



The Italian National Anthem

A Short History



The music of the Italian national anthem was composed in 1847 by Michele Novaro, to words by the young poet, Goffredo Mameli. This song, known as L'Inno di Mameli has been the national anthem of the Republic of Italy since 1948. Between 1861 (the year when Italy became a united nation) and 1946 the official anthem was the March of the House of Savoy.

Goffredo Mameli

Goffredo Mameli was born in Genoa in 1827 and from an early age gave proof of literary talent. But even before he was twenty years old he gave up his studies in order to dedicate himself to politics. Genoa and Liguria, which the Congress of Vienna had given to the Kingdom of Sardinia (a fief of the House of Savoy), were, in these tumultuous years of aspiration to freedom and independence, gathering points for political exiles from the other parts of Italy. For the Savoy had placed themselves at the head of the movement which was to go down in history as the Risorgimento. Followers of Mazzini and Garibaldi were present in large numbers and very active, and young Goffredo Mameli had grown up in this atmosphere of patriotic enthusiasm, with Mazzini as his particular hero.

Fratelli d'Italia, l'Italia s'è desta (Italian Brothers, Italy has Arisen)

The year 1847 was one of celebrations and demonstrations, following up the commemoration, the preceding year, of the centenary of the expulsion from Italy of the Austrian during the war for the Austrian succession (1746). Along with the indefatigable Nino Bixio, young Mameli was in on every demonstration in approval of Pope Pius IX, who had conceded liberal reforms in Rome. Amid the excitement of these days Mameli wrote a poem even more ardent than the many that he had written before. The indecisiveness of Carlo Alberto of Savoy offended his patriotic and republican feelings; he wanted the war of independence to be the people's war, not that of the king. And the popular songs of the time all referred to the king; indeed, the one most widely sung in Genoa was The Star of Alberto. In an effort to supplant this song Mameli impetuously wrote Fratelli d'Italia, l'Italia s'è desta (Italian Brothers, Italy has Arisen). Actually it seems that the well-known first line was originally Evviva l'Italia, l'Italia s'è desta and that the call to brothers was a happy second thought.

The tune.

The words of the anthem were meant to call to mind past battles for freedom waged by the Lombard towns, the Florentine republic, the Genoese, together with the young Balilla, against the Austrians, the Sicilians against the French in the so-called Sicilian Vespers. The focus of all aspirations to freedom was Rome, the Rome which, in another poem, Mameli called City of memories, city of hope. On November 23, 1847 Mameli went to take the anthem to his musician friend, Michele Novaro, who lived in Turin. Overnight the enthused Novaro composed the music, and the next day, in Genoa, Mameli brought back words and music to his companions. A few days later, on December 1, Fratelli D'Italia was played for the first time, at a popular assembly. The tune began to run like wildfire throughout the peninsula. It was on everyone's lips, in defiance of the Austrian, Bourbon and Papal police.

The American consul.

There is still another and equally romantic story of the circumstances of the anthem's composition. On the evening of September 8, 1847, in the house of the American consul, there was talk of the uprisings of the day. Many of the guests clustered about Mameli and urged him to write a new song. On the spot he improvised a few lines, and later in the night, at home, wrote the rest. A few days later a painter friend took the poem to Turin and read it aloud at the evening party given by a nobleman, Lorenzo Valerio, who was also a benefactor in the realm of music and musicians. The composer Michele Novaro, enthused in his turn, tried out a few notes on the piano and then, too, went home to compose the sequel. The anthem was sung for the first time the next day by a group of political exiles in the Caffè della Lega Italiana of Turin.

The Italian Marseillaise

Fratelli d'Italia has been called the Italian Marseillaise, but this appellation is inexact. The Marseillaise is the anthem of a revolutionary army on the march; it has a military nature and voices a break with the past. Goffredo Mameli was a civilian, ready to take up arms because Italy has called. As a man of letters he felt that this was the moment to join in an action which, with sufficient support, would lead to victory. He did not protest against the past; indeed he called it up - from the glory of ancient Rome to the more recent glory of the boy, Balilla. The verse's outstanding characteristic is the spirit of 1848, that is, of a revolution made by intellectuals nurtured on the past rather than present. The most telling comment on his verse is that of the poet Carducci: "It sprang from his eager heart in the springtime of his life and our revolution."

The Roman Republic

Goffredo Mameli fought in the first war of independence in Lombardy in 1848. After the armistice, against which he protested, he joined the troops of Garibaldi and entered, with him, in to Rome. He took part in the valiant defense of the Roman Republic against the French in 1849, was gravely wounded on June 3 of that year and taken to the hospice of the Trinità dei Pellegrini, where he died a month later and was buried at the adjacent church of Santa Maria in Montecelli. The French authorities refused to give the body to his father. Today, along with other patriots who died for the Roman Republic, Goffredo Mameli lies on the Janiculum, near the spot where the city was most bravely defended.

Hear the Anthem at <http://www.sfiac.org/images/Italian%20National%20Anthem.mp3>

From the website of the San Francisco Italian Athletic Club