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[Home](#) > [Archive](#) > [2011 Features](#) > [Icarus Ensemble at hcmf//: Interview with Marco Pedrazzini](#)

Icarus Ensemble at hcmf//: Interview with Marco Pedrazzini



Education and Culture DG

Culture Programme

"[The ECPDP] is really a new experience, not only for us but for the Italian scene in general"

Icarus Ensemble was founded in 1994 in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Since then, they've been performing basically everywhere in the world, giving a tremendous contribution to contemporary music in Italy and abroad. At hcmf// 2011 they present two concerts: the European Composers Spotlight on Wednesday 23 November and the programme of Romitelli works on Thursday 24 November.

Marco Pedrazzini, co-founder and artistic director of the ensemble, speaks to Marcello Messina, who has been working with the ensemble this year as a composer on the European Composers' Professional Development Programme (ECPDP).

What are your thoughts about the ECPDP?

It's the first time we take part in such a project: these things are not that common in Italy, although we did similar experiments in the past. At the Civica in Milan there are some courses which lead to a final performance of students' pieces by an external ensemble. Something similar happens in the

Accademia di Siena, but in Italy we don't have any programme that involves an intense collaboration between young composers and ensembles. This is really a new experience, not only for us, but for the Italian scene in general. On the contrary, when I've been to Amsterdam Joël Bons from the Nieuw Ensemble told me that for them this is a very common thing.

Any comments on the pieces?

We came across extremely different languages, especially with regards to the scores. I would say that there were also different levels of artistic maturation, regardless of the specific language of each single piece/composer... Some are more drawn towards traditional compositional styles, while others are pursuing more personal paths. Generally speaking, the extreme diversity of the pieces reflects the current situation of contemporary music, extensively characterised by a substantial multilingualism rather than dominated by a small number of prominent aesthetic trends.

In our pieces you will play a sampler keyboard. Why did you choose to insert this instrument in the line-up?

From the beginning I strongly wanted to insert this instrument in the programme, along with two other instruments, the electric guitar and the electric bass, which belong to another musical tradition, but have been absorbed by the languages of contemporary music, especially by composers who belong to our same generation, such as Nova, Verrando, Romitelli, etc. I've got to say that I feel these instruments are becoming more and more part of our music, although they've been already historicised by other musical traditions: for example the keyboard is associated to its use in pop/rock bands from the past decades... Now it's even different, such keyboards are totally obsolete, now we use 'silent keyboards' that need to be connected to a computer and, by means of various software, are capable to do pretty much anything by simply pressing a key. It would have been interesting to do a more extensive work on the electronics, although realistically in two weekends there's not much that could have been done, as the rehearsals were already taking up most of the time at our disposal...

I agree, more work on the electronics would have helped, for example before writing for you I was not used to such instruments...There might be also a problem with the way we are taught as composers?

The role of the composer is still mainly focussed on the score, whereas technology is progressing at a much faster pace than that of writing, and thus we end up with possibilities that are basically unlimited, but that remain unused because composers are not aware of their existence. I would definitely say that the notion of sampling, either using a keyboard or any other electronic device, has dramatically changed music in the last years, not just from an aural point of view, but also from a more practical perspective: my keyboard is so small that I can just stick it in my suitcase and take it everywhere I need - that wouldn't have been possible in the past with an old keyboard.

Let's talk about the second part of your presence at this year's hcmf//, your concert on Thursday 24 November, entirely dedicated to the Fausto Romitelli's music. Why Romitelli?

Well, presenting Romitelli wasn't our choice, but a request from hcmf//. However, this request coincides with our interests, as we played *Professor Bad Trip* many times, since 1999 when we premiered the full version of the piece in France, 'til 2004, the year the composer died. All our performances of the piece, except one in Zagreb, took place in presence of the composer, who was satisfied with our interpretation of the piece. He would always work with us on particular aspects of the performance, for instance in Belgium, at the Ars Musica, he came to work on the distortion in the two cadenzas for cello in Lesson II, the second part of *Bad Trip*. There he specifically called for the use of an acoustic cello with external amplification, whereas nowadays many ensembles use an electric cello for these cadenzas, with the result of having to insert long fermatas that are not called for in the score, in order to replace the acoustic instrument with the electric one and vice versa.

We also published a recording of the piece in 2000, edited by Romitelli himself... surely Romitelli marked our career, and our collaboration with him was fruitful and inspiring... his premature death was really a big tragedy. Wherever we go nowadays they ask us to play his music, no matter if they know of our friendship with Fausto or not. For instance, they asked us in Vilnius last year, but there we played just *Trash TV Trance* and not *Bad Trip*. Actually, after Fausto's death, we've never played this piece, which on the contrary has been showcased by many other ensembles I know... Sometimes someone contacts me to ask advice for the performance of the piece: the last one was an Australian ensemble a couple of months back... And then *Bad Trip* was recently presented by the Ensemble Talea at the Bang on a Can Marathon, well, Romitelli's music is always demanded and performed.

Definitely, looking just at this year's hcmf// Romitelli will not only be performed by you, but also by Ensemble Recherche and recorder player Chris Orton... In general, there's going to be a lot of Italian music in the Festival, including a performance of Nono's classic *La fabbrica illuminata* on the closing day...

I'm very happy about Romitelli's presence this year... As it regards Nono's *La fabbrica illuminata*, I'd like to add that it has a strong connection with our town Reggio Emilia, as our local workers' movement got really involved, and then, a few years later the Musica/Realtà festival, directed by Armado Gentilucci, started bringing in town important musicians, such as Luigi Pestalozza, Claudio Abbado, Maurizio Pollini, and Luigi Nono himself, who eventually came to present a performance of *La fabbrica illuminata*.

Speaking about your recent repertoire, many of the projects you've been working at involved pieces with a strong component of multimediality, and the use of new technologies, such as Casale's recent opera *Conversazioni con Chomsky*, that you premiered in last year's REC festival, or Francesconi's *Lips Eyes Bang*.

Yes, back in 2001 I really insisted with the Teatro Valli to schedule *Lips Eyes Bang*, we were looking at collaborating with AGON and I had personally gone to meet Francesconi and Tadini... We are really interested in multimediality, and in particular in these technologies that have come up in the very last year, that basically allow to control the audio, video and graphics using pretty much the same interfaces... obviously we're also interested in sound spatialisation...

However, we keep ourselves tied to the past, be it recent or remote: for example, we've just performed Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître* at the Festival Aperto in Reggio Emilia, along with some transcriptions from Bach's *Musical Offering*. Moreover, we also direct a project called Icarus Junior, whose last project consisted in the performance of pieces that belong to a really distant past, transcribed by contemporary authors, such as Pérotin transcribed by Guarnieri or Bach transcribed by Sonia Bo.

I've also noticed that many of the projects you've been involved in engage with the current historical moment. For example, you've played in Nicola Sani's opera *Il tempo sospeso del volo*, about Giovanni Falcone, the Sicilian judge killed by the mafia in 1992...

That was a very good experience, we even received a fax from our President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano, and then in the audience there was the then President of the RAI (Italian state TV) and the anti-mafia magistrate Ilda Bocassini, together with Falcone's sister and other important institutional figures.

Well, these examples from your past activity surely show how you've been actively contributing to the recent history of Italian music.

Well, thanks, that's a bit too much, but we do our best!

Let's put it this way then: judging upon the contribution you're giving, were you based in

another country you wouldn't have the problems with state funding you were talking about before. So do you think Italian institutions ignore your contribution?

They're not just ignoring us. It's a bit hard to explain the situation of contemporary music in Italy... For instance Reggio Emilia is characterised by a strong leftist tradition: the local administration has always belonged to what's supposed to be the progressive part of our politics... well, even they can't stand contemporary music, they do everything they can to dismantle it, they've even deprived us of the Officina delle Arti, the venue where Icarus used to rehearse and where we hosted you during the workshops. Luckily there is a private donor now who looks interested in offering us a new space.

Does this happen for mere financial convenience? Or do you think they're openly hostile towards contemporary music?

I think there is an utter hostility towards contemporary music. Some members of our local administration repeatedly declared that it's just a peripheral form of art, and that nobody should invest in it: such an attitude is typically populist.

On the contrary, we have to say that the Teatro Valli is always very keen to promote contemporary music, but the problem is that the Teatro alone can't have a sufficient impact on the town's cultural life.

Is this the reason why you're looking more and more at the international scene?

Yes, although we've recently been involved in a number of very good large-scale production here in town, always with the Teatro. Now we feel it's time we concentrate on our international presence though.

So, would you feel comfortable in describing yourselves using the archetype of the Italian artist 'in exile'?

Sure. This is a topic that we discussed several times in various occasions: those who choose to be artists in Italy generally end up going abroad sooner or later. With regards to contemporary music, we need to say that IRCAM literally absorbs the majority of Italian composers abroad, but in general there are really a lot of Italian artists abroad, affiliated to various institutions.

More information on Icarus Ensemble can be found at <http://www.icarusensemble.com>

Marcello Messina

Archive

- [2013](#)
- [2012](#)
- [2011](#)
 - [Programme](#)
 - [News](#)
 - [Features](#)
 - [Participate](#)
 - [Blog](#)
 - [Watch & Listen](#)
- [2010](#)
- [2009](#)
- [2008](#)

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