

A CHAT WITH FRANCESCO PELLEGRINO



Many of us will have never heard anything like the repertoire Vesuvius Ensemble performs — can you describe what makes it unique?

This is very unusual repertoire for listeners in North America and I'm very proud to perform it here in Toronto. This is traditional folk music, still played and sung by farmers in southern Italy. The style is full of rhythm and is played with the *tammorra* (drum). It is meant as dance music for a ritual party, or *festa*. For example, every January there is a big *festa* for Sant'Antonio Abate, the patron saint of fire. The farmers make a big bonfire and people dance and sing

around it. It is a kind of *scongiuro* or wish for the new season in the countryside.

The other type of music, the melodic side, is usually a kind of *barcarolla* or serenade, always on the topic of love, and related to a particular style called *villanella*. In Neapolitan dialect, *villanella* means little girl. The first canto on the programme is a *cappella*, just a solo voice singing a kind of lament called *fronna*. The origins are in Greek or Roman music; the melody sounds Arabic/Mediterranean, and the lyrics are improvised.

I'm in love with these traditions, this music, these rituals. Ethnomusicology is my passion, and I've been doing this all my life. I LOVE it.

What was your first encounter with Neapolitan traditional music?

I was about six or seven years old and had gone to a *festa* with my family at an important sanctuary called La Madonna dell'Arco. We went with my entire family in an old FIAT 500 car. We brought food—because after you hear the mass, you have a party in the countryside. I'll never forget it: the food, the music, the dancing, the tables, the chairs on the roof. I can still see myself as a little boy, sitting on the trunk of the car with my friends, my brothers and sisters, listening to this music.

Where did the idea for the ensemble come from and how did you meet the other members, Marco Cera and Lucas Harris?

Three or four years ago I met Marco Cera through another friend. We talked about music—not just the business side of it, but the passion too. I told him that I loved this traditional music; he picked up a guitar and we started to play through some songs. Marco has a long experience with the ensemble La Cappella della Pietà dei Turchini and played in Naples for many years. I told him we needed a theorbo or a lute player, and he arranged a meeting with Lucas Harris. I'm super lucky—I found these two amazing musicians who are in love with this repertoire and who have become my great friends.

The singing style for this repertoire is very particular.

This repertoire—the traditional music of Campania and Puglia—is an expression *di dolore* (pain); *di lamento* (lament); *di strazio* (torment); *di passione* (passion). When they were working in the countryside, the farmers sang as a form of protest, because these people were exploited and badly treated by the barons and landowners. So the reaction was a *canto a dispetto* (spiteful song). On my mother's side, they are farmers. I grew up watching my grandmother wake up at 4:00 in the morning and jump on a wagon with the other farmers, singing as they travelled into the countryside. I always thought, how is it possible that she goes to work at 4:00 in the morning, singing, and comes back at 7:00 at night, dead tired, but still singing? That's something magical, something you can't explain.

What kind of research goes into assembling a Vesuvius Ensemble programme?

The traditional repertoire is huge and I learned it by listening. It still survives around the area of Mount Vesuvius, and every single town has its own characteristic traditional music. Every 10 kilometres there's a different rhythm, expression, style, vowel, and in particular, in the *tammurriata*, a different beat. Most importantly, they each have their own Madonna and everything is coordinated around the local *festa della Madonna*. For example, in Pagani (a town between Naples and Salerno), there's a procession through the different neighbourhoods with hundreds of people playing the same beat on the **tamburi** drums—the sound is massive. The people walk in procession and stop with the statue of the Madonna; they eat and drink wine. Then they get up and walk another 300 or 400 metres to another neighbourhood, where they stop again to eat and dance—all night long!

In addition to Vesuvius Ensemble's own recording, where else can interested listeners turn to hear more of this music? Any favourite performers you would recommend?

Pino De Vittorio is a great friend, and we have the same story, the same background. He's a little older than me, and is a spectacular singer and an amazing person. Of course, I love Peppe Barra and Giovanni Mauriello [both singers performed with La Nuova Compagnia di Canto Popolare, the ensemble that single-handedly revived traditional Neapolitan repertoire in the 1970s]. And the “unknowns,” the farmers. My favourite is Giuseppe del Sorbo, 92 years old and still singing—we called him “Zi' Giannino.”

Where is the point of intersection between Vesuvius Ensemble and Tafelmusik in this week's concerts?

The idea is to show the audience what was going on in 17th- and 18th-century Naples in two types of music: the classical repertoire of the court or the royal palace, and the traditional music heard on the street. It's a musical snapshot of a day in baroque Naples. Giuseppe Verdi used to say, “*torniamo all'antico e sarà progresso*”—let's go back to the old ways and it will be progress.