

# Friends, Romans, Minimalists

By Kyle Gann

## New Italian Music

ROME—The outbreak of war was a strange and, yes, exciting moment to be an American here. Within hours of the initial bombing, Italian youth hit the streets. The wife and I fell short on our Tintoretto quota because art students closed *l'accademia* in Venice as a protest, carrying signs reading (in Italian), "We're 18 and We Don't Want To Die for Petroleum." In Florence a few days later, vacationing scholars erected a tent in front of the baptistery at Santa Maria del Fiore, one placard on which read (in English), "Americans for peace." Inside the tent squeezed dozens of students and lost but eager American backpackers, along with a scattering of '60s-ish demonstrators, who, on the night of the 20th, carried lit candles in a tremendous, chanting ring around the duomo. No sooner had Italian pilots joined the allies than Xeroxes circulated in the piazza charging that the attack violated Italy's constitution.

Uncertainty sparked anxiety and commotion. Accounts in the *London Times* and *International Herald-Tribune* were so Bush-slanted they strained credulity, and it took us a week to learn how exaggerated the first reports were. Roman friends confided they were uneasy about the proximity of Iraq's deadly gas reserves (at least 1000 miles away). Rumors



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flew that Neapolitans were hoarding bottled water. Despondent American exchange students, newly arrived for the semester, had received bomb threats and were rushing to see sights before being whisked home. In Rome, American tourists couldn't locate the American Airlines office; the sign had been taken down.

Yet the dominant Catholic Party supported Italian participation. Even where antiwar feeling festered, people greeted Americans warmly. Innkeepers graciously assured us that Saddam's a madman and waited for a similar assessment of Bush in return. A *pensione* hostess took one look at us and trilled operatically, "Ahi! Poveri Americani. La guerra è molto triste." Yet when we told her we were going home to *protestare la guerra*, she shook her head. "No, no, la guerra è necessaria. Saddam è pericoloso [dangerous]."

It felt like a World War II movie, but that was *Life*; we came to Italy for Art. I wanted to check out a new music scene we *poveri Americani* are commercially insulated from. Not via concerts, for January is their least lively new-music month, but via contacts with musicians and publishers, and CDs not sold stateside. The Virgil who led me through Italy's new-music purgatory was Roman avant-garde pianist Oscar Pizzo, who evaluated the discs I found at Ricordi's. This outfit, which records CDs and publishes scores as well as selling them, does well by Italian composers. No women, though. Apparently Europe hasn't invented them yet.

I have an affinity for the intellectual, Busoni/Dallapiccola side of Italian music, the dark lyricism couched in supple structures. That tradition, more spiritual than stylistic, continues, but there are oth-

er strains, too. As everywhere, the youngest composers seem more conservative than their elders, and some cling to the anonymous gestures of a diluted serialism. But now that Darmstadt kingpin Brian Ferneyhough has subjected everything up to and including the number of drops of sweat on each performer's forehead to serial permutations, many Italians have turned away from that impasse, and the attractive alternative is American minimalism.

They approach minimalism, though, with less energy and conviction than the Hungarians have, and Italo-minimalism can be limp. Ludovico Einaudi's *Time Out* (Ricordi), with its English text, transparently caters to American tastes and mixes a hodgepodge of bland repeated-note passages among stiff simulacra of mellow jazz. Franco Battiato's brief opera *Genesi* (Fonit Cetra) charts Glass-ish electronics with ancient-Egyptian flair, rhythmic but fluffy; Pizzo tells me that, like Glass's, Battiato's early music had backbone but is difficult to find. The best minimalist may be the younger Giorgio Battistelli, whose *Ostinato* (Il Pontesonoro) makes its simple points via propulsive rhythm and violent drumming.

The best artists lie outside the imported isms, along the extended Busoni/Dallapiccola axis. Florentine pianist Giancarlo Cardini is my favorite living European composer, and I tracked down his Edison record in Rome. His music is moody, delicately dissonant, ro-

matic, and outrageously theatrical by turns; he weaves 12-tone rows into repeating patterns, tosses books onto the floor in midpiece, or sets four music boxes running while he continues playing. Some pieces work with a limited number of complex chords, like Cage circa 1950 but more disturbing. In *Oggetto che cade* (Falling Object) the tick of an alarm clock backdrops abrupt noises, but Cardini's Sonata No. 1 filters a Schumann-depressive sensibility through Stockhausen moment forms and meditative reiteration. Gorgeous.

To understand the context Cardini's circle comes from, you need to know the voluptuous music of Sylvano Bussotti, the Darmstadt figure least known in America, but influential here. That ambience underlies the Asian sense of temporal space in Salvatore Sciarrino's actionless opera *Lohengrin* (Ricordi). No Wagnerian bridal march here, but an ethereal texture of bleeps, insect sounds, violin tremolos, and muffled voice, sometimes approaching Robert Ashley's *Automatic Writing*. Aldo Clementi (born 1925) is the old man among the composers I found, but his music shows a refreshing independence of his generation's trends. In his chamber concerti (Ricordi), tense webs of hardly moving atonal lines create a distinctive static counterpoint.

Less doctrinaire than those of Rihm-dominated Germany or Boulez-terrorized Paris, Italy's is a diverse repertoire we could stand to absorb. However, the premises of air travel have changed since I came, and for now you might want to let these descriptions suffice. My next foreign destination may be Canada. ■

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