

Jeremy Dibble

Michele
Esposito

Jeremy Dibble skilfully reconstructs the life and career of Michele Esposito (1855–1929) – a figure of seminal importance in the history of Irish music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Neapolitan by birth and education, Esposito moved to Dublin in 1882 and became an artistic leader in the organization of the chamber concerts for the Royal Dublin Society and the foundation of the Dublin Orchestral Society, the city's first professional orchestra. He was also involved with the Literary Revival and the Feis Ceoil during the turbulent half-century he spent in Dublin. This important book introduces us to the life and work of a dedicated composer, teacher and organizer whose influence needs to be recognized and appreciated both by all who are interested either in music or in Irish cultural history.

Jeremy Dibble is Professor of Music at the University of Durham. He is a noted authority on British and Irish music of the 19th and 20th centuries. His previous publications include monographs on Hubert Parry, Charles Villiers Stanford and John Stainer.

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Field Day Music 3

Series Editors: Séamas de Barra and Patrick Zuk

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Field Day Music

This series of monographs was conceived to provide a scholarly and readable account of the careers and creative achievements of some of the most significant figures in Irish composition. Each volume will provide the reader with some idea of the nature and extent of a composer's work and the context in which it was produced. The monographs are aimed at the general reader as well as at the specialist and will appear in pairs, one devoted to an historical figure and the other to a living composer. Forthcoming volumes will survey the careers of Ina Boyle, Seóirse Bodley and James Wilson, and it is envisaged that every major figure will be covered in due course.

Séamas de Barra and Patrick Zuk

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2007. In these idyllic surroundings, free from distractions and interruptions, I was able to make considerable progress with the early chapters.

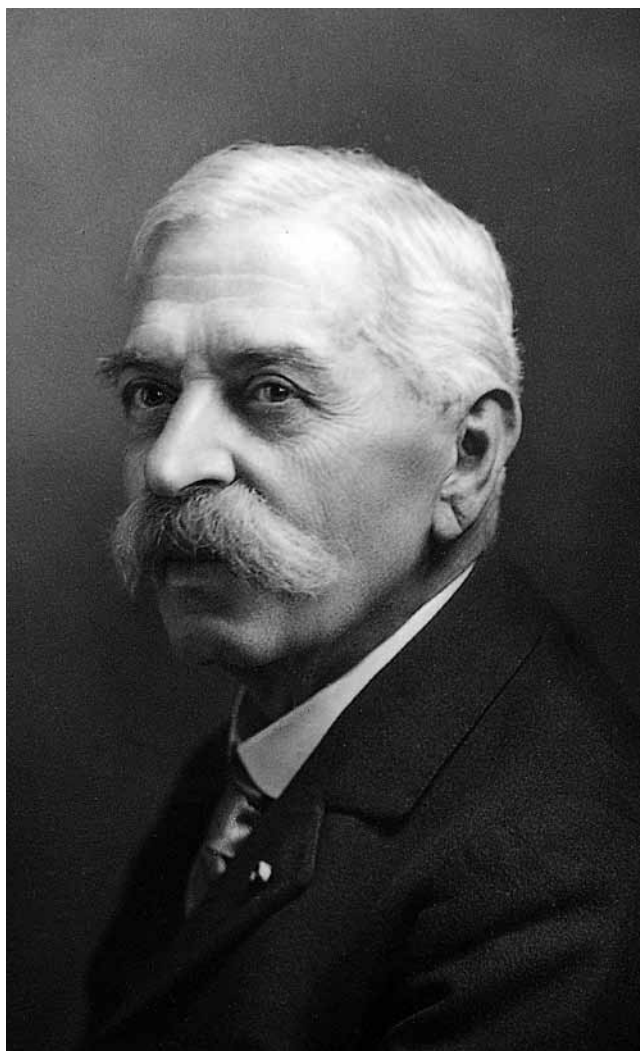
I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to my editors Séamas de Barra and Patrick Zuk for their work in bringing the book into a final form, as well as for their assistance with translations (especially from Irish and Russian) and advice on various points of detail. I would also like to thank Seamus Deane of Field Day Publications for recognizing the importance of this series on Irish composers, Ciarán Deane of Field Day for copy-editing the text and compiling the index, and Katherine Brownridge and Stuart Bradfield at Red Dog for their excellent graphic design work

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Jeremy Dibble
Durham 2010

Abbreviations

GB-BE _q	Library of Queen's University, Belfast (Hamilton Harty Archive)
I-Baf	Library of the Accademia Filarmonica, Bologna
I-Nc	Naples, Conservatorio di Musica S Pietro a Majella, Biblioteca
I-Mb	Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, Milan (Archivio Casa Ricordi)
IRL-Da	Library of the Royal Irish Academy of Music, Dublin
IRL-Dna	The National Archive, Dublin
DOS	Dublin Orchestral Society
DCMU	Dublin Chamber Music Union
ISM	Incorporated Society of Musicians
RIAM	Royal Irish Academy of Music
RCM	Royal College of Music, London
RDS	Royal Dublin Society



Michele Esposito c. 1923
Courtesy of
Royal Irish Academy
of Music, Dublin.

Introduction

In the context of Irish cultural studies the career of Michele Esposito is of no small interest, as he is a figure of seminal importance in the history of Irish music. Born in 1855, Esposito studied piano and composition at the Naples Conservatory, where he was a close contemporary of Giuseppe Martucci. Like Martucci, his remarkable musical gifts were apparent at an early age and by his early twenties he had earned a notable reputation as a pianist and conductor. He also made his mark as a composer, aligning himself with the progressive coterie of Italian musicians who, under Liszt's influence, chose to cultivate instrumental music based on Austro-German models rather than opera. In 1878, finding that Naples offered limited scope for his talent, Esposito moved to Paris on the advice of Anton Rubinstein, hoping to forge a reputation there. His public appearances as a pianist were well received, but the lucky break which might have launched him on an international career somehow eluded him. After four years of eking out a precarious living, he accepted a teaching post at a private music school in Dublin, the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM), in order to provide adequately for his own family. Paris's loss was Dublin's gain: in the event, Esposito remained in the Irish capital for forty-six years, quickly establishing himself as a leading figure in the country's musical life.

For complex reasons bound up with Ireland's colonial past, musical culture in Ireland had remained rather undeveloped in comparison with other European countries. Dublin had no symphony orchestra, opera house or ballet company. Concert life was fairly restricted and educational opportunities, particularly for advanced students, were almost entirely lacking. With remarkable energy and determination, Esposito promptly set about transforming these circumstances and greatly enriched Irish musical culture in the process. At the RIAM, he proved himself to be a dedicated and exacting teacher of piano, setting new standards of artistic accomplishment and technical excellence. He was tirelessly active as a performer, appearing in recital with some of the most eminent

instrumentalists of the period. His appearances as a solo recitalist and in programmes of chamber music were a constant fixture in the city's calendars of musical events, and over several decades he introduced an enormous repertoire of unfamiliar works to Dublin audiences. He went on to found Ireland's first professional symphony orchestra, the Dublin Orchestral Society, which was run on a cooperative basis and presented annual seasons of concerts between 1899 and 1914. In later life, his scholarly interests came increasingly to the fore: Esposito became a prolific editor, producing a pioneering anthology of early Italian keyboard works, an edition of the Beethoven piano sonatas and a great deal else besides.

He also continued to compose to the extent that his heavy professional schedule allowed. His output is not very voluminous, but it includes orchestral music, substantial chamber works, two operas, songs and much music for the piano. This corpus of work is uneven, but at its best, Esposito's music is imaginative and skilfully wrought. In his lifetime, his compositions attracted distinguished advocates of the calibre of Hamilton Harty and Vittorio Gui, which testifies to the high regard in which they were held. Some of the chamber and orchestral works — particularly the *Neapolitan Suite*, the violin and cello sonatas, the string quartets — are of notable distinction and would amply reward the attention of enterprising performers. For the most part, they are couched in the idioms of late Romanticism, although some of Esposito's later music reflects modernist influences such as that of Debussy. Listeners familiar with late nineteenth-century Italian instrumental music will immediately recognize its kinship to the music of Sgambati, Martucci and other figures. From an Irish perspective, a few of Esposito's scores are of particular interest: his *Irish Symphony* and the *Irish Suite* are notable early attempts to use Irish folk tunes as a basis for serious symphonic works; while his operas and the cantata *Deirdre* engage with a new kind of subject matter, principally drawing on Gaelic mythology and folklore as well as contemporary rural life, which came to be favoured by many Irish writers during the Literary Revival. These works are amongst the most interesting attempts by composers at the period to forge a distinctively 'Irish' mode of musical utterance.

As will be apparent from the foregoing account, a survey of Esposito's career as composer, performer and scholar is consequently richly interesting on many levels, and sheds a fascinating light on both Irish and Italian musical life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In trying to reconstruct this career, however, the researcher is beset with practical difficulties of a kind that complicate his task considerably. Although information about Esposito's professional activities is reasonably abundant, there is a striking paucity of materials providing information about his personal life and the earlier phases of his career. As is explained in the Epilogue, virtually all of Esposito's personal papers have disappeared without trace, and only a handful of his letters are known to be extant. For information about many aspects of his life, particularly his childhood and early adulthood, one is almost wholly reliant on a small commemorative monograph in Italian that was published in Esposito's birthplace of Castellammare di Stabia in 1956,

Al musicista Michele Esposito nel prima centenario della nascita, a title which might be loosely translated as ‘In commemoration of the musician Michele Esposito on the centenary of his birth’. A few remarks should be made about this book here, as its authorship has been disputed in several publications and it has been the subject of various misunderstandings.

This monograph was the brainchild of Giuseppe Lauro Aiello, a local historian who both contributed to it and edited it. It comprises four sections, the first of which is a tribute by the distinguished Italian conductor Vittorio Gui, who befriended Esposito at the end of his life and came to know him fairly well. The second section is an extended biographical sketch of the composer’s career by Aiello himself. The third section is a catalogue of Esposito’s compositions, which is unattributed, but may well have been compiled by the author of the fourth section, Otello Calbi, a composer and member of staff at the Naples Conservatoire, who contributed a concluding essay on Esposito’s music.

In 1995, John Bowyer Bell published an article in the periodical *Éire-Ireland* in which he asserted that the biographical section of this book had in fact been written by the composer’s son Mario Esposito, adducing as evidence the fact that when Mario presented a copy to his Irish relative Morgan Dockrell in 1968 he crossed out Aiello’s name on the title page and replaced it with his own.¹ The matter does not appear to be quite that simple, however, and there is persuasive evidence on purely stylistic grounds to cast a doubt on Mario’s claim to authorship. If one examines his published writings on medieval Hiberno-Latin literature — a subject on which Mario was a leading authority — it is immediately evident that he was a man of remarkable intelligence and erudition. As one might expect from a scholar with a disciplined and critical cast of mind, these publications are models of clarity, lucidly expressed and meticulously referenced. The biographical chapter in the Aiello book, on the other hand, is anything but scholarly. It is couched in bombastic, effusive language redolent of the worst excesses of nineteenth-century biography and presents a mawkishly idealized, wholly two-dimensional view of its subject. It contains glaring misprints and other errors. It is poorly structured, chaotic in its presentation of information and frustratingly imprecise about facts and dates. Documents are regularly quoted without indications of their source, and sometimes even without indications of when they were written or by whom. In short, it is a thoroughly amateurish production — exactly the kind of thing one might expect from an amateur local historian, which Aiello was.

To be fair to Bell, Mario makes similar claims about the book in a letter to the Belgian historian Hubert Silvestre, a fellow medievalist, which contains the following passage:

1 J. Bowyer Bell, ‘Waiting for Mario: the Espositos, Joyce and Beckett’, *Eire-Ireland* 30, 2 (1995), 11, 20. This assertion is also repeated in Richard Pine and Charles Acton, eds., *To Talent Alone: The Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848–1998* (Dublin, 1998), 561–62, 77n

Je tiens à vous faire remarquer que je suis moi-même l'auteur de presque tout ce livre, mais il m'a semblé préférable de ne pas mettre mon nom sur le titre. Mon langage a été souvent altéré et des additions d'authenticité douteuse ont été faites. *Les épreuves ne me furent pas soumises ...*

[I am anxious to make you aware that I wrote virtually all this book myself, but it seemed to me preferable that my name should not appear on the title page. My language has been often altered and additions of questionable authenticity have been made. *The proofs were not shown to me ...*]²

One the face of it, these remarks might seem to leave little room for doubt about his authorship, but they are still difficult to reconcile with the actual nature of the book. Moreover, Mario's claim to have written 'virtually all' of it is almost certainly an exaggeration: Otello Calbi undoubtedly existed and there seems no reason to doubt that he contributed the concluding essay on the music.

A plausible explanation for this conundrum is not too hard to find if one turns to consider Aiello's prefatory remarks in which he describes how the book came to be written. In 1955, it came to his attention that plans were afoot in Dublin to commemorate the centenary of Esposito's birth. Feeling it would be a great pity if this event passed unmarked in the composer's native town, he conceived the idea of producing a commemorative publication. He goes on to explain in his rather stilted and self-consciously 'literary' prose, of which the following is a representative sample:

La raccolta degli elementi necessari per fare opera degna, si presentava però irta di difficoltà. Dove trovare le notizie, i dati, i documenti, e almeno una fotografia di Michele Esposito? Un primo, ma ben luminoso fascio di luce ci venne dal Maestro Vittorio Gui, che si risultava essere stato amico di Michele Esposito. Interpellato, con un semplice biglietto, il Maestro Gui rispose con una lettera che è lo specchio di quanta possa un animo nobile quando è spinto dal sentimento Fu in seguito possibile metterci in rapporti epistolari con i congiunti del Maestro Esposito e propriamente col figlio Mario, residente a Firenze Giunsero, così, musica, notizie, fotografie: un'autentica scoperta, una documentazione emozionante, una vera rivelazione! Preziose informazioni ci pervennero anche da Dublino. ... Il Maestro Gui, col suo consiglio, alimentava un fuoco che ormai non poteva più spegnersi.

2 Letter from Mario Esposito to Hubert Silvestre, 28 July 1958, quoted in Hubert Silvestre, 'Mario Esposito. Brève evocation de sa vie et de son oeuvre', in Mario Esposito, *Studies in Hiberno-Latin Literature*, ed. Michael M. Gorman (Aldershot, 2006), 1-13, 4. Emphasis in the original.

Assembling the necessary materials to produce a work worthy [of its subject] seemed fraught with difficulties. Where could I find the information, the dates, the documents and at least a photograph of Michele Esposito? A first, but brightly luminous ray of light reached us from Maestro Vittorio Gui, who, it transpired, had been a friend of Michele Esposito. Consulted by means of a brief note, Maestro Gui responded with a letter revealing what a noble heart is capable of when moved by emotion As a result, it was possible to enter into correspondence with Maestro Esposito's relatives and in particular with his son Mario who resided in Florence In this way, I obtained music, information and photographs — a real discovery, exciting documentation, a true revelation! Valuable information also reached me from Dublin. ... Maestro Gui, with his advice, nourished a fire which henceforth could never be extinguished.³

From this, it seems clear that Mario supplied information by letter and is thus the 'author' of the biographical chapter in the sense that Aiello had drawn extensively on his contributions, but not in any literal sense. In the absence of the original documentation, the factual accuracy of Aiello's essay must remain open to question: as Mario informed Silvestre, he was never shown the proofs and had no opportunity to correct various errors that had crept in.⁴ As a result, although the monograph contains a great deal of useful information, it cannot be considered altogether reliable.

Fortunately, documentation about Esposito's career becomes much more abundant after he moved to Ireland in 1882, and it has proved possible to piece together a fairly detailed — and, one hopes, more or less accurate — account of his professional activities from articles in contemporary newspapers and periodicals, as well as various works of reference. I would like to acknowledge my particular indebtedness to the standard history of the Royal Irish Academy of Music edited jointly by Richard Pine and Charles Acton, *To Talent Alone: The Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848–1998*, which contains a great deal of useful information not readily available elsewhere.

In addition to the difficulties inherent in giving a satisfactory account of Esposito's life, it is also impossible, as matters stand, to offer a comprehensive evaluation of his creative achievement. Some of his most important compositions — including two piano concertos, several major orchestral works, a string quartet, a piano quintet and two piano quartets — were not published in his lifetime and the manuscripts seem to have disappeared along with his personal papers, together with the full orchestral scores of his

3 Giuseppe Lauro Aiello, ed., *Al musicista Michele Esposito nel prima centenario della nascita* (Castellammare di Stabia, 1956), 14–15; hereafter *Al musicista*. The spelling of Gui's name has been standardized from the variant form 'Guy'.

4 Mario sent Hubert Silvestre a copy of the Aiello monograph which is annotated in his own hand: see Michael M. Gorman, 'Mario Esposito (1887–1975) and the Study of the Latin Literature of Medieval Ireland', in Esposito, *Studies in Hiberno-Latin Literature*, 312, 46n. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr Gorman for making a copy of this document for me. Unfortunately, the annotations provide little new information of significance and mostly indicate typographical errors in the text.

two operas and the cantata *Deirdre*. (Fortunately the vocal scores of these have survived, as they were published). In the cases of the works that have been lost, the researcher is entirely reliant on newspaper reviews or published programme notes for an idea of what they might have been like. Should these scores ever come to light, they could well add considerably to Esposito's stature as a composer. Only one commercial recording of music by Esposito is currently available — a selection of his piano works performed by the Irish pianist Mícheal O'Rourke which was issued on the Chandos label, recorded in 1997.⁵ It is to be hoped that the present study might help to revive interest in this unjustly neglected figure and stimulate further performances of his work.



Michele Esposito, *Pianist and Composer* (1926)
Sarah Cecilia Harrison (1863–1941)
Collection, National Gallery of Ireland
Photo © National Gallery of Ireland

*Per Lucia senza cui
questo libro non sarebbe stato scritto mai*

1 Neapolitan Origins and Early Maturity, 1855–78

The town of Castellammare di Stabia is situated at the inner edge of the Sorrentinian peninsula in the Gulf of Naples, not far from Mount Vesuvius. The Romans knew it as Stabiae — a popular resort, frequented by the wealthy and famous for its panoramic views of the bay. But like nearby Pompeii and Herculaneum, it was buried when Vesuvius erupted cataclysmically in A.D. 79. Although the town was destroyed, the area soon attracted new settlers as the soil of the region had been made very fertile by the volcanic residue and proved ideally suited to growing fruit and vines. The modern town took the first part of its name, Castellammare, from the thirteenth-century castle built by Emperor Frederick II that overlooks it from the hill above. By the mid nineteenth century, it had a population of about 22,000. Many of its inhabitants were employed by naval shipyards, of which there were a considerable number in the region. The town was a busy commercial centre and much railway traffic passing between Naples and Rome halted there. It offered little by way of cultural life, however; for such diversions Naples, some twenty miles further up the coast, was the capital of the region, enjoying a notable reputation as a lively centre for theatre and opera. The upper and middle classes who patronized such fashionable entertainments were scarcely visible on the uninviting streets of Castellammare, preferring their retreats in the surrounding hillsides. Industrialists from the increasingly prosperous north of Italy and wealthy aristocrats holidayed in imposing villas and *palazzi* at nearby Quisisana, where even the king and other members of the royal family came to bathe in the town's famous *terme* (thermal springs) and partake of the mineral waters, which, some believed, offered cures for everyday ailments and an occasional miracle remedy for serious illnesses.

Such was the place where Michele Esposito was born at 10 pm on 29 September 1855. The birth was registered the following day, and on 1 October he was baptized in the cathedral.¹ His father, Domenico Esposito, a 28-year-old mariner, was from the lower middle classes. Domenico's wife, Rosa D'Angelo, an illiterate yet intelligent woman of peasant stock, was five years younger than him. Michele was the fourth of seventeen children, and the first of three sons. The family home was evidently a very modest one, being situated in the Strada della Marina, an area of the town which has since been reconstructed extensively. The boy's father, although not wealthy, was an upstanding member of society. He was employed by Baron Giovanni Barracco, an important Neapolitan dignitary with connections to the royal court. An enormously successful merchant, the baron was keenly interested in politics. He and other members of his family were fervent supporters of Italian unification and supplied funds to Garibaldi for the liberation of the Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies in 1860. Thereafter, he became a prominent deputy in the newly formed Parliament of the Nation from 1861 and was later made a Senator.

Domenico Esposito was recalled as 'an energetic, serious [and] severe man', who, although somewhat volatile, 'regained his composure just as easily, given the fundamental goodness of his character'.² He also had a reputation for honesty. He was often engaged in important commercial activities for Barracco, travelling between Castellammare, Naples and other parts of Italy with substantial sums of money. Although he must have handled millions of lire, he never appropriated a penny for himself, being zealous for his family's good name.³ We may assume that Domenico, like his anti-Bourbon employer, was in favour of Italian unification. When the Bourbon kingdom fell in 1860, he was in Naples among the crowds to greet the victorious Garibaldi. As Michele Esposito's son, Mario, recalled many years later, his father 'always liked to tell of his first memory of childhood which was being carried as a baby to see the triumphal entry of Garibaldi into Naples on 7 September 1860, and how they had to wait for several hours on a roof in the baking heat'.⁴ After Naples was incorporated into the larger kingdom of Italy, the city rapidly became more cosmopolitan in outlook.

Michele was evidently a precocious child with a quick intelligence. At an early age he asked to be given music lessons and declared his desire to become a musician. His father secretly opposed the idea, as he hoped his son would go into business. The boy's first instruction in music consequently came about in a rather unusual manner. The new political regime set up a communal band in Castellammare and some of the local young

1 The surname 'Esposito' is very common in Naples and the surrounding area. Prior to unification in 1860, it was a name given to children who were given up for adoption by their parents. Derived from the Latin *expositus*, the past participle of *exponere*, it literally means 'placed outside'. It remains today a name associated with the Neapolitan region.

2 Aiello, *Al musicista*, 18

3 Aiello, *Al musicista*, 18

4 Aiello, *Al musicista*, 61

men, principally labourers and fishermen, volunteered to take part, although some were unable to read music or play a note on any instrument. Accordingly, it was decided that they would study after hours with a teacher at the local elementary school. When he heard about these classes, Michele expressed a wish to attend even though he was too young to do so. With the encouragement of this mother — she gave him some extra food to bring with him, so that he would not miss out on anything by having to return home to eat — he contrived to eavesdrop on the lessons, and while these proceeded in an upper room of the school, he hid outside on the stairs, often numb with cold, listening attentively to what the music master was saying. After some months, the teacher discovered that his class seemed to have learned very little:

‘Tell me this’, he asked the class one day, ‘what is the value of a semibreve?’ Silence. ‘And a minim?’ Silence. ‘Have you have learned absolutely nothing, for heaven’s sake? I repeat: how many beats are there in a semibreve?’ The silence was broken by a small voice coming from the top of the stairs, saying ‘There are four beats in a semibreve.’ The surprised teacher looked up, saw the child ... and said: ‘Come down here, boy! Who are you? The son of the concierge, perhaps?’ He replied: ‘No, I am the son of Domenico Esposito!’ ‘And where have you learned these things?’ ‘From you!’ ‘And when?’ ‘When you are giving the lessons, I listen from the stairs!’⁵

The teacher, at first dumbfounded, realized the young boy’s innate ability and asked his father if he might continue to teach him. When he promised to furnish the boy with an instrument for the band as well as a uniform, Domenico finally relented.

Michele made rapid progress and was soon given a solo on his cornet in a concert which the new band gave in a local theatre. Domenico, wishing to surprise his wife, brought her to the event and she beamed with pride as her son played his piece and subsequently acknowledged the applause. Unfortunately, the occasion was spoiled by a fracas between Michele and another member of the band who slapped him on the back to congratulate him, causing him accidentally to split his lip on his instrument. Domenico rushed into the fray, gave his son a thrashing and returned the instrument to the teacher. This incident threatened to put an end to his music lessons. But yielding to entreaties from the boy and his mother, Domenico bought his son a small piano. The boy’s interest in music steadily intensified, and Domenico was impressed, in spite of himself, by his son’s evident dedication. He eventually agreed to approach Francesco Simonetti at the Real Collegio di Musica in Naples, the most important music school in the region, with a view to enrolling Michele as a student there. Simonetti agreed to teach the nine year-old privately in order to prepare him to compete for a scholarship. Michele evidently made rapid progress and was considered ready for the competition in just over a year. Thirty-two candidates vied for

only two bursaries, which covered the winners' tuition fees in music and other subjects for eight years, in addition to providing them with full maintenance during this period. Michele was fortunate in being awarded one of the bursaries: given the size of his family, it was highly unlikely that his father could have afforded to spend so much money on his training. The Collegio's director, the eminent composer Saverio Mercadante, who by this stage had gone blind and was in poor health, appears to have been deeply impressed by the boy's talent: he asked for Michele to be placed next to him and 'caressing his little hands', asked him 'From whereabouts are you?' The boy replied: 'From Castellammare di Stabia!', whereupon the old Maestro exclaimed: 'Long live Castellammare, for giving us another Palumbo' — a reference to a former pupil of the Collegio, Constantino Palumbo, who had since embarked on a brilliant career as a pianist.⁶

By the time Michele enrolled there, the Real Collegio (which in 1889 was renamed the Conservatorio S. Pietro a Majella, after the monastery to which it relocated in 1826) had come to be regarded as one of the leading music schools of its kind in the country. It had come into being when various local music schools merged during the period of French occupation between 1806 and 1815. By all accounts, it had been somewhat moribund in the earlier decades of the century, but had been revitalized to a remarkable extent under Mercadante's able leadership after he was appointed director in 1840. Mercadante is a figure of considerable importance in the history of Italian music at this period. A prolific composer, he had, like many of his contemporaries, largely devoted himself to writing for the operatic stage in his earlier career, but in later life he was increasingly drawn to composing instrumental music — which up to this point had been largely neglected by composers and audiences alike, and even regarded as something alien to the Italian temperament. As one nineteenth-century commentator observed:

Twenty years ago, pure instrumental music was a thing unknown in Rome. ... [A] few *maestri* cultivated the German classics. ... The pianists played nothing but opera-music in poor arrangements Tullio Ramacciotti, an excellent violinist, a highly educated and progressive-minded artist, was the first to venture upon the unpopular mission of inviting the public to attend quartet-soirées — with slight success; some few foreigners came to them; Roman society, even the liberally educated, felt a holy horror when anybody so much as mentioned classical instrumental music... . It was a thankless apostolate.⁷

During his period of tenure, Mercadante trained quite a number of musicians who would remain at the forefront of Italian musical life for the rest of the century. His composition students included Mariani and Serrao, both of whom made their debuts with operas

6 Aiello, *Al musicista*, 25

7 Oscar Sonneck, *Suum Cuique: Essays in Music* (New York, 1900), 255

that were deeply indebted to his style. A musician with extensive practical experience of performing, Mercadante also took great pains to raise the standards of instrumental playing. He enlarged the repertory of the student orchestra by introducing the music of Beethoven, Weber, Auber and Offenbach, constructing novel and unusual programmes. His task was facilitated to some extent by a series of extensive reforms of national musical institutions that got underway in the 1850s, which not only overhauled the curriculum, but also introduced a number of important administrative measures, one of which was to require new teaching posts to be awarded on a competitive basis. Mercadante was also successful in attracting to the staff a number of highly gifted executants — particularly pianists — and by the 1860s the Collegio had come to be regarded as a major centre for pianistic training. This was a highly significant development. During the first half of the nineteenth century, public piano recitals (and, indeed, performances of chamber music generally) were rare in Italy, but the piano had nonetheless grown steadily in popularity as a domestic instrument. The Italian tours of renowned international pianists such as Henri Herz and Theodor Doehler were undoubtedly important in this regard. However, the regular visits of Franz Liszt to Rome from 1861 onwards, and the decision of Sigismond Thalberg to settle in Posillipo near Naples, did even more to heighten the prestige of the keyboard virtuoso in Italy, as both men were regarded as two of the greatest performing artists of their era.

The young Esposito had clearly entered the institution at a propitious stage in its development. He was also to prove fortunate in his first piano teacher, Benjamino Cesi, whose rise to prominence as a pedagogue had been made possible by the recent reforms. A one-time pupil of the Roman pianist Luigi Albanesi, Cesi had gained a teaching position in the Real Collegio in 1863 at the age of only eighteen, having competed against other well-established figures such as Simonetti and Palumbo. In 1866, by royal decree, he was given the position of *secondo maestro*. Moreover, his talent had been recognized by Thalberg, who took him on as his only pupil and promoted a concert in 1865 to enable him display his talents to the Neapolitan public. His playing was acclaimed and the event effectively launched Cesi's career as a leading figure in Italian musical life and as one of the country's major exponents of the piano.

Cesi's importance in the wider context of Naples's musical life cannot be underestimated. As a pupil of Thalberg, he enthusiastically assimilated his teacher's techniques and theories of piano-playing, which not only aimed to develop brilliance of fingerwork, but also placed great emphasis on the cultivation of a singing tone that strove to emulate the human voice. Thalberg's important treatise *L'art du chant appliqué au piano* [The Art of Song Applied to the Piano] provided detailed guidance on how to achieve this 'singing style' and the projection of tone. He advocated a firm, measured touch, the cultivation of steady tempi, and the intensive study of contrapuntal music to develop discipline and clarity of execution. Between 1853 and 1863, Thalberg published a series of twenty-five transcriptions of vocal works by other composers which illustrated all of these facets of

his performance style. His pedagogical approach was enthusiastically adopted by Cesi, whose own output of compositions — operatic fantasias, nocturnes and studies (some of which aimed to develop proficiency in playing polyphony) — were followed later by his substantial *Metodo teorico pratico per lo studio del pianoforte* [Practical Theoretical Method for the Study of the Pianoforte], which he brought out between 1893 and 1904. Here, technique was imparted with a carefully considered view of the canon of the classic repertoire, a stance which was further affirmed by the ten volumes of his *Repertorio del pianista: Pezzi scelti di autori antichi* [Pianistic Repertoire: Selected Pieces from Old Masters] and the twenty-one volumes of *Pezzi scelti di autori classici* [Selected Pieces by Classical Masters]. Moreover, Cesi did much to arouse interest in early music through his activities as a performer and teacher. He was a passionate exponent of the harpsichord music of J. S. Bach and J. P. Rameau, and he greatly admired the keyboard sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti, a composer whose work was being rediscovered around this time. His own recital programmes were notable for their enterprise: he gave the first performances in Naples of such demanding repertoire as Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata. Cesi's activities also brought a more international dimension to Neapolitan musical life. He founded a journal, the *Archivio Musicale*, which not only reported on local musical activities, but also contained coverage of important international figures. Much space was devoted in the first issues to Wagner, for example, and in particular to the premiere of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth. The journal also featured articles by internationally renowned correspondents such as Emil Naumann, Ludwig Nohl and Arthur Pougin, which offered a broader purview of European musical developments beyond the confines of Italy. Cesi's charismatic personality attracted a circle of enthusiastic disciples who constituted a distinctive Neapolitan school of pianists, to which Michele Esposito would himself belong in time.

Like most students at the Real Collegio, Michele boarded — although day students were also accepted. Pupils were admitted up to fifteen years of age and usually left when they were about twenty-two. The students' timetable was onerous. Music lessons took place on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. They were suspended during the whole of October and during the periods of Christmas and New Year, the last three days of the Carnival (usually the last week of February), Easter and Pentecost. During the October holiday, pupils worked on tasks set by their teachers, which represented the culmination of their studies for that academic year. In addition to their musical training, students were expected to study writing, arithmetic, Latin, Italian, history and other subjects. Discipline was strict and students had to wear a uniform. They rose before 6.30 am, washed and tidied their rooms before attending daily Mass at 7.15. Classes began at 7.45 and finished at 11.30. After lunch at midday, the boys were permitted a short period of recreation before lessons resumed at 1.30. At 4.30, they were permitted to take an hour's break, until 5.30, when the younger boys attended further lessons under the direction of the senior students, who

were known as *maestrini*.⁸ Dinner was served at 9 pm following a second visit to church. After this the boys were free for a further hour's relaxation before bed.⁹

On entering the Collegio, Esposito was assigned to Cesi for piano lessons, although part of his pianistic studies (most probably in the area of duet-playing and chamber music) were overseen by Luigi Caracciolo. He went to Paolo Serrao for training in composition and may have taken lessons in harmony and counterpoint with Carlo Conti.¹⁰ With the latter's death in 1869, this responsibility probably also fell to Serrao. Esposito was an exceptionally disciplined student and his assiduous practising of technical exercises seems to have been a source of much irritation to the local residents and shopkeepers. Indeed, he often practised late into the night and even when the other students were taking their afternoon recreational outings.¹¹ He made rapid progress and at the age of fourteen was himself nominated a *maestrino*. Two years later he was promoted to the privileged position of *primo alunno* [senior prefect] — an indication that he was considered the most distinguished student of the Collegio at that time.

Esposito's contemporaries included several individuals who would, in their various ways, make their mark in the musical profession. Paolo Tosti, who entered the Collegio in 1858 and later became famous as a singer and composer of popular songs — especially in England — was studying the violin and composition. Luigi Denza, best known today for his celebrated song *Funiculì funiculà*, was also from Castellammare and had enrolled around 1862 to study composition with Serrao. He also taught theory to the younger students. Other notable contemporaries included Luigi Caracciolo, an able pianist, who entered the Collegio in 1864 at the unusually advanced age of 17 and, as already has been mentioned, acted as Cesi's assistant. Caracciolo was to play a vital role in bringing about Esposito's eventual move to Ireland. Florestano Rossomandi, known later for his eight volumes of *Guida per lo studio tecnico del pianoforte* [Guide to the Technical Study of the Pianoforte], became a student in or around 1867; Leopoldo Mugnone, known later as an opera conductor, enrolled some time around 1868; and Ruggero Leoncavallo, most famous for his one-act opera *Pagliacci*, registered as a student in 1866.

But without doubt Esposito's closest friend at the Collegio was Giuseppe Martucci. A brilliant pianist, Martucci had started at the Collegio in 1867 as a day-boy largely because this was less onerous financially for his father. Martucci's father, Gaetano, himself a musician, was very ambitious for his son. The boy came to the attention of Cesi, who persuaded Martucci's father to allow him to become a boarder in 1868, after

8 The title *maestrino* was bestowed on a student who was seen to possess special abilities and who had successfully completed an advanced stage in the curriculum. A *maestrino* was also expected to assist with teaching younger pupils, enforcing discipline, directing public performances of the choir and orchestra, and other tasks.

9 The foregoing account of the daily routine for students at the Real Collegio is based on Folco Perrino, *Giuseppe Martucci: Gli anni giovanili 1856–1879* (Novara, 1992), 28

10 Perrino, *Giuseppe Martucci: Gli anni giovanili*, 28

11 Aiello, *Al musicista*, 26–27

which the friendship between him and Esposito grew more intimate. In 1872, however, Martucci's father, still in difficult financial circumstances, withdrew his son with a view to launching him immediately on a career as a virtuoso pianist. The abrupt end of their friendship was upsetting for Esposito, but the five years of their association had been highly beneficial nonetheless. As two of the most promising students, they developed a healthy sense of rivalry, one always trying to outshine the other. For some years, in order to facilitate additional practice, the two boys shared a piano, which was partly paid for by prize money — five gold Napoleons — won by Esposito in a competition sponsored by Prince Umberto, son of Victor Emanuel II.¹²

In addition to his pianistic studies, Esposito obtained a thorough grounding in elementary music theory — initially under Conti and then with Serrao, who not only had a considerable reputation as a pedagogue but also as a composer of opera. On completion of these basic courses, he was able to progress to the so-called *Scuola d'armonia* [School of Harmony] and to embark on the study of harmony and counterpoint, which required the composition of canons, two-part and three-part inventions and fughettas and culminated in the writing of fugues for string quartet and settings of movements from the Mass for various combinations of voices.¹³ When Mercadante died in 1870, Serrao temporarily took over the role of Director of the Collegio. His national standing is indicated by the fact that he was appointed the following year to a committee chaired by Verdi to consider national reforms to the study of music. The thoroughness of his teaching is evident from a short manuscript compilation of his course notes entitled *Corso di contrappunto* [Counterpoint Course], which the young Esposito assembled in 1875.¹⁴

At sixteen, Michele had begun to undertake more demanding assignments. Besides monitoring the progress of the day-boys (which was one of the duties of a *primo alunno*), Serrao also entrusted him with conducting the student orchestra. Esposito later acknowledged that this experience was of immense value in acquiring a fundamental knowledge of how to write for the medium, especially as orchestration was not taught as a separate subject in the Collegio's curriculum.¹⁵

It was only upon completion of this rigorous preliminary training that students proceeded to study original composition. Several of Esposito's juvenilia survive, the first being a short song *Canzonetta per gli Asili infantili* [Little Song for the Orphanage], which was dedicated to Raffaele de Novellis, the author of the text. The manuscript is dated August 1871 and also bears the annotation *Michele Esposito Anni 16 Pianista da due anni alla Scuola d'Armonia a Contrappunto* [Michele Esposito, 16 years old, pianist for two years in the School of Harmony and Counterpoint], which reveals that the young man had already

12 Aiello, *Al musicista*, 27

13 See Perrino, *Giuseppe Martucci: Gli anni giovanili*, 40–41, for the programme of composition exercises undertaken by Martucci.

14 Aiello, *Al musicista*, 82–83

15 'Signor Michele Esposito', *Weekly Irish Times*, 8 September 1900

completed two years of compositional training. A simple *ninna nanna* or lullaby, this song may be undistinguished melodically but amply demonstrates the young composer's competence in the manipulation of standard harmonic resources and the handling of the through-composed structure.

Two years later, in September 1873, he submitted a single-movement *Sinfonia* in F minor in part requirement for his diploma. This may have been publicly performed by the college orchestra, as it is described as being '*scritta per gli esperimenti pubblici dell'anno 73*' [written for the public performances in [18]73]. A slow introduction was added in September 1874. While this overture-like work is clearly an apprentice piece, it nonetheless demonstrates an impressive level of technical accomplishment. It is scored for an orchestra of double woodwind, horns, trumpets, trombones, ophicleide, timpani and strings. The rhythmical energy of the principal *Allegro* clearly recalls Mendelssohn, as does the lyrical second subject which is first heard on clarinet and bassoon. The work is in sonata form and follows standard classical procedures in its use of the relative major A flat for the second subject. The reference to the first-subject material at the close of the exposition is perhaps indebted to Mozart's use of this device in the movement of the G minor Symphony K. 550, a work that Esposito is likely to have known. The development section features a severe fugato, demonstrating his recently acquired contrapuntal skills, while the recapitulation is distinguished by an imaginatively re-orchestrated version of the second subject.¹⁶

Esposito's elevation to *primo alunno* appears also to have been prompted by a piano work he composed in honour of Vincenzo Bellini, which impressed the professors so much that the Collegio printed it for use as an entrance test piece for new candidates.¹⁷ Two further works written around this time reflect the prevalent fashion for fantasias on operatic themes. Both employed melodies from operas by Lauro Rossi, who had succeeded Mercadante as director of the Collegio in 1870. The *Fantasia per pianoforte* on themes from *Benvenuto Cellini* was first performed by Esposito as part of a concert given in honour of Rossi himself and was published by Cattrau of Naples as the composer's Op. 1 in 1874. This piece effectively marked Esposito's successful attainment of the Collegio's diploma. The second work, dated 22 July 1874, is an orchestral fantasia based on Rossi's opera *La Contessa di Mons*, which had been premiered in Turin the previous January. Later in the same year, Esposito went on to win the *premio d'uscito* or 'graduation prize', which entitled him to a grant of funding for a further three years, allowing him to continue his studies and to launch his professional career.¹⁸ He was not quite twenty years of age.

During these years, Esposito assisted Serrao and Cesi with teaching and other responsibilities. He was already acquiring a reputation as a musician of promise: he

¹⁶ The catalogue of works in Aiello's monograph also refers to a Symphony Op. 24 which Esposito apparently composed in Naples in 1874: see Aiello, *Al musicista*, 72. This was never published and, like all of Esposito's unpublished works, is missing.

¹⁷ Aiello, *Al musicista*, 27

¹⁸ Alessandro Longo, 'Michele Esposito', *L'Arte pianistica*, 1, 2 (1914), 1

earned the nickname of *Maestrino di Castellammare* and potential students from good Neapolitan families requested to study with him.¹⁹ Serrao also entrusted him with some deputy conducting work. Esposito's first appearance in this capacity occurred when Serrao was unable to direct the first act of an opera one evening and asked his protégé to take his place in the orchestra pit:

The youthful leader got on remarkably well, but he says he will never forget the look of surprise upon the face of the *prima donna* of the evening when she came upon the stage, and, glancing down at the orchestra, noted the change of conductors. However, everything proceeded with great *éclat* and absolutely without a hitch, and at the fall of the curtain a well-known voice from the back of the theatre called out 'Bravo' in stentorian tones. It was Serrao, who had been in the audience for some time, a genuinely delighted witness of the ability and success of his pupil on his first public appearance in the role of conductor.²⁰

Esposito's professional standing received an unexpected fillip in 1874 when the legendary Anton Rubinstein visited Naples.²¹ The Russian composer and pianist was then at the height of his career and was generally regarded as being one of the greatest virtuosi of his age, with a reputation that rivalled even that of Liszt. Having resigned as Director of the St Petersburg Conservatoire in 1867, he toured Europe extensively before undertaking marathon tours of the United States, where he gave some 215 concerts with the renowned violinist Henryk Wieniawski in 1872–73. Although he professed increasing repugnance for the career of a touring virtuoso, and repeatedly declared his intention of giving it up in order to concentrate on composition, Rubinstein undertook further tours in Europe after his protracted sojourn in America, one of which brought him back to Naples. The city had changed considerably since his previous visit, having become much more international in outlook. Although the appetites of Neapolitan audiences for opera remained undiminished, there were now more opportunities to hear instrumental music and chamber music. A *Società Filarmonica* had been founded in 1867 and expanded rapidly after the resounding success of its initial concerts. Its first orchestral concert was given on 25 August 1868 and, the following year, a mixed orchestra of professionals and amateurs accompanied the young Palumbo who had just returned from a tour abroad. From the 1870s onwards, instrumental music was cultivated more intensively. And not only had the musical fare on offer in Naples become varied and interesting, but the city could now boast a distinguished school of local pianists. Rubinstein, who was

19 Aiello, *Al musicista*, 29

20 'Signor Michele Esposito' *Weekly Irish Times*, 8 September 1900

21 The article on Esposito in the *Weekly Irish Times* of 8 September 1900 gives the date of Rubinstein's visit as 1873; Alessandro Longo, in the article in *L'Arte pianistica* cited above, gives the year as 1874 and Aiello, more specifically, as January 1874: see *Al musicista*, 29.

known for his generous support of young talent, made it his business to keep abreast of the latest developments at the Real Collegio. He heard Esposito perform Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* at a student *matinée* concert and subsequently conduct a performance of Mozart's late G minor *Symphony*. The Russian was clearly impressed and personally invited Esposito to attend one of his own forthcoming recitals in the city. Afterwards, he made a point of singling out the eighteen-year-old, who had come backstage with his friends to join the throng of admirers wishing to see the great man. He had been standing shyly near the door, whereupon 'Rubinstein, with kindly enthusiasm, rushed forward, and bringing the lad into the midst of the group of his favoured intimates, introduced him frankly and genially as a coming pianist of most promising talent.'²² As a further mark of his esteem, Rubinstein effected an introduction to Pietro Clausetti, the manager of the Naples branch of Ricordi, the distinguished Italian music publisher — a contact that eventually led to the inclusion of two of Esposito's early piano works, *Pensiero malinconico* [Melancholy Thought], Op. 2, and *Romanza*, Op. 6, in Ricordi's rapidly expanding catalogue of keyboard music in 1877.²³

Rubinstein evidently believed that it was imperative for the young man to leave Naples if he were to realize his gifts to the full. Before his departure from the city, he offered him some advice: 'You are young now and Naples's sky is far too beautiful to allow you to work ... you must go away... !'²⁴ This remark can be interpreted in several ways. First of all, it would seem to suggest that Neapolitan musical life struck Rubinstein as still being rather parochial, recent developments notwithstanding. Although Esposito had come into contact with several fine pianists — Cesi, Palumbo, Martucci and others — Rubinstein probably thought that he needed to experience life in a larger and more challenging arena. And as far as composition was concerned, the city was undoubtedly a backwater in comparison with major cultural centres such as Berlin, Vienna or Paris. For the time being, however, Esposito was simply not in a position to take such a momentous step, tempting though it must have been. A seemingly insurmountable difficulty was presented by the fact that the young man was now the principal breadwinner for his sizeable family, as his father had gone blind and been forced to give up work. His parents and younger siblings were thus completely dependent on his income from teaching or performing, which was supplemented for the time being by his government grant. The young man was obliged to work very hard, his days being filled with an arduous round of lessons, rehearsals and concerts. For a time, he travelled back and forth every day between Naples and the family home in Castellammare, but found this so fatiguing as to be completely impractical. He

22 'Signor Michele Esposito', *Weekly Irish Times*, 8 September 1900

23 Esposito subsequently managed to negotiate more advantageous terms with the firm of Lucca, Ricordi's principal Italian rival, which published all of his piano works and songs between 1877 and 1879. He did not place works with Ricordi again until 1882, as shall be detailed in Chapter 2.

24 Aiello, *Al musicista*, 29