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Press Conference to present the “Perosian Year”

At 11.30 this morning, a press conference was livestreamed from the Holy See Press Office to present the “Perosian Year”, celebrated on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Msgr. Lorenzo Perosi, nineteenth-century maestro and director of the Pontifical Sistine Chapel Choir, to be inaugurated this coming 21 December.

The speakers were Msgr. Vincenzo Di Gregorio, dean of the Pontifical Institute for Sacred Music; dean of the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music; Msgr. Carlos Alberto de Pinho Moreira Azevedo, delegate of the Pontifical Council for Culture; Msgr. Guido Pozzo, economic superintendent of the Pontifical Sistine Chapel Choir; Msgr. Marcos Pavan, maestro director of the Pontifical Sistine Chapel Choir; and Professor Daniele Maggione, organizer and editor of the “Perosian Week” (14 to 21 December 2022).

The following is the intervention by Msgr. Vincenzo Di Gregorio:

Intervention of Msgr. Vincenzo Di Gregorio

How and why it was decided to celebrate a year dedicated to Lorenzo Perosi

When the first, timid torch was lit, which would gradually inspire enthusiasm among music lovers, to commemorate the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Lorenzo Perosi’s birth, the initiatives, as was to be expected, also touched the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music. The question arose: what to say and remember about the maestro of Tortona? There are numerous and extensive publications concerning the epistolaries, paths and developments of a luminous and, in some ways, coherent career without internal fractures. But it is also necessary to offer, today, a faithful view of the character, which certainly does not offer an easy approach.

Lorenzo Perosi is a complex and complicated figure for two reasons:

a. The first reason is linked to his life experience as a priest following a professional musical path of great depth: he was not a priest who knew about music, not a priest who had carried out important musical studies and had acquired significant professional skills in music. He was a musician, a composer, an artist. All this made him, as

happens to all artists, transcendent in relation to canons and stereotypes.

b. The second reason is constituted by musical/cultural, ecclesial and ecclesiastical contexts that, as soon as one considers his human and musical poetics, place him at the nerve centre of the Church (he was the “perpetual” director of the Pontifical Sistine Chapel Choir) but, in other respects, at the margins.

The Roman Catholic Church of Lorenzo Perosi. The Church of Lorenzo Perosi was the western Church caught between the last flare-ups of the anticlerical *Risorgimento*, the crushing internal troubles - the outcome of the dangerously lacerating vicissitudes of Modernism - and the anxieties of that new century that just after its midpoint would be the womb of the startling novelties of the pontificate of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council.

Lorenzo Perosi: do we really know him? Barely a hundred and twenty years separate us from 1902, when Leo XIII ordered the dismissal of *castrato* sopranos from the Sistine Chapel.

We can only remotely imagine how much publicity from the circles of positivism, socialism, and anticlericalism played amusedly on the presence of the *castrato* singers in the Sistine Music Chapel, the exemplary heart of the great polyphonic musical tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. Meanwhile, the Western Catholic Church, in the territories where it had an almost exclusive or very significant presence, had to begin to measure itself against the developments of bourgeois ambitions that were emerging in the ephemeral but devastating triumphs of totalitarianism. The Catholic priest Lorenzo Perosi could still continue to provide an image of himself marked by generosity and closeness.

Who performed the music of Perosi? In that priest, all music and song, generations of choirs from seminaries and training institutes for clerical and religious life discovered themselves. At the same time, the countless choirs from major cathedrals as well as small towns that solemnized the great liturgical feasts of the Catholic rite, from the Alps to islands large and small, drew primarily on Perosi's music.

The merit of these liturgical feasts celebrated with music was that of making present the repertoires of the Sundays and solemnities that, in unique terms, unfortunately punctuated the musical life of the people.

Why “unfortunately”? Because, besides the existence of musical bands, nothing else created music for the people. The Kingdom of Italy, from its *Risorgimento* formation, had injected a strong anti-Catholic and anti-clerical commitment in designing the educational path of the citizen of the realm. From this framework music, like art, had been excluded. Perhaps music emanated too much the odour of the sacristy.

The privileged tools of this attention to Lorenzo Perosi are the critics and the chronicles of musical events in newspapers and magazines. It was intended to entrust the research of social, cultural, artistic and ecclesiastical contexts with the path of rereading Lorenzo Perosi's extraordinarily vital personality.

In particular, the publication entrusted to Luigi Garbini, himself a priest and musician, was able to range between poetry, literature, symphonic and theatrical music along with the issues that connected, intercepted and contrasted, also, Church and Civil Society, polemical literature and apologetic publications.

What is to be expected from this Perosian year: first and foremost, a wide-ranging and widespread re-presentation of performances of the music of this extraordinary priest who was contemporary with both the underlying dynamics of Catholic worship and the demands and horizons of the great music of European culture.

Was he a personality enclosed within ecclesiastical horizons? No. In Lorenzo Perosi we will not find, the seduction proper to the music of the theatre of his time, but in particular the performance of his *Oratorios* will allow us to be enveloped in the beauty of the music that in his *Oratorios* is set forth with a definite program, as in the symphonic poem. We will find, above all, beginning with his production of chamber music, an astonishing ability to captivate and fascinate, as happens only in the greats of the Art who, at the same time, are great in

knowledge and expertise and just as generous as a river that suddenly gushes forth full of freshness and spontaneity.
