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Translated and abridged by Cristina Bisiani

The noteworthy musician from Catania Giovanni Gioviale died on June 11th 1949. Author of popular compositions almost unobtainable nowadays, he had been born in November 1885. His myth is still unaltered among those who are fond of popular music and his life was marked by exciting anecdotes. All fellow citizens knew and loved his generosity in performing hard concerts, often without any reward, but only for the audience's pleasure and for music's sake.

Anywhere he played, it was a great success! Those who knew him, say that "he was playing like an angel". He actually could astonish those present by playing as a mandolin virtuoso and giving brilliant performances which could attain frantic rhythms. Those who "compared Gioviale to Paganini" understood his greatness.

In his art, Gioviale had no competitors, even if in Sicily – and particularly in Catania – there were both professional and amateur musicians who could amaze an audience because of their gift for music. These musicians often did not learn the art of music in important city theatres but, instead, either in craftsmen's workshops or in private clubs. They were said "having a good ear" (because they used to play without reading music, but only listening to the theme). They generally played for occasional listeners, mostly familiar ones, rather than for a true audience.

Gioviale's career began when he was about 10, that is when he began learning mandolin after attending short concerts performed at a barber's shop in Plebiscito Street, at closing time, almost every evening.

Later on, he learnt playing banjo, guitar and also violin at the boarding school of Cruciferi Street. As a violinist, he became a member of the Orchestra of Bellini Theatre. Anyway he was particularly fascinated by mandolin. In 1922 at Acireale he conducted a plucked string orchestra formed by 19 players and so he was awarded the first prize in that mandolin competition, thus prevailing over the other orchestras, even if they were formed by the best Sicilian mandolin players.

Around 1923, as a young musician, he was appreciated by Pietro Mascagni – in Catania for conducting an opera of his own – when he played "the Exotic Dance" on the mandolin at Hotel Bristol. Great appreciation was shown by the well-known tenor Dino Borgioli too, who heard by chance Gioviale's performance of the "Dance of the Hours" and who was so surprised that he proposed him to go on tour to Spain. Gioviale accepted and went to Madrid.

Another famous anecdote (reported by Saverio Fiducia in an article written on the 20th anniversary of Gioviale's death) is the one about the famous and strict conductor Leopoldo Mugnone: after listening to Gioviale's performance of the Serenade (from Othello – Act Two) on the mandolin, he said: "Even if I conducted a hundred times Verdi's masterpiece, I've heard for the first time the serenade performed in such a way! In the past it had always been only a burning desire!"

Giovanni Gioviale liked travelling. Besides Spain, he went to Africa, England, Austria and to the U.S.A. During his stay in New York, from 1926 to 1929, he attained a high reputation for his concerts and his recordings too. However the new continent, with its wealth and particularly with its new music rhythms, so far from his own, convinced Gioviale to come back. Most probably he was homesick too, because he missed his country.

His fame was at the top: he became member of the "Italian Federation of Plectrum". He was playing and conducting plucked string orchestras in Sicily and Rome. He also became a player of the Toscanini Orchestra of the Teatro alla Scala.

He held concerts in many Italian cities: Turin, Milan, Rome, Genoa and Palermo.

In Catania he took part in a weekly programme broadcast by the radio, the title of which was "I canti dell'Etna" (Songs from Etna). Then the programme was stopped and this probably contributed to Gioviale's decision of going back to the U.S.A. He was waiting for the authorization to leave the country, when he was suddenly taken ill. He performed his last concert in February 1949 and died of cancer of the lung on June 11th of the same year.

His repertoire included works by Frontini, Calì, Bellini, Mozart, Grieg, Ponchielli, Verdi, Mendelssohn, Mascagni and many works of his own.

He wrote many works for mandolin, mostly polkas, waltzes and mazurkas recorded by the best record companies. The most famous are: "Viale fiorito" (Blossoming Avenue); "Ritornando da Vienna" (Coming back from Vienna); "Biancuccia"; "Allegra compagnia" (Merry Company); "Occhi di bambola" (Doll's Eyes); "Amorino" (Little Love); "Balliamo l'ultima mazurca" (Let's Dance the Last Mazurka); "Serate primaverili" (Spring Evenings); "L'ultimo amore" (The Last Love).

Two writers took interest in Giovanni Gioviale: they are Francesco Granata and Saverio Fiducia (already mentioned). Certainly his artistic figure should be studied in depth, particularly because his technical skill had given mandolin such a special "voice" which must not be lost forever

Gioviale's name given to a street on the outskirts of Catania is the only little tribute (and maybe it is not enough) his city paid so far to this mandolin player, who could perform "Lucia di Lammermoor" in six different voices, making the audience burst into thunderous applause!