

## *RomaEuropa Festival: an experience of cultural innovation through the arts*

The paper we present focuses one of the most important experiences in the field of arts and innovation in Italy and Europe, that is the “RomaEuropa Festival”, created by the Socialist Minister of Tourism Giovanni Pieraccini, and the Director of the French Academy in Rome, Jean-Marie Drot, who signed RomaEuropa's birthday – in 1986 – with some significant words:

The Villa – she said, referring to Villa Medici in Rome, where the Festival takes place – has to move with the times and start interacting with Rome, Italy and France. It can not go on just being an ivory tower for 23 rather randomly chosen people, however much they have to contribute

The aim of the paper is pointing out some elements that mark this experience as an important example of cultural diplomacy: both from the thematic point of view – linking tradition and modernity, creativity and innovation – and from the organizational one: presenting Festivals with lots of participant from Europe and from the world, and in particular linking East and West of Europe, and opening some important chances to the dialogue between democratic and communist Europe till 1991.

At the moment when the Festival was created, in 1986, Rome had been already experienced the Rome's Summers promoted since 1977 by Renato Nicolini, councillor under the first communist Rome town council with mayor the famous art historian Professor Giulio Carlo Argan. And the Rome's Summers of Nicolini were a cultural innovation that made their mark on the European stage and continue to flourish to this day under a different guise long after Nicolini relinquished his post in 1985. Nicolini's innovation was to create an institutional framework to public art's collective impulse, but we could say a strongly-motivated event able to establish a permanent appointment with contemporary international creativity for the general public, was still lacking.

The first Villa Medici Festival proposed a comparison between cultures (Italian and French), and ages (past and present) and was titled “Baroque and trends”, with a great effort to demonstrate how fertile the comparison between Baroque and contemporary music could be. And one of the Festival's recurring themes was to be an awareness on our roots and a reflection on our times, exploring fashions, tools, issues, events of the present. The Festival concentrated its proposal on music, but during the years more and more attention was payied to the other fields of art: so cinema, picture, poetry, dance. For example we could quote the importance of experiences like the “Falso Movimento” - by Mario Martone – the “Magazzini” by Federico Tiezzi – or the great experiment of exploring relationship between cinema and dance, by Georges Méliès and the consideration of the first pioneers' attention to the boy as an inspiration for the contemporary dance and cinema. The dance events of the first edition, in 1986, were promoted with the cooperation of the “And the Stars Shine” review, as an hymn to the new and vigourous ferment in the dance creating in France, encouraged by the Ministry of Culture under Jack Lang. For example, Maguy Marin and Philippe Decouflè brought an important element of Baroque culminated in a Defilé: a show with clothes designed by Jean Paul Gaultier. Next year, significantly, the arrival of Mathilde Mounier, Jean-François Douroure, and the Groupe de Recherche Choreographique de l'Opera de Paris, and of Jean-Claude Gallotta – Director of Maison de la Culture de

Grenoble. Another important event was the exhibition of the Orchestre de Paris, directed by Pierre Boulez, and a series of film in a restored version, like for example Ben Hur with live music, that were presented in the next years. At the same time, the RomaEuropa Festival had also an institutional development through the organization and the creation of a “RomaEuropa Art and Culture Foundation”, promoted by Giovanni Pieraccini, who in 1990 became the President. But in 1985, when Nicola Signorelli became Mayor of Rome with a council expressed by the coalition so-called pentapartito, and the RomaEuropa Festival took a central place in the Rome's Summer against the programme created by Nicolini, the Communists acknowledged the importance of the Festival but accused it to be elitist, in a comparison with a sort of French Summer. An answer to this kind of risk was the edition of 1988, when the Festival was opened to the city, to invade other parts of Rome: the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, the National Dance Academy, Palazzo Farnese, the Orto Botanico. In particular, very interesting was the screening of Cabiria, the movie written by Gabriele D'Annunzio, with the accompaniment of the Orchestre de l'Ile de France with music by Ildebrando Pizzetti. Moreover, the National Dance Academy provided a stage for company performing original works by italians such as Laura Corradi, Roberto Cocconi, Lucia Latour, Enzo Cosimi. This provided an occasion to offer the public the uncertainties of creation but also the creativity of the risk, as Monique Veaute wrote in the catalogue of 1988. Also, these performances were the first attempts – by the Council of Town – to promote tours of the international circuits. The next musical events were the Oresteia by Xenakis, with its particular mathematical and architectural crossover influences, and the Rèports by Boulez, with the particularly impressive acoustics of the courtyard of Palazzo Farnese.

### **A thematic organization**

One the characteristics of the Festival during the early years was the thematic organization: the Festival concentrated on a limited number of events in the month of July and the programme was generally organised around a theme and there were links between one performance and another often celebrating some sort of anniversary.

An example was the celebration of the anniversary of French Revolution in 1989, when Pierre Boulez conducted a concert featuring the musical revolution of four 20th century composers: Stravinski, Varèse, Schomberg and Webern. On the dance front Trisha Brown represented the post-modern american revolution, while the Paris Opera courps de ballet grappled with the works of the great masters of the 20th century: in particular William Forsythe, author of a piece destined to become a classic: In the middle Somewhat elevated. On July 14, also, Giovanna Marini presented a musical version of the “Declaration of the Rights of Man”, in a metaphorical assault on the Bastille, which snaked its way from Campo dei Fiori to Piazza Navona. And, together, the exhibition of the Testaccio popular orchestra, presenting a dynamic interchange between classical and popular music.

From the point of view of cultural diplomacy, the edition of 1989 was particularly important also for the participation of the Hungarian Academy, one of the oldest academies present in Rome: the power of music began to chip away at the Iron Curtain that divided Europe and that was to collapse materially a few months later with the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the meantime, the VillaMedici Festival acquired its name “RomaEuropa” and its legal identity in 1990 and 1992. The presence in Rome of a large number of cultural academies offers a unique opportunity to discover new developments in all the various

fields of contemporary culture. In 1990 six nations participated: Britain, Hungary, Spain, Germany, Italy and France. The theme was “the other” transcending geographical borders as it transcended the territorial borders separating the various disciplines. Also, the European character of the Festival did not confine it in Europe. One of the most important events of 1990 edition was the Ramayana – the Indian show inspired to a mythological theme – and, contemporary, the Italian screening of Mahabharata by Peter Brook.

The academies and cultural institutes pooled their know-how from past events and joined forces under the RomaEuropa umbrella, resulting in the popular contemporary music review entitled New Musical Spaces curated by Ada Gentili. For examples two impressive events were in this sense the Evenings in the Gardens of the Spanish Academy – to paraphrase the famous opera by Manuel de Falla *Noches en los jardines de España*; and the Kafkaian babble of language in *The building of a Great Wall of China*, featuring Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese and French actors with an impressive spectacle with acrobats, fireworks, ambient music and a strong scent of mint.

In 1991 also the Soviet Union took part to the Festival, opening the gates of its Villa Abamelek with a tribute to Prokofiev, with his son Oleg as a guest. Through the Festival, Europe had managed to regain another place of its geography and history, and the Romans had reconquered access to a corner of their city that had, until then, been strictly off-limits.

## **The last decades**

The nineties were the decade of a consolidation of the Festival from the institutional point of view, and of more and more open programs. The Festival consolidated its institutional links by joining an international circuit of European bodies, with whom it coproduced several events. In the meantime the RomaEuropa Art and Culture Foundation had gained charity status and extended its activities year-round with new projects. The first step was a conference dedicated to Another man's point of view. Personalities such as Octavio Paz, Manuel Vazquez Montalban, Predrag Matvejevic all attended representing east and west. Other events were followed over the years, often examining the political, economic and social aspects of themes initially launched by the Festival. In 1995, for example, the Department of Entertainment nominated the Foundation an institution for the promotion of dance. This ushered in a new phase where energies were concentrated on sponsoring contemporary Italian dance and encouraging contacts and exchanges with international realities. With this aim in view, RomaEuropa set up a series of yearly “platforms” designed to present Italian artists to foreign producers. These events were initially held around Italy in different cities, and were later transferred to a multimedia showcase to give them greater visibility and diffusion and information about companies in real time.

Another aspect of the Foundation's responsibility in this field was the creation of a video archive containing thousands of hours of material on the work of Italian and foreign choreographers. And, also, was during the Nineties that RomaEuropa decided to promote its image engaging different artists: the decision of the President – Giovanni Pieraccini – was to ask a different artist each year to create a logo for that year's Festival. So, for example,

the first was Carlo Guarienti – 1990 – and then Piero Dorazio, Pierre Alechinsky, Joe Tilson, Achille Perilli, Markus Lupertz, Pedro Calapez, El Kazovsky, Sveta Pakovska.

On a thematic level, the Nineties were years of more and more open programs, as we can demonstrate pointing out a few examples: in 1993 the Festival was organized around the concept of “Grand Tour” - the journey around Europe made affluent young gentlemen and nobles in the 17th and 18th centuries: the Festival opened with a musical Festival on the Tiber, delivering the river with boats, and with the work of Daniele Abbado, Michele Dall'Ongaro, Paolo Fresu, the Tiber was transformed in a sort of “river of music”. Lots of musical events were organized with a large participation from Europe: the Spanish Academy, the Hungarian Academy took part to the event with an important result also from a diplomatic point of view.

Another example: a large part of the Festival in 1994 was dedicated to the Mediterranean, and in particular to the music. The encounter with the Arab world means rethinking the relationship between tradition and originality, as suggested by marvellous voices from Algiers, Cairo, Casablanca, Madrid, Naples. Electronic art and contemporary music joined to create a homage to two great composers: Luigi Nono and Yannis Xenakis.

Finally, after in 1997 the Festival was organized in two different sections – one in July, the other in September – the editions of the last ten years defined a new status and model of the RomaEuropa Festival, along with the transformation of the city: Rome was provided with a series of new avenues for art, culture, entertainment: particularly significant the Auditorium Parco della Musica, opened on 21 April 2002. Also, in a deliberate policy of diversification and redistribution of culture events over the year, in 2000 the RomaEuropa Festival cut its ties with the Roman Summer and moved all its events to the autumn.

In 2008, Fabrizio Grifasi took over the artistic direction of the Festival from Monique Vaute, who maintained the position of vice-president of the Foundation.

I want to promote contemporary creativity – said Grifasi – on the basis of two founding principles: to pay attention to what is new and to take responsibility for cultural risk.

Tradition and modernity, international exchange and crosses between Italian and foreign artists and producers. This – we could say in a sort of first and brief conclusion – was the spirit of the RomaEuropa Festival, and the aim its promoters – Giovanni Pieraccini and Monique Vaute – pointed out in their experience. RomaEuropa has become rapidly both these things: a Festival that has carved itself out a prominent position on the Italian and European scene, but also a factory in full flow, powered by boundless energy to go on embodying the dreams and visions of artists.