

ORGAN “LOST LANDS” II

An Interview with Eugenio Fagiani



While surveying the history of music in Europe, for most countries it is easy to find stretches of history where a former torrent of fine performers, fine instruments and fine composers slowed to a trickle, or even seemed to stop entirely. Often war, occupation, disease and recession are at least partly to blame. In *Org.Alt* #38, and in a recent online feature at *Org.Alt.com*, we examined the forgotten and neglected Czech Republic, whose organ culture has virtually always been a secret from the greater world. Just as intriguing is the story of Italy, the home of Roman Catholicism, and the land of Frescobaldi, the Gabriellis and other giants of the Renaissance. Why did the land of such international musical superstars as Vivaldi and Verdi slip off the organ musical map?

Recently, I had the opportunity to speak with a representative of a younger generation of musician which is seeking to return the Italian organ culture to its former glory. Eugenio Maria Fagiani is Organist to the parish church of San Michele Arcangelo in Mapello, Bergamo, and director of Italy's only school of “20th century” organ improvisation. We met at St. Clement's Anglican Church in Toronto.

CD: You are director of Italy's only school of 20th century improvisation? Could you explain?

EF: You have to know that in Italy, and in Europe generally, we have many ancient instruments, so we are always fascinated by ancient music. We have, however, very few new organs, unlike in France and Germany. We are looking mostly into the past: 20th century music, and improvisation have very little place. Moreover, we don't have a great tradition of improvisers: in the 20th century we had a few people like Gambarini who improvised well, although not in a very contemporary style – very “easy-going” music. The Italian public has very much this conception of music for organ and choirs – easy listening, very approachable and not too contemporary. But in the last 10 years, we are developing a new way of thinking, thanks to a major organ Festival in our city, and the opportunity it has given us to hear some of the world's greatest organists.

CD: But like France, Italy is a strongly Catholic nation, with an ancient tradition of liturgical improvisation. That tradition clearly continued in France. Why did it become broken in your country?

EF: Where France had Gregorian Chant and Noels – we had opera. In the 19th century Italian church music was greatly influenced by opera, and so improvisations would mostly be based on operatic themes.

CD: Was there no objection to this “opera in church” from the clerics?

EF: No, it was very strange. You must remember that the greatest of our improvisers in the 19th century, Padre Davide, was a monk himself, and a composer of operatic-style music (although no actual operas). This continued until the *Moto proprio* from the Pope in 1903, specifying

ing the importance of sacred music – but the tradition of liturgical music had all but stopped. What remained was very free and fantasy-like, no formal improvisation of any kind (Symphony, Sonata, etc.).

CD: Was Marco Enrico Bossi an example of that musical style?

EF: Yes. If you see his compositions, many of them start from that point, and are very free and fantasy-like. For this reason the French didn't think too highly of Bossi.

CD: Would I be right that the Germans held similar views of Italian improvisation?

EF: Probably worse! Although another of our really good improvisers, Lorenzo Perosi was invited to become a teacher in Regensburg. He chose however to remain in Italy to help change Italian church music from opera to sacred music, following the Papal decree.

CD: Is it true that in Italy, the Mass provides fewer opportunities for liturgical improvisation than it does here?

EF: Yes. Again, as a hold-out from our operatic past the congregation sings during communion. It's not like here in Canada, where in many churches there are many moments for improvisation.

CD: So now, in the 21st century you are seeking to develop a 20th century school of improvisation?

EF: Yes. For me it is unbelievable that we have improvisers in the world who will improvise only the style of Bach and his predecessors. Our sensibilities have changed in 300 years – we cannot ‘hear’ music the way Bach intended it anyway. We still have many ancient instruments, though, so the idea of me and a few colleagues is the reverse of what some do: we don't try to show ancient music on modern instruments: we try to show modern music on ancient instruments.

CD: Are you evolving, do you think, a form of improvising that is indigenously Italian?

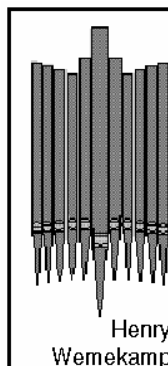
EF: ‘Indigenously’ is an interesting word. It is nearly impossible to use it in our time, since the world is so international. But I would say that what we are developing is Italian in two ways: first, we use Italian organs, which have very different stops from the organs of other countries; second, we are evolving a form based on the fantasy, the ‘Estro’ as we say, meaning “brilliant fantasy” – and perhaps in forty years we will be able to say it is truly Italian. It is not possible to imagine we could have it now: I think we have started a new way of improvising, rather than a new form. I and a few other colleagues that have studied abroad (because we have no teachers) are bringing the world's improvising traditions here: we are trying to make improvisation more rigorous, more formal, but still have an Italian sound.

CD: Perhaps the weakness of any real past tradition makes Italy a good place for the world's improvisation styles to “meet”?

EF: We think so, and we think what we are doing is unique.

CD: Does your group have a philosophy of teaching improvisation?

EF: We feel that the best teachers offer many possibilities to their students: not simply saying “be like me”, but rather, “be like you, viewing all you have learned.”



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