as a consequence of the enforcement of Mussolini's racial laws, Castelnuovo's music was banned: no more radio broadcasts or public performances. At 44 his career was cut short. His children were no longer allowed to attend school. The "Manifesto of the Race" removed both Jewish teachers and students at all levels from the Italian educational system.

The only alternative to discrimination was emigration, the *Exodus*. In the summer of 1939 Castelnuovo took his family to New York where he could count on influential friends such as Toscanini, Heifetz and the violinist Albert Spalding. They were all very helpful in promoting his music and finding him employment. On November 2, 1939, Castelnuovo made his American debut at Carnegie Hall as a soloist with the New York Philharmonic, John Barbirolli conducting, in the first performance of his *Second Concerto* for piano and orchestra.

Heifetz negotiated for him a three-year contract with the MGM Studios in Hollywood and, in November 1940, Castelnuovo moved to California and made his home in Beverly Hills. That was the beginning of a new career as a composer of film scores, first for MGM, then free-lance. Castelnuovo could compose with incredible speed, which was crucial in that kind of job. His name would not be credited when he set single scenes or cues, so he often worked as a 'ghost writer'. His reputation grew fast and other studios commissioned him soundtracks for famous films such as the Twentieth-Century Fox's *And*

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*Then There Were None* (1945), directed by René Clair, and Columbia's *The Loves of Carmen* (1948) with Rita Hayworth in the title role.

More important, he made a remarkable contribution to the development of film music because he trained a whole generation of film score composers like André Previn, John Williams, Henry Mancini. The Los Angeles Conservatory of Music (later California Institute of the Arts) employed Castelnuovo as a composition teacher until his death in 1968.



Fig. 2 Stravinsky and Castelnuovo-Tedesco in Beverly Hills, 1955

Of course, Castelnuovo was not the only European composer to choose Hollywood, and racial discrimination was not the only reason Europeans immigrated to California in those years. During World War II, Los Angeles proved attractive for lots of European intellectuals and artists – mainly Russian and German – seeking a safe haven from Hitler's Europe. The city offered endless creative and financial opportunities. The two major composers of that period, Igor Stravinsky and his great rival, Arnold Schoenberg, chose to live there. Stravinsky had many polyglot, international friends. Castelnuovo was one of them (Fig. 2).

In 1950, the music critic of the «Los Angeles Times», Albert Goldberg, published a series of three articles on “The Transplanted Composer”, an inquiry into the difficulties European composers had experienced in adjusting themselves to life in a new country. The first article reported the responses of Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Castelnuovo-Tedesco. While the first two were rather dismissive on the matter, Castelnuovo offered a detailed and heartfelt account of his personal experience as a Jewish refugee:

As for my own experience, expatriation (and under tragic circumstances) was a bitter test, from which I suffered, at the beginning, almost physically. But morally I never felt ‘cut off’; my Jewish ancestry and my Latin culture were a wealth which I had acquired once and for all; which were within me forever, which I never tried to forget, to dismiss

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or to minimize. [...] All in all today (at 55) I can sincerely tell you that I feel perfectly at peace with myself and with my environment; mainly because, no matter how difficult the external circumstances were, I remained faithful to myself and to my own beliefs.<sup>[4]</sup>



Fig. 3 Castelnuovo in 1961 in Florence, Via de' Bardi, 52

In actual fact, the statement quoted above does not fully convey the impact of the permanent “tragedy” the composer brought on himself leaving his own country for good. Mario and Clara Castelnuovo-Tedesco became U.S. citizens in 1946. Two years later they returned to Italy for the first time and, together with the deep emotion of seeing again Florence, their relations and friends, they also experienced the disheartening feeling of not belonging there anymore. In 1952 they bought a flat near Ponte Vecchio (Fig. 3) in order to have a ‘home’ for their Florentine holidays rather than staying in hotels like foreign tourists, but even that would not dispel their sense of estrangement.

In his autobiography, Castelnuovo recalls that feeling regarding both Italy and his adopted country:

Ma non sarei stato, d’ora in poi, completamente felice né qui né lì, e non sarei appartenuto, in definitiva, a nessuno dei due. Realizzai forse allora per la prima volta quella che doveva essere la vera tragedia della mia vita [...]: la tragedia dell’espatrio! Da allora in poi sarei rimasto per gli Americani “l’Italiano”, per gli Italiani “l’Americano”: ormai per sempre (o almeno per gli anni che mi rimanevano) sospeso fra due mondi!<sup>[5]</sup>

## 2. A polyglot song-writer

Browsing through British periodicals of the 1920s, one finds reviews and articles presenting Castelnuovo-Tedesco as a young Italian pianist and composer whose works were already known outside his own country. As early as 1921, London’s literary journal «The Athenaeum», reviewing a recital of violinist Adila Fachiri at the Wigmore Hall, discussed her programme which, next to Bach and Veracini, included “two very attractive little pieces, still in MS., by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, a pupil

of Pizzetti, whose work is beginning to be known in this country. It well deserves to be, for he is a young composer of much promise. At present he is rather in the virtuoso stage of development, but he should do great things.”<sup>[6]</sup>

A few days after Fachiri’s recital (January 25), the «Musical Times» (February 1) featured the composer in an article by Guido M. Gatti, an Italian leading critic and promoter of modern music. He surveyed Castelnuovo’s production highlighting his songs, the piano pieces and those for violin and piano (like the two sketches *Signorine* performed by Adila Fachiri). In particular, the song cycle *Coplas* (1915), a set of eleven Spanish folk poems, “revealed a strongly musical temperament, an astonishing mastery of means, and a sense of formal perfection quite unusual in a youth of his age. [...] Reading the early works of Castelnuovo, one wonders at finding nothing of the extravagance and want of balance which are a characteristic of youth [...]”.<sup>[7]</sup> Gatti portrayed the composer as a “typical Florentine of to-day, who is not lacking in the spirit of irony and satire characteristic of his city”,<sup>[8]</sup> and closed his survey with a reference to Castelnuovo’s major work in progress which would show “the ironic side of his temperament”, his first opera, *La Mandragola*, from Niccolò Machiavelli’s comedy.

In 1925, the British musicologist Herbert Antcliffe, in an article for the prestigious journal «The Sackbut», expressed a flattering opinion about the composer as a song-writer: “Castelnuovo is the most prolific and versatile of the song-writers whose work I have come across and may well be the founder of a new Italian school of song-writers, for he is still young and is far outstripping his predecessors in this particular respect”.<sup>[9]</sup> Antcliffe examined thirty-five settings by Castelnuovo, ranging from the song-cycle *Coplas* to *3 Fioretti di Santo Francesco* (1919), Leopardi’s *L’infinito* (1921), and some Tuscan lyrics including the lullaby *Piccino picciò* (1922). The critic’s in-depth analysis led him to predict a brilliant future for the composer: “[...] if only he goes on as he has begun he will have not only a position entirely his own, but one of the greatest positions among song-writers of this period”.<sup>[10]</sup>

Meanwhile, Castelnuovo had discovered Shakespeare’s works and developed a deep and lasting passion for the English Bard. Between 1921 and 1925 he set 33 lyrics taken from his tragedies and comedies. They were printed in London by J. & W. Chester as *Shakespeare Songs* in 12 volumes (1926). In the same year, a critical assessment of Castelnuovo’s works appeared for the first time in an American journal, «The Musical Quarterly», thanks to the indefatigable promoter Guido M. Gatti who contributed a long essay on “Four Composers of Present-Day Italy”, the first being Castelnuovo-Tedesco. It was, in fact, a reworking of his previous article for the «Musical Times» with an update on

the composer's latest works, namely the *Shakespeare Songs* ("these pieces are among the most exquisite of all the musician has written, and discover, as always, an intimate comprehension of both the spirit and the language of Shakespeare").<sup>[11]</sup> He also commented on Castelnuovo's earliest essay in vocal music, the medieval French ballad *Le Roi Loys* (1914). He then discussed piano pieces like *Alt Wien. Rapsodia viennese* (1923), *Piedigrotta* 1924. *Rapsodia napoletana* (1924) and finished with larger and more complex works such as the *Concerto Italiano* for violin and orchestra and the Florentine comedy *La Mandragola* ("there is not a word, there is not a note, that does not mark 'atmosphere'; Florence is in the air, omnipresent and hidden, the *deus ex machina* of the comedy").<sup>[12]</sup>

In 1927, Herbert Antcliffe devoted more attention to Castelnuovo in an article for the «Musical Times». He started with a quick reference to the recently published *Shakespeare Songs* ("written with such perfect sympathy and knowledge"), and then discussed at length the thirty-five compositions already examined in «The Sackbut», supporting his analysis with musical examples. *L'infinito* was identified as "the finest song that Castelnuovo-Tedesco has written, and one of the really big songs of our time". The critic commented on the musical rendering of Leopardi's poetic vision: "It is a broadly-conceived work, breathing the atmosphere of the open country and limitless space, of the sea and sky and silence. In construction it is very simple, though for its proper performance it requires artists of the highest qualifications, not only technically, but in matters of perfect sympathy with its sentiments."<sup>[13]</sup>

Antcliffe was also impressed by the religious zeal which inspired the three *Fioretti di Santo Francesco* in the version for voice and orchestra. He was left in no doubt as to the composer's own creed: he had to be "a very good Roman Catholic and an ardent follower of that holy and joyful lover of nature, St. Francis"(!) In line with Gatti who had defined the *Fioretti* as "three symphonic frescoes, conceived as a sort of musical interpretation of Giotto's pictures",<sup>[14]</sup> Antcliffe considered each of the songs as being so long and elaborate to deserve the denomination of *scena*: "Rich in orchestral colour, highly developed thematically, with a strong melodic outline that comes from such development, they employ all possible means to suggest the spirit of the words, the spirit which is as much of the other world as of this, and yet is intensely human."<sup>[15]</sup>

As for Castelnuovo's style, Antcliffe's remarks did not simply concern the *Fioretti* but the composer's overall approach to song-writing: "He is [...] first of all a musician and a composer whose nature calls for expression, and only after that is he an experimentalist as to the best methods of such expression. His songs are songs to be sung, not to be admired on paper for their cleverness." The critic pointed



out that the ‘musical interest’ of the songs was “in the instrumental part, in the development, from a single motive to an elaborate combination of melodies, of his main idea. The voice often takes a part in this, but so far as the actual musical development is concerned, it is only one part among several, the others being taken by the instrument or instruments.”<sup>[16]</sup>

Moving into the 1930s, one finds reviews of Castelnuovo as a performer of his own works with first-rate singers and chamber ensembles. In 1936 «The Times» reported on a concert offered by the Chelsea Music Club which “was devoted almost entirely to the works of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco”. His *Piano Quintet* (1932) was performed by the Griller Quartet with the author himself at the piano. The «Times» music critic was not quite convinced by its youthful exuberance: “After a strikingly beautiful opening, the first movement soon degenerates into a grandiose and noisy rhetoric, the strings often in octaves and the piano part extremely complicated and brilliant. [...] The work as a whole, which was beautifully played, has a certain vitality and rather over-rhetorical grandeur, but it is ineffective as chamber music.”<sup>[17]</sup> Castelnuovo’s vocal pieces, sung by the Italian mezzosoprano Rachele Maragliano-Mori, made a better impression: both the two Spanish songs (“the best works of the evening”) and the three *Chansons par Alfred de Musset mises en musique sur des fragments de Bach* (1925). As Castelnuovo explained in his autobiography, there was a satirical intention behind the *pastiche* he created by fitting French lyrics to some Preludes of J.S. Bach. At the time, many of his major colleagues (including Casella) were ‘returning to Bach’ writing Suites, Partite, Concerti Grossi; so Castelnuovo’s ironic mismatch was just a spoof which irritated older composers (Pizzetti among others) but proved highly successful in Italy and abroad.<sup>[18]</sup>

The “need for song”, as the composer put it, was a profound urge within him throughout his life. In his essay “Music and Poetry: Problems of a Song-Writer” (1944), Castelnuovo dealt with his approach to setting music to a poetic text. First came the choice of a suitable poem. It had to have an “expressive core”, which could awake a “resonance” in the composer’s soul, in a simple and direct form, without too many words. The next point was the “musicality” of the different languages. Of course, to him Italian was the most musical language, but he was ready to acknowledge English as a language “not only of perfect beauty, but also of astonishing ‘musicality’.” It was Shakespeare’s poetry that won him over to the English language, and he could not rest until he had set to music all the songs he could find in Shakespeare’s tragedies and comedies! Castelnuovo professed his boundless admiration for the English Bard in enthusiastic terms, which are even more interesting coming from a Florentine:

In Shakespeare I found my ideal, the greatest human richness, the greatest

psychological profundity, united with the most supple and varied poetry. [...] Shakespeare has seemed to me the most alive and most modern, the most eternal and universal of all poets (more so even than Dante), and I feel him to be a “contemporary”.<sup>[19]</sup>

Castelnuovo admitted that English presented “some remarkable difficulties to the song-writer”; one being the great number of monosyllabic words which are difficult to distribute over an expressive melody. Still, he concluded, “it is perhaps just this – its very lack of ‘sonorous substance’ – that lends English its charm, and makes it one of the most ‘spiritual’ and transparent languages I know.”<sup>[20]</sup>

Lastly, there was the “practical problem – how actually to write a song”.

Castelnuovo’s discussion reminds us of Herbert Antcliffe’s perceptive remarks on ‘expression’ and the importance of the ‘instrumental part’ (see above, p. 7). What is commonly called the ‘accompaniment’, argued the composer, “is by no means the least important portion of a song nor necessarily the easiest one to evolve. To produce it properly is a matter of finding the right atmosphere, the ‘background’, the environment that surrounds and develops the vocal line. It is also a question of expressing through the instrument what the voice alone cannot express. Finally, it is a question of creating something that will combine with the vocal line to form a quite inseparable and complete unity.”<sup>[21]</sup>

Moving from such premises, Castelnuovo put so much care in setting Shakespeare’s lyrics that he sometimes went beyond the pattern of the art song and aimed at a miniature *scena lirica*. It is the case of *The Willow* (1923). In the scene from *Othello* (Act 4), where Desdemona prepares to go to bed, attended by Emilia, she “Sings”: *The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree...etc.* Her foreboding of tragedy emerges in her anguished lament: “Sing willow, willow, willow”. In Castelnuovo’s setting, the piano introduces the “willow” motif in the very first bar. The left hand plays two-note ‘sighs’ in widening intervals (E-D, F-D, G-D) which are then reiterated by the right hand over the D minor tonic chord as the voice enters on “*The poor soul...*”. The piano insists on the “willow” intervals with a crescendo of intensity until the voice joins the instrument and adds words (“Sing willow, willow, willow”) to the already familiar motif (Fig. 4).

The text setting is mostly syllabic. The voice breaks into *quasi parlato* for two brief exchanges



between Desdemona and Emilia. Those interruptions heighten the suspense and widen the range of emotions conveyed by both voice and piano.

Castelnuovo also set 32 out of the 154 sonnets by Shakespeare, the highest number ever set by a single composer. While the *Songs* had been a youthful exercise performed with the enthusiasm of a novice, the composer waited some twenty years before setting the *Sonnets* as he felt he was not “sufficientemente preparato per affrontare queste poesie, che sono fra le più difficili e complesse di tutta la letteratura inglese”.<sup>[22]</sup> Later, he felt very proud of his achievement, and considered his *Sonnets* more perfect than the earlier *Songs* “nello sposalizio, direi, della voce e del commento pianistico, e li considero (in questo campo) come il mio punto d’arrivo”.<sup>[23]</sup>

The image displays a musical score for the piece "The Willow" by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco. It consists of several systems of music, including piano accompaniment and vocal lines. The score is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat major/D minor) and a 4/4 time signature.

- System 1:** Piano introduction. The right hand starts with a *Lentissimo* tempo. The left hand is marked *mp espr.* (mezzo-piano, expressive). A *subito mosso* (suddenly moving) instruction is placed over a melodic line in the right hand, which is marked *mf* (mezzo-forte).
- System 2:** Continues the piano accompaniment. The right hand is marked *p lamentoso* (piano, lamentoso). The left hand has a *p* (piano) dynamic.
- System 3:** Introduction of the vocal line. The tempo is *Lento e doloroso*. The vocal line is marked *p cupo* (piano, cupo). The lyrics are: "The poor soul sat sigh-ing by a sy-camore tree, Sing all a green". The piano accompaniment is marked *perdendosi* (fading away), *p grave* (piano, grave), and *triste* (sad).
- System 4:** Continues the vocal line. The lyrics are: "wil-low; Her l". The piano accompaniment is marked *ppp* (pianissimo) and *mp espr.* (mezzo-piano, expressive).
- System 5:** Continues the vocal line. The lyrics are: "Sing wil-low, wil-low, wil-low! Sing". The piano accompaniment is marked *pp* (pianissimo).

Fig. 4 Castelnuovo-Tedesco, The Willow

In 1936, halfway between the completion of the *Songs* (1925) and the setting of the *Sonnets* (1944-1963), Castelnuovo discovered and fell in love with Walt Whitman's poems, which he would later define as "così piene di calore, di entusiasmo, di solidarietà umana".<sup>[24]</sup>



Fig. 5 Whitman in the Famous Americans Series, Postal issue 1940

Whitman's reputation as "the bard of American democracy" (Fig. 5) reached Italy at a time when there was a lively interest in American literature, especially among antifascist intellectuals: it meant modernity and freedom from the rhetoric of the Fascist regime. The writer Cesare Pavese was one of the first admirers of his poetry.

Whitman is rightly considered as a "musicians' poet". His poems, and particularly his major work, *Leaves of Grass*, attracted the attention of European composers such as Delius, Holst, Vaughan Williams, Grainger, Hindemith. Castelnuovo first set some single poems (*I saw in Louisiana, Ocean*). Then he arranged a song cycle from *Leaves of Grass* choosing ten poems from the *Calamus* cluster, named after the calamus plant symbolizing "manly attachment", one of the recurrent motifs in Whitman's poetry.<sup>[25]</sup>

Castelnuovo was, of course, well aware of the risky choice he was making in setting poems with a homoerotic character. This is quite explicit in one of them: "We Two Boys Together Clinging", which is one of his most brilliant settings. The composer infuses excitement and dynamism into the brisk piano accompaniment while the voice part has a hectic crescendo that reaches its climax on the last line of the poem conveying a sense of achievement, of liberation:

*We two boys together clinging,*

*One the other never leaving,*

*Up and down the roads going, North and South excursions making,*

*Power enjoying, elbows stretching, fingers clutching,*

*Arm'd and fearless, eating, drinking, sleeping, loving.*

*No law less than ourselves owning, sailing, soldiering, thieving, threatening,*

*Misers, menials, priests alarming, air breathing, water drinking, on the turf or*

*the sea-beach dancing,*

*Cities wrenching, ease scorning, statutes mocking, feebleness chasing,*

*Fulfilling our foray.<sup>[26]</sup>*

Most likely, Castelnuovo aimed at voicing a discreet critique of fascism through Whitman's poems, as John Champagne argues in his study on modernism and masculinity in fascist Italy.<sup>[27]</sup> Eight years later, the composer closed his essay on "Music and Poetry" with a flattering reference to Whitman:

And let me express a hope: that English-speaking people (Americans especially) find in their admirable poetry – which has given so much joy to me, an Italian – a rich source of inspiration for their song literature, towards the furthering of happiness and fraternity among men, as their great poet Whitman would have wished.<sup>[28]</sup>

Whitman's message of universal brotherhood comes through very strongly in the last poem of the song cycle Castelnuovo set in 1936: "The Base of All Metaphysics". The very experience of his own life inspired him to endorse it wholeheartedly:

[...]

*Yet underneath Socrates clearly see, and underneath Christ the divine I see,*



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*The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend,*

*Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents,*

*Of city for city and land for land.*<sup>[29]</sup>

How modern was Castelnuovo-Tedesco as a composer in the first half of the twentieth century? To what extent did he care to be? And what did *modern* mean anyway?

The second edition of *The Book of Modern Composers* (1950) – a sort of *Who's Who* of living musicians from all over the world – opened with an “Introduction” by Nicolas Slonimsky who stated bluntly: “Modern music is not necessarily new, and new music is not necessarily modern.”<sup>[30]</sup> Each entry of the *Book* consisted of a short “Biography”, a middle section: “The Composer Speaks”, a third section with an assessment of the composer by some music critic. Italy was represented by Pizzetti, Malipiero and Castelnuovo-Tedesco. The assessment of Pizzetti was contributed by Castelnuovo. As for his own entry, in the section “The Composer Speaks”, Castelnuovo disclosed his artistic references: “My principal sources of inspiration have been: my homeplace (Florence and Tuscany), the Bible, and Shakespeare”.<sup>[31]</sup> This is how the Florentine Jewish Anglophile defined his own aesthetic:

I do not believe in theories. I have never believed in modernism, or in neo-classicism, or in any other isms. I believe music is a form of language capable of progress and renewal (and I myself believe that I have a feeling for the contemporary and, therefore, am sufficiently modern). Yet music should not discard what was contributed by preceding generations. Every means of expression can be useful and just, if it is used at the opportune moment (through inner necessity rather than through caprice or fashion). The simplest means are generally the best.<sup>[32]</sup>

The critical assessment of Castelnuovo's compositional style was entrusted to Roland von Weber. He simply endorsed the composer's aesthetic: “Here are no problems, no experimentalism, no intellectualism, no disjointed modernism, no reassembled chords, and no theories to be explained, but a clear, direct expression which has matured by deepening itself and subtilizing its techniques.”<sup>[33]</sup>

Weber praised the three stage works Castelnuovo had composed up to 1950 (*La Mandragola*, *Bacco in*

*Toscana and Aucassin et Nicolette*). The three-act opera *La Mandragola*, composed in 1920-23, won the top prize of a Concorso lirico nazionale in 1925 and was premiered in Venice at La Fenice in 1926. The critic considered it as “one of the most brilliant comedies that has graced the Italian operatic stage since Verdi’s *Falstaff*. A musical setting of the wittiest and bawdiest drama of the golden age of the Renaissance, the opera is Florentine to the end of Machiavelli’s diabolical teeth and the composer’s honey-and-vinegared pen.”<sup>[34]</sup>

Just as he had done with Machiavelli’s comedy, Castelnuovo himself abridged Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (1956), premiered at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino in 1961, and *All’s Well That Ends Well* (1955-1958, unpublished). His Tuscan humour emerges in his adaptation of Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1962), a brilliant chamber opera scored for two pianos and percussion.<sup>[35]</sup>

His stage works, much less well known than his guitar music, lie awaiting rediscovery and appreciation, and might yield up pleasant surprises just like his art songs which testify to Castelnuovo’s refined metier and cosmopolitan taste.<sup>[36]</sup>

## NOTES

1. Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, *Una vita di musica*, a cura di James Whestby, Fiesole, Cadmo, 2005. The two titles refer to ch. 12 and ch. 70 of Part 1, *In Italia*. [↑](#)
2. The title – *The Prophets* – shows the influence of old Hebrew music. Its three movements attempt to characterize three major Biblical prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Elijah. [↑](#)
3. Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, *La penna perduta*, a cura di Mila De Santis, Roma, Aracne, 2017. [↑](#)
4. Albert Goldberg, “The Transplanted Composer”, «Los Angeles Times», May 14, 1950, p. H5. [↑](#)
5. Castelnuovo-Tedesco, *Una vita di musica*, cit., p. 492. [↑](#)
6. «The Athenaeum», Feb. 4, 1921, p. 135. [↑](#)
7. Guido M. Gatti, “Some Italian Composers of To-day. 1. –Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco”, «The Musical Times», February 1, 1921, pp. 93-97: 93. [↑](#)
8. Gatti, cit., p. 94. [↑](#)
9. Herbert Antcliffe, “Some New Italian Songs”, «The Sackbut», Nov. 1925, pp. 112. [↑](#)
10. Antcliffe, cit., p. 113. [↑](#)
11. Guido M. Gatti, “Four Composers of Present-Day Italy”, «The Musical Quarterly», Vol. 12, No. 3 (July 1926), pp. 449-471: 455. The other composers featured in the essay are: Vincenzo Davico, Riccardo Pick-Mangiagalli and Vincenzo Tommasini. [↑](#)



12. Gatti, cit., p. 456. [↑](#)
13. Herbert Antcliffe, "Some Songs of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco", «The Musical Times», May 1, 1927, p. 411. [↑](#)
14. Gatti, cit., p. 454. [↑](#)
15. Antcliffe, cit., p. 412. [↑](#)
16. Antcliffe, cit., p. 413. [↑](#)
17. «The Times», Oct. 30, 1936, p. 14. [↑](#)
18. Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, *Una vita di musica*, a cura di James Westby, Cadmo, Firenze, 2005, p. 161. [↑](#)
19. Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, "Music and Poetry: Problems of a Song-Writer", «The Musical Quarterly», Vol. 30, No. 1 (Jan., 1944), pp. 102-111: 108. [↑](#)
20. Castelnuovo-Tedesco, cit., p. 108. [↑](#)
21. Castelnuovo-Tedesco, cit., p. 110. [↑](#)
22. Castelnuovo-Tedesco, *Una vita di musica*, cit., p. 451. [↑](#)
23. Castelnuovo-Tedesco, cit., p. 453. [↑](#)
24. Castelnuovo-Tedesco, cit., p. 283. [↑](#)
25. The name Calamus comes from an ancient Greek poem – *Dionysiaca* – by Nonnus, about the life of Dionysus. In one episode, Kalamos and Karpos, two handsome youngsters in love with each other, take part in a swimming contest organized by Dionysus. Karpos drowns; Kalamos, incapable of living without him, commits suicide and is transformed into a water reed, whose rustling in the wind will be interpreted as a sigh of lamentation. The scientific name of that water reed is *Acorus Calamus*. On Whitman and the *Calamus* cluster see Joseph Cady, "Not Happy in the Capitol: Homosexuality and the *Calamus* poems", «American Studies», Vol. 19, No. 2, Fall 1978, pp. 5-22. [↑](#)
26. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, New York, Doubleday, 1919, p. 156. [↑](#)
27. John Champagne, *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy*, London and New York, Routledge, 2013. The author states that Castelnuovo's cycle should be heard "as an attempt to fabricate an 'unsayable' critique of fascism" (p.126). On the historical context of Castelnuovo's song cycle see also John Champagne, "'Il mito americano' and Masculinities of the Fascist Era", «The Modern Language Review», Vol. 111, No. 4 (October 2016), pp. 988-1003. [↑](#)
28. Castelnuovo-Tedesco, "Music and Poetry: Problems of a Song-Writer", cit., p. 111. [↑](#)
29. Walt Whitman, cit., p. 147. [↑](#)
30. *The Book of Modern Composers*, ed. by David Ewen, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1950, p. 3. [↑](#)
31. Castelnuovo-Tedesco, "The Composer Speaks", *The Book of Modern Composers*, cit., p. 392. [↑](#)

32. Idem, p. 393. [↑](#)
33. Roland von Weber, “Castelnuovo-Tedesco”, *The Book of Modern Composers*, cit., p. 395. [↑](#)
34. Weber, cit., p. 397. [↑](#)
35. For a discussion of Castelnuovo’s operas see Nick Rossi, “A Tale of Two Countries: The Operas of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco”, «The Opera Quarterly», 7, No. 3 (1990), pp. 89-121. [↑](#)
36. [↑](#)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### Matteo Sansone

Matteo Sansone studied piano and composition at the Conservatorio S. Pietro a Majella, Naples, and graduated in English Language and Literature from the Istituto Universitario Orientale. He received his PhD from Edinburgh University where he also taught for many years. He taught Italian at the University of Malta and at St. Andrews University. His main research areas are late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Italian opera with a focus on Verismo, and the relationship between opera and literature. His essays have appeared in *Italian Studies*, *Music & Letters*, *California Italian Studies*, *Civiltà Musical*, and *Early Music*. He has co-authored a book on Italian and Maltese Music (Malta, 2001) and has written entries for *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, *International Dictionary of Opera*, *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. He is the Florence correspondent for the London monthly *Opera*.