

**Forgotten Artists 27: Erminia Romano (b.1921)**  
**An occasional series by Christopher Howell**

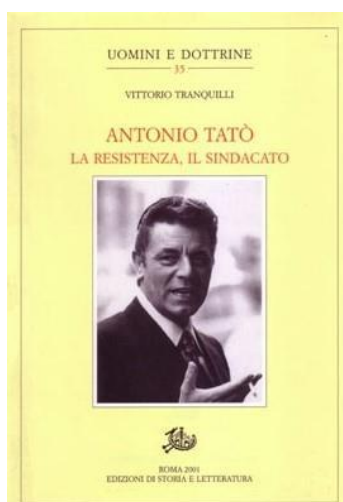
Some time during this year – I haven't traced the exact date – we are celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Erminia Romano. It would be difficult to find a more forgotten artist and, whereas for my other articles in this series, a reasonable array of facts has emerged, the present essay, necessarily brief, is more of a plea to anyone who has further information to come forward.

Erminia Romano, born in Rome in 1921<sup>1</sup>, has been described as the first Italian woman conductor, but similar claims have been made for Carmen Bulgarelli Campori (1910-1965), whose career is a little more documented and who was Romano's senior by eleven years. Campori's official debut was in 1950, in Milan. A few brief lines in the Radio Corriere of 17<sup>th</sup> July 1956 tell us that Romano had formed an orchestra called the "Archi di Roma" but gives no dates. So who got there first is presently unknown. Both deserve commemoration as pioneers in a difficult field.



Erminia Romano dirige il concerto sinfonico delle 21.30 sul Terzo Programma

The careers of Campori and Romano are almost diametrically opposite. Carmen Bulgarelli, to use her maiden name, married the Marquis Campori, scion of an aristocratic family of Modena with roots traceable to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Her career took place mainly outside Italy – she achieved very few appearances in her home country – and was principally dedicated to opera. She had originally trained as a soprano. Romano was a militant Communist who married, in 1944, the likeminded Antonio Tatò.



A major figure in the Italian Communist Party, Tatò rose to head the secretariat of Enrico Berlinguer, the man who, in the 1976 elections, brought the Communists within a stone's throw of governing Italy. They were divorced in 1960, though how they managed this is not clear, since divorce was made legal in Italy only in 1970. Nevertheless, Tatò married another leading Communist, Senator Giglia Tedesco, in 1960. Tedesco recalled that, in 1946, Romano had been the guiding spirit of an all-female "Commission for Trade Unionism and Collaboration"<sup>2</sup>.

Romano's career took place almost exclusively within Italy. So far as I can trace, she conducted only orchestral concerts though, given the immense difficulties for a woman conductor in Italy in those days – not that things have advanced so very much since – the absence of opera from her curriculum does not entirely prove she did not wish to conduct it. It says much for the conflicting claims of the political and musical worlds, not to speak of men's worlds versus women's worlds, that all the biographies of Tatò I have seen<sup>3</sup> mention his first marriage to the "militant Communist" Erminia Romano, but ignore her musical career. Tatò and Romano had four children – Giovanna, Carla, Franco and Paola. Giovanna, a journalist, recalled that her mother looked after her children "up to a point"<sup>4</sup>. Carla became an actress.

<sup>1</sup> Date found in Radio Corriere 1974 n.33 p.12. All issues of the Radio Corriere can be viewed at <http://www.radiocorriere.teche.rai.it/Search.aspx>. All links in this article were visible in April 2021.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.noidonne.org/articoli/testimonianza-su-giglia-tedesco-per-le-donne-nella-cooperazione.php>

<sup>3</sup> Of online sources, the following seems the fullest: [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-tato\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-tato_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.poetisolopoetipoeti.it/socio-onorario-giovanna-tato/>. The Italian word used is "relativamente".

In an interview available on the internet<sup>5</sup>, Carla Tatò (opposite) describes how she found “liberation” when she undertook the part of the Narrator in Stravinsky’s “L’Histoire du Soldat” in 1973, overcoming the limits of the male/female personage to narrate, simply, the “character”. She likens this to the experience of her mother, who faced a pre-eminently man’s world. Competitions for conductors were always won by males and, when Romano stood before an 80-strong orchestra, she found maybe three women players, usually the harpist, one of the violinists and one of the violists, and “a protuberance of males all sniggering at the idea of being conducted by a woman”. Carla Tatò noted that her mother was always described on the billboards as “direttore d’orchestra” (never the female form “direttrice”). Today, when actresses expect to be called actors (and Italians, too are increasingly preferring “attore” to “attrice”), this may seem a plus point. Back then, it evidently implied a refusal to accept that a female conductor could exist, rather than the adoption of “actor/attore” as a neutral word that could describe either a male or a female. She also described how she opened the score of “L’Histoire” and tried to find in it the secret of her mother’s “absence”<sup>6</sup>. This ties in with Giovanna Tatò’s statement that Romano looked after her children “up to a point”. It may be noted that the marriage failed when Romano’s engagements became more frequent, from 1958 onwards, and most of her appearances that I have traced took place in the five years following her divorce.



The above-mentioned lines in the Radio Corriere tell us that Romano studied piano with Alfredo Casella, composition with Tosatti and Pinelli and attended conducting courses with Paul van Kempen at the Accademia Chigiana. No dates, but Casella died in 1947, while Van Kempen taught conducting at the Accademia Chigiana from 1949. The career of the once-influential Vieri Tosatti (1920-1999) is too long to help us narrow down the field and, if the Pinelli mentioned was Carlo Pinelli (1911-2004), the same may be said. The lines also tell us that she had written a treatise on problems of technique and interpretation in conducting and that she had curated, for RAI, a cycle of programmes on the musical serenade from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. I have found no reference either of these.

An article in a later Radio Corriere<sup>7</sup> slightly skews the picture. It confirms that she obtained a diploma in piano and then took a post-diploma course – what the Italians call “perfezionamento” – with Casella, but it tells us that “with very rare exceptions” she was self-taught as a composer. It is silent on Van Kempen, but tells us she took a diploma in conducting – the first Italian woman to do so – at the Santa Cecilia Academy, studying with Fernando Previtali. As regards composition teachers, given that Tosatti was only a year older than Romano, the discrepancy is explained if we suppose she took a little advice from friends rather than a regular course of instruction. I have found no mention of any composition by Romano, let alone any performance of one. She did a little editing/arranging, however. A manuscript page of her transcription of Egidio Romualdo’s “L’Isola dei Pazzi”, from the Ricordi archives, can be seen on internet<sup>8</sup>. For the

<sup>5</sup> The interview is in Italian, but is extremely interesting for those able to understand it:

[http://patrimoniorale.ormete.net/ohms-viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=Intervista\\_a\\_Tato\\_Carla.xml](http://patrimoniorale.ormete.net/ohms-viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=Intervista_a_Tato_Carla.xml)

<sup>6</sup> The Italian word used is “mancanza”, literally “lack”. When the Italians say the mother “manca”, they usually mean she is there but always thinking of other things.

<sup>7</sup> 1961, no.35 p.55.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.digitalarchivioricordi.com/it/partiture/1903>

conducting lessons, it is perfectly possible that she took a diploma with Previtali in Rome followed by “perfezionamento” in Siena with Van Kempen.

Apart from this, the only traces of Romano’s activities are the programmes of her concerts. The Radio Corriere of 17<sup>th</sup> July 1956 referred to earlier was introducing Romano’s contribution to a series entitled “Nuovi direttori alla radio” (New Conductors on the Radio). She directed the Orchestra dell’Associazione Alessandro Scarlatti di Napoli (not yet a RAI orchestra) in Beethoven’s Leonora no.1 and Bartók’s Divertimento, immediately showing a certain independence in her choice of repertoire.

Next followed two “Miniature Concerts” with singers, listed in the Radio Corriere issues of 6<sup>th</sup> September and 27<sup>th</sup> September 1956. In the first, the mezzo-soprano Luisella Ciaffa sang arias from “Werther”, “Prince Igor” and “La Cenerentola”. In the second, the less-remembered soprano Luciana Gaspari sang arias from “Manon”, “Pagliacci” and “Suor Angelica”. The orchestra in both cases was the Maggio Musicale of Florence. In a concert with the RAI Rome Orchestra listed on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1958, she was on her own with Schubert’s Fifth Symphony, Debussy’s “Gigues” and the Dances from Borodin’s “Prince Igor”.

It was the Florence Maggio Musicale and operatic extracts again in a programme listed for 3 August 1959. Though not described as a “Martini and Rossi Concert”, it has all the appearance of one. The soprano Renata Mattioli (a lovely singer worth an essay in this series) and the bass Carlo Cava alternated in an incongruous sequence of arias from “Die Zauberflöte”, “Faust”, “Die Meistersinger”, “Manon”, “La Bohème”, “La Wally” and “Don Carlos”. Romano also conducted the overture to “Il matrimonio segreto”, the Dances from “Prince Igor” and Beethoven’s Leonora no.3.

On 7<sup>th</sup> October 1959, Romano conducted the Santa Cecilia Orchestra for the first time. The programme consisted of Leonora no.3, Haydn’s D major Piano Concerto, the Prelude to Casella’s “La donna serpente”, R. Strauss’s “Don Juan” and the dances from “Prince Igor”. The piano soloist was Emilio Riboli. She conducted the orchestra again on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1960, in Brahms’s Tragic Overture, Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto, once more with Riboli, “Don Juan” and Prokofiev’s “Scythian Suite”.



A concert broadcast on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1960 with the orchestra of La Fenice, Venice, has left some trace in the annals, since it saw the première of a Concerto for Orchestra by the young Ennio Morricone. The concert had begun with the overture to “Il matrimonio segreto”, after which the harpist Susanna Mildonian played a concerto by Dittersdorf arranged by Pillney and Ravel’s “Introduction et allegro”. The Morricone came next and the evening ended with Beethoven’s Second Symphony.

Another big programme was broadcast on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1960, when Romano conducted the Rome RAI Orchestra in the first series of symphonic fragments from Casella’s “La donna serpente”, Schubert’s “Great” C major Symphony and Prokofiev’s Seventh – one of its earliest outings in Italy. Also in 1960, she conducted the Florence Maggio Musicale Orchestra in an unspecified programme of music for schools.

For the summer season of the Santa Cecilia, in the Basilica di Massenzio, Romano conducted a relatively popular programme on 25 July 1961 – the prelude to Casella’s “La donna serpente”, Debussy’s “Nuages” and “Fêtes”, R. Strauss’s “Till Eulenspiegel” and Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony. Her last appearance with the orchestra was on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1962, when she performed Rossini’s Overture to “Le Siège de Corinthe”, Chopin’s First Piano Concerto, with Dino Ciani and Dvořák’s “New World” Symphony. It has to be remarked that Romano never achieved a

place in the orchestra's subscription series. Her first concert had been one of their "Extraordinary Concerts at Popular Prices"; the others were part of their summer season in the Basilica di Massenzio.

Definitely not for popular audiences was the programme recorded on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1962 with the Rome RAI Symphony orchestra – Webern's 5 Pieces op.5, Petrassi's Second Concerto for Orchestra, a Suite arranged by Max Schönher from Weill's "Die Dreigroschenoper" and Prokofiev's "Scythian Suite". As remarked earlier, Romano liked facing challenges head on.

A few smaller items follow, apparently studio sessions. A Cello Concerto in A by Tartini, set down with Giorgio Menegozzo – a fine cellist – and the RAI Alessandro Scarlatti Orchestra of Naples, was broadcast on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1963, while a Cannabich Symphony in F was heard on 22<sup>nd</sup> June with the same orchestra. With the RAI orchestra of Turin, Romano recorded Haydn's 44<sup>th</sup> Symphony, the "Trauer", Schubert's "Gruppe aus dem Tartarus" in Reger's orchestration with the baritone Cesare De Leon and two arias from Beethoven's Singspiel "Ignaz Umlauf" with two RAI stalwarts, the soprano Adriana Martino and the tenor Carlo Franzini. These were broadcast on, respectively, 9<sup>th</sup> October 1963, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1965 and 12<sup>th</sup> March 1966.

The Radio Corriere does not name the orchestra with which Romano broadcast, on 14 August 1965, Haydn's Piano Concerto, Wolf-Ferrari's "Suite Veneziana" and a Divertimento for Strings by Vieri Tosatti. The pianist was Emilio Riboli. More popular fare was played on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1966 by the orchestra of the Teatro Municipale di Bologna – Tchaikovsky's "Romeo and Juliet", Prokofiev's "Lieutenant Kijé" Suite and Brahms's First Symphony. This was Romano's only appearance with this orchestra. Closer to her life-mission, perhaps, was a programme with the RAI Rome Orchestra dedicated to contemporary women composers. – "Nicolette s'endort" for violin and strings by Giulia Recli, a Fantasia for piano and orchestra by Sandra Caratelli Surace, an Allegro from a Suite for Strings by Claude Arrieu and "Improvvisazioni concertante" for flute and orchestra by Norma Beecroft. The concert was shown on television and the soloists were Angelo Stefanato (violin), Marcella Crudeli (piano) and Severino Gazzelloni (flute).

We now take a leap ahead of ten years and discover with surprise that, just as in 1956 Romano appeared on a programme of "New conductors on the radio", twenty years later she was still rated a "new conductor", this time on the television. An article in the Communist newspaper "L'Unità" noted that Romano had, in fact, a considerable career behind her, but was a "new conductor" in the sense that "she had never fallen back on routine. She comes new to each concert"<sup>9</sup>. Her chosen works, with the RAI Alessandro Scarlatti Orchestra of Naples, were Prokofiev's "A Summer Day" and Kodály's "Dances of Marosszek". The other "new conductors", Nicola Samale and Riccardo Chailly, performed Schubert's First and Sixth Symphonies respectively. Nicola Samale – readers unversed in Italian names are reminded that Nicola is a masculine name – subsequently had a considerable career in film music. Chailly needs no introduction. The programme was shown on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1976.

And here the trail ends. She was then only 55, but no further information emerges. An article on women conductors in the Radio Corriere of 22-28 March 1981 implies that she was still alive at that time. If she is still alive to celebrate her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, I extend her my best wishes. However, the tone adopted in Carla Tatò's interview suggests she is talking of a person who died a good while ago. I can only repeat my initial invitation for anyone who knows more to come forward.

I normally continue my articles in this series with a discussion of the artist's recordings, often from sources unavailable to my readers. In this case, however, I have to confess to having heard only the "Dreigroschenoper" Suite, which was re-broadcast a couple of years ago and can still be heard in

<sup>9</sup> [https://archivio.unita.news/assets/main/1976/02/21/page\\_010.pdf](https://archivio.unita.news/assets/main/1976/02/21/page_010.pdf)

streaming<sup>10</sup>. It is an excellent performance, with a fine sense of style and a good response from the orchestra. It can only be hoped that the RAI archives contain other recordings, enabling us to obtain at least a partial view of her abilities. And what better occasion than this centenary year of her birth?

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.rai.it/dl/portaleRadio/media/ContentItem-69339727-3371-4ea0-a09b-94665cedd504.html>