

Marco Santilli: stories on the clarinet

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How does he reconcile it all? Marco Santilli composes and improvises, exploring jazz, classical and folk, pursuing various projects with other artists, and will soon release his first CD as a vocalist. The «La Stüa» project, presented at the Alpentöne (Alpine Sounds) festival, echoes some moments of his childhood.

The dialect expression «La Stüa» refers to the traditional sitting room of homes in the Leventina Valley, as displayed in the Ethnographic Museum in Giornico, where Marco Santilli grew up. Since information on the flyers for non-Italian speaking tourists was very limited, it was necessary to explain the use of the ancient objects on display, so this was how he helped his grandfather, the museum's caretaker, when he was a boy. And even then he found himself improvising.

Instrumental stories inspired by a Ticino village

The art of story-telling has remained with him but now he tackles narratives instrumentally. His village of origin continues to be a source of inspiration for the melodies of many of his compositions, which Santilli refines and develops with jazz improvisations. Like the song about a group of hikers along the high altitude trail, who refresh themselves with a flask of *grappa* and confront the ascent with tentative steps ...

This project fits perfectly into the concept of the *Alpentöne* festival, which this year has strengthened the link across the Alps to the south. Therefore, the presence of Ticino is apt and Marco Santilli's Swiss-Italian jazz quartet brings a touch of class to it, thanks to a selection of high-calibre musicians.

Jazz as a bridge to a classical wind quintet

Classically trained clarinetist and composer Santilli enlarged his group on this occasion with five low register wind instruments: alto flute, English horn instead of the oboe, and bass clarinet, which, together with the French horn and bassoon, help make the sounds warmer and more intense.

Whether he performs in a duo (with organ, piano or cello) or in a quartet, Santilli does not betray his Leventina roots: that's where (in Bodio to be precise) the band can be found in which he took his first steps as a clarinetist, in those days conducted by his uncle; where you'll find his immediate family and the tapes of dance music to which his grandparents used to listen, and where, in Giornico, a village of 900 souls, the bells of seven churches ring out.

From commerce to Zurich Opera

Before beginning his professional career as a musician, Marco Santilli attended the Cantonal High School of Commerce, where he acquired a solid education, which allowed him to pay for his studies at the Zurich Conservatory. And from there, as a young professional, he joined the Zurich Opera.

Despite having never completely severed his ties with classical music, his love of jazz has had the upper hand in his career. From the outset he admired Benny Goodman and Tony Scott, who had moved to Italy from the United States.

Spontaneous compositions dictated by the moment

The artists who have influenced Marco Santilli's style the most, alongside the Frenchman Michel Portal, were the great Jimmy Giuffre, a shy and thoughtful musician, and the clarinetist William "Bill" Smith, whose inventiveness and elegance Santilli admired from the first time he heard him play, with the Dave Brubeck Quartet.

His compositions always emerge spontaneously, riding waves of emotional impulses, Santilli says in his impeccable German, enhanced by his southern temperament and accent. He searches for the exact word: immediacy. It is this immediacy that captivates his audience when they listen to him.