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Interview with Floraleda Sacchi

The world can be such a bright place if you allow curiosity to direct your actions instead of bowing down to the supposed demands of society and the public.

Floraleda certainly has. Starting in 1998, she has amassed a colourful discography consisting of classical CDs, contemporary pieces, soundtracks for public transport, a christmas gift for BMW, singer/songwriter productions and multimedia projects, which have turned her into an immediately recognisable voice in the harp world: Her interests are diverse, her musical partners inspiring and her style full of subtle nuances and performing techniques ranging from the here and now to forgotten tricks of the 19th century. Today, we talk to her about her latest mind-child, the new album with her partner in crime Claudio Ferrarini (flute). Only 1,5 years ago, this duo was responsible for a spontaneous and vibrant selection from the harp repertoire of Czech composer Krumpholtz (the man who popularised the instrument) - now they are back with a much wider program, taking listeners from World Music to Philip Glass and from the Tango to Eric Satie. Thanks to this tour de force, the duo has picked up even more momentum and is already thinking about adding further pieces to their live performances, which are both fun and a challenge to play. But there is more: Sacchi has signed with famous Philips records, while making her entire back catalogue available via iTunes and she is directing the prestigious Lake Como Festival. Interviews can be such bright encounters, if there is so much to do and so much to talk about.

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Hi! How are you? Where are you?

I am fine and have just returned to Milan after several concerts to promote the new Suite en Duo CD.

What's on your schedule at the moment?

I am going to play a recital in Bergamo (Italy) this evening.

Last time around, you and Claudio were still called "Amadeus Duo". How come you're no longer?

We decided to delete our name. The name came instantly to our mind thinking of Mozart's Concerto, which is one of the most popular pieces for the duo, but after we realised other groups have already used this name and in CDs we always avoided the name. It is of course not a registered trademark, but it can create confusion.

You are currently actively performing "Suite en duo" on stage. So what was there first: The album and then the wish to perform it live or your concert program which you then decided to record?

We started playing what we liked and as we both love 20th century repertoire, we started trying on various styles. After several concerts, we recorded a collection depicting different musical path of the last century, which to us also means a variety of approaches and sound research on our instruments. Of course, we could realise a CD just for Minimal music or Tangos or Italian repertoire or French masters, or Oriental music. But as there is so

few main repertoire recorded for our duo, we decided to realise first an overview of 20th century possibilities.

We are not pleased with the usual flute and harp collections uniting 15 (or more) pieces, of 3 minutes each, from baroque to contemporary, we wish to promote programs with an idea behind them. There are great performers, who play beautifully, and still decide to release such patchworks. For example, Berceuse by Fauré is a nice piece, but two musicians can just perform it after 15 minutes, or less, of rehearsal. We are looking for a real duo repertoire, where you have to work and find together how to play it and explore each instrument's possibilities.

Now our mind is far away from Suite en Duo. We are currently promoting the CD, but from autumn on, we will present new repertoire.

You are both an active live performer and a recording artist. To you, what are the advantages of the different forms of expression? Do you actually enjoy the studio experience?

We prefer the public performance. We try to make it as similar as possible to a concert. We always invite some friends in small churches in the countryside, where we don't have the problem of time constraints and where there is a good atmosphere. Then, we perform all as if it were a public concert. We never add reverb; we use the acoustic itself and generally play the program through 3 or 4 times. We recorded Suite en Duo in 2 days. There are few cuts, and we tried to select the longest possible sections. I know we could work on searching for a perfect execution, without any breathing noises, but I think there are PCs and MIDI for this. I see a CD as a picture: You fix an execution, an emotion and this is the main thing.

Was the diversity and contemporary edge of the album in some way a reaction to the "Krumpholtz" disc, which only featured a single composer and more "classical" material? How does the audience reaction differ with regards to the program?

There is no reaction at all in us. We just wanted to present another musical aspect of the flute and harp duo. I think one should love what one is going to play and the public will appreciate any repertoire where the sincere work of an artist is evident. For this reason we have no fear in changing style and repertoire in CDs. Keats was writing "Beauty is Truth, truth Beauty" – that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know", so we humbly try to do our best without getting bored.

The album is now being sold under the renowned "Philips" label. Were they involved in the project in any direct way or was it rather an album you had finished and for which you then went on to search a label?

We finished the CD and found the label later. I think nobody would have taken care of us without listening to the repertoire.

How did you decide upon the program for the album? Can you maybe reveal who came up with the idea for recording the Ravi Shankar piece, for example?

As I told before, we tried to realise a balanced collection of different musical styles of the last century (this is the reason why we thought "Suite" was the best word for the title, too). Also, I love Indian and Japanese music, so how we could jump the Shankar's piece? I experimented on harp to imitate the sitar, without changing any note in the score. I included vibratos, played with nails and near the soundboard, realised notes through pedal slides and inspired myself to the gestures of Indian dance. Claudio plays millions of notes, but mainly I repeat the main note of the raga and give the rhythm, so I had also fun creating something around this.

You also taped a version of Piazzolla's "Histoire du Tango". What attracted you personally to this piece?

We both like Piazzolla's music. We think this piece, which was written for a classical musician and with a clear

score, is a perfect border line between classic and ethnic music, where you are free to improvise. We based everything on the score, but tried to make the rhythm flexible and change colours often thinking of the tango quintet. We had to work long for this and it's a hard piece for both: I make 592 pedal movements and the flute part is virtuoso as well.

Phillip Glass seems a very natural inclusion in your repertoire and I thought "Open the Kingdom" integrated itself very organically into the mix. Are there any plans of maybe recording more of his material in this combination of harp and flute?

I love Glass' music and played a lot of his composition on the harp. It would be interesting to work on his music with the duo, but we felt there is no interest in such a project from labels. We are preparing something new for Philips for 2008, but in the meantime I have created a sort of virtual label. My society signed contracts for all iTunes shops. We are putting out some previously published CDs of us there and we have the idea of placing there projects not supported by labels. I think this can be a great opportunity for musicians in the future. We only need to record and can thus reach millions of people all over the world, without any printing of the CD and any problem of distribution. This way, we are really free to do what we like when we decide it (with labels a CD can have a waiting list of years...). In June we will have about 25 albums online and in July it will be out our first project exclusively for iTunes.

While reading the (very informative!) liner notes, I had the impression, that you were deeply interested in contemporary styles. Has the occupation with World Music and the "Avantgarde" given you active inspiration and insight for your "Classical" performances and vice versa?

A performance is the result of a person. I am curious, so I am interested in several arguments, not only in music and I wish to understand the world and society, especially the one I am living in. My performances, music, writings, book and booklets (also the Krumpholtz one) are surely influenced by what I feel and understand of a certain period. In music, I avoid to create a difference between pop or classic repertoire: there is music I like and music I do not like; I improved my technique playing South American music on lever harp, studying on my Erard harp the 18th century methods (I could do the harmonics of Piazzolla, almost an octave higher than the limit reported in harp methods, using a Bochs technique, no longer in use today, dating back to 1828). So, you see, everything comes together, I try to keep my mind open and I cannot define a clear border among my influences.

You also often come up with references to painting. Would you say that you are a musician with a keen interest in the "visual" side of hearing?

I grew up in a house full of art books, which I was looking through as a game since I was 1 or 2 years old. For this reason I am influenced by visual art, which was my first relation with any form of art, before music. I always visualise images when playing, sometimes even purposely. For me, the 20th century repertoire is more 3D, so it is interesting to build a piece of music as a sculpture in space.

From my experience on the internet, I had the impression that the Harp scene (if there is such a thing) may not be as big as, say, the piano one, but that it was a very tight community with a positive spirit. How would you rate that yourself?

The Internet is a great way of communication. I always place a blog, images, video, everything regarding my music activities and in a smaller percentage regarding myself there. Recently, I got hundreds of views in just a few weeks of my performances on YouTube, and seen many people interested in my compositions on MySpace... The Internet always works and I am happy if many harpists present themselves: it is publicity for the harp itself.

In our previous interview, you mentioned you would like to have festivals show more openness to different kinds

of instruments. Has the thought of a "Harp" festival ever crossed your mind?

No Harp Festival at the moment. At present, I direct the Lake Como Festival (www.lakecomofestival.com) and it is already a hard task! From August to mid September we will organise 8 concerts.

You quote Satie's motto in the booklet to "Suite en duo": "Music as white and pure as antiquity". What does that mean to you?

It means sunlight, which is a burning white and a power always identified with God (which is also a sound!) since prehistoric time. In music, this can be intended as simplicity with such an intensity that one should concentrate deeply to obtain such an effect. If divinity reveals itself to us completely, we cannot bear it and we die - or we survive just because God wants us to become a witness of him. There are many references of this in antique literature and even in Christianity, just think of St. Paul. I think this was the concept Satie wanted to deal with and the reason why, in order to describe such an argument in music, he decided for an essential style and pop colour. To understand divinity and survive you cannot permit yourself much more: a veil must remain.

By Tobias Fischer

Discography:

Suite en duo/ w. Claudio Ferrarini (Philips) 2006

Krumpholtz: Complete Sonatas for Flute and Harp/ w. Claudio Ferrarini (Aulia) 2005

Little: The Riddle of the Rough (Adnarim) 2002

Floaleda Sacchi 2001

In a Landscape 2000

Una storia scritta in cielo 1999

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