

The Cristo Nero of Castelnuovo di Garfagnana

Castelnuovo di Garfagnana is a fortified town located about an hour north of Lucca, accessible by train after a fascinating train ride through the Garfagnana mountains. On 18 December last year, we went there to enjoy the Christmas concert at the Duomo dei Santi Pietro e Paolo. One of the church's pleasant features is that it has heating under the floors so despite the cold, rainy weather we were able to enjoy our time inside this monumental church. It also has marvelous acoustics.

In the time available between the final rehearsal and the concert itself, Maestro Luca Bacci, director of the chorus and orchestra, guided me to one of the church's less evident treasures, on a side wall behind the elaborate nativity scenes adorning the San Giuseppe chapel. The *Cristo Nero* is a large wooden crucifix carved from a pear tree, dating from the 15th century. From our vantage point and in the dim light, it was difficult to see Christ's hands, which had been badly burnt in a fire in 1977. The crucifix was restored after the fire but the hands could not be saved.

During the Second World War, in December 1944, Castelnuovo and the church, especially its roof and external walls, were heavily bombed. But these were later rebuilt, emphasizing the classical origins of the church, whose Renaissance façade was originally in the style of the Florentine architect Brunelleschi.

Inside, my eyes were drawn to a luminous glazed terracotta altarpiece. Dedicated to San Giuseppe, this has been attributed to Verrocchio (of the Della Robbia school, 1510-1520). In other parts of the church there is a Madonna with Saints by Michele di Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio (1503-1577), an Assumption attributed to Santi di Tito (from the late 1500s), and other works of art. Above the main altar is a crucifix in the style of Giotto.



Originally built in the 1100s in Romanesque style, the church was rebuilt in the 16th century, which must have been an amazing century for Castelnuovo. Under the control of the condottiero Castruccio Castracani in the 1300s, the town would be contested over the years by the Florentines, Pisans, and Luccans. It came under the control of the Este family of Ferrara in the 1500s, and remained under their dominion until Napoleonic times, and again after the end of French rule, from 1814 to 1861.

Ludovico Ariosto, who wrote much of his epic poem *Orlando Furioso* while living here, was sent to serve as governor from 1522 to 1525. Later, between 1579 and 1586, Alfonso d'Este II ordered the building of the Fortezza di Mont'Alfonso. This covered 60,000 square meters with a surrounding wall 1150 meters long, and was intended to defend the Este territory from the Republic of Lucca. (In good weather, near the Serchio River, you can walk along "Ariosto's path" leading to Mont'Alfonso.)

Only in 1924 did Castelnuovo become part of the province of Lucca.

Visitors will enjoy the local shops, selling cheeses and other products of the region. Most of these shops are located inside the town walls. In February there are Carnival events, while June 29th is dedicated to the town's patron saint, Peter. In September there is an agricultural fair.

– by Norma Jean Bishop

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