

THE HARMONY BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AFFECTION AND FESTIVE GRANDEUR IN LUCIANO SIMONI'S *MISSA SOLEMNIS*

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SUMMARY. The article presents the complex personality of the Italian composer Luciano Simoni (1932–2010), highlighting his dual career as an engineer and musician, as well as his rich compositional portfolio, which focuses primarily on religiously inspired vocal-symphonic music. It mentions his international collaborations and his artistic relationship with the Târgu Mureș Philharmonic, which resulted in numerous recordings under the baton of conductor Romeo Rîmbu. The central work analyzed is *Missa Solemnis*, composed between 1969 and 1977, and highlights Simoni's distinctive stylistic synthesis, which blends elements of post-Romanticism, Neoclassicism, serialism, and minimalism into an original language dominated by melody and expressiveness. It highlights the thematic unity of the work, achieved through the repetition and transformation of musical motifs across different sections, as well as the use of polyphonic techniques and Gregorian influences. The analysis examines each part (*Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo*, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei*) in detail, highlighting the correspondence between the musical discourse and the theological meanings of the text. An important aspect is the composer's artistic conception, based on expressive sincerity and the transmission of a spiritual message of hope and peace. The Mass thus takes on the character of a choral symphony, due to the extensive role of the orchestra and the instrumental interludes. Finally, the article highlights the aesthetic value and interpretive challenges of the work, as well as the critical acclaim received by Simoni's composition, which is characterized by stylistic coherence and fidelity to the Italian musical tradition.

Keywords: Luciano Simoni, *Missa Solemnis*, Contemporary vocal-symphonic music, Contemporary *Missa*, Religious expressivity

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1. Introduction (about Luciano Simoni biographical landmarks)

This article aims to shed light on a lesser-known composer, whose life and musical career are intertwined with a long teaching career in engineering at the University of Bologna, the oldest institution of higher education in Western Europe. His name is Luciano Simoni, and his lifelong passion for music has accompanied him throughout his entire life; he was a prolific composer of works in the most diverse musical styles, ranging from chamber music to symphonic pieces and large-scale works, such as vocal-symphonic compositions, both in the secular sphere and, above all, within the Western Christian context.

Luciano Simoni, born in Bologna in 1932 and deceased in the same city on December 23, 2010, was a multifaceted figure, holding a degree in electrical engineering from the University of Bologna, but also having studied composition from 1951 to 1959 with Lino Liviabella, director of the Bologna Conservatory and a student of Ottorino Respighi.

As a professor of electrical engineering, he rose through all the ranks of the academic career, authoring hundreds of scientific articles and being invited to lecture at numerous prestigious institutions in the U.S., Japan, Czechoslovakia, Germany, and Poland, with some topics related to scientific progress as well as the relationship between science and music.

In the musical field, Luciano Simoni is the recipient of a composition award, having won first prize in 1975 for his First Symphony from the "Cassa Nazionale Musicisti," and his works have been performed in Italy, Poland, and Romania.

As a conductor, my first personal encounter with the composer took place in Târgu-Mureș in September 1996, when I recorded a CD featuring his Symphony No. 3 and the work St. Paul Hymni, alongside the Târgu-Mureș State Philharmonic. This marked the beginning of a fruitful collaboration based on mutual affinity, which led to the release of several subsequent recordings. I thus collaborated with the composer on the production of six more CDs, some of which featured world premieres. Through these recordings, we introduced the public to the work of composer Luciano Simoni, with the selected repertoire being representative of his compositional style. However, a large portion of his works remained unperformed, given that Simoni was a highly prolific composer, with a body of work totalling 71 opuses.

The following works were recorded over the course of approximately 14 years of collaboration:

1996, 04-07 VII- CD: *Simfonia III, St. Paul Hymni*, Electrecord- EDC 207, Inedita- PI 2472

1999, 14-17 IX- CD: *Da sempre mi conosci, Concerto dell, Europa, Canto di liberazione*- Agora 253.1

- 2002, 10-12 III- Concert and CD: *Ouverture Transilvana*, Dedicated to the 60th anniversary of the Târgu Mureș Philharmonic
2003, 01-04 IX- CD: *Concerto per violino, Simfonia IV*- Inedita, PI 2463
2005, 16 IX- Concert L. Simoni, CD: *Requiem della Misericordia, Magnificat*- Inedita, PI 2483
2007, 24-27 VI- CD: *Simfonia V, Inno alla Pace, Our Lady of Heavens*- Inedita, PI 2654
2008, 25 IX- CD and Concert - *Missa Solemnis*- Tactus, TC 931903
2010, 25 III- Symphonic Concert

2. *Missa Solemnis*, preliminary informations

Although the work under consideration here, *Missa Solemnis*, was composed and performed on October 13, 1988, on the **festive** occasion of the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna, the work's subject matter is inextricably linked to the religious sphere, demonstrating, alongside many of his other works dedicated to this genre, the composer's deep affinity with the theological realm, especially since another major work of his bears the title *Requiem della Misericordia*, a piece dedicated to the memory of Pope John Paul II, recorded in 2005.

The composer's close emotional connection to the divine is also evidenced by the creation of numerous other works, such as *Agnus Dei, Canto di Liberazioni, Ave Maria, Piccola Messa Italiana, Messa Semplice, Sacrificium, Our Lady of Heaven, Allegoria della Speranza, Misterium Amoris, Hymni, Missa Festa, Dal Profondo Ti Prego, Magnificat, Gesù Signore, Inno a Dio Padre, Ante Crucem*, and *Salmo Ottavo*.

His secular works include five symphonies, concertos for violin and cello, as well as various orchestral and chamber pieces, totalling 71 works. *Missa Solemnis* is the result of an eight-year creative process, spanning from 1969 to 1977, and comprises all the significant parts of a Catholic Mass: *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei*. In terms of musical language, Simoni employs a blend of styles that, though heterogeneous, achieves originality through the way it combines various trends—from post-Romanticism to serialism, neoclassicism, or minimalism—with the guiding thread always being the inspiration and melodic quality of the musical discourse, a defining characteristic of Italian composers.

As Adriano Cavicchi states in the preface to the program booklet for the gala concert, "His vast musical output, now appreciated, awarded, and performed in Italy and abroad, encompasses works ranging from symphonies

to choral symphonies, from chamber music to cantatas for voice and orchestra. His musical world, characterized by intense expressive vigor, finds its inspiration in the atmosphere typical of post-World War II Italy; then, in accordance with expressive needs, it moves toward horizons of conscious atonality... toward neo-Romantic spaces with post-expressionist accents, placing the Missa Solemnis in a particularly favorable position to illuminate a text so rich in diverse facets and dramatic situations of heart-wrenching expressiveness.”²

Figure 1



Cover of the program booklet for the inaugural concert,
featuring the world premiere

In the same booklet, the composer makes several remarks regarding his artistic philosophy and the inner motivation that led him to compose such a monumental work; these remarks are drawn from an imaginary dialogue

² Program booklet for the premiere in Bologna, on October 13, 1988.

with a music lover. „With regard to the traditional form of the requiem, the Dies Irae section does not align with my conception of the Last Judgment, as I place my trust with serenity in divine forgiveness; thus, when I do not deeply share an idea, I cannot translate it into music. For me, composition is an act of supreme sincerity. The spark that ignites inspiration must spring from the depths of my soul. Thus, was born a work that is unique in form, structure, and strictly musical characteristics; featuring notable passages of polyphony and drawing upon Gregorian “tonalities,” which link the Missa to the great tradition of sacred music. But these elements coexist with the characteristics of my usual style, which is “novecentesco,” into which these elements fit naturally, with harmonic, dynamic, or coloristic contrasts. These contrasts, which provide the work with a further and interesting emphasis between the choral section—rigorously polyphonic—and the free flow of the substantial, purely orchestral intermezzos, true symphonic developments, give the Mass a character akin to a symphony with choir. This variety has allowed for the highlighting of multiple historical or theological meanings, embedded within a text of remarkable poignancy. Here are a few points to help the listener absorb and retain something of this uninterrupted musical flow, keeping it in mind and in heart.”³

3. Analysis

With regard to the analytical approach to the Missa Solemnis, I will outline several key ideas concerning its structure, as well as my own interpretive perspective on specific elements of the work’s performance.

Missa Solemnis is available from the Italian record label *Tactus*,⁴ but it can also be heard on YouTube in my own interpretation.

KYRIE ELEISON⁵

The first theme of *Kyrie eleison* begins in the low register of the cellos and double basses, presenting a lyrical melody that forms the core of the subsequent thematic development.

³ Program booklet for the premiere in Bologna, on October 13, 1988.

⁴ <https://www.tactus.it/tc931903-luciano-simoni-1932-2010-missa-solemnis/>, accessed on March 23, 2026

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAbnqrK9B8Y&list=RDqAbnqrK9B8Y&start_radio=1, accessed on March 23, 2026

E.g. 1



The beginning of *Kyrie*'s first movement

This introduction serves as a prelude to the choir's entrance, beginning with an initial B minor chord, immediately followed by the dominant F-sharp major chord with a descending altered fifth—a harmonic "coloring" technique characteristic of the composer's style:

E.g. 2



Choir's entrance, bar 21

Like many of his illustrious predecessors - such as J. S. Bach, R. Schumann, D. Shostakovich, Alban Berg, M. Ravel, G. Enescu, or E. Elgar - Luciano Simoni constructs many of the themes in his works by incorporating the musical cryptogram of his name into key moments within them. This encrypted personal signature appears as early as his first symphony in the form of a three-note motif that constitutes the beginning of the main theme in the second movement of the symphony. As a personalized *motto*, it is also present in most of his later works,

E.g. 3



***Motto* Luciano Simoni**

Luciano Simoni is not the only 20th-century composer whose musical output defies categorization into a specific style; the originality of his music lies precisely in its spontaneous inspiration, the naturalness of its melodies,

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and the solidity of its formal structure, with his background as an engineer contributing to the successful architecture of his works. A telling example is the theme from the sonata-form recapitulation of the Kyrie section, which appears in a transformed form in the final section, the Agnus Dei, thus demonstrating the composer's cyclical thinking. The coherence and unity of form demonstrate a logic of organizational strategies characteristic of a scientist whose sensitivity and expressiveness are shaped by a deepening of the sacred sentiment.

E.g. 4



Kyrie, First movement, varied recapitulation, bars 194-196

E.g. 5



Miserere, Sopran solo, Fifth movement, Agnus Dei, bars 24-26, Adagio

E.g. 6



Agnus Dei, First Movement, Tenor solo, bars 67-71

From these three examples presented above, one can observe, on the one hand, thematic unity, but also the way in which the composer develops the themes, thereby managing to create a blend of unity in diversity. In fact, it should be noted that sometimes, in the case of great composers, when the

work's structure is based on the sonata form, one can observe how the two themes, which are usually contrasting, share a common origin - an origin that is not easily discernible, but which confers a thematic unity perceived only intuitively, offering the listener a sense of familiarity that, in turn, provides a spiritual pleasure that is seemingly inexplicable and ineffable, yet perceptible on a sensory level. I believe that the use of such subtle techniques distinguishes "ordinary" composers from those of great stature, and Luciano Simoni, all things considered, seems to approach this privileged territory with reverence, at least from this perspective.

GLORIA⁶

Movement II, **Gloria**, is characterized by a dynamic and solemn atmosphere and begins with an *ff* played by the entire orchestra. Notable are the tonal harmonies marked by triads (chords), as well as the geometric chordal structures of fourths and fifths found in the works of all modern composers. Polytonality is also a discernible element in the musical discourse of this movement.

E.g. 7



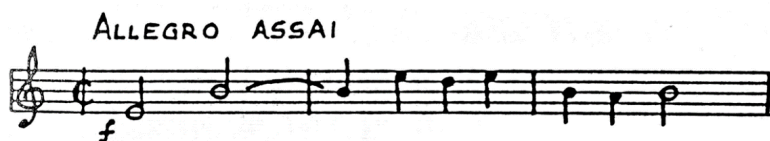
Gloria, first bars

In the Laudamus section, the composer chooses the flute and trumpet to introduce the main theme. This sets the stage for the entrance of the male voices of the choir, to which all the instruments of the orchestra are gradually added, thus creating a grandiose effect that prepares the ground for the "Domine Deus" section. Of particular interest is the moment when the composer invokes "Domine Figli unigenite," followed by the "Deus Pater" passage, with the symbolic intention of emphasizing the union between "Padre e Figlio."

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5LqeQI0EVo&list=RDN5LqeQI0EVo&start_radio=1, accessed on March 23, 2026

Gloria has a particularly complex structure, consisting of multiple contrasting musical sections, in accordance with the symbols contained in the liturgical text; the varied and ornamented theme for solo soprano, "Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris," the "Quoniam" section, a hymn dedicated to the glory of Christ based on a diatonic theme that becomes the foundation for an elaborate fugato.

E.g. 8



Gloria, Quoniam, fugato, bars 219-221

The extensive section of Gloria concludes with the return of the opening theme, a refrain that encapsulates, in a magnificent corollary, the atmosphere of gratitude with which humanity honours the sacrifice of Christ's crucifixion.

CREDO⁷

Like the previous movement, Credo is a musically and structurally dense section, given the length of the original text. The composer constructs an equally complex framework, based on the depiction of a veritable fresco of human faith. From the depiction of the Creation of the World based on the text "Credo in unum Deum/Factorem coeli et terrae" to the musical portrayal of the suffering of the crucifixion with the evocation of the Resurrection in the central section, and in the final section the history of humanity after Christ, this complex movement musically illustrates all the eschatological anxieties and dramas through which humanity has gone, with faith and trust in the message of goodness and salvation that the Son of God conveyed to all. Significant for the symbol of Christian unity is the use of unison in the "recitation" of the first verse in the form of a recitative recto-tono on the note C (in Italian DO, from Domine).

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K92eO3Or-mw&list=RDK92eO3Or-mw&start_radio=1, accessed on March 23, 2026

E.g. 9

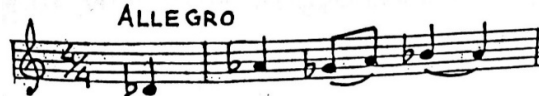


Credo in unum Deum, first bars

This theme is constantly revisited in various orchestral arrangements, followed by a new theme assigned to the flute that musically depicts the text “patrem omnipotentem” through sonic arabesques that create a luminous atmosphere. This theme is then taken up by the string section, lending timbral variety to the movement.

The complexity of the musical discourse is conveyed through the quasi-programmatic suggestiveness of the message employed; the trills of the strings overlap a deep pedal note from the double basses, signifying the primordial chaos preceding creation. It is the prelude to the presentation of the theme of creation, first intoned by the trumpet, joined by the other brass instruments, then the viola and the other strings, so that in the end the choir intones: “Factorem coeli et terrae”:

E.g. 10



Credo, Factorem coeli et terrae, bars 102-103

Various episodes are evoked, such as “Deum de Deo,” “Omnia facta sunt,” and “Incarnatus,” which describe the birth of Jesus, followed by the episode dedicated to the tenor soloist: “Et homo factus est.” The “Crucifixus” moment is particularly evocative, with the tenor singing extended intervals that symbolize, in an almost cinematic way, Jesus crucified on the cross:

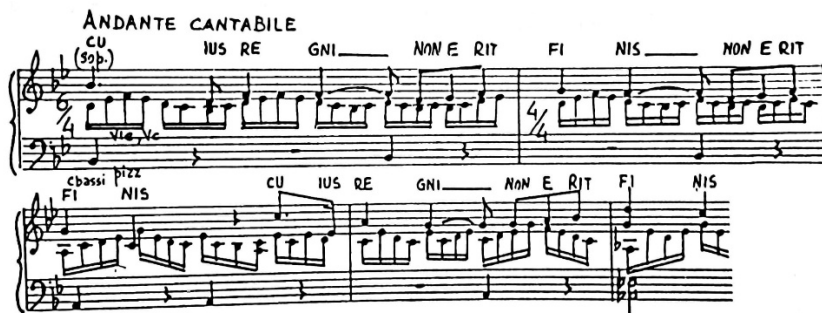
E.g. 11



Crucifixus, bars 294-298

The tenor also delivers the line “Et resurrexit tertia die,” and the choir responds, “Secundum Scripturas.” This is the moment when the composer employs a perfect D major chord, which, following numerous prior dissonances, signifies the Resurrection: the liberation of the spirit from the nightmare of death. One of the most melodious moments of the Credo is dedicated to the soprano soloist, forming the central section of the Mass, “Cuius Regni”:

E.g. 12



Cuius Regni, soprano solo, bars 388-392

The movement concludes with “Regno che no avra fine” and a final “Amen” from the choir, built on a perfect B-flat major chord.

SANCTUS⁸

After an introductory passage for the choir in *pp*, “Sanctus Dominus,” a theme emerges that evokes the turbulent history of the Jewish people, with their violent struggles, tragedies and victories, and the flame of faith sustained and rekindled by their great prophets; images conveyed through a harsh and dynamic twelve-tone composition:

E.g. 13



Deus Sabaoth, bars 34-36

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1E5YPN8R0gg&list=RD1E5YPN8R0gg&start_radio=1, accessed on March 23, 2026

The journey of Israel as it prepared for the coming of the Messiah is evoked, the one who would establish the covenant between humanity and God by building the community of believers through the Church. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is also recalled, which metaphorically signifies God's entry into human history, and the way in which He has transformed us.

After several dramatic episodes, the composer evokes, through the soprano's sweet voice, a "dolcissima" melody from the Benedictus section:

E.g. 14



Benedictus, bars 149-152

In classical Masses, the "Osanna" section of the Sanctus is usually repeated exactly as it appeared in the first exposition. Here, however, the "tripartite" form of the Sanctus stands out - that melodic structure already foreshadowed in the Kyrie and developed particularly in the Credo. Through this technique, the composer creates unity in diversity: unity through the varied repetition of previously presented themes, and diversity through the fact that, instead of an identical reprise, he presents this thematic synthesis.

E.g. 15



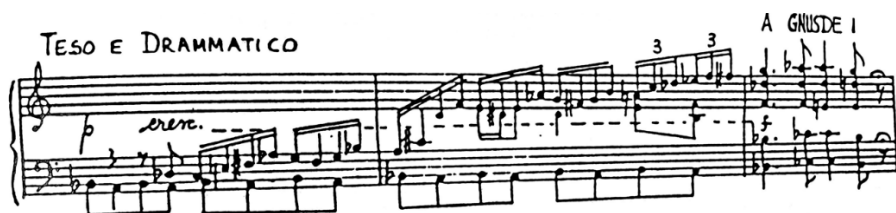
The Osanna sub-section from Sanctus, bars 220-221

AGNUS DEI⁹

In this final section of the work, the composer sought to depict the breath of the Spirit entering like a gentle breeze that draws in all the instruments of the orchestra one by one, preparing the choir's cry: Agnus Dei!

⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztraZMhuod8&list=RDztraZMhuod8&start_radio=1, accessed on March 23, 2026

E.g. 16



Agnus Dei, beginning

This theme, presented in various ways across several sections, is followed by the segments “Qui tollis” and “Miserere, miserere,” as well as an instrumental episode suggesting that our salvation came through the cross. As in the entire work, these segments also feature an abundant use of abstract-chromatic language, through episodes of significant scope, which justifies the composer’s initial observation that this Mass possesses the characteristics of a choral symphony due to the primary role of the choir in the structure of the sound architecture.

Agnus Dei also serves to provide a conclusive synthesis of the entire work, with the composer drawing upon themes present in the preceding sections and thereby imparting a stylistic and structural unity so essential to a work of such monumental scale. This is evident in the recurring presentation of fragments such as “Crucifixus” from the “Credo,” or the theme of peace, “Dona nobis pacem.”

The work’s finale brings to the fore a chromatic instrumental fugue also based on the development of a dodecaphonic theme:

E.g. 17



Final fugue from Agnus Dei, bars 220-223

This is a section in which the composer employs various serial compositional techniques, using the process of inversion based on a melodic-rhythmic cell in both ascending and descending patterns; this cell will also serve as material for the counter-theme, then serves as the foundation for the augmented theme, performed in a tense crescendo by the

choir and brass. After this climax, the choir and soloists ease the tension, murmuring together with the muted strings: "Peace," thus creating an atmosphere of tranquillity and inner peace.

Missa Solemnis concludes on a consonant B-major chord played by the entire orchestra, on a note full of hope and divine peace. The composer opens up in the conclusion of the introductory text in the program booklet for the premiere, emphasizing the impulse that constantly drove him in the creation of this monumental work: to convey a message of hope and peace to the listener, as well as the desire to reach directly into the listener's heart through that miraculous spiritual connection that only music - great music - can achieve.

From a conducting perspective, *Missa Solemnis* presents the usual technical challenges of bringing together a massive ensemble - one that includes a large orchestra, a mixed choir, and two soloists. The different sound production techniques specific to each instrumental or vocal group, along with the original score, which lacks predictable stylistic cues, make this complex work a challenge for both the performers and the conductor.

The prospect of performing the work in its world premiere may induce a certain sense of anxiety, uncertainty, or inner nervousness in the conductor or performers, states that must be controlled and must under no circumstances influence the atmosphere of the concert or performance. In the case of a recording intended to immortalize the work, the responsibility increases, as the performers are aware that this recording may serve as a future interpretive benchmark for future generations. From this perspective, the composer's presence at every recording session served as a source of reassurance, but also as confirmation of the quality of the final result we achieved.

As for the specialized press, I consider that it is important for the reception point of view, to include here a few reviews of Luciano Simoni's work/premieres:

"The final concert featured the *Missa solemn*is by contemporary Italian composer Luciano Simoni. The *Missa solemn*is is a large-scale work, intended for choir, symphony orchestra, and soloists (soprano and tenor). Luciano Simoni is not an avant-garde composer. His work draws, both in instrumentation and form, on the illustrious legacy of late Romanticism. Interesting harmonization and instrumentation, extensive use of polyphonic technique, and an emotionality that could be described as Puccinian—in the best sense of the word—are the stylistic hallmarks of this composer, the last excellent product of Italian musical culture. It should be added that the composer was greeted with warm applause at the end".

Maria Magdalena Janowska, After the Wroclaw Concert (December 8, 1991) in the local newspaper

"To place Simoni within a specific musical movement would be to undermine his stylistic richness and his music, in which the composer, with a highly personal language and without shocking the audience, moves from consolidated and traditional symphonic patterns to pantonal solutions. *Mio fiume* is a truly singular work; it presents itself as a recitative yet is simultaneously interwoven with intense, exclusively instrumental moments. It is a message-opera, like Ungaretti's opera, so imbued with cathartic pain and captivated by the figure of Christ. The orchestral instrumentation, which faithfully conveys all the nuances of the text and its anguished atmosphere, has been utilized in these pages with great sensitivity and skill. Due to its artistic and educational completeness, the work will be used by the Tirgu-Mures Philharmonic Orchestra to test the preparation of young conductors. But it is difficult to convey much in writing, and one realizes that very little actually reaches the reader".

Sivia Andretta IN THE SPOTLIGHT, Monthly Art News, No. 3, 1986

"Simoni's vocabulary is broadly traditional and neo-Romantic; at his most modern he sounds a little like Bartòk, and much of the time his tendency to break into pastoral melody or swelling romantic lushness places the music's antecedents a good deal further back than that. This is not to say that these works are anything other than thoroughly satisfying; the concerto is very much in the conventional mold and does all the things you would expect: a spirited dialogue between soloist and orchestra, virtuosic cadenzas for the violin, and a full-blooded sense of dramatic narrative. The symphony, confirming the four-movement plan that one would expect, gives an easy recommendation for anyone who regrets that the Romantic era didn't produce enough symphonies".

Records International, 2007

"The author's intent is singular: to illuminate the liturgical text in its most profound meanings as effectively as possible. To achieve this, he does not hesitate to converge the most heterogeneous languages of ancient and modern art into a grand symphonic-choral fresco, resulting in a synthesis that is a defining characteristic of his idiom. Precisely to support the clarity inherent in the liturgical message, the decision to intersperse extensive instrumental passages within the various sections of the work is neither arbitrary nor coincidental. Often, these 'intermezzos' correspond to precise expressive requirements of the text; in other instances, they represent a symphonic development of elements previously introduced by the voices".

Maria Chiara Mazzi, Presentation of the work in "Alla RIBALTA"

The complementary webography includes a few links where you can find more information about Luciano Simoni and purchase some of his CDs.

4. Conclusions

Luciano Simoni's *Missa Solemnis* reflects the spirit and creative identity of a 20th-century composer who is less well known to the general public. The work falls within the realm of musical post-modernism, distinguished by a pronounced polystylism, manifested through the diversity of its musical elements: extended tonality, post-Romantic influences, tonal and geometric harmony, as well as the free use of dodecaphonic and serial techniques. The musical discourse combines diatonic lyrical themes with chromatic structures of a serial nature, within an architecture that frequently draws on neoclassical forms, such as the fugue, fugato, sonata form, or ABA-type strophic patterns. This synthesis of compositional techniques, difficult to classify within a single stylistic movement, constitutes the very originality of his language.

Luciano Simoni thus emerges as an authentic creator who refused to align himself with the trends of the time, remaining faithful to his own artistic creed, grounded in intuition and personal expressiveness. In this sense, he represents a unique case in the history of music, in which his compositional vocation coexisted constantly with a demanding teaching career, without diminishing his creative force.

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