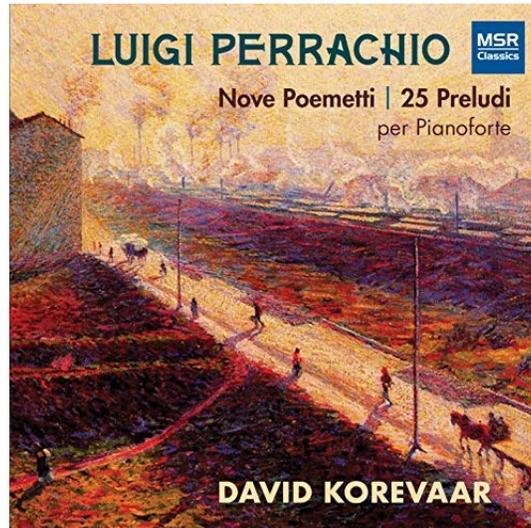


FEATURE REVIEW by [Jerry Dubins](#)

 **PERRACHIO** *Nove Poemetti. 25 Preludi* • David Korevaar
(p) • MSR 1710 (68:28)



Luigi Perrachio: Piano Music - *Nove Poemetti* (1917/1920); *25 Preludi* (1927)

Audio CD

MSR Classics



Some fish swim in schools. That profound thought occurred to me as I began thinking about how the authors, annotators, and editors, of music history have conveniently, if sometimes questionably, grouped composers into schools based on time, place, aesthetic outlook, and stylistic similarities: the First and Second Viennese Schools, the Franco-Belgian organ and violin schools, Vincent d'Indy's Schola Cantorum, Russia's "Mighty Handful," America's "Boston Six," and so on. Italy made it into "school" too with its "Generation of the 80s," a group of composers thrown together based on their decade of birth and on their independently shared interest in making Italy great again in the field of instrumental, orchestral, and symphonic music, which, one might argue, it hadn't been since the end of the 18th century. The names usually associated with this early 20th-century Italian musical renaissance are Ottorino Respighi (1879–1936), Ildebrando Pizzetti (1880–1968), Gian Francesco Malipiero (1882–1973), and Alfredo Casella (1883–1947). It should be pointed out, however, that the revival was under way well before these guys got credit for it. They were preceded by the likes of Giovanni Sgambati (1841–1914), Marco Enrico Bossi (1861–1925), Leone Sinigaglia (1868–1944), and, most notably, Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924).

With the release of this new recording by acclaimed pianist David Korevaar, those authors, annotators, and editors that wrote the books are going to have to update them and put out revised editions, for we now have a new composer to add to Italy's "Generation of the 80s." His name is Luigi Perrachio. He was born in Turin in 1883, and died there in 1966. Chronologically, at least until someone else turns up, he and Casella now bring up the rear guard of the group. While I don't usually quote at such length from an album's booklet note, I am going to do so here because Korevaar has written extensively and articulately on his discovery of Perrachio in his enclosed essay.

"A few years ago, when my colleague Laurie Sampsel and I were investigating the University of Colorado's collection of scores from the library of the Catalan pianist Ricardo Viñes (1875-1943), I discovered an intriguing volume by a composer whose name I had never come across before: *Nove Poemetti* (Nine Little Poems) by Luigi Perrachio. What were evidently nine individually published pieces had been primitively bound together into a book—one assumes by the publisher—and presented to Viñes by the composer.

"While biographical details on Perrachio are scarce, it seems safe to assume that he encountered Viñes while in Paris in the 1910s, a trip that allowed him to immerse himself in, and fall in love with, the music of Debussy and Ravel, and to meet both of these composers and members of their circles. While the *Poemetti* reflect the influence of this exposure, Perrachio has his own distinctive voice, crafting a kind of Italian Impressionism. The *Preludi*, composed almost a decade after the *Poemetti*, have a more muscular and neoclassical sound, but are still immediately appealing to the listener.

"Perrachio initially was taught piano and cello by his father, an amateur musician, and then received the obligatory law degree from the University of Turin in 1908. Music called to him strongly, and he completed a degree in piano and composition in Bologna in 1913 after spending time in Vienna, where he worked with the Moravian pianist and composer Ignaz Brüll (1846-1907).

"After a sojourn in Paris, he returned to Turin, where he established himself as a promoter of new music, founding a group known as the 'Double Quintet of Turin,' dedicated to presenting new works. In 1924, he published a small monograph on the piano works of Debussy. In 1925, he began teaching at the Liceo Musicale (now Conservatorio) of Turin, first piano, and later composition. He was an important mentor for a generation of Italian composers, continuing to teach at the Conservatorio until 1955. His deteriorating health led to almost complete immobility, but he continued to receive private students at his home until his death in 1966.

"Today, Perrachio and his music are almost completely forgotten, although there are some recent scholarly articles in Italian, including a brief survey of his piano

music by Attilio Piovano, and an album of recordings of music for harp. Why such neglect? As a composer, Perrachio seems to have suffered from undue modesty: he published only a small fraction of his work, and he was willing to do so only after significant arm-twisting from his supporters. Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, in a review of the *Nove Poemetti*, begins, ‘Yes, it is decided, finally! Luigi Perrachio has published some of his piano pieces: more compelled by the affectionate pressures of his friends than by the impulse of his own will.’

“Some years earlier, in 1918, Guido Gatti had written an enthusiastic encomium to Perrachio, which he prefaced with a statement that his readers would not have heard of the composer because he hadn’t actually published anything and no one was playing his music in public. Nonetheless, Gatti informed his readers that Perrachio’s music was amazing. I think Gatti was right: this is wonderful music, composed by a man with a distinctive and beautiful compositional voice and a mastery of the piano that comes through in vivid and colorful writing. These two works, recorded here for the first time, show two important facets of Perrachio’s style that he shared with other composers of the era: colorful impressionism in the *Poemetti* and lean neoclassicism in the *Preludi*.”

“Impressionism,” at least insofar as music is concerned, was an inclusive tent that lent shelter to a diverse gathering of composers from far and wide. The term is virtually synonymous with Debussy and Ravel, but Respighi and Albéniz are generally classified as Impressionists, as are Vaughan Williams, Butterworth, and Moeran, in whose hands Impressionism morphed into “pastoralism” (aka the cow pat school), when it crossed the Channel from France to England. It then leaped across the Atlantic to become an Americanized version of Impressionism in the hands of John Alden Carpenter and Charles Tomlinson Griffes. There may well be more composers labeled Impressionists than there are composers pigeonholed under any other 20th-century “ism,” and the Babel of musical languages they speak are so many and sundry as to render the term “Impressionism” practically meaningless.

Somewhere in this collective is Luigi Perrachio. As Korevaar notes, Perrachio spent time in Paris, rubbing elbows with Debussy and Ravel, and their influence rubbed off on him in a fairly big way. That is immediately apparent from the *Nove Poemetti* (Nine Little Poems), composed between 1917 and 1920. They sound almost like a dead ringer for Debussy, but not quite. If you guessed Debussy as the composer, you wouldn’t be laughed out of class and then shunned. Yet there’s a gnawing sense that something is off, as one listens to these atmospheric musical renderings of brief poems and verses by various attributed and unattributed authors.

The fourth poem, “Libellule” (Dragonflies), for example, has the earmarks of Debussy’s harmonies but not his keyboard figurations. There’s a brittleness and an

edginess to Perrachio's writing that are his own. Where Debussy's water fountains flow with ease, dancing and sparkling in the sun's rays, Perrachio's waters appear as glinting, frozen shards that fracture and break apart, diffusing the light into a rainbow of colors. With poems bearing titles like "The Night of the Dead," "Rain," and "Night," it strikes me that Perrachio gravitates towards somewhat darker regions and more somber moods.

The 25 Preludes are of an altogether different mindset and purpose. For one thing, they are strictly abstract pieces, designated simply by tempo markings, as opposed to the descriptive character pieces of the *Nove Poemetti*. Perrachio was a serious student of Bach, serious to the point of having authored a 300-page monograph on Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. And like Bach, Chopin, Scriabin, and others both before and after him, Perrachio chose to make his own contribution in 1927 to the sets of preludes that traverse all the major and minor keys.

Why 25 instead of 24? That's the easiest part of Perrachio's systematic progression to explain. He simply wished to differentiate between F# Major with six sharps and its enharmonic equivalent Gb with six flats. One could argue that equal temperament tuning renders it a distinction without a difference. It may look different on the page and involve different fingering on the part of the player, but it can't sound any different to the ear, anymore than if you notated and played *Happy Birthday* starting on F# with a key signature of six sharps, or starting on Gb with a key signature of six flats. You're pressing the same keys on the keyboard. Of course, Perrachio didn't write the *same* prelude twice, once in each key. One prelude is *Happy Birthday*; the other is *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, so of course they're going to sound different; they're different tunes.

The rest of Perrachio's "circle of fifths" progression is unique and rather more complicated in that it doesn't follow either the Bach or Chopin models. Eventually, Perrachio does cover all of the keys, but he does so by following a scheme of major-major, relative minor-minor: C, F, a, d, and so on. The progression is designed to end with a prelude in Bb Major (German notation, B) and an inscription, "In nomine JOHANNIS SEBASTIANI."

Korevaar consigns the Preludes to a Neoclassical in style, compared to the *Nove Poemetti*. Generally, I would agree. There's certainly enough melodic angularity, harmonic dissonance, and tonal ambiguity in a number of the preludes to suggest that Perrachio may have encountered Prokofiev and Stravinsky in Paris, as well as Debussy and Ravel. But every now and then—as in the first two preludes and again in the 18th and 21st numbers of the set—there's a reverberation from afar of a Romanticism distantly reminiscent of the late piano pieces by Brahms.

This is altogether a fascinating album and the music a real treat for the ears. It would be reason enough to applaud David Korevaar for discovering these works

and enabling us to hear them on record for the first time, but a standing ovation is in order, along with the applause for playing of such beauty and artistry of such penetrating insight. Urgently recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

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