

OBITUARY

Ennio Morricone, when faith becomes music

CULTURE

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A statement from his family has announced that Ennio Morricone died “on the morning of July 6 in Rome with the comfort of his faith.” This is perhaps the most relevant news within the news of the passing of the Roman composer: Morricone left this earth with the comfort of his faith, an expression that, we hope, means “with the comfort of the Sacraments.”

In speaking of the musical composer of *For A Fistful of Dollars*, *Once Upon A Time in America* and *Mission*, the first factor to begin with is his relationship with God, because all the rest is secondary, even for greatly talented people like him. Thus, in an interview released in 2015 to the Italian Catholic magazine *Famiglia Cristiana*, Morricone spoke about the Catholic education he had received: “I come from a Christian family. My faith was born in my family. My grandparents were very religious. I always prayed together with my mother and my sisters before we went to bed. I remember the period of the war. During those terrible years we prayed the Rosary. We were all deeply impressed by this. When I am falling asleep, I still imagine that I am responding to my mother’s Ave Maria. We were always religious. Every Sunday we went to Mass and we received the Sacrament of Holy Communion.” A faith that was fervent even in advanced age: “I pray for an hour every day, sometimes even more. It is the first thing that I do. Also throughout the day, when possible. In the morning I sit before that Christ [pointing to an image of Jesus present in the living room]. And also in the evening. I hope that my prayers are listened to.”

Next, a question follows on the relationship between music and God: “Music is definitely close to God,” the maestro responds. “Music is the one true art that truly draws near to the eternal Father and to eternity.” If the eyes are the window of the soul, for Morricone his music was also the window – it revealed much about him. “Luciano Salce, a director for whom I had written musical scores for several films, called me one day and said: ‘I have to leave you.’ ‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Because I make comedy films and you make music that is spiritual, sacred. I simply have to leave you.’ This episode affected me greatly. Thanks to him I began to think about it. Probably at times I express sacrality even when I am not even thinking about it or trying to.” If on the one hand some of his music only implicitly expresses a tension towards the transcendent, other compositions intentionally place themselves in the repertoire of the sacred. We may think for example of *Amen*, *Missa Papae Francisci*, and *Una Via Crucis*.

“Morricone” is synonymous with “film soundtracks,” but in reality the Roman composer’s work spanned many genres, and he arranged many famous songs, such as *Sapore di sale*, *Il mondo*, and *Se telefonando*, among many others. Among these genres,

the one he cultivated most passionately was contemporary music, which he called “absolute music,” perhaps because, in his intentions, it had value in itself; it could be listened to without a film.

If for the two-time Oscar winner the contemporary music that he wrote was his most precious jewel, it was substantially snubbed by the critics, as well as by contemporary composers among his colleagues as well as by the public. The public understandably goes into raptures for *Gabriel's Oboe*, a famous piece that returns several times in the film *The Mission* and whose melody proves, together with many other soundtracks, how Morricone was one of the most worthy contemporary heirs of the Italian *bel canto* tradition. Certainly the general public does not go out to listen to his concerts for the sake of solo instruments and orchestra or pieces like *Fragments of Erossu* or the music for the ballet *Requiem For A Destiny*, compositions that most people probably don't even know exist (on YouTube the number of listeners for these pieces is only a few hundred, as opposed to 1.3 million for *Gabriel's Oboe*).

Now, if the typical Italian snubs Morricone as the author of contemporary music because it is not as catchy as his soundtracks, the environment that gravitates instead towards so-called contemporary music has always looked at him with distrust for the opposite reason: it considers his music to be only apparently cultured, but in reality too accessible, too melodic, too easily “drinkable” (the idea is that if you are easily understood you must not be cultured), devoid of those dissonances, stumbles, aches, and screeches that are supposed to be a hallmark of those who want to write serious music today.

In fact, our composer Morricone studied at the school of Goffredo Petrassi, and substantially the layout of his works – outside of some experimentation – was tonal, thus easily listened to. This is a true blasphemy in the musical world, above all if we think of the years in which Morricone was formed and began to write, years in which the twelve-tone technique, structuralism, and minimalism raged. In addition, the academic circles have never forgiven him for his supposed sell-off and vulgarization by writing pop music for films. Essentially he was an unwelcome person, a pariah, in the environments that are said to count.

For his part, Morricone never hid the fact that he began writing music for films in order to make a living (Petrassi detested his choice because he considered it impure), so that he would be able to write more cultured music. But his fame came from popular production, and he never broke through as a contemporary composer. Here then is the

paradox of Ennio Morricone: a man who was acclaimed worldwide by the public and by almost every single movie director, who won dozens and dozens of awards and marked the history of musical composition for the big screen forever, found almost no recognition for the works he judged the most valuable.

One wonders then if he died with this regret: the regret of having gone down into history for writing the soundtrack for *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* and not for *Four Latin Anamorphoses*. Perhaps not, judging from his humble character, which led him to ask for private funeral services, because, as he wrote in his will, "I don't want to disturb."