

Oscar Ghiglia
Antonin Vercellino

The Music comes first

Meetings with Oscar Ghiglia

Preface by Piero Bonaguri

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Preface

I waited a long time for the publication of this volume, and when I had it in my hands I “devoured” it avidly.

I attended many courses given by Oscar Ghiglia, from 1974 to 1983. The first time I went to the course in Gargnano because Alirio Díaz was not giving the course in Alessandria that year, which I had attended in previous years, and I wanted to meet another important exponent of the “Segovia school”. I have many vivid memories of Ghiglia’s lessons and I retain valuable suggestions, perhaps more from things said by the Maestro to others than directly to me: after all, Ghiglia himself said that it is more useful to listen to what he said to others rather than corrections addressed to oneself...

I could summarize these suggestions by saying that they are very useful general ideas on method, useful both for tackling each piece of music (such as, for example, the recommendation to be aware of the beginning and end of each articulation of the musical discourse – starting from the smallest one, which almost always begins with an arsis, therefore not coinciding with the beginning of the bar – with examples which I remember well from Bach’s *Prelude* BWV 1006 and the beginning of the *Allegro* from Sor’s *Gran Solo*) and for some historical periods in particular (“In Baroque, it is the harmony which guides the musical discourse”, “Contemporary music should not be played as if throwing it away, because ‘it

is only contemporary’... instead, it should be treated well!”). I also remember that Ghiglia said to a student who was playing Ponce’s *Prelude* in E major (the one in the style of Weiss) something like: “the beginning of this piece is like opening your bedroom window on a beautiful morning”, as I also remember the revelation of contrapuntal wonders contained in Bach’s *Fugue* BWV 998 and the admiration for the formal mastery expressed by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco... A long lesson by Ghiglia in Siena on relaxation and the use of weight is really imprinted in my memory and I have continued to recommend it for decades. I also remember a lively correction by Ghiglia to a student who continued to object to his corrections: “Teaching is not like a pawn shop, where you bargain: for teaching to take place, there must be a student. If you don’t behave like a student, there is no teaching!”.

Many other things could be said... fortunately, many are contained in this volume.

I vividly remember these observations decades later (some of them almost fifty years ago) because they helped shape my way of relating to music, based on the observation and assimilation of aspects of the musical object “as it is” to seek out its deep meaning. I came from a way of studying which, mostly due to my own fault, was more based on the external imitation of the teacher, perhaps of dynamic and timbre nuances suggested by him. I was fascinated by Alirio Díaz’s way of playing, and also on my first course in Gargnano I felt that I was seen a bit as “Díaz’s student”, but then I myself was the one to reduce the scope of his teaching, so full of general advice, such as paying attention to the “climax” point of each piece,

taking care of the sound balance, or modifying the fingerings in order to achieve an ever-better musical and instrumental performance.

The most decisive contribution which came to me from attending Ghiglia's courses was in fact a direct observation made to me by Ghiglia in a personal exchange, not in the presence of others, in 1981: "You try to imitate Alirio Díaz; but you can only imitate the external "shell" of another... but inside Díaz's shell there is Díaz, instead you are you". This judgment really marked a turning point in my way of studying and playing (in fact at that point in my life I was starting to feel restricted, even if I hadn't yet fully realized it, in this "aping" of mine, which is also useful and perhaps even a little inevitable when you are very young) and opened the way to my consciously personal artistic research.

So, when the following year I went with great expectation to study with Segovia in Geneva, I certainly did not go there to imitate his unmistakable personality, but rather to seek an authoritative comparison on the work of personal study which I had begun to do, starting precisely from that fundamental observation of Ghiglia the year before. I returned from the Geneva course with the confirmation of the validity of this beginning of my personal journey. The following year, in 1983, already a teacher at the conservatory myself, I attended a course of both Díaz, in L'Aquila, and of Ghiglia in Gargnano. I then realized that, with all the gratitude possible for these great Masters of mine (whom I would then continue to meet in the future also by attending their lessons, asking them questions, continuing to learn from them

and also becoming their friend), a certain phase of my journey was now over and, for better or for worse, inevitably that of personal “risk” began, of my getting involved in artistic life, no longer as a “student of ...”, but with a personality of my own, seeking a personal connection with that European musical tradition shown to me by the Masters, and above all seeking a connection with the roots, where they are still alive today, of this tradition. It is only this living connection which makes me feel that these great Masters are still alive and by my side today.

Ghiglia’s contribution to my growth has been of prime importance, and for this I will always be grateful to him. I hope that this book will be useful to many.

PIERO BONAGURI

Introduction

On 14, 15 and 16 April 2017, during the Easter weekend, I was lucky enough to be hosted by Elena Papandreou and Oscar Ghiglia in Athens. It was agreed that I would prepare questions for Oscar, to which he would respond: the aim was to write a biographical text. Neither of us expected that our dialogues would be so rich and spontaneous: in two and a half days we conducted more than sixteen hours of interviews.

I then produced a first draft of the text (which was the result of these dialogues) in which the different points discussed were reorganized and detailed. Oscar reread this first version entirely, adding clarifications and new elements to the text, and this was how the book came into being.

I am very grateful to Elena and Oscar for their warm hospitality in Greece and for their help in the elaboration of this text.

My sincere thanks go to Piero Bonaguri, through whom I met Oscar Ghiglia and who supported me in this biographical project.

Finally I would like to thank Lisa Joannas for her valuable work in editing this book.

ANTONIN VERCELLINO

The Ghiglia family

I was born on 13 August, 1938 in Livorno,¹ a city located on the Tyrrhenian coast of Tuscany. From the time I was born, my older brother Diego has always called me “Titti”, and this diminutive has accompanied me for most of my life.

I was lucky enough to have a second brother, Maurizio, seven years younger than me. When my mother returned home with him from the hospital after giving birth, I wrote him a poem: “A ray of sunshine has come through our window because today a little babe has come to live with us”... Well, this “ray of sunshine” cried every night!

My father, Paulo Ghiglia, was a very well-known painter in Italy, especially in Rome, where he had almost all his contacts. The nobility regularly commissioned many portraits from him, and my family and I followed him on his travels between Livorno and the capital. My father was an excellent portraitist: he had a certain talent for identifying the beauty of the people he came across and for bringing it out in his paintings.

My mother, Giuliana Folena, was very devoted to us. Mum was a pianist, gifted with a beautiful soprano voice and a talent for poetry which allowed her, at the age of twenty-five, to publish two books of poems:

¹ The city has been the birth-place of many great artists, such as Amedeo Modigliani, Giovanni Fattori and my grandfather Oscar Ghiglia.

Verba volant and *Scripta manent* (the spoken word disappears, the written word remains). Some time ago I managed to find them and reread them and these poems are truly very delicate.

Mum always said that we had a blood relationship with the great Napoleon Bonaparte: Letizia Ramolino, the mother of the Emperor Bonaparte, was originally from Livorno and was, so it was said, a distant cousin of my grandmother Isabella Ramolino. Unfortunately, Napoleon's genealogy is rather complex and I have never been able to confirm these statements of my mother's with certainty.

Unlike me, my two brothers were not born in Tuscany, but in Rome.

We were a very close family. When we lived in the capital we stayed in an apartment and caused a lot of problems for the neighbours: there were five of us with five strong personalities. Over the course of ten years we had to move house several times: our neighbours did not appreciate Maurizio and Mum's piano-playing, our father shouting, Diego's singing and the rhythm of the tempo that I beat with my foot on the floor to accompany the pieces I played on the guitar. I played at all hours of the day and, sometimes, of the night!

Anyway, all these moves allowed us to discover many parts of the city.

My mother, Giuliana Folena

My mother was an excellent pianist. For this reason, one day, long before I was born, my maternal grandfather Alberto Folena decided to set a trap for her.

He was to board an ocean liner bound for the United States of America and had asked her to go with him to the deck of the ship, which had docked at the port of Livorno. The plan was that my mother would give a concert for the passengers. My mother did not know that she was to play immediately before the big departure and my grandfather hoped that she would only notice it once out to sea; then the ship would take them to America and she would be able to build a career there.

However, when my mother felt the ship's vibrations and heard the siren sound for departure, she hurried to take a dinghy and return to dry land. Seeing Giuliana return to the family home, my grandmother exclaimed, a little disappointed: "How silly of you...!". Of course my grandparents had talked about this project between themselves, hoping for a better future for their daughter...

But you have to understand my mother: at that time a career in music was not well thought of for a woman... Furthermore, she did not want to leave her mother on her own, and perhaps this was what made her decide to stay in Italy.

As I have already said, my mother sang very well. One day Romano Romani, a pianist and

composer, visited my paternal grandparents. He was accompanied by the famous soprano Rosa Ponselle,² to whom he had taught everything. Romani was from Livorno and knew my grandfather well. At their meeting, my mother sang for them, accompanying herself on the piano. When leaving their house Rosa Ponselle exclaimed: “Romano, never again take me to people where there is a girl who plays the piano magnificently and sings much better than me!”. My mother left us, in addition to two books of poetry, some paintings, pastel drawings and watercolours worthy of admiration. She was also a composer, and the recording of one of her piano pieces was sent to Federico Fellini. He whistled the melody which he had memorized to the composer Nino Rota during the making of the film *La strada*, as if it were his own creation, and which was then immortalised by Giulietta Masina’s trumpet...

² Whose real name was *Ponzillo* because she was originally from Naples.

Grandfather Alberto

My grandfather, Alberto Folena, owned a large house where we often spent the summer. It was a magnificent villa located in the Ardenza district of Livorno. The house had an upper floor which was reached via broad stairs. On the lower floor a large veranda opened onto a wide outdoor space. There were flowers, a well, a vegetable garden where vegetables were grown and an orchard with lemon trees.

I remember my grandfather, sitting like a gentleman in his leather armchair. He would tell me and my brothers many stories: fables, ancient legends and tales of Greek mythology. I remember the story of the Battle of Thermopylae, with King Leonidas I and his three hundred Spartans.

It was in this villa that my parents met. My father had just returned from a year-long stay in Paris, the city where he had begun his career. The people of Livorno held him in high esteem because his path was similar to that of Amedeo Modigliani.³ My father was commissioned by my grandfather Alberto to paint a portrait of his daughter; that is how my parents met. Alberto soon realized that between Paulo and Giuliana Folena, sitting in the field of flowers in the garden, there was something more than a simple friendship. In fact, my father's work took longer than

³ Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920) is a painter from Livorno who worked in Paris like my father.

expected. The relationship between my parents was not well regarded by my grandfather and the two of them (he and my father) had a violent argument. Following this quarrel my father left for Rome and my mother followed him, the supposed reason was to study with a great pianist. My parents began to live together after leaving for the capital. They got married when they learned that Diego was on the way: at the time Mussolini rewarded young couples who were expecting a child...