

Russians Broadcast 'Ave Maria' When 'Boy Nightingale' Sings

(Editor's note: This story about a young Italian lad whose voice won the hearts of Russia was reported by United Press International reporters Nicholas Daniloff in Moscow and Sheila Walsh in Rome.)

By NICHOLAS DANILOFF and SHEILA WALSH
United Press International
The visitor to Moscow could hardly believe his ears. Was this "Ave Maria" pouring so lyrically from Moscow Radio, the voice of the Kremlin? Indeed it was. "It is the

boy nightingale," remarked his Russian hostess. "Isn't he marvelous?"
The voice was that of 15-year-old Robertino Loretto, a youngster whose golden songs for more than a year have captured the hearts of music lovers throughout Russia.

Records Sell
Moscow Radio frequently has devoted a whole hour of its program to Loretto's recordings. His "Ave Maria" is a special favorite. Others are "O Solo Mio," "Return to Sorrento" and "Santa Lucia."

Foreign records are hard to come by in Moscow under any circumstances, with Russian and East European records taking up most of the store shelves. So when such records do become popular, they are virtually unobtainable by the average citizen.

"A Loretto record," a Moscow student told UPI, "is a prized possession, something you just can't get. He has invaded our hearts and we love him."
Russian newspapers and magazines have filled columns with stories about the boy, and Moscow Radio obtained a New Year's interview with him in Rome in which he conveyed his greetings to the Soviet nation.

Boy Ill
Early this year the magazine Ogonyok had bad news for Loretto fans in the USSR. The boy was ill, Ogonyok

said, his voice had suffered and it was not certain he ever would sing again.

Russians by the score wrote letters to newspapers bemoaning Robertino's sad fate and expressing urgent wishes for his recovery. Loretto records became even more collectors' items.

But things did not remain as bad as Ogonyok and the boy's millions of Russian fans feared.

UPI interviewed Robertino a few days ago in Rome — and found a healthy, happy teen-ager impatient to resume his career.

"I feel confident everything will go well now," he said. "By May when I go to Hamburg in Germany for television appearances my new tenor voice will be completely set."

Voices Changes
Part of the young singer's trouble was the fact of nature that at a certain age, boys' voices change. That's what happened to Robertino's pure soprano and the lyric tones that made him a hit

not only in Russia but throughout Northern Europe.

With the voice change young Loretto suffered other misfortunes. In Norway last year he had a bad fall that damaged his hip. An infection set in and an operation in Rome became necessary. For more than a year he has not sung and there were fears Robertino would be a has-been before he reached 16.

Now there is no trace of illness on the boy. He is a robust lad and he has been exercising by riding horseback, swimming and fencing.

"I'm all right," he assured the interviewer. "I'll sing again."

In the Loretto home in a new apartment building not far from Rome's famed Cinecitta film studios, the dining room looked like a post office during the Christmas rush.

"Thousands of letters," said Robertino pointing at the stacks of mail. They never stop coming. Most of them come from Russia.

Many Letters
Robertino's mother, Mrs. Cesira Loretto, smiled as she spread out one pile of letters on her gleaming dining room table. "There are so many," she said. "We don't know what to do."

On one of the letters, with a USSR postmark and addressed in both Russian and English, was written, "Robertino Loretto, The Italian Nightingale, Italy."

"I would like to answer them all," the boy said, "but it's a problem. Especially the ones in Russian."

Young Loretto has seven brothers and sisters and his success obviously helps support the whole family.

"I love singing and it just came naturally to me," he said. His father, Orlando, explained that by the time Robertino was six years old he was singing in church, at wedding parties and in contests for talented children.

Stars on Radio
At 10, he won a nationwide contest sponsored by the state-owned radio and television network. His launching into international stardom came during the 1960 Olympics in Rome. He was singing in an outdoor cafe in Rome's Central Piazza Esedra when he

was heard by Wolmer Sorenson, a Danish music critic and impresario. Sorenson signed the boy to an exclusive contract with the "Triola" recording company of Copenhagen and as Robertino made records, he also began touring.

"I would like to go to Russia," Robertino said. "I like to see new countries. I have not been wasting my time even though I haven't been singing. I've been studying languages, learning to play the piano, and been working with a voice tutor."

Proudly, Robertino said he already speaks English and Danish in addition to Italian, and "some German which is getting better." And maybe, he grinned, "some day I will learn to speak Russian."

Mother Loretto listened approvingly. "He's a good boy," she said.



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RECORDS SELLING—Robertino Loretto, 15, sings in his Rome, Italy, home above. His records sell out within minutes after reaching music shops in Moscow, Russia. Moscow Radio has frequently devoted a full hour program to his recordings. His "Ave Maria" is a special favorite. (UPI)



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