NAXOS

Goffredo **PETRASSI**

Concertos for Orchestra
Nos. 1–3

Orchestra Sinfonica di Roma
Francesco La Vecchia

Goffredo
PETRASSI
(1904–2003)

(Primo) Concerto per orchestra (1933–34)   **28:46**

①	I. Allegro	8:10
②	II. Adagio	8:28
③	III. Tempo di marcia	6:08

Secondo Concerto per orchestra (1951)   **17:09**

④	Calmo e sereno – Molto mosso con vivacità –	7:00
⑤	Allegretto tranquillo –	3:13
⑥	Molto calmo, quasi adagio –	3:38
⑦	Presto	3:18

Récréation concertante –
Terzo Concerto per orchestra (1952–53)   **20:46**

⑧	Allegro sostenuto ed energico – Allegro spiritoso –	5:28
⑨	Molto moderato –	3:48
⑩	Vigoroso e ritmico –	5:06
⑪	Adagio moderato –	3:37
⑫	Allegretto sereno	2:50

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Goffredo Petrassi was born in Zagarolo, near Rome, on 16 July 1904. His family relocated to Rome in 1911, where he became a choirboy at the Schola Cantorum of the Chiesa di San Salvatore in Lauro – as decisive a catalyst for his musical career as his work from 1919 at a music shop to supplement parental finances. From 1928 he studied organ and composition at the Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia where, in 1936, he was appointed teacher in the first of a series of prestigious posts – culminating in his being professor of composition during 1940 to 1960, then head of its masterclass in composition from 1960 to 1978. He also taught at the Mozarteum in Salzburg. From 1937 to 1940 he was superintendent of Teatro La Fenice in Venice where he organised the Biennale, the international festival devoted to contemporary music.

Petrassi's reputation was established in 1932, when his *Partita* attracted popular and critical acclaim. That year it won the Contemporary Music Award of the National Musicians Union and was selected by the Società Internazionale di Musica Contemporanea (SIMC) for both its festivals in Amsterdam (1933) and Prague (1935). Comparable inspiration in traditional Italian dances is apparent in the *Introduzione e Allegro* (1933), whose adherence to neo-Classicism is countered by more modern traits expressed via allusions to jazz and a marked timbral asperity. Works such as his *Ouverture* (1931) show the influence of Hindemith and Stravinsky. Sacred choral compositions, such as *Psalm IX* (1934–36) or the *Magnificat* (1939–40), refer to Baroque polyphonic music with the sacred aspect evident in a luminous and solemn rituality.

In the 1940s, as a direct experience of working at the Teatro La Fenice, Petrassi turned to the theatre, composing the ballets *La follia di Orlando* (1943), then *Ritratto di Don Chisciotte* (1945), both in collaboration with choreographer Aurelio Milloss. He enjoyed further success with his two one-act operas: *Il cordovano* (1944–48), derived from Cervantes and translated by Eugenio Montale, then *Morte dell'aria* (1949–50), with its libretto by Toti Scialoja. Religious inspiration was to find further expression towards the end of the composer's life. Of particular significance are the cantata *Noche oscura* (1950–51), to a poem by San Giovanni della Croce, and *Propos D'Alain* (1960) – the idea for which had come directly from one of the *Propos sur le christianisme* of Alain Chartier. In his last years Petrassi was at work on a Mass, of which he managed to complete the *Kyrie* (1986), but got no further than the beginning of the *Gloria* when failing eyesight intervened. He died in Rome on 2 March 2003 at the age of 98, his significance to 20th-century European music duly acknowledged well beyond his homeland.

The concept of a 'concerto for orchestra' can be traced back several centuries (at least to the first *Brandenburg Concerto* of Bach), but the earliest work so designated is by Hindemith of 1925. Petrassi's [*First*] *Concerto for Orchestra* was begun in December 1933 and completed a year later. Premiered in Rome by Bernardino Molinari with the Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia (Symphony Orchestra of the Augusteo) on 31 March 1935, it secured his reputation outside Italy. Tautly argued, its three movements are a distinctive take on neo-Classicism from the inter-war years.

The opening *Allegro* launches straight in with an incisive theme, brass to the fore and with interjections on piano an indication of the crucial role it has in what follows. A second main idea is stealthier with a martial undertow, but the momentum persists through to a forceful climax, after which, the second idea yields greater repose with alto saxophone making its haunting presence felt. At length the initial theme steals back in, then the movement heads remorselessly to its decisive close. The central *Adagio* starts ethereally on strings, and this continues with a ruminative dialogue for clarinets then oboes. Trumpets sound an ominous tone, the piano initiating a steady ostinato rhythm on which strings and woodwind build to a powerful culmination with that earlier dialogue now majestic on brass. This dies down to leave woodwind and strings musing on elements heard previously, before saxophone sees a return to the initial stasis. The final *Tempo di marcia* picks up where the first movement left off, its impetuous initial idea affording contrast with the capricious manner of its successor. This soon heads to a forceful climax, before the second theme underpins a quieter and more speculative passage that brings a return to the earlier idea then a purposeful advance towards the movement's culmination, rounding off the work with its sequence of peremptory chords.

The 1950s saw the composition of most of Petrassi's concertos for orchestra – *Nos. 2* to *6* being written during the period 1951–57, during which his earlier neo-Classical idiom took on more modernist tendencies that increasingly reflected the influence of the avant-garde in Western Europe. Each one is original as regards both its form and its instrumentation, with a notable range of compositional processes – taking in athematicism to serialism, and from continuous variation to rhythmical flexibility – harnessed to a tangible emotional expression. Written in 1951, the *Second Concerto for Orchestra* was commissioned by Paul Sacher who premiered it in Basel with his Basler Kammerorchester on 25 January 1952. Playing continuously, the four compact movements outline a musical argument perceivable as an unbroken whole.

After an arresting chordal gesture, the first movement proceeds with eloquent polyphony on strings that incrementally gains in impetus when woodwind come to the fore. Its expressive poise is complemented with more ambivalent asides and sparer textures, the music building to an impassioned climax before it suddenly exudes a livelier and more animated manner, bringing this movement to an expectant close. This is taken up in the *Allegretto* (its following on without pause is to become a regular formal feature of these concertos hereafter), whose inquisitive character and lively rhythmic undertow inform the unfolding dialogue between woodwind and strings. A sudden outburst does little to ruffle the prevailing understatement, which soon slows down then embraces a rapt calm that indicates the beginning of the slow movement. This continues upon its elegant course at some length, the woodwind appearing individually and in dialogue as the music reaches a brief apex before returning to its earlier tranquillity. A stark chord on woodwind ushers in the closing *Presto*, whose swifter motion persists through a series of piquant and imaginative exchanges between the solo instruments while the pace increases incrementally prior to a coming together of the full orchestra. The conclusion is deft but decisive, so ending a work appreciably more than the sum of its parts.

Written from October 1952 to April 1953, Petrassi's *Third Concerto for Orchestra* was premiered by Hans Rosbaud with the Südwestfunkorchester Baden-Baden in Aix-en-Provence on 23 July 1953. Its five movements have a deftness and playfulness ever more crucial to his idiom.

The opening *Allegro* erupts on percussion and brass, then leads to tense exchanges between woodwind and strings continuing that initial energy through subtler means. Retaining its initial intensity, the music belatedly re-encounters that explosive opening gesture – after which, a sequence of stuttering chords leads into the second movement. This unfolds as a calm, if highly atmospheric, intermezzo with horns, woodwind and upper strings to the fore with just a brief interjection on percussion. The latter regains its prominence in the central *scherzo*, marked 'vigorous and resolute', with animated interplay over the orchestra plus a correspondingly wide range of timbre and texture (equally to the fore in those works that followed). The sardonic manner of its central trio is particularly distinctive and re-emerges towards the close, heading straight into a slow movement of a spaciousness and repose out of all proportion to its length. Woodwind and strings thoughtfully exchange gestures during its later stages, with the initial calm maintained into a finale that is less a decisive rounding-off, as were its two predecessors, than one that brings a certain levity to the musical content. In due course this arrives at a point of neutral calm, only for a final eruptive gesture to echo into silence, having brought this whole work unexpectedly though satisfyingly full circle.

Richard Whitehouse

Orchestra Sinfonica di Roma
Francesco La Vecchia

The Rome Symphony Orchestra was established in 2002 by the Rome Foundation (Fondazione Roma Arte – Musei), a rare example in Europe of an orchestra that was completely privately funded. Under its artistic and musical director Francesco La Vecchia who, in turn, set up the Fondazione Arts Academy, the orchestra performed regularly in Rome at the Teatro Argentina, Teatro Sistina and Auditorium Conciliazione. It received critical and public recognition at distinguished venues in Asia, the Americas and Europe, with notable success in 2007 at the Berlin Philharmonie. The orchestra also undertook a wide-ranging and well received series of recordings, principally for Naxos, of important compositions by Italian composers of the 19th and 20th centuries, including Busoni, Catalani, Ferrara, Ghedini, Malipiero, Mancinelli, Martucci, Mercadante, Petrassi, Sgambati and Wolf-Ferrari. Many of these are world premiere recordings. The orchestra was dissolved in 2014 not long after giving the first modern performance of Giovanni Sgambati's *Symphony No. 2*.

Goffredo Petrassi's reputation was established in 1932 when his *Partita* (available on Naxos 8.572411) won critical acclaim. Petrassi then composed his *Concerto for Orchestra*, the first of eight, which, upon its 1935 premiere, secured his reputation outside of Italy. The *Second Concerto* from 1951 reveals more avante-garde tendencies, while the *Third Concerto* from 1952–53 is animated and playful.

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