

Aldo RAGONE,

Concert Pianist, D.M.A. Professor of Piano, Italy

AZERBAIJAN AND MUSIC, A SUCCESSFUL BIND!



My profession as a musician has often taken me out of my country of origin, and therefore I had a chance to play, teach and study abroad, getting to know cultural realities. Around the world in 3 different continents, during my stays in various countries it was inevitable to compare the Italian

musical world with that of other places. Unusually, of all the countries I was able to visit, one in particular struck me more than the others, Azerbaijan.

Straddling Asia and Europe, bordered to the east by the Caspian Sea and to the west by the Caucasus mountain range, the small Euro-Asian country (small only in

size but large in traditions), in rapid economic growth and international prestige, preserves and professes a particular attention with understandable pride for classical music, at the times of art in great decline almost everywhere in the so-called advanced west, especially in my decadent Italy.

My visits to Azerbaijan date back to 2017 and 2018, visits that I consider happy events in my professional activity. In particular, I then had the opportunity to play and hold two Masterclasses lasting a few days for the students of the National Academy of Music in Baku, the main institution of musical studies in the country. Immersed in that new musical environment, I was able to quickly become familiar with it, being strongly impressed by it. After meeting excellent young talents and some of the most renowned teachers, I have personally witnessed an enthusiasm and respect for Classical Music that is extremely rare to find among young Italians, sometimes even among the students of our Conservatories. Following the professional and friendly relationships established with some musicians of that country, I learned about the prestige that the Azerbaijani government attributes to its artists and how much credit it gives to the national musical tradition. Such tradition is the result of the mixture of the great Russian - Soviet school with the fascinating richness of Azerbaijani music, whose style is the outcome of the union of rhythms and chromatisms, strong oriental flavour, contaminations deriving from Western Classical Music along with influences of Turkey and ancient Persia.

The passion for their national music is extraordinary among Azerbaijani musicians, to the point that any student or professional often includes works by Beethoven, Bach, Chopin with those of Fikret Amirov, Kara Karayev or Arif Melikov in their study or concert programs, to name a few. I myself, after the exciting discovery of classical Azerbaijani music, performed in various concerts pieces by Melikov, Amirov, Magomayev and Ceyhun Allahverdiyev, a fantastic composer and pianist that I had



the pleasure of meeting during one of the editions of the Pera Piyano Competition and Festival in Istanbul, both of us being members of the jury. Maestro Allahverdiyev is a professor of Composition at the National Academy of Baku, as well as a People's Artist, a title reserved to the most eminent artistic personalities of the country. On my recommendation, some of my students did also learn and perform pieces by composers from Azerbaijan, to the point that one of them, Gianluca Cristofaro, in 2021, won the "Kara Karayev Open Music Internet Competition" in Moscow, Russia.

Italy is a country of great musical tradition, a tradition that has prevailed in the vocal and melodramatic genres to the detriment of the instrumental one. Many are the admirers of Palestrina, Monteverdi, Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi or Puccini but few are those who know or consider the instrumental works of Sgambati, Martucci, Respighi or Castelnuovo - Tedesco. During a meeting with fellow teachers in which new programs for Piano Academic studies were decided, I had to put up with the "blasphemy" of a colleague who, with great nonchalance, said he did not miss the Italian authors in the least among the works performed by the students. This lack of consideration for the national instrumental repertoire is unfortunately very widespread among Italian musicians. In this sense, I believe that Azerbaijan, the first among the countries of the Islamic world to see,

The Uzeyir Hajibayov Baku Academy of Music



in 1908, the creation of its own lyric genre with “Layla e Majnun” by Uzeyir Hajibayov, unlike Italy, demonstrates an openness to a wider-ranging musical culture that does not discriminate but rather enhances its heritage in all its forms. As proof of what I say, there is not only a rich vocal and instrumental production, but also a further national style in the jazz genre, the Jazz-mugham, founded by the composer and pianist Vagif Mustafazadeh. The reason for this open and unprejudiced attitude by the Azerbaijani colleagues originates above all in the way in which the country has combined the various cultural influences that have converged there over the time.

To better understand this phenomenon, it should be considered that over the centuries musical styles have gradually evolved partly due to the radical changes in the societies, partly due to the growth of musical knowledge, as well as because of the birth of new awareness on the part of composers, who have thus renewed the language of sounds by building one that is increasingly complex and more connected to philosophical concepts and abstractions. In truth, musical languages are

varied; I am referring in particular to the strong changes that have taken place since the early 1900s thanks to composers such as Alexander Skrjabin, Arnold Schönberg, Bela Bartok, Igor Stravinsky, just to name a few. Each of them strongly contributed to a new musical poesis pushing for the acquisition of new horizons in the idea of musical conception and semantics of Music.

The evolutionary excursus of musical language and its vastness, should have by now established that changes but also contaminations are inherent in musical creation and beyond. The musical vision of Azerbaijani musicians is extraordinary, in that in their works and performances Western classical music, oriental rhythms and harmonies are mixed, together with the rich Russian-Soviet pedagogical and instrumental tradition, a melting pot that gives the dimension of a conception of Culture as a means of progress and civilization. This is a lesson for the political class of Western countries which, with the pretext of the possible rebirth of authoritarian movements, is all busy eliminating national cultural roots rather than enhancing them, according to a wrong idea that establishes the equation cultural



With faculty members of Baku Academy of Music. From left to right: Professors Nazaket Rimazi, Aldo Ragone, Yegana Akhundova and Ceyhun Allahverdiyev.

identity equal to deleterious and dangerous nationalisms.

Classical music should always be considered a backbone in an advanced society, the study of a musical instrument an added value for an individual. I believe that Azerbaijan constitutes a shining example in this. A model of devotion and enhancement of the creative forces of its people, preserving the richness of a musical tradition as an indispensable reference for civilization, spirituality as an instrument of peaceful unification of peoples.

The recent tragic events in Ukraine and above all the consequent sanctions against Russia, including the hateful censorship of that country's culture, remind us of how Culture for the political classes is nothing more than an instrument of propaganda which, in an act of contrast, becomes an offensive weapon. Therefore, literary events concerning Dostoevsky, or musical events dedicated to Tchaikovsky were recently prohibited in many Western countries, artists and intellectuals involved were also threatened. I am convinced that peoples and politics, culture and finance should never be

confused. However as long as the ruling classes do not develop a new awareness, the world will continue to experience stark contradictions between creation and destruction.

I firmly believe that to improve the destiny of humanity, everyone must constantly work on their own improvement. Art offers a unique opportunity to bring positive changes to individuals and societies. If technology has undoubtedly contributed to facilitating human activities, it is unfortunately a fact that technological development has gone hand in hand with the overshadowing of Arts and Culture in general. In fact, a technical evolution is presently matched by a humanistic involution, where efficiency is placed at the centre, at the toll of the spiritual indigence of a Man. The challenge with the future will not be won if there is not a renewed awareness of the fact that Art, Music in particular, constitutes an indispensable tool for combating violence and discrimination and, as a creative activity, gives peculiar qualities of a superior intelligence.

The recent cooperation between Italy and Azerbaijan gives hope for an exemplary approach between the two countries, that is not exclusively of a commercial nature, but can lead to something much more significant and compelling. Despite what some sceptics might think, there are many points in common between Italy and Azerbaijan. As a musician and citizen of the world, I hope that these aspects will lead to an intensified cultural exchange between our countries which, I am more than sure, would greatly enrich the Italian cultural world. ✨