

STEFANIA NANNI

THE SPIRITUAL SONGS OF  
SAINT ALPHONSUS M. LIGUORI (\*)

In 1801, the popular songbook published in Naples, edited by the famous *Maestro* Mattia del Piano, introduced to the public the «many beautiful and devout songs in the Tuscan language and the Neapolitan dialect» that St. Alphonsus Maria Liguori «taught people everywhere to sing»<sup>1</sup>. It had been thirteen years since the death of the great bishop, missionary and reformer of moral theology. Thanks to the publication of various biographies and the beginning of the canonical process for Alphonsus' beatification and eventual canonization, new evidence surfaced to celebrate his fame «not only as a saint but also as a literary man» and as a «connoisseur of fine music».

In that pastoral and apostolic life of Saint Alphonsus, musical expression was a forthright language of spiritual conversion, capable of renewing practices previously established (by Oratorians, Jesuits, and the Pious Workers<sup>2</sup>). Gradually Alphonsus had expanded his repertoire of spiritual songs and greatly increased the scope of their use.

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(\*) The present essays constitutes a revisiting of the article: *La musica dei poveri* by S. Nanni and P. Saturno, published in *La musica dei semplici. L'altra Controriforma*, ed. by S. Nanni, Roma 2012, 261-275.

<sup>1</sup> Mattia DEL PIANO, *Canzoncine da aggiungersi al manual canzoniere intitolato Il freno della lingua ovvero Laudi Spirituali composte nell'idioma toscano, e napoletano per lo popolo oltre a quelle aggiunte nella seconda edizione*, Napoli 1801. (This was an enlarged version of a work by the same author and title published in Naples in 1729 and in 1788).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview on the strategies and musical repertoires addressed to the people to whom the apostolate was directed, see: *La musica dei semplici*, as indicated above at FN (\*); Oreste GREGORIO, *Canzoniere alfonsiano. Studio critico ed estetico del testo*, Angri (SA) 1933, shows how the Alphonsian songs recall the medieval hymns and the laudistic heritage of Saint Philip Neri. Note: hereinafter this work by O. GREGORIO will be cited often, but simply by the author's name followed by *op. cit.*

In this aspect of his missionary work, the poetic, literary and musical formation received early in life had proved to be a great asset. Antonio M. Tannoia, who had been Alphonsus disciple and a fellow member of the missionary congregation which the saint founded, was to be the first to describe these studies of young *Alfonso* in 1798. Tannoia grew effusive in highlighting his founder's talents. He portrayed Alphonsus as «excellent in poetry... since he was a child». He marveled at Alphonsus' compositions as an old man (when «little things had a special influence on him... and were enough truly to touch his heart»).

Tannoia also maintained that Alphonsus' poetic tendency never withered, for when he was «sick, humiliated, and decrepit he still found in the depths of his soul a wealth of wonderful feelings to celebrate the magnificence of creation»<sup>3</sup>. Certainly, in Alphonsus Liguori music and singing were not simply the result of a «sensitivity of temperament», or of an «inclination for music, and an admiration for nature». Rather music and singing took on a depth of spirit and meaning *within his mission*. Tannoia narrates how his *maestro*, fully convinced of the moral and spiritually renewing function of religious poetry, used a number of «devout songs» in his rounds of preaching to the people of the countryside and in the poorest districts of Naples, among the struggling artisans and *Lazzaroni*<sup>4</sup> who attended the *Cappelle Serotine*<sup>5</sup>. The disciple Tannoia depicts his teacher and founder

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<sup>3</sup> Tannoia reports of the first musical studies by Alphonsus as a teenager, his touching «the cymbal as an expert» under the guide of Gaetano Greco, the performances of sacred dramas in music, the practice of interspersing «holy meditations» with «tender hymns and songs» experienced during his withdrawal from legal practice in 1726 in the aftermath of his priestly ordination. (Antonio Maria TANNIOIA, *Della Vita ed Istituto del venerabile servo di Dio Alfonso M. Liguori vescovo di S. Agata de Goti e fondatore della Congregazione de Preti Missionari del SS. Redentore*, Vincenzo Orsini, Napoli 1798-1802, reprint of this work, Materdomini 1982).

<sup>4</sup> *Lazzaroni*, has various translations, but generally: a member of the poor working class of Neapolitan society, some of ill repute. See *History of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer*, Francesco CHIOVARO, ed., J. Robert FENILL, trans., Liguori (MO) 1996, 104.

<sup>5</sup> Literally, «Evening Chapels». – More information on how Alphonsus believed in the spiritual effectiveness of spiritual songs can be found in: O. GREGORIO, *op. cit.*, passim; Théodule REY-MERMET, *Il Santo del secolo dei lumi:*

as «accustomed to gather the children, holding high a Crucifix and singing songs, leading them to the church, and teaching them the rudiments of Christianity, as if he were an elder parishioner». Tannoia also speaks of the practice of Alphonsus who, before the sermon, would chant his hymn *Gesù mio, con dure funi...* (*My Jesus, with harsh ropes...*). He did so with such devotion and plaintive tones that the people burst into tears. In the opinion of some of the other missionaries, his song yielded more benefit than the sermon<sup>6</sup>.

With that allusion to Alphonsus' singing, Tannoia introduces his readers to issues that have been concerning the historiographers about the compositions of Alphonsus for over a century. These issues deal with both their authorship, and the relationship between his poems and their translation into music<sup>7</sup>. The compendium of Alphonsian spiritual songs certainly lies within the corpus of his oratory, poetry and music, all of which were addressed in distinct ways to both aristocrats and to common folk. A double track can be seen, even in liturgical pieces, depending on whether what he composed was meant for the erudite or for those of more humble state<sup>8</sup>.

However, later in the life of Alphonsus, his hymns were directed toward a broad populace, rather than to distinct pastoral environments. In doing this he achieved a synthesis between learned and common modes of language so as to reach out to every

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*Alfonso de Liguori*, Roma 1983 (1° ed. Parigi 1982), 110-111; Rey-Mermey offers certain emphatic points, especially about the *Cappelle serotine*: Giuseppe ORLANDI, *S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori e i laici. La fondazione delle «Cappelle serotine» di Napoli*, in: *SHCSR* 35 (1987) 393-414, and *Il Regno di Napoli nel Settecento. Il mondo di s. Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, in: *SHCSR* 44 (1996) 205.

<sup>6</sup> TANNIOIA, *Della Vita ed Istituto*, see I, Ch. 9, 31, and III, Ch. 17, 81.

<sup>7</sup> Paolo SATURNO, *Un musicista sconosciuto del '700 napoletano, S. Alfonso Liguori*, mimeograph edition, Pagani 1977; also, Paolo SATURNO, *La tradizione musicale alfonsiana*, in: *Alfonso M. de Liguori e la società civile del suo tempo. Atti del Convegno Internazionale per il Bicentenario della morte del Santo (1787-1987)*, Napoli, S. Agata dei Goti, Salerno, Pagani, 15-19 maggio, 1988 (Biblioteca dell'«Archivum Romanicum» fondata da Giulio Bertoni, Serie I – Storia, Letteratura – Paleografia, Vol. 243), a cura di Pompeo GIANANTONIO, Part II, Firenze 1990, 577-590.

<sup>8</sup> A radical reform of these trends in sacred music and chant is identifiable in the *Motu Proprio on Musica sacra* of Pius X, 1903.

person of faith. One can see that his approach was leveling out with a uniform attitude and tone suitable to the many differences of social class, gender, and age.

The formal spiritual composition by Alphonsus called «*Il Duetto tra l'Anima e Gesù Cristo*» («Duet between the Soul and Jesus Christ»), is a key example of the pastoral and social orientation of Alphonsus, as well as of his desire to impart divine values. It is a composition of verses with musical accompaniment, performed as an «intermezzo» between a catechetical session and the major sermon. The occasion was a retreat directed by Liguori in Naples at the Church of the *Trinità dei Pellegrini* on March 16, 1760. Regrettably, the manuscript of the *Duetto* was lost. But a note written at the bottom of a precious copy now in England states that it was composed by St. Alphonsus Liguori. This copy is considered reliable, and was purchased between 1841-1845 by the Royal Library of London, at that time located within the British Museum<sup>9</sup>.

Liguori wrote this spiritual cantata when he was sixty-four years old, during a period of his very intense and often requested pastoral activity. For this retreat he was called upon to preach the Lenten spiritual exercises in the well-known Neapolitan Church of the *Trinità*. He meant the *Duetto* as an interlude in place of the type of musical pieces that customarily came between an Instruction on the Commandments and the so-called «Great Sermon». By means of one steady bass voice and two other parallel voices, Alphonsus staged the bloody drama of the Crucifixion, and a «contest of love between creature and Creator»<sup>10</sup>. After a short and majestic introduction by the orchestra, the Soul enters

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<sup>9</sup> The London copy is titled *Cantata on the Passion of Jesus Christ, the words and music by S. A. M. Liguori*. It was published in 1860 shortly after its discovery by Frederick Liguori, musician and descendant within the Liguori family; second and third editions followed in 1887 and 1898 (ed. by Father Joseph C. Heidenreich, C.Ss.R.). In 1905 the *Duetto* was published (in Italian, French, English and German) in the Italian magazine «*Santa Cecilia*». DE MEULEMEESTER, I, 176.

<sup>10</sup> The quotation is from Antonio DI COSTE, *Le melodie di S. Alfonso M. de Liguori in alcuni suoi canti popolari e Duetto tra l'Anima e Gesù Cristo*, Roma 1932; O. GREGORIO, *op. cit.*, 146ff., (on which the on-line edition of the *Canzoncine spirituali* is based: [http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ITASA0000/\\_IDX032.HTM](http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ITASA0000/_IDX032.HTM)).

the scene, first rebuking Pilate with an intense recital which ends with a heart-rending exclamation poured out about Christ Himself, the «King of Scorn and Pain». Meanwhile the orchestra, with a doleful progression, announces that Christ is now almost on the scene. And then He slowly enters, head crowned with thorns, while the «divine blood marks the earth wherever his steps fall». The Soul rushes towards him and with gentle voice asks, «Where are you going, Jesus?». «I am going to die... for you», he says in soft reply. The verses of Alphonsus are beautifully blended into this «contest of love», fused into «this *Duet* of superbly pure emotions».

The verses, too, adapted themselves to the style of melodies written earlier in this time period<sup>11</sup> – melodies which traced the musical paths created by the Neapolitan School (and, in particular, those of Francesco Durante, Alessandro Sebastiano Speranza, and Gaetano Greco) and thus were charged with additional pathos and sheer poignancy. The tone was «immediate», addressed to the core of the meditative theme, namely, one's felt-compassion for the death of Christ<sup>12</sup>.

For sentiment within a prayer experience was, and is, the overriding theme of the spirituality of Alphonsus; it was also indicative of the kind of religious language used in eighteenth-century Italy. Through the melody and the rather erudite form of the composition, the cantata could speak to the cultured audience of the capital city. However, it could also touch the heart of the popular audience that gathered to worship at the Church of the *Trinità*.

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<sup>11</sup> The *Duet* appears to be relatively independent from the guidelines still based on the profane style linked to Monteverdi (Paolo SATURNO, *Le canzoncine-laude di A. de Liguori. Sviluppo storico-artistico; Duetto(i) tra l'Anima e Gesù Cristo di Alfonso Liguori*, in: *La poesia e la musica di Alfonso Liguori e la tradizione missionaria redentorista*, ed. by Alfonso Amarante, Materdomini (AV) 2006, 21-42; 73-82); see also Renato NICODEMO, ed. by, in: S. Alfonso LIGUORI, *Canti dell'anima. Canzoncine spirituali*, Materdomini (AV) 1996, 52.

<sup>12</sup> In the wide historiography about Alphonsian spirituality: *Alfonso M. de Liguori e la società civile del suo tempo*, Part. I-II, *passim* (as in FN 7 above); *La recezione del pensiero alfonsiano nella Chiesa. Atti del Congresso in occasione del terzo centenario della nascita di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, Roma 5-7 marzo 1997, Roma 1998.

Here we can clearly find ourselves within the pattern of devotional (and often anonymous) songs used in the celebrations for Christmas, the Passion, the Eucharist, the Virgin Mary, and in such devotions as the Way of the Cross, the *Tre ore* of Jesus' Good Friday sufferings, the rosary and the novenas honoring saints. Moreover, we follow along in the wake of the language which urged a conversion of heart. This had already been tested for efficacy in the long-revered Alphonsian apostolate among the people of hamlets and villages.

An intentional «disciplinary element» also played a central role in this genre of sacred music as, in fact, it did in all the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century devotional hymns. This element tended to denounce any «infantile conceit and selfishness, frivolity, the overuse of cosmetics, and general spiritual lethargy». For these things would not nourish the spirit. The spiritual songs likewise disparaged any profanely suggestive songs and «saccharine, often licentious, romances»<sup>13</sup>.

Therefore the poetic component, accompanied by music, was designed to be a pastoral activity. This pastoral moment was capable of using word, gesture, exemplary conduct, chant and instrumental music so as to «substitute with good songs those bad songs», such as those which resonated during work in the farmlands. It was an attempt to oppose the «great evil that came from filthy songs common among young men and young women». In short, the purpose was to facilitate the redemptive process of the most derelict people of the countryside.

The devotional songs which came from St. Alphonsus, or were borrowed and revised by him, enjoy a quiet style that is rarely redundant. They use «lithe and soft lines of verse, each with five syllables<sup>14</sup> and then are blended with longer lines of verse called *hendecasyllabic*<sup>15</sup>. This, in itself, gives the composi-

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<sup>13</sup> The mention of softness and frivolities shows the distance between what Alphonsus composed and promoted and that hymnography said to have a «*Pietro Metastasio*» style which was «voluptuous in content and conventional in form». See O. GREGORIO, *Canzoniere alfonsiano* (as in FN 2 above), V-IX; 3-29.

<sup>14</sup> In Italian these are referred to as *Quinari*.

<sup>15</sup> Originally in classical Greek or Latin poetry the *hendecasyllabic* was a metrical line consisting of eleven syllables. In Liguori's era it was very popular

tion an almost epic solemnity; and then lines of seven syllables<sup>16</sup>, when placed next to the meek and humble lines of eight syllables<sup>17</sup>, move along very quickly. From a cheerful tone of a pleasant idyllic work, there follows a change to a more pensive section with eight lines of verse<sup>18</sup>. The result is that, instead of experiencing just a grim motif as in an epistolary poem, one now finds a style having a hopeful, Biblical flavor.

The verses alternate «to break up the monotony», being composed in a way that leaves them open to *further* rearrangement from the modal sign to the tonal sign, from polytonality<sup>19</sup> to dodecaphony<sup>20</sup>. As time passed, such adaptability of texts and melodies allowed for the intermingling of new contributions, often grafted onto the achievement attributed to Saint Alphonsus by his contemporary Redemptorists and their successors. However, such «adaptability» did enable Liguori, because of his vast cultural and artistic training, to leave *his* mark on works which he wanted to improve. At the same time, that same adaptability had resulted from a vast and anonymous heritage of texts and music already used in popular missions and by many spiritual confraternities.

The devotional songs written or used during the earliest missions of the Redemptorist founder – which came from his «poetic soul» and from his vibrant apostolic zeal – and which were first tested out during these rural missions – have not been found among his extant signed manuscripts. Instead these songs have come to us by way of the oral tradition of the Redemptorist

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in Italian poetry.

<sup>16</sup> These are lines of metric verse referred to in Italian as *Septinari*.

<sup>17</sup> These are lines of metric verse referred to in Italian as *Ottolari*.

<sup>18</sup> An *octava* was a grouping of eight lines of poetry, suggestive of the first eight lines of a sonnet by Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), (1304-1374).

<sup>19</sup> Polytonality is the use of more than one key simultaneously.

<sup>20</sup> Dodecaphony is a method of musical composition ascribed to Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951). This technique ensures that all twelve notes of the chromatic scale are sounded as often as one another in a given piece, yet preventing the emphasis on any one note through the use of «tone rows», an ordering of the twelve pitches. Thus the music avoids being in a given key. – Also, other authoritative composers as Perosi, Fugazzola, Voices, Bonnet, Di Martino express themselves in this tone. See also the notes by R. NICODEMO, in: S. Alfonso LIGUORI, *Canti dell'anima, Canzoncine spirituali*, 52.

congregation, and after that from the wider Italian clergy. Thus we witness all the problems related to the authorship of the texts and to the authenticity of the melodies.

But the most important fact is that this repertoire has spread among the Christian people, passing from generation to generation (a practice among the «most holy and sweet ones of the Christian populace of the Southern Italy»<sup>21</sup>). This is clearly shown in the most successful selection from this repertoire, namely, the hymn *Tu scendi dalle stelle*<sup>22</sup>. It is believed to have been composed in 1755 for the Christmas Novena at Nola, an important town about twenty-seven km. from Naples<sup>23</sup>. Documentary sources do not allow us to attribute this lively hymn to Saint Alphonsus. For the biographies of St. Alphonsus, along with certain other memoirs and the editorial information on his hymns, have all contributed to confusion about the dates, the authenticity, the origin and even the number of so-called Alphonsian musical compositions. The total count of these compositions has even appeared to «grow along with the year of publishing». The author Maurice De Meulemeester, C.Ss.R., has pointed out that the 1758 edition of these compositions listed twenty-eight pieces – and this number had grown to forty-five in the 1896 edition!<sup>24</sup>.

However it is possible to establish some definite facts about the authorship of the songs. The first *Canzoncine* were composed by Saint Alphonsus (or he was at least acquainted with and made

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<sup>21</sup> See Giuseppe DE LUCA, *Sant'Alfonso, il mio maestro di vita cristiana*, ed. by Oreste GREGORIO, Roma 1983 (reprint of the first edition, 1963), 62, 90-92, 106.

<sup>22</sup> Often translated into English as: «From Starry Skies Descending».

<sup>23</sup> About this song see A. PARISOTTIE and A. TONIZZA, *Il duetto di sant'Alfonso* (quoted in P. SATURNO, *Le canzoncine-laude*; see FN 11 above); see also Gaetano VALENTE, *S. Alfonso, mons. Felice de Paù e la nenia natalizia «Tu scendi dalle stelle»*, in: «Rivista di Scienze Religiose» 14 (2000) 17-53. The composition has been translated all over the world since the publication of Jacob BOGAERS, *S. Alphonse Liguori musicien et la réforme du chant sacré*, Paris 1899.

<sup>24</sup> Some editions appeared while the author was alive, and about fifteen editions after his death; to these must be added the many partial publications. In 1769 a comprehensive collection was printed in Naples with the title of *Canzoncine Spirituali dell'Ill.mo e Rev.mo Monsignor Don Alfonso Liguori* (presented as seventh edition). FRANZ X. REUSS, *Carmina sacra S. Alphonsi M. de Liguorio*, Romae 1896, 253-264. See DE MEULEMEESTER, I, 50.

use of them, sometimes rewriting the lyrics) in the period not long after of his priestly ordination. We are aware of this because he alludes to them in a letter which he wrote to a group of women religious. Specifically, in a kind of spiritual direction letter written on October 29, 1730, to Sister Maria Angiola del Cielo, superior of the monastery in Scala, he speaks of a song composed in honor of the Virgin Mary. Rather informally he refers to the structure of a certain spiritual hymn and allows us to hypothesize that «other rhymes had preceded or followed» and that the composition of words and music for spiritual songs had now entered «the regular routine of the priestly apostolate of Alphonsus, who was then thirty-four years old»<sup>25</sup>.

Two years later, in July 1732, the first publication of his early musical compositions appeared in a «very modest edition, at a price of thirty-three grains<sup>26</sup> for every one-hundred copies, which undoubtedly was, ... a kind of leaflet distributed during the missions»<sup>27</sup>. On April 22, 1737, Alphonsus sent a letter to Sister Maria Giovanna della Croce stating that he was sending her a packet of «devotional booklets which contain some *canzoncine* composed by me». Some commentators identify these *canzoncine*/spiritual songs as the nine compositions which can be found in «*La via facile e sicura del Paradiso*» («The Easy and Safe way to Paradise»). This work was published anonymously in 1737, although it is now believed that Gennaro Maria Sarnelli was responsible for its appearance<sup>28</sup>. Sarnelli had entered the Redemptorists in 1733, and within the Neapolitan church he then became a prominent advocate for the poor. In addition, he was a leader of the eighteenth-century religious reform in Italy, and

<sup>25</sup> This is the opinion of Father O. GREGORIO, C.Ss.R., *op. cit.*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> To grasp some idea of this monetary worth, we learn that a carpenter in those days earned about thirty grains (*grana* in Italian) per day. See ORLANDI, *Il Regno di Napoli nel Settecento*, p. 298, n. 219.

<sup>27</sup> DE MEULEMEESTER, I, 50.

<sup>28</sup> The printer Giovanni RICCIO, who published *La via facile e sicura del Paradiso*, in 1737 (the same year of Alphonsus' letter to Sister Giovanna della Croce) commissioned the Canon Fontana to do the revision of Sarnelli's work, *La Via facile e sicura del Paradiso*. For clarification of this fact, and the evidence regarding the juxtaposition of Alphonsus' and Sarnelli's compositions poems in the *Canzoniere*, see O. GREGORIO, *op. cit.*, 18.

possibly the one who had inspired the first Alphonsian collection of spiritual songs in 1732<sup>29</sup>.

Liguori and Sarnelli shared much in common. Neapolitans by birth, they both came from a background in law, both had a talent for writing, and both possessed a keen pastoral sensitivity. In later years this led to a confusion about which of these two men authored certain devotional musical pieces. In fact, there are some books published after 1737 by Sarnelli which contain works undoubtedly by Sarnelli himself, but accompanied by several unsigned *canzoncine* which certain commentators have without hesitation ascribed to Liguori<sup>30</sup>. These latter compositions (believed to be Liguori's) are listed in the index of the books published by Sarnelli all with the same typeface, and are presented under the heading *Canzoncine Divote in lode della Gran Trinità, di Gesù Cristo, del SS. Sacramento e della Divina Madre: da cantarsi nelle dottrine, nella vita divota, nelle scuole de' fanciulli e delle fanciulle, nelle campagne, nei monasteri e nei lavori*<sup>31</sup>.

Therefore, as other scholars believe, these same compositions may have been published *previously* and erroneously included in the songbooks of Sarnelli. Judged as a whole, these compositions point to the confusion one finds when determining which works can be ascribed to Alphonsus, and when verifying the authorship, date, etc., of spiritual compositions which in those days were used to aid priests in their apostolates.

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<sup>29</sup> DE MEULEMEESTER, I, 50.

<sup>30</sup> The overlap between the spiritual *canzoncine* of the two religious men is also shown by a reference to some «*Canzoncine divote*» in two of Sarnelli's unpublished letters of July 1732. See Candido M. ROMANO, *Delle opere di S. Alfonso. Saggio storico*, Roma 1896, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Translation: «Devotional Hymns in Praise of the Holy Trinity, of Jesus Christ, of the Most Blessed Sacrament and of the Divine Mother: To be sung in Catechetical Classes, in Devout Live, in Boys' and Girls' Schools, in the Countryside, in Monasteries, and at Work». – On this matter, see again the already mentioned study (cfr. our FN 2 above) by Father O. GREGORIO, *op. cit.*, 19. – On p. LIV of the *Introduzione* to the *Opere ascetiche di sant'Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, IX, *Apparecchio alla morte e opuscoli affini*, Roma 1965, see extracts from letters of Sarnelli dated 1738. For an outline and notes about the various editions of the spiritual songs by Alphonsus during his lifetime can be found in DE MEULEMEESTER, I, 50f.

Also, in actual practice, there was considerable pastoral and apostolic adaptation going on. That is, the many religious orders and missionary congregations of the Naples region all adjusted their approach to the situations they met. Thus they overlapped one another, losing their «family identity» in favor of one common aim: converting souls and transforming behavior.

It was a usual thing in parish missions to use devotional hymns which had diverse origins and authors, modifying them according to the need of the moment. It was common practice to distribute the lyrics, sometimes in handwritten copies, and at other times in printed form, to the local clergy, to confraternities, and even to local churchgoers who were able to read and teach them to others. The usage of words and music composed by others was widespread (and, apparently, unchallenged) among Neapolitans in their urban and rural ministries. This was Sarnelli's course of action in his 1733 publication of «*librettini e canzoncine*» [booklets and hymns] which were works supposedly authored by Alphonsus. Sarnelli did the same with his 1737 publication of «*La Via facile e sicura del Paradiso*» [«The Easy and Sure Way to Heaven»] in which he included not only other songs attributed to Alphonsus, but also much older compositions like «*Ama il tuo Dio con disamar te stesso*» [«Have less self-love and more love of God»]. These revered songs had been seen as far back as 1680 in a book called *Sacred and Spiritual Poems* by Cardinal Pier Matteo Petrucci<sup>32</sup>.

There was also the instance of a 1749 anonymous collection (later attributed to a Jesuit priest) entitled «*L'Arpa di Sacre Laudi e Divozioni ad uso delle Missioni de' PP. Gesuiti, delle chiese parrocchiali, delle case private, e di ogni stato di persone per tutto l'anno*» («The Harp of Sacred Praises and Devotions for the Use

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<sup>32</sup> CARTEGGIO, I, 272 and 280. In two letters from Gennaro M. Sarnelli to Alfonso Liguori, there are references to «your *canzoncine*», to the cost for purchasing «your booklets», and to his intention of «printing immediately the *Vera sapienza* by Segneri, with *canzoncine*» as a supplement. – Inspiration for the lyrics of Alphonsus arose from the poetry of Cardinal Pier Matteo Petrucci (1636-1701), and similar inspiration can be felt in the works of Don Matteo Coferati. Father Coferati was from Florence, was choir director at S. Maria del Fiore, and was also a theorist and author of the work *Corone di sacre laudi*. See *Alfonso M. de' Liguori e la società civile...* (as in our FN 12 above), 402ff., and *Introduzione*.

of the Missions of the Jesuit Fathers, of Parish Churches, of Private Homes, and of People of Every State of Life Throughout the Year»). Published in Naples, this anonymous collection contained the hymn «*Gesù mio con dure funi*» («My Jesus, with Harsh Ropes»). But this work was (at least in part) by Alphonsus Liguori and had already been published by Sarnelli eight years earlier (1741) in a booklet, *A Gesù Appassionato (To Jesus Fervent with Love)*. Sarnelli had placed it in a section of Alphonsus' *Canzoncine Spirituali!* Not only that, but this «Alphonsian hymn» had appeared repeatedly in reprint editions of Sarnelli's booklet.

Alphonsus himself is said to have taken part in this «open and carefree interchange» of lyrics and basic melodies, a situation characterized by «spontaneity and pleasant sentiment». At the beginning of April 1740, he informs Gennaro Maria Sarnelli that he had told the Redemptorist Brother Gennaro<sup>33</sup> to make copies of some songs for which he himself would undertake a revision once his missionary campaign at Nocera was finished. In addition, he asked Sarnelli to modify certain other compositions, giving Sarnelli the responsibility of inserting «affective qualities into both the hymns and religious poetry». Alphonsus singles out the hymn: «*Anima Desolata*» [«The Desolate Soul»], saying that it would be enough to revise just the one strophe which [the Canon Giacomo] Fontana had rearranged.

Above all, he wanted Sarnelli to insert into this set of songs two more compositions: «*O bello Dio, Signor del Paradiso*» [«O God of Loveliness»], and «*Quando penso alla mia sorte*» [«When I Ponder my Fate»]. The first of these two compositions is attributed to Thomas Falcoia (a member of the Pious Workers and also Alphonsus' spiritual director); the second was attributed to Bishop Carlo Majello [Maielli]<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> See *Carteggio* (as in our FN 32 above), 558, where G. Orlandi identifies this confrere as Brother Gennaro Rendina, C.Ss.R. (1708-1789).

<sup>34</sup> See O. GREGORIO, *op. cit.*, 20, and 34, where these two songs are attributed to Falcoia and «Majello» respectively in 1756 and 1769. «Majello» is most probably Bishop Carlo Maielli, b. Naples, Mar. 18, 1669; ord. priest Mar. 21, 1693; was rector in, and taught at Naples theological seminary, was for some years director of the Vatican Library; ord. as bishop Sept. 21, 1724; d. Jan. 3, 1739. See Remigius RITZLER and Pirminus SEFRIN, ed. by, *Hierarchia Ca-*

The Alphonsian poetic-musical production therefore lies within a repertoire meant for apostolic-pastoral settings. Its usage required ongoing textual adjustment and melodic variations to suit the different contexts of liturgical and devotional events. It summoned and encouraged the emotional involvement of the devotees who lived in a number of cultural and linguistic venues. Due to this flexible situation, it is widely believed among historians that the Alphonsian hymns

have been [largely] inspired by his hearing religious hymns already in use in the places visited during his constant apostolic journeys...; then, duly trimmed of their secular elements and any words or phrases from «foreign» local dialects, these hymns were revised in literary and poetic style. Finally the content of these hymns was expanded according to their specific topic with the result that they formed *in toto* a sizeable pedagogical handbook to educate and build up the faith of [predominantly] rural people<sup>35</sup>.

As mentioned, the Alphonsian spiritual songs were revised to fit the sacred themes of various liturgical and devotional ceremonies, and they were refashioned in simple poetry patterns. This gave them «expressive immediacy in accord with popular language and they were cast in the easy-to-learn and highly evocative choral chant». So they played an important role, not only in the Alphonsian strategy toward conversion of one's life, but also within the more general piety which was encouraged by varied apostolic means of expression in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Alphonsian compositions can be viewed as part of a large production of anthologies of devotion for the use of the people. With the songs there were allied meditation readings and prayers. The books used for *Visits* to Jesus and Mary often had an appendix of some hymns composed in such a way that all the people were able to take part in the customary devotional practices<sup>36</sup>.

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*tholica Medii et Recentioris Aevi*, V, Patavii 1952, 195. In this source, the surname Maielli is alternately given as «Maiella».

<sup>35</sup> Gaetano VALENTE, *S. Alfonso, Mons. Felice de Paù, e la nenia natalizia «Tu Scendi dalle Stelle»*, in: «Rivista delle Scienze Religiose» 14 (2000) 44. This entire article provides further insight into St. Alphonsus' use of spiritual songs in his missionary activity.

<sup>36</sup> Karl KEUSCH, *Dottrina Spirituale di S. Alfonso*, Milano 1931, 47. Of spe-

At least since the early twentieth century, Alphonsian historiography has been almost obsessed by the question of «whether all of the songs published in various editions under the name of Saint Alphonsus were really composed by him»<sup>37</sup>. More recently, however, there has been a growing awareness that «the time and place of original composition has remained shrouded in a veil of silence, perhaps lastingly impenetrable for a good number of the these works». It has become popular to state that the texts are the «result of an autonomous plurality, founded on a single poetic text»<sup>38</sup>. Scholars are now oriented in another direction. The proposal «to defend the validity» of the *Canzoniere alfonsiano* has moved instead into research about «the more authentic melody»<sup>39</sup>. In this instance, «more authentic» means a concentration on the melody's aptitude relative to the «music of the poems» and «the adherence between words and music».

The biographies of Saint Alphonsus dedicate only fleeting paragraphs to the theme of the melodies of the spiritual songs, hinting at Liguori's reliability on expert composers for the music which accompanied his verses. This documentary vagueness opened the way to three lines of interpretation. The most prevalent, existing mainly in the Redemptorist province of southern

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cial interest on this topic is: Mario ROSA, *Settecento religioso: politica della ragione e religione del cuore*, Venezia 1999.

<sup>37</sup> Mario PALLADINO, *Sant'Alfonso poeta*, s.l., 1917, 28. On meager hints of the historiography about the time of the composition of the Alphonsian songs: TANNOIA, *Vita ed Istituto*, vol. 1, at pages 8 and 185; ROMANO, *Delle opere di S. Alfonso*; REUSS, *Carmina sacra*, 253-264.

<sup>38</sup> Father O. Gregorio (in the 1930s) knew that definitive research had not been done and, deferring to the wishes of Cardinal Willem Van Rossum, C.Ss.R. at the beginning of the twentieth century, he presents an edition capable of «establishing authority» or, at least, «stemming the editorial freedom, which profited by citing the name of St. Alphonsus». – See also Gullielmo M. VAN ROSSUM, *S. Alphonsus et Immaculata Conceptio b. Mariae Virginis.*, Ex Typ. Polyglotta S. C. De Propaganda Fide, Romae 1904, 221.

<sup>39</sup> P. SATURNO, *Le canzoncine-laude*, Section 3; see FN 11 above. – The expression «*Canzoniere alfonsiano*» derives from Father O. Gregorio; it was intended to indicate the entire corpus of Alphonsus' poems and musical compositions, which expressed the single inspiration which led Alphonsus to help people celebrate the Mystery of Salvation. See O. GREGORIO, *op. cit.*, *Introduzione*, V-IX.

Italy, was convinced that the melodies used in the apostolate remained unchanged since the time of the founder – and became widespread throughout the Redemptorists in the nineteenth century. The second line of interpretation, by [Vito] Domenico Scaligina, C.Ss.R.,<sup>40</sup> and then by Antonio Di Coste, C.Ss.R.<sup>41</sup> favored a «codification» (according to original authorship, date, etc.), developed by the second generation of Redemptorists, some of whom were contemporaries of St. Alphonsus. Finally, a third line of interpretation insisted that such a codification was possible, but only through the Redemptorist novitiates and houses of study, in which a continuous oral tradition was traceable back to the teaching given by Alphonsus to young clerics.

Given these different interpretations – and considering the confusion among genuine and spurious melodies derived from oral tradition – the comparison of the musical variants of the Alphonsian poetic-musical production was abandoned by the critics; or, rather, it was absorbed into two tracks. The first track, favored by many diocesan priests and religious communities<sup>42</sup>, took into consideration the «way in which parish missions were organized»; this was their primary gauge for the production and use of spiritual hymns. The second track preferred to clearly identify a single uniqueness of style for parish missions dating back to one and only one source, namely, St. Alphonsus. They believed that this pure style was capable of creating through Redemptorist missionaries a «global musical tradition» in this field of apostolic labor<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Vito Domenico Scaligina, C.Ss.R., b. Feb. 5, 1839; prof. Feb. 2, 1858; ord. Apr. 5, 1862; d. May 9, 1929.

<sup>41</sup> Antonio Di Coste, C.Ss.R., b. May 1, 1865; prof. Nov. 9, 1883; ord. Nov. 20, 1887; d. July 13, 1944.

<sup>42</sup> Very significant, from this point of view, are the studies presented at the international conference of 1997 about *Alfonso Maria Liguori e la società civile del suo tempo*; and Giuseppe ORLANDI, *Il rapporto tra s. Alfonso e il Venerabile Lentini*, in: *Il Venerabile Lentini nella storia sociale e religiosa della Basilicata*, ed. by Gabriele DE ROSA and Francesco VOLPE, Roma 1987, 125-153. A general framework in S. NANNI and P. SATURNO in: *La musica dei semplici*, and important notes about the geography of the devotional songs (and about the origin of «*Tu scendi dalle stelle*») in: G. VALENTE, *S. Alfonso, Mons. Felice de Paù e la nenia natalizia «Tu scendi dalle stelle»*, as in FN 35 above.

<sup>43</sup> P. SATURNO, *La tradizione musicale*, as in FN 7 above.

The fact remains that, setting aside all questions of firm authorship, the «Alphonsian *canzoncine*», have been welcomed and loved in many lands for over 270 years. They played an extraordinary role in forming Catholic identity in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Then, through time, these spiritual songs were enriched by new themes and further interpretative effort by the Redemptorists. Also, professional musicians and trained liturgists, with unique charisms and with great success, introduced them as a pattern of sacred music for devout people. They have represented a vast Alphonsian repertoire for Christmas, Easter, Marian feasts and devotions, and for Eucharistic celebrations<sup>44</sup>. Some of them were recognized for the subtle appeal of their mystical content.

And so, for ordinary people of genuine faith, as they have sung his hymns, there has been left a keen impression of the figure of St. Alphonsus Liguori. Moreso than his moral or ascetical works, moreso than his exhortations or devotional writings, these hymns which he produced, ...or adapted, ...or revised, invoked the image of a man with an ardent charism to be an apostolic missionary close to the people<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> ID., *Le canzoncine-laude*, passim. See FN 11 above. – This work provides information about twentieth-century developments of the cantatas and about the musical contribution of the Redemptorist congregation toward the circulation of the «Alphonsus-Redemptorist repertoire» (in Europe, Canada, Mexico). During the twentieth century, some composers and musicians such as Lorenzo Perosi, Licinio Refice, and Alfonso Vitale have applied their own music to lyrics by Alphonsus. At times they also altered the melodies and the texts. For further clarification, see NANNI and SATURNO, *La musica dei poveri*, as above at the beginning of this article, FN (\*).

<sup>45</sup> About the role of the musical expression within the overall pastoral and doctrinal works of Saint Alphonsus, see also: Antonio DI COSTE, *Le melodie di S. Alfonso M. Liguori in alcuni suoi canti popolari e Duetto tra l'anima e Gesù Cristo*, Roma 1932; Domenico CAPONE, *S. Alfonso missionario con i suoi redentoristi nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia dal 1732 al 1982*, Napoli 1987; Emelindo MASONE and Alfonso AMARANTE, *S. Alfonso Liguori e la sua opera. Testimonianze bibliografiche*, Pagani-Napoli 1987; Marina MAYROFER, *Devozione e teatro nelle melodie alfonsiane*, in: *Alfonso M. De Liguori e la società civile* (see FN 7 above), 541-562; Ezio MARCELLI and Santino RAPONI, *Un umanista del '700 italiano, Alfonso M. de Liguori*, Verona-Roma 1992.

SUMMARY

This article traces the role that musical expression played in the pastoral and apostolic life of St. Alphonsus. It was his belief that music and song constituted a true and proper language of conversion. Hence he used devotional songs with a moral and catechetical purpose in mind. The poetic and musical talent of Alphonsus had been refined by the expert artistic training of his formative years. This article first takes us back to the period which preceded Alphonsus, when the Oratorians, Jesuits, and Pious Workers developed verses and music texts for use in their missions. Then we are shown how Alphonsus took those older texts, reworked and adapted them, and added some of his own, but always with pastoral objectives in mind. The songbook produced by Alphonsus was addressed to the heart of both the educated and the general populace. His aim was to reach the heart of all devout people, even as his special predilection was for those in the vast areas of countryside and in the poorest districts of Naples. By means of his spiritual songs he succeeded in providing a «solid pedagogical instrument for instructing and building up the faith of people».

SOMMARIO

L'articolo ripercorre il ruolo che l'espressione musicale svolge nell'azione pastorale e apostolica di sant'Alfonso, dando forma ad un vero e proprio linguaggio di conversione che usa le «divote canzoni» a fini morali e di catechesi. Il linguaggio poetico-musicale alfonsiano – nato da una specifica formazione artistica acquisita in gioventù dal fondatore – rivista in patrimonio di testi in parole e musica già usato nelle missioni (particolarmente di Oratoriani, Gesuiti, Pii Operai) e lo rielabora adattandolo ai contesti dell'apostolato. Continuamente rinnovato sulla base degli obiettivi pastorali, il canzoniere di sant'Alfonso si indirizza ai colti e ai semplici e mira a raggiungere l'insieme del popolo devoto, ma è soprattutto rivolto alle genti delle campagne e dei rioni napoletani più poveri come un «solido sussidiario pedagogico per l'istruzione e l'edificazione delle popolazioni».