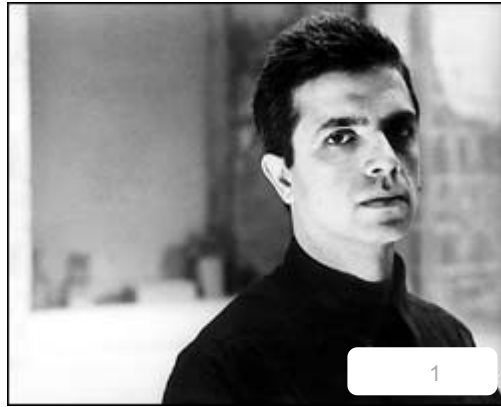


# Sawing Through Italy

BY KYLE GANN

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It's refreshing to hear a European writing music in an American style like postminimalism.

*photo: Case Musicale Sonzogno*

Giovanni Sollima is being touted as "the Jimi Hendrix of the cello." No one ever stops to ask whether the cello *needed* a Jimi Hendrix. It's just taken for granted that if there's a slot open, someone will eventually fill it. Someday we'll have a Jimi Hendrix of the harp, a Bubber Miley of the glockenspiel, a Diamanda Galas of the all-in-one socket wrench, and like that. So it came as some relief that at Sollima's October 17 Carnegie Hall concert with the Lark Quartet, he never once, for a moment, reminded me of Hendrix in any way. And then you start wondering about PR people.

Sollima is a good, 38-year-old Italian postminimalist composer. Postminimalist composers are still a novelty in Western Europe, though there are probably more of them in Italy than anywhere else (and fewest in Germany). Sollima is also a virtuoso cellist—as far as one can tell from someone who writes his own material—and sat in with the Lark to perform an 80-minute string quintet in 14 movements called *Viaggio in Italia—A Journey Through Italy*. Applause between movements was appropriate, for the work wasn't so much a magnum opus as a suite of often similar but self-contained pieces, a personal "Anneé de Pèlerinage."

Modal melody, repetitive structures, and an energetic folk-fiddling approach to strings are the hallmarks of Sollima's style, which sounds something like the music Terry Riley has written for the Kronos Quartet, though with more modest counterpoint and less formal variety. The Lark players led off with a rousing dance in 7/8 that kept changing mode, sounding Arabic and

Scandinavian by turns. This gave way to a devout, chantlike cello solo that Sollima played over a taped background of reverberant cello drones and ambient noises recorded in an Assisi cathedral. In several movements Sollima sang poetry in an untrained, rough but enthusiastic voice. Several of the quartet movements were enlivened by cross-rhythms between instruments, and the sixth movement passed hocketing lines around in a vigorous canon.

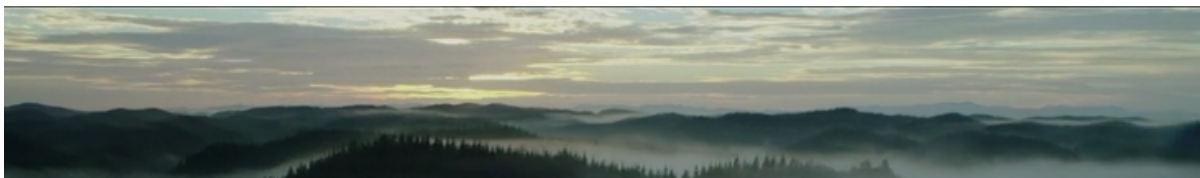
It was beautiful, engaging stuff; only the presentation was a little off-putting. After one sawing cello solo (the Hendrix moment?), Sollima collapsed into a glissando and rolled his head back in ecstasy; elsewhere, when not playing, he would close his eyes and grimace as if transported by his own music. The Lark players performed beautifully, but were similarly ostentatious in their physicality, and not above gyrating while holding a single note. And while the roughness of Sollima's voice had a certain appeal, his divergence from the Lark's flawless intonation grated on the ears. (He also gestured so wildly while singing that he bumped his microphone about every fifth measure, with jarring results.)

Comedians can't laugh at their own jokes, and Sollima should give the audience time to take his music seriously before acting so enthralled with it himself. After all, he seems to have only two compositional paradigms: the lonely, impassioned solo over a distant background, and the full-textured continuum in which motives and melodies pass back and forth between the different instruments. He can compose each of these paradigms at two speeds: rousingly fast and mournfully slow. Every one of the 14 movements fell into one of these four categories, and similar movements were mainly distinguishable by meters, of which Sollima uses an admittedly interesting array: 7/8, 5/8, a Philip Glassian 3 x 2 versus 2 x 3, and some that went by too quickly to count.

It's refreshing to hear a European writing in an American style like postminimalism, and I could name a couple dozen Americans whose music his fits in with: Duckworth, Drescher, Giteck, Lauten, Lentz. One hopes Sollima doesn't become the newest incarnation of the Arvo Pärt phenomenon, another Euro-Benny Goodman making hay off new music's Fletcher Henderson: Some Continental Johnny-come-lately barges in and plays Carnegie Hall with an idiom that Americans had long developed to greater depth and complexity at Roulette. Sollima is talented, with a wonderful ear for chamber counterpoint and dance rhythms, but he needs to expand his repertoire of textures and formal strategies to a number greater than two if he's going to justify his visible self-approval. And he needs to turn down the volume on his PR so we can hear the music.

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