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# Wolf-Ferrari

PIANO TRIOS

Trio Mezzena, Patria, Ballario



## Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari (1876-1948)

### Trio No.1 in D for piano, violin and cello Op.5 (1898)

1. I. Allegro molto moderato 13'15
2. II. Presto, Vivace, Tempo I 6'32
3. III. Larghetto 9'36
4. IV. Allegro vivace assai 9'59

### Trio No.2 in F sharp for piano, violin and cello Op.7 (1900)

5. I. Sostenuto, Agitato, Tranquillo, più tranquillo, Sostenuto, Tempo del principio, Più mosso, Largamente 17'03
6. II. Largo 5'06
7. III. Lievemente mosso, e tranquillo sempre 4'43

### Trio Mezzena, Patria, Ballario

Franco Mezzena *violin*

Sergio Patria *cello*

Elena Ballario *piano*

Recording: 19-22 October 2017, Piano et Forte Recording Room, Perugia, Italy

Sound engineer and producer: Luca Ricci

Editing: Luca Tironzelli

Cover: J.M.W. Turner, Venice, The Mouth of the Grand Canal, c.1840.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

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Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari is perhaps now best-known for the one-act opera *Il segreto di Susanna* (Susanna's Secret) and a one-off venture into the territory of verismo *I Gioielli della Madonna* (The Jewels of the Madonna) while his more characteristic works, inspired dramatically by the character comedies of the 18th century Venetian playwright Goldoni and musically by the classicism of Mozart, have fallen into obscurity. Equally his reputation as an operatic composer has overshadowed the instrumental and chamber music on which he concentrated at the beginning and end of his career. As his name suggests, Wolf-Ferrari enjoyed a dual heritage derived from his German father, the Bavarian painter August Wolf, and Italian mother Emilia Ferrari. He was born in Venice on 12 January 1876 and christened Hermann Friedrich Wolf, and despite a talent for and extreme sensitivity to music (especially Wagner) he was originally destined to follow his father's profession. In 1891 he went to Rome to study at the Accademia di Bel Arti and the following year to Munich where for a brief period he attended the independent art school of the Hungarian Simon Holossy. However music soon triumphed over art and he enrolled at the Akademie der Tonkunst where he studied for the next three years under Josef Rheinberger. When his *Serenade in E flat* was published in 1895 he decided to adopt the Italianate form of his forename and added his mother's surname, to distinguish himself from other musical Wolfs of the period (notably Hugo). He left the Akademie in 1895 without graduating, having refused to sit one of the exams, and returned to Italy, where in 1897 he became director of a German choir in Milan.

Two large-scale choral works on biblical subjects - *La Sulamite* (1898) and *Talita Kumi* (1900) brought him some recognition but his first attempts at opera were disastrous. After two projects failed to get off the ground, his third attempt *Cenerentola* was badly received at its first performance at La Fenice in February 1900 when the audience, unsympathetic to its Wagnerian chromaticisms and dramatic longeurs made its dissatisfaction painfully audible. Wolf-Ferrari immediately withdrew the opera and left Italy with his wife, the soprano Clara Kilian whom he had married

in 1898, and young son spending the next three years in Munich. Although a revised German-language version of *Cenerentola* and the Brahmsian Dante cantata *La vita nuova* (Op.9) had some success in Germany, it was with his new-style *opera buffa*, *Le donne curiose*, first performed in Munich in 1903, and followed over the next decade by four others in similar vein, that he established his international reputation. In 1903 he returned to Italy to assume the directorship of the Venice conservatory, the Liceo Benedetto Marcello, but resigned six years later, moving back to Munich which remained his main place of residence for the rest of his life.

Italy's entry into the First World War against Germany in April 1915 brought the two countries of his heritage into conflict, resulting in a severe personal and creative crisis. In 1916, leaving his wife and child in Germany, he fled to Zurich, where he spent the next six years working intermittently on a serious "fairy tale" opera *Das Himmelskleid* which was eventually produced in Munich in 1927. It was only in 1925, three years after his return to Munich with his second wife, that he broke his musical silence with *Gli Amanti Sposi*, which premiered at La Fenice, scene of his humiliation twenty-five years earlier. His work now began to be performed regularly in Italy, possibly as a result of Mussolini's active promotion of Italian culture, although Wolf-Ferrari was not himself ideologically or personally associated with the regime. In the 1930s he began to compose purely orchestral music for the first time in thirty years and from 1940 onwards, apart from a single opera *Der Kuckuck von Theben* (*Gli dei a Tebe*) produced in Hannover in 1943, wrote exclusively for instrumental forces in various combinations. He remained in Germany and Austria throughout the Second World War – he had been appointed professor of composition at the Salzburg Mozarteum in 1939 – and after a brief period in Switzerland he returned to Venice where he died suddenly on 21 January 1948.

Much of Wolf-Ferrari's early chamber music survives only in unpublished manuscript form and without record of public performance. However in an undated letter to his old professor, Rheinberger, in which he gave news of his appointment as

director of the Milan choir and his marriage, both in 1897, he mentioned a concert, which had been "an extraordinary success" among the Milanese who dubbed him a "Componista dotto! (learned composer). It included a piano trio in D (completed in 1896 although parts may have been composed earlier) of which he thought Rheinberger would approve "because it was an important step back to simplicity and beauty of form" (Einfachheit und Formschönheit) revealing that even at this early stage in his career he was contemplating the stylistic fusion of past and present that was to characterise his later music. The extensive corrections and revisions in the manuscript (most evident in the second movement) reveal how intensively he worked to achieve this end. The first movement is set out in sonata form although it is not rigorously applied, the second subject being very much subordinate to the first and more or less ignored in the recapitulation, lending a monothematic feel to the movement. The grandiose statement with which it ends recurs at the close of the finale introducing a cyclic element to the work. The second movement alternates a rustic dance complete with drones and a faster paced section separated by a transitional passage which returns at the close to replace the original much longer coda. The third movement embodies even greater contrasts, passing through various moods from the languid barcarolle of the opening *Larghetto* to the central *Vivace* before repeating the sequence in reverse. The *Allegro vivace* finale displays a thematic variety which has been described as operatic, the transitions between the contrasting sections skilfully effected, and ending with a reprise of the first movement coda, this time on a forceful double forte final statement. When the trio was published in 1900, it was dedicated to Count Lurani who had been responsible for employing Wolf-Ferrari as choral director in Milan and its publication several years after its composition may have been to generate some income after his resignation from the position at the time of his sudden departure from Italy in the aftermath of the *Cenerentola* fiasco.

If the Op.5 Trio is indebted to Brahms and Dvorak (the latter in the second and final movements) the Trio in F sharp (Op.7) of 1900/1901 reveals the influence of

César Franck, especially in the monumental first movement which, at double the length of the other two together, totally dominates the work. Its abrupt changes of mood, dramatic silences, disconcerting chromaticism and uncertain tonality is far removed from the formal simplicity of Op.5. Following a massive introduction (equal in length to the entire statement of the themes), it follows conventional sonata form, perhaps more closely than in its predecessor although there is no coda, the movement ending unexpectedly on the reflective final bars of the second theme. The following two movements are inevitably overshadowed by this gigantic musical edifice and seem to belong to another work entirely. In the *Largo*, the cello assumes the dominant role with the violin playing a subordinate contrapuntal or unison role, although it is given the last word in a another surprising ending which seems to break off of mid-phrase. The finale features a lengthy canon, firstly with the cello leading the violin and then piano leading the strings and although tautly constructed avoids academic formality. Taken as a whole, the D major Trio is as curious hybrid encompassing the late romanticism of the present and the graceful romanticism of the past which as it turned out was to characterise Wolf- Ferrari's musical future.

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The **Trio Mezzena-Patria-Ballario** was founded in 2016 by the meeting of three soloists for whom chamber music plays an important and prevalent role in the artistic experience. Besides the concert activity, the Trio has embarked on a record production path starting from the complete recording of the trios of Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari for Brilliant Classics and of Rachmaninoff's trio "Elegiaco" No.1 in G minor and Op.50 in A minor by Tchaikovsky for the Dynamic label.



**Franco Mezzena**, a violinist known all over the world, former Conservatory professor, has achieved more than 70 records.

**Sergio Patria**, First Violoncello and former Conservatory teacher, has had soloist experiences all over the world with important conductors.

**Elena Ballario**, current Conservatory professor, in addition to concert activity has undertaken the composition and recording of his original works and transcriptions.