

**Domenico Carboni:**

## **GRIEG AND SGAMBATI IN ROME**

### **SGAMBATI NO LONGER LIVES HERE**

Giovanni Sgambati no longer lives at 93 Piazza di Spagna. He was evicted from his flat where, as can be seen from the memorial plaque affixed by the R. Accademia Filarmonica Romana, "he lived for thirty-seven years and died on 14 December 1914". It is true that his bodily remains left the house at the date inscribed on the plaque, but the engraved dates make it appear that the maestro had lived there uninterruptedly until his death. His daughter-in-law Giuseppina, the sole surviving descendant, had religiously kept everything as if her father were still alive: his pencils and glasses lay on the desk, while on a shelf were his conductor's batons. One of these, made out of ebony, had a silver handle on which was engraved "Liszt to Giovanni Sgambati, director of the Dante Symphony". In a display case a visiting card from Johannes Brahms lay propped up against a coffee cup, and in the centre of the salon, pride of place was given to Liszt's favourite chair. Giuseppina never failed to show the few privileged visitors of her private museum the score of *Die Walküre*, with its corrections in Wagner's own hand, for the great composer, having noticed this edition lying on a shelf, informed Sgambati that it contained a number of typographical errors, asked for a pencil and proceeded to correct the score. Even if it was no more than four semibreves, they were after all written by the composer of the Ring. Sgambati's flat was like an inviolable island in the prestigious building, now restored and polished to welcome millionaire VIPs and celebrated dress designers. On the door of the flat, the only one to have retained its period appearance, there still hung the little bellpull (the ancestor of the electric bell) that Liszt and Wagner would have used, as well as the more modest but skilled Roman musicians Pinelli and Romaciotti. Giuseppina put up a brave fight to stop the eviction order sent by the Generali assurance, the owners of the flat, but at her death in 1993 (at the ripe age of ninety-five), the Company sued, and the contents of the flat were sold.

During the 1980s, I often went to Sgambati's house because I was working on a catalogue of his works, and I was thus able to examine his musical archives, which had been conserved almost in their entirety. Besides his autograph scores and his compositions, some thousand letters bore evidence of assiduous correspondence with the great personalities of music and culture (such as Wagner, Brahms, Massenet, Tosti and Richard Strauss). There were hundreds of photographs, many of which had been signed, and other documents, many of which were of great historical interest. Unfortunately the piano on which Liszt had played was no longer there, for in 1908 Sgambati had exchanged it for a brand new Erard grand piano. Also missing was the very full correspondence, which was given to the Liszt Museum in Budapest after the Second World War. Likewise, Tchaikovsky's letters had also been sent to a museum in Moscow. In order to prevent a further cull, Sgambati's archives were handed over to the Biblioteca Casanatense in Rome, and

the furniture to the music instruments museum, where a replica of his office in the Piazza di Spagna was made up. The flat has now been luxuriously refurbished and is occupied by a renowned fashion designer whose sign is now in the windows whence, in the distant past, the music of the maestro once flowed.

## **WHO WAS GIOVANNI SGAMBATI?**

He was born on 28 May 1841 in Rome. His father, Filesio, was a well-known lawyer and his mother, Anna Gott, was the daughter of the famous London sculptor Joseph Gott, who had settled in Rome. He began to study the piano with Amerigo Barbieri, a pupil of Clementi, and was soon discovered to be a child prodigy. When he was only seven his father wanted him to play in a concert, and in order to show off his son's precocious ability he even lied about his age, from which he quietly subtracted two years. Perhaps he was unwilling to cause any displeasure to his father, but Sgambati retained this incorrect date of birth all his life, which is why all the contemporary biographies gave his birthdate as 1843. His musical gifts were genuine, however, as well as exceptional, for at the age of seven he sang in the chapel of Santa Maria Maggiore, conducted a small orchestra and composed sacred music. When his father died in 1849 his mother remarried and moved with her two children to Trevi, in Umbria. Giovanni continued to study music, and besides the piano lessons he learnt harmony with Natalucci, a teacher who had trained at Naples Conservatoire, and a former pupil of Zingarelli. At the age of thirteen he took the admission examination for the Accademia Santa Cecilia. In those days any musician who wished to work in the Papal States had to be associated with the Academy, and pass an aptitude test. The examiner's report remarked that the adolescent boy was "able to recognise by ear not only every note on the violin and piano, but also the chords. He can also sightread and play pieces correctly, even those that are difficult at first sight. He also plays pieces considered to be very difficult, with great precision".

So Giovanni was recognised as a professional pianist. In 1860, he returned to Rome and embarked on a brilliant career, thanks to his reputation, which was due to the extreme care with which he designed his recital programmes. Although he included Mozart, Bach, Händel and Domenico Scarlatti, he showed a preference for Beethoven, Chopin and Schumann. At this time Italy was in a state of turmoil on account of the war of independence against Austria, Garibaldi's Mille expedition and the ardent desire for a unified Italy, yet Sgambati remained apolitical, and was more oriented towards Europe than Italy. This was in part due to his education at the hands of his English mother who was rather distanced from the dramatic events in Italy. In fact Sgambati seemed more English than Italian, with his quiet demeanour and sense of humour. The musical world was dominated by opera, and Verdi, one of the Risorgimento prophets, recommended musicians "not to cut down wood in the German forests". Sgambati recalled this period: "Even the most

cultivated Roman society simply could not bear even to hear about classical instrumental music. They knew nothing about it, and having no notion of it, condemned it without hearing it. They shunned the danger of conversion like saints shun sin".

So life was not easy for the young pianist who gave half-clandestine concerts, mostly attended by foreigners, with programmes made out in French. But one day Franz Liszt, who had been living in Rome for a short while, was in the audience. Sgambati's performance of Hummel's septet made a great impression on the Hungarian who, in a letter to a friend, described their meeting: "Sgambati combines both Bronsart and Tausig. What an unusual mixture in an Italian born and bred, with such fine eyes, like those of the king of Bavaria". This took place in 1862, and it became a turning point in Sgambati's life, for Liszt took him under his wing and made him his protégé so that a working relationship soon became friendship. Sgambati lent his house to Liszt for him to give lessons to his "Roman school", and closely collaborated with the composer in all his work, including teaching. In 1866, Liszt invited Sgambati to conduct the première of his Dante Symphony. To those who objected that the pianist had never directed an orchestra, he replied that "Sgambati starts where most people leave off". Its success encouraged him that same year to present Beethoven's Third Symphony for the first time in Rome, and the following year he appeared as both conductor and soloist in Beethoven's Emperor Concerto, as well as Liszt's Christus. In 1869, the composer invited Sgambati to accompany him to Germany where he was able to hear Wagner's music for the first time, and meet Anton Rubinstein. On his return to Rome, he immediately devoted himself more energetically than ever to his apostolic mission for instrumental music. The city had no public music school, so that anyone who wanted to study music had to do so by means of private lessons. The question of such a school had been discussed for years in the Accademia Santa Cecilia but never came to fruition on account of internal conflict. And it was Sgambati who forced things through. His own account of events appeared in an article in the *Nuova Musica* in Florence in 1910: "In 1869, I had a multitude of pupils, most of them foreign and amateur, and I realised how desperately Rome needed an institution where these young students could learn, for despite their great gifts, they had no means of paying their teachers adequate fees. To this end, therefore, I decided to found a free course, and this was the real origin of today's Santa Cecilia Liceo Musicale; that is how it happened. My own classes filled up so quickly that I had to call on the services of two former students, now fully capable pianists, to help with the teaching. It so happened that that my school was housed in the modest residence of the Papal Congregation and the Accademia Santa Cecilia, and my example was soon followed by Pinelli on the violin, Fiorino with the cello, and Orsini and Signora Cortini for singing. At that time it was the only public teaching establishment for music in Rome [...] After we had exerted pressure on the government authorities of the kingdom [...] they agreed to treat the teachers and students with due consideration [...]". The Liceo Musicale of the Accademia Santa Cecilia

which became a Conservatoire in 1919) was accorded official status on 13 May 1877; up to then, Sgambati and his colleagues had taught on a voluntary basis.

In 1870 Rome was again in turmoil after Porta Pia had been taken, an event which marked the end of the temporal powers of the papacy, following which the city was proclaimed capital of Italy. Sgambati composed a March-Hymn for the occasion, which remained unpublished, with the unwieldy dedication "To His Majesty Vittorio Emanuele King of Italy on the occasion of his entry to Rome - Long live Rome the capital of Italy (In Rome!)". Despite which, he did not let the centenary of Beethoven's birth pass without a historic concert in the Dante hall, where he conducted for the first time in Italy the master's Seventh Symphony, for which the Accademia Santa Cecilia presented him with a gold medal. That same year Sgambati married Costanza Mele, the daughter of a well-known surgeon and a French woman. They had a single son, Oreste, for whom Franz Liszt stood as godfather. Oreste took up the career of his maternal grandfather and became a renowned surgeon at the head of the Regina Elena hospital in Rome; he died in 1960. Another decisive event that marked Sgambati was his meeting with Wagner. The latter, on holiday in Italy with his wife Cosima, was in Rome, staying at the America hotel in the Via del Babuino from 12 November to 2 December 1876. The two musicians met at the German Embassy during a musical evening organised by the ambassador in honour of his illustrious guest. During the concert, Sgambati played one of his two Quintets, accompanied by Ramaciotti and Pinelli on the violin, Monachesi on the viola and Forino on the cello. Wagner was so moved that he suggested a further concert, to be entirely devoted to the works of Sgambati. This duly took place in the same room three days later, with the Quintets opus 4 and 5 on the programme, followed by pieces for voice and piano, as well as piano solos. Wagner decided to become better acquainted with the Italian, and offered him an informal invitation for the following day. When he learnt that none of Sgambati's compositions had found a publisher, Wagner returned to his hotel where he immediately wrote a letter to his friend Strecker, the director of Schott editions in Mainz, inviting him to publish the two Quintets by Sgambati whom he described as a "composer and remarkable pianist of the highest, most authentic and original talent, whom I would like to introduce to the world of music [...] in Vienna and throughout Germany, so that his compositions may be performed, works of which I expect the greatest success after the problems with new German chamber music, including that of Brahms". A few days later a reply arrived in the affirmative, which Wagner hastened to communicate to Sgambati, accompanied by a note in French:

*Dear Friend,*

*Here is the reply from B. Schott fils in Mainz. Get it translated, and have a look at the personal postscript. You have to begin. With best wishes Richard Wagner, Rome, 30 November 1836*

Sgambati immediately imparted the glad news to Liszt of the interest shown by his famous son-in-law, and seized the occasion to ask if he might dedicate his Quintet no. 1 to Liszt. Here is the reply, also in French: "Your first Quintet is a remarkable work, noble in style and appearance, like the second. I am truly delighted to see both works published (by Schott), and I thank you cordially for the dedication". Schott went on to publish not only the Quintets, but also all the remaining unpublished works. Seeing his compositions issued by such a prestigious publisher encouraged Sgambati to write further, more complex works, including the Concerto in G minor for piano and orchestra op. 10 (1878), the D major Symphony op. 11 (1880-81), the C minor Quartet op. 12, and numerous pieces for piano, among which were six Nocturnes, the Suite in B minor and several Pezzi Lirici.

In the 1880s, he thus acquired fame as both pianist and composer, and undertook a series of tours in Italy and abroad. In 1882 he was invited by the Philharmonic Society to London, where he scored a great success with his Concerto and D major Symphony. Two years later, he represented Italy during an international festival held in the Trocadéro in Paris, returning to France in 1886 where he was nominated as the foreign member of the Institut de France in the place of Liszt, who had died a short while before. Next he went to Cologne to perform his unpublished B flat major Symphony, and in 1890 he gave a series of concerts in Russia. He was even offered the post of director at the Conservatoire in St. Petersburg to replace Anton Rubinstein, but this he refused, preferring to remain in Italy. And in the eternal city he had other sources of satisfaction. In 1881, he founded and directed the Rome Quintet Society, for which he organised several chamber music concerts. On 28 March that same year in the Quirinal he conducted a historic concert with symphony orchestra in the presence of the entire royal family and an audience of eight hundred. Besides works by Beethoven, he introduced his own D major Symphony, dedicated to Queen Margherita. After the concert, King Umberto I made him an Officer of the Crown of Italy. The final decade of the century witnessed a gradual decline in both Sgambati's concerts and compositions, but he never gave up teaching in the Liceo Musicale of Santa Cecilia, and in 1893 he was appointed artistic director of the Rome Philharmonic Society.

Giovanni Sgambati died on 14 December 1914. The Accademia Santa Cecilia, on the thirtieth day after his death, organised a memorial concert directed by Bernardino Molinari in the Augusteo theatre, entirely devoted to his work, with the G minor Concerto played by his pupil Bajardi, the B flat major Symphony (the first performance in Rome), and his Berceuse rêverie in an orchestration by Massenet.

Giovanni Sgambati is, universally credited for having reintroduced Italian instrumental music during the

final decades of the nineteenth century. Although his own contribution has been long lain forgotten, it deserves to be rediscovered and placed in its proper historical context. One of the causes for such neglect, is the label of anti modernist reactionary that remains stuck to him, of one following in the wake of romanticism, and a composer out of his time, for which reason, according to a "modern" critic, his works are "prematurely withered trees [...] with numerous little flowers to be plucked from their sad branches [...] modest little flowers whose perfume yet lingers long enough to attract a poor thirsty pilgrim to gather them in the fullness of happiness" (Alberto Gasco, 1939). If for "thirsty pilgrim" we substitute today's listener, and if we examine the current market and concert programmes, we find that "followers", "those behind the times", like Rachmaninov or Soviet realism composers, are today much more successful than a century ago. For instance, among Italians of the 1880s, it is noticeable that a "modern" composer like Casella has long been dropped from the repertoire, whereas the "reactionary", much decried "fountain-man" Respighi is still much in demand.

In addition, Sgambati stands accused of the grave "crime" of having scorned melodrama and the law of Verdi. Everyone tried to persuade him to turn his hand to opera, and Wagner even went so far as to suggest Nerone to him, but to this he turned a deaf ear. And yet he did not dislike opera, and owned dozens of operatic scores. Few people know that he was responsible for making Mascagni's fortune, for the publisher Sonzogno invited him to preside over the famous competition in 1889 from which *Cavalleria rusticana* emerged as a winner. (As a confirmed Lisztian, he must have suffered greatly in having to listen through so many poor imitations of Verdi and Wagner).

It could be said that Sgambati suffered from the same problems in his career as a composer as Liszt and Busoni, namely of being at the same time a great virtuoso and celebrated piano teacher; indeed, both of the last-named composers made no secret of their difficulties. Sgambati's position was made worse by his refusal to go on long, exhausting tours like those undertaken by his famous friends and colleagues, and by turning down enticing offers from abroad in order to remain at home, preferring not to budge from Rome despite the provincial lack of cultured society, so that he did not reap the benefits of publicity. True, he enjoyed a certain posthumous fame in the interwar period, when a number of prestigious musicians performed some of his works, including the conductors Richard Strauss, Arturo Toscanini, Willy Ferrero and Franco Capuana, the pianists Busoni, Rachmaninov, Lhevinne and Ganz, and the violinist Jascha Heifetz. Following this period, however, there was only a long period of silence, and even the Accademia Santa Cecilia dropped him from their concerts. Today though there seems to be a renewal of interest in Sgambati, for two talented pianists, Daniela Morelli (Fonoteca) and Francesco Caramiello (Agorà), have recently recorded his complete piano works. Nevertheless this leaves all his orchestral output unheard, and

the G minor Concerto and D major Symphony in particular deserve to be performed again.

## **GRIEG IN ROME**

It is not my intention to repeat all the well-known stories about Grieg's Roman holidays – because they are all well and truly described in his many biographies and in his letters to his family. I intend to highlight some rather lesser known episodes which have been documented by unusual witnesses, such as the Conte of San Martino, then President of the Santa Cecilia Academy.

His first trip to Rome was planned for the autumn of 1865. Grieg was supposed to come to Rome together with Rikard Nordraak whom he had come to know during the preceding year in Copenhagen. Nordraak left Norway first on his way to Berlin where he intended to stay for a few weeks. Grieg was busy with concerts and was supposed to join him later on. Unfortunately Nordraak fell ill with tuberculosis. In the meantime Grieg reached the German capital and decided, under the circumstances, to continue on his own for Rome, probably because he had not fully understood the gravity of his friend's illness. After a battle of six months with his illness, Nordraak died on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 1866. The news of his death reached Grieg in Rome on the 6<sup>th</sup> April: a date that he signed with a cross on his Roman diary.

His first stay in Rome lasted until the spring of 1866 and, apart from the anguish and remorse for his friend's tragic death; his stay was a happy and stimulating one. His "voyage in Italy" included the classical tourist and cultural cities: Naples, Capri, Sorrento and Pompeii, but it was above all to Rome that he devoted the greater part of his time. As far as music is concerned, he noted in his diary on the 17<sup>th</sup> December 1865: "Horrible music in the Chiesa Nuova: Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini: Two *castrati*, sickening, quite against nature." In Rome there was a large Scandinavian community dominated by Bjørnson and Ibsen. His meeting with the latter, in which he noticed the writer's love affair with wine, was the beginning of a very fruitful collaboration. With Bjørnson he was to have a great and sincere friendship.

It is in this period that he wrote his Overture "In Autumn" for which he used a great deal of thematic material from the Lied "Autumn Storm".

### **His second Roman holiday.**

During his first visit to Rome he came to know Liszt who encouraged him, once he returned to Norway, to send him his Sonata n° 1 for violin and pianoforte. It was from Rome, on the 19<sup>th</sup> December 1868, that he received a letter from his generous Hungarian musician friend, with an invitation to come and meet him to "get to know each other better". In any event Liszt had already recommended the Sonata to one of his

students – Giovanni Sgambati, who performed the work a few months later in a concert with the violinist, Ettore Pinelli. (Amongst other things: Pinelli was the nephew and student of the Violinist, Tullio Ramacciotti, who in his turn had been a student of Ole Bull's, during his long stay in Rome). When, therefore, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1869, Grieg returned to Rome he was not altogether an unknown quantity. With regard to his two meetings with Liszt on the 17<sup>th</sup> February 1870 and on the succeeding 9<sup>th</sup> April (when they read through the fore mentioned Sonata and the Concerto in A Minor) there is an ample description in his letters to his family. Sgambati was always present. We should also underline that the “large hall in the Monastery” was that inside the monastery next to the Church of the Madonna del Rosario in Monte Mario.

1870 was an important year for Rome: on the 20<sup>th</sup> September, with the entrance of the bersaglieri through the “hole in Porta Pia” Rome finally became the capital of Italy and ended the earthly power of the Papacy. In his lied Op. 39 “*Dal monte Pincio*” we can find the premonitory verses written by Bjornson: “*Through the phantoms of the past we see the future in the heavens, like a light that trembles in the grey oncoming night. But a light will re awaken Rome, clearing the darkness over Italy: the bells will ring and the canons thunder! From History books comes Hope for faithful hearts! Italy, Hold to these Ideals with Passion...*”

The entire Scandinavian community resident in Rome in that period obviously upheld the ideals for freedom of the Italian Resurgence Movement.

Fourteen years would pass before Grieg returned to Rome. 1883 was a year full of engagements with a large number of concerts that the composer performed throughout Europe. At the end of the tour, in January 1884, his wife, Nina, joined him to leave for a long Italian holiday that was to last until the month of May: from Como and the lakes in the North down to Sorrento, Naples, Pompeii. Again the main stay in the visit would be Rome. This is probably the period in which he had visiting cards inscribed with the words “Edvard Grieg, Norway”; these can be seen in the Sgambati archives housed in the Biblioteca Casanatense. On one of them we can read: “*Dear Mr Sgambati! I am very upset not to be able to accept your invitation for tomorrow but I have been unwell for some days now and I really do not dare to tire myself. Alas, it is probable that I shall have to leave on Friday but, in any case, I shall try to meet with you before my departure. Your most devoted – E. Grieg*”

In another card he writes: “*I'm sorry not to find you – we're leaving tomorrow for Naples*”.

One evening in March, in Rome, Grieg and his wife were invited to a reception offered by the Norwegian painter, Kristian Ross, and were surprised to meet Ibsen again. During the evening they performed some

songs that Grieg had composed to texts by the great writer. The composer described Ibsen's emotions when he heard the concert that they had improvised in his honour.

In an undated letter written to Sgambati and dated as having been written in 1892 by Sgambati's daughter in law, Madame Giuseppina, by then custodian and librarian for his archives, Grieg writes:

*“Dear Maestri – I was extremely touched to see in the “Art in Italy” some truly complimentary and touching articles about the art of a maestro as important as you are. Without doubt it is not a good idea to write to you in such terrible French to express what I want to say – but I’ll do so anyway, nothing will stop me from expressing my enthusiasm for your wonderful Symphony in D, which I have finished reading today. It is a great work of art, as great as powerful, full of meaning, enthusiasm and inventive novelties. At the time of writing I prefer the “serenade”. Tomorrow I shall surely prefer the “scherzo” and the day after tomorrow probably the other movements – at the end I am enchanted by the whole work. The orchestration is admirable! I am only sorry not to have heard a performance of this masterpiece. I hope you will not think that I am asking too much if I ask you to make me a gift of this score and to write your name on it. By sending you the two songs enclosed I know well that I am giving you this book for now, but what does it matter anyway, this is all that remains for me to give you as a witness for my recognition. Your admirer Edvard Grieg.”*

Grieg's music was well known in Rome by this time. Giovanni Sgambati and his ensemble “Società Romana del Quintet” which later became known as the “Queen's Quintet” had done a great deal to promote a knowledge of Grieg's Music. It was this latter quintet, patronised by Queen Margarita, which presented his music in a monographic concert given on the 19<sup>th</sup> March 1897 at the Quirinale Palace, during which they played his Sonata Opus 8 for violin and pianoforte, the Sonata Opus 7 for pianoforte and his Quartet, Opus 27. Sgambati let Grieg know about the event, and Grieg replied with the following letter written in April:

*«Cher maître et ami! Après avoir reçu votre lettre aimable j'aurai préféré aller à Rome à l'instant pour vous serrer la main. Mais hélas! Le chemin est trop long! Permettez-moi donc Monsieur, en mal français de vous dire que je suis touché de l'honneur que vous m'avez témoigné en prenant mes oeuvres de jeunesse sous vos ails protégeantes. Me remerciements les plus cordials à vous et à vos confrères! L'exécution a été excellente, j'en suis bien sure! Si vous auriez l'occasion, veuillez bien exprimer pour votre gracieuse Reine ma reconnaissance pour l'intérêt, qu'elle a eu la bonté de montrer à mon art. Je regrette infiniment n'étant pas en état de recevoir l'invitation de St. Cecilia si flattante pour moi. Mais j'espère que je serais plus heureux une autre année. Avec les meilleurs compliments aussi de la part de ma femme, à vous et à Madame Sgambati, je suis votre très dévoué admirateur. Edvard Grieg».*

This letter talks about an invitation from the Santa Cecilia Academy. In the 1897 Chamber Music Season, the violinist Eugène Ysaye had performed Grieg's Sonata number 13, and on the 29<sup>th</sup> March the Rosé Quartet from Vienna had performed his Quartet Opus 27. According to the memorials of Conte di San Martino, who for many years was President of the Academy, the invitation to Grieg was fostered by painter Kristian Ross, who sounded out his availability to give an invitation to Grieg to conduct the Orchestra.

Conte di San Martin affirms that many famous musicians (Paderewski and Joachim) used to offer him concerts free of charge in return for some kind of honour, for example a Royal mention or their nomination to become a member of the Academy. Alternatively, they would be paid a fee. At that time Grieg was famous throughout Europe and full of honours and Honoris Casa degrees. If he were to perform in Rome it would only be for a high fee. Presidente Di San Martin writes that:

*“After a few days I did in fact receive a letter from Grieg, very haughtily written, in which he said that his friend had sent him my offer of a fee or of an honour; that he was a Socialist and this meant that he had no use for honours and considered a fee necessary for every job of work. I wrote immediately to Grieg telling him that in our contractual negotiations his political ideals had nothing to do with the questions in hand, but that I wished him to know that his friend has surely misunderstood what I had said. I was not in a position to offer honours and that in my country this was something that only the Royal family could undertake, I could only, perhaps, solicit such an honour for someone who together with an exception talent wished to honour with the gift of his presence one of the most ancient of the Italian cultural institutes: on the other hand further discussion was out of the question from the moment in which he had decided that he would accept the fee that I had offered in the first place”*

For the rest of the story it is necessary to read the letters conserved in the Historical Archives of the Academy.

This is what the Count wrote to Grieg on the 13<sup>th</sup> January 1899:

*«Illustre Maître. Je vous remercie de votre lettre et je me suis déjà mise in rapport avec MM Ross e Gulli pour le différents dettails. J'accepte votre demande d'honoraire. Quant au Quatuor de notre orchestre, j'ose affirmer qu'il est ecce lente. Il comprend 12 premier violons, 10 seconds, 8 altos, 6 violoncelles et 6 contre basse. Les artistes sont de premier ordre [...] J'espère donc que vous serez complètement satisfait. Aussitôt que le programme sera définitivement fixé je ferai venir la musique de façon que vous ouïssiez la trouver à votre arrivée [...]».*

The date of the concert was fixed for the 3rd April. Grieg and Nina came to Rome well in advance. On the 19<sup>th</sup> March Grieg wrote from his lodgings in Via della Vite 58, 5<sup>th</sup> floor, to be able to see the scores.

The concert programme was:

*Tre pezzi orchestrali* written for *Sigurd Jorsalfar* by Bjørnson; a selection of *Lieder* to be sung by Bergliot Ibsen, with the composer at the pianoforte; the *A Minor Concert for piano and orchestra*, for which the soloist was Luigi Gulli; *Two Elegiac Melodies* for strings, and to finish the *First Suite* from *Peer Gynt*.

Grieg asked the president to reserve two decent seats for “*the father of the singer, the Norwegian poet Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (Via Quattro Fontane 147)* ».

So how did the concert go? The descriptions left by the Count di San Martino and Grieg are rather different.

The Count of San Martin writes:

*From the first rehearsal Grieg upset the entire orchestra. He was unsatisfied, hard, a very mediocre conductor, he didn't know how to obtain what he wanted and gave the others the responsibility for his own lack of preparation.*

There was also a near diplomatic incident.

*“The hereditary princess of Sweden and Norway, now the Queen of Sweden, was in Rome and Queen Margarita believing that she was undertaking a diplomatic act invited her to come and listen to the concert from her own box. On the same morning of the concert I received a visit from the Princess's chamberlain who begged me to go with him immediately to the Quirinale Hotel. The Princess was very nervous and said that the invitation from the Queen had put her into a great deal of embarrassment. Grieg, following his Socialist ideals had been most undiplomatic in his regards towards her and the King and Queen. She said that she had once met him and that he had said that he didn't wish to come close to certain people. On another occasion, in Christiania, while he was conducting the King entered the theatre and the orchestra, according to tradition, stood up and played the national anthem. Grieg put down his baton and walked out. “So” added the Princess, “I know that the Queen is used to inviting the artists, after the concerts, to the Royal box, and this could cause an embarrassing situation for us all”*

The Count went to the Royal Place where the Queen received him and together they planned a strategy whereby any contact between Grieg and the Princess would be avoided. The Princess was supposed to leave the box a few minutes before the composer arrived. But the Queen expressed her doubt that Grieg, after his experience with a national anthem, would have wished to accept an invitation from anyone in the Royal family. So the count set out to hear what Grieg thought.

*«Grieg jumped up and down like a young hen. “No problem – I really wish to meet her – I know that the Queen of Italy is a real music lover (,,,) any exception with regard to me would be an unworthy act with regards both to me and my music”.*

The Count concludes his story:

*“The concert went well although I felt that an entire concert with music by Grieg left the public with an unpleasant feeling of total monotony.”*

And Grieg’s reaction” This is what he says in a letter to his publisher:

*“...All went well, fortunately because the opposite could have taken place. The orchestra is totally impossible, without any idea of ethics: Gulli played well and Madame Bergliot Ibsen sang what she had to and with a great deal of grace. As for me...I conducted and played when I had to. The public applauded and many many requests for curtain calls...so what more do we want? After the concert I was invited together with my artists, to go to the Royal Box to meet the Queen who trotted out some trite comments. The wife of our Hereditary Prince was also present but she left after about five minutes – typically Swedish I thought, or would have done so if she had not come up with an excuse. From this brief letter you can see that I am not particularly happy although the newspapers are full of compliments. The orchestral performance was not first class but I know that I did as much as I could, in fact more than enough because the public said that they had never heard the orchestra play so well. Today I was invited to a banquet offered by the Santa Cecilia Academy. There were many Italians amongst whom Sgambati and it was very pleasant and very informal.”*

However Count di San Martino refers to the banquet in this way:

*“ The banquet went off very well except for a rather grotesque incident during the toasts. In the Swedish language there is a word that is pronounced touching the glass and that means “ to your good health”. Unfortunately in Italy this same word has a rather different meaning...Grieg lifted his glass at the end of the banquet according to the custom in his country and went all round the table touching everyone’s glass and repeating the dreaded word. First everyone was amazed and then laughed hysterically.”*

The dreaded word was “skol” a sound which in Italian rings like the word “scolo” a rather vulgar term for the venereal disease, blenorraggia. Prudery from a by past century.