

Don Bosco and music

written by P. Natale CERRATO | November 21, 2024

For the education of his youngsters Don Bosco made much use of music. Even as a boy he loved singing. As he had a beautiful voice, Mr Giovanni Roberto, head cantor of the parish, taught him Gregorian chant. Within a few months, John was able to join the orchestra and perform musical parts with excellent results. At the same time, he began to practise playing a spinet which was a plucked string instrument with a keyboard, and also the violin (BM I, 173).

As a priest in Turin, he acted as music teacher to his first oratory boys, gradually forming real choirs that attracted the sympathy of the listeners with their singing.

After the opening of the hospice, he started a school of Gregorian chant and, in time, also took his young singers to churches in the city and outside Turin to perform their repertoire.

He composed hymns such as the one to the Infant Jesus, *'Ah, let us sing in the sound of jubilation...'*. He also initiated some of his disciples into the study of music, among them Fr John Cagliero, who later became famous for his musical creations, earning the esteem of experts. In 1855 Don Bosco organised the first instrumental band at the Oratory.

He did not, however, get ahead of the good Don Bosco! Already in the 1860s he included a chapter on evening music classes in one of his Regulations in which he said, among other things:

'From every student musician a formal promise is demanded not to go and sing or play in public theatres, nor in any other entertainment in which Religion and morality could be compromised' (MB VII, 855).

Children's music

To a French religious who had founded a festive Oratory and asked him if it was appropriate to teach music to boys, he replied: *'An Oratory without music is like a body without a soul!'* (BM V, 222).

Don Bosco spoke French quite well albeit with a certain freedom of grammar and expression. One of his replies concerning the boys' music was famous in this regard. Father L. Mendre of Marseilles, parish priest of St Joseph's parish, was very fond of him. One day, he sat beside him during entertainment in the Oratory of St Leo. The little musicians would occasionally play a flat note or

two. The abbot, who knew a lot about music, winced each time. Don Bosco whispered into his ear in his French: "*Monsieur Mendre, la musique de les enfants elle s'écoute avec le coeur et non avec les oreilles*" (Father Mendre, children's music is listened to with the heart and not with the ears). The priest later recalled that occasion countless times, revealing Don Bosco's wisdom and goodness (BM XV, 58 n.3).

All this does not mean, however, that Don Bosco put music before discipline in the Oratory. He was always amiable but did not easily overlook failures of obedience. For some years he had allowed the young band members to go for a walk and a country lunch on the feast of St Cecilia. But in 1859, due to incidents, he began to prohibit such entertainment. The youngsters did not protest openly, but half of them, urged on by a leader who had promised them to obtain permission from Don Bosco, and hoping for impunity, decided to leave the Oratory anyway and organise a lunch of their own accord before the Feast of St Cecilia. They had taken this decision thinking that Don Bosco would not notice and would not take action. So they went, in the last days of October, to lunch at a nearby inn. After lunch they wandered around the town again and in the evening they returned to dine at the same place, returning to Valdocco half-drunk late at night. Only Mr Buzzetti, invited at the last moment, refused to join them and warned Don Bosco. The latter calmly declared the band disbanded and ordered Buzzetti to collect and lock up all the instruments and think of new pupils to start instrumental music. The next morning, he sent for all the unruly musicians one by one, telling each of them that they had forced him to be very strict. Then he sent them back to their relatives or guardians, recommending some more needy to city workshops. Only one of the mischievous boys was later accepted because Fr Rua assured Don Bosco that he was a naive boy who had allowed himself to be deceived by his companions. And Don Bosco kept him on probation for some time!

But with sorrows one must not forget consolations. 9 June 1868 was a memorable date in Don Bosco's life and in the history of the Congregation. The new Church of Mary Help of Christians, which he had built with immense sacrifices, was finally consecrated. Those who were present at the solemn celebrations were deeply moved. An overflowing crowd packed Don Bosco's beautiful church. The Archbishop of Turin, Archbishop Riccardi, performed the solemn rite of consecration. At the evening service the following day, during Solemn Vespers, the Valdocco choir intoned the grand antiphon set to music by Fr Cagliero: *Sancta Maria succurre miseris*. The crowd of faithful was thrilled. Three mighty choirs had performed it perfectly. One hundred and fifty tenors and basses

sang in the nave near the altar of St Joseph, two hundred sopranos and contraltos stood high up along the railing under the dome, a third choir, made up of another hundred tenors and basses, stood on the orchestra that then overlooked the back of the church. The three choirs, connected by an electric device, maintained synchrony at the Maestro's command. The biographer, present at the performance, later wrote:

"The harmony of all three choirs singing in unison cast a spell over the entire congregation. As the voices blended together, the listeners felt that they had been immersed into a sea of voices which rose from all directions. During the singing, Canon John Baptist Anfossi was kneeling behind the main altar with Don Bosco. As far as he could remember, he had never seen or heard Don Bosco stir or say anything while at prayer. On this occasion, however, Don Bosco looked at him with moist eyes full of joy and whispered, 'Dear Anfossi, doesn't it feel like being in heaven?'"

(BM IX, 128).