

The future of mandolin music

A very interesting meeting with contemporary composers held in Vittorio Veneto

An opportunity of exchanging views on music

by Cristina Bisiani and Michele De Luca

On October 15th took place the meeting with mandolin music composers, which was particularly interesting. It gave them the opportunity of speaking about music subjects and of making the audience listen to some explanatory recordings as well.

Mr. Diego Fabbri, Director of Frescobaldi Conservatory in Ferrara, started off by hinting at some particular subjects, such as: music groups to be stimulated, styles to be adopted, whether is there only one way of writing for plucked string orchestras, which kind of audience is a music piece devoted to, the different kinds of music, the undefinable peculiarity of 20th century music, the increasing role of mandolin in concert seasons...

Then a recorded message by Mr Dimitri Nicolau (who could not be there) was heard out. He spoke about his career as a composer dating back to 1959 and underlined the identity relationship of the musician with his instrument: "Interest towards this instrument and the innermost relationship between player and instrument itself should be considered beyond its history. There are geographical borders, which can be climbed over but, I say again, if there is not a sole creative output, it will never be possible to break the present deadlock of mandolin. You cannot just arrange pieces, but you have to develop the repertoire free from patterns or academy, in order to improve the role of this instrument in a constant and definite way".

Mr Claudio Mandonico described Nicolau as an "up-and-coming composer" for mandolin.

Then Mr Mandonico spoke of his "Oratorio for orchestra and choir" he wrote with the idea of recovering tradition, even if the composer must act as an independent. Then the audience could listen to the recording of two movements from "Beauty and the Beast" of Nicolau and "Exhortation and Dance", the former in classic late-Romantic style and the latter, instead, quite "Stravinsky-like" (as it was defined by Mandonico himself). He also stressed the need for mandolin players "to study more and better. Pieces can be hard, but not impossible". He also stated: "Of course traditions of the plucked string orchestra are to be recovered. There were musicians in the past having full dignity. We have forgotten tradition". One of the latest pieces by Mandonico is a working-out of an "Adoration of Stars" originally written by Sartori, "on which I inserted some other melodies, with choir, band and stringed instruments, and I think the outcome is really interesting", said the composer from Brescia. "There should be an approach to something peculiar and you should be aware of capabilities and styles, which is quite difficult to understand". "A historical mandolin repertoire is missing, with the exception of Baroque pieces. Even the history of the instrument is peculiar, played in taverns at the beginning to become noble afterwards. In a word it gained full dignity". The musician went on by criticizing orchestral groups: "They find it hard to create something new. You wonder how long this situation can last." Mr Mandonico also criticized some trends concerning film music: "If you take away images, that is the aesthetic side, very little remains".

In conclusion he stated that "it is extremely difficult to understand mandolin future developments. For certain, quality should be the goal."

Then Mr Stefano Squarzina (conductor of "G. Neri" Orchestra in Ferrara) began by saying that writing was for him a way of knowing instruments better. Even if he composed only two

works for plucked string orchestra in the last six years, he defined the guitar as a "hard instrument" and himself as a "good craftsman" who has not the heart to make risky choices. He proposed a recording taken from his first composition: it was a descriptive piece dating back to the XVI century, which he reworked and "made up again". The audience could afterwards listen to a live recording of Squarzina's second composition (CPO Rhapsody of 2001). He moreover added that in order to know deeply an orchestra, it is useful to strengthen the interpreting capabilities and that from the basic idea of a music piece, it must follow style.

Then it was Mr Luca Mereu's turn, who told about his twelve-year-old experience as a boy who was given a guitar as a present. He had thus begun composing "without knowing notes". After the diploma in guitar in 1987 and in mandolin later on, he had also approached electronic music. He called himself "the sole player-composer" and proposed the recording of an interesting piece for mandolin and guitar, where the secondary role played at first by the guitar becomes predominant afterwards, whereas mandolin - protagonist at the beginning - carries out an accompaniment role later on. "Mandolin has to interact with the other instruments too" he emphasized bringing to an end his speech. Then the audience could listen to a recording of his prelude called "Dream", performed by a Japanese orchestra, which has been playing Mereu's works for a long time.

In the end it was Mr Diego Minoia's turn. He mentioned his musical training (from the piano to ballroom music, and from rock to jazz, etc.) and underlined the importance of knowing ourselves, first of all. "We are what we remember" and therefore a composer is his music. "When I write I want to amuse myself and the composer must be a craftsman, as Bach himself asserted". Minoia went on saying that it has to be the same for those who play and those who listen as well. "My first approach to the guitar was hard. My assumption is that amusement should be meant in the true sense of the word, keeping in mind the audience. This is valid both for the player and the public". Then he went on saying that transcription has nothing negative in itself and therefore it mustn't be "demonized". "It has a meaning of its own, just the same as it is for arrangements".

Then three pieces were proposed to listening: the 1st in minimalist style (stratification with variety in repetitiveness); the 2nd was a transcription from plucked string orchestra to electronic instruments and the 3rd one was always the second, but performed by a plucked string orchestra together with a string orchestra. All that much to the audience satisfaction. During the meeting several topics were dealt with, such as: the importance for composers to write for mandolin; the interest towards plucked string instruments, which can always play a role in concert seasons. Moreover it is possible to contribute to their revaluation (all too often not taken into consideration) both by listening and by teaching.

So, for example, Mr Minoia is working on a book for secondary school, in which both mandolin and the plucked string orchestra will be inserted at last. Mr Fabbri pointed out all bureaucratic difficulties run into and long time needed in order to obtain from Ministry the teaching of mandolin at Ferrara Conservatory. Furthermore he said that "studying composition should be compulsory to encourage creative thought".

The importance of tradition was underlined, but at the same time the requirement of going further was emphasized too. Thus Mr Squarzina quoted a sentence by Verdi "to look at the future, let's look at the past" and it was stressed that Beethoven himself, in the last decade of his life, used to study Bach and Palestrina. The importance of the past, stated by

Mandonico, was reasserted by Minoia, who took the image of a tree, saying that "roots", after being interiorized, should let "branches" sprout.

Moreover, the musicians who took part in the meeting had different and various experiences (composition, conducting, instrument training, teaching . . .) and therefore they could deal with several aspects of music subjects under many viewpoints.

Even if not many people were present, the audience showed to enjoy the meeting by frequent clapping and final comments of great appreciation. The chance to attend a meeting with contemporary composers of such prominence is a rare occurrence: a great praise to those who organized the "National Days on Mandolin and Plucked String Music" in Vittorio Veneto, for having included in such event this moment devoted to composition too!

For those absent (namely conductors and plucked string groups) it was definitely a missed opportunity. Let's hope this non-attendance of many experts is neither sign of inertia in the present world of mandolin music, nor lack of open-mindedness, which involves the risk of weakening the mandolin background of our country. Already in the past there had been Italian orchestras, either out of habit or because they liked more traditional repertoires, who showed to be unwilling to innovation and brought about as a result a considerable falling-off of interest in the new generation.

The non-attendance of many people, in spite of the great availability of the organization, does not seem to suggest an optimistic future.

Actually if open-minded and artistic attitudes together with a sort of good will are missing, it is useless to organize any meeting, because it will not be worth while. Moreover if the few contemporary composers do not see results, they will unlikely write other pieces in the future. If this could only be an incentive to consideration, then a step forward would be taken. Let's hope for the best!