

CIVITELLA DI ROMAGNA (FC): A FATHER, A SON AND THE RAGGIOLETTO FARM

FOUR-HANDED HARMONY

A UNIQUE STORY, WRITTEN TO THE SOUND OF THE
ASTONISHING MUSIC BY ANDREA BENZONI: GUITARIST,
COMPOSER, ARRANGER AND CONDUCTOR IN LOVE WITH THE
ANTIQUES: “MY FATHER, GIORGIO, WAS DEEPLY BONDED TO
THIS FARMHOUSE”. ANDREA WANTED TO CONTINUE HIS
FATHER'S WORK: “A TOUCHING MEETING POINT BETWEEN A
FATHER AND HIS SON”.
THE RESULT IS AN AUSTERE, SINCERE AND TIMELESS BEAUTY
OF DEEP CREDIBILITY.

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In the opening page: Andrea posing for CasAntica with his beloved dog Argo. The Raggioletto Farm covers 11 hectares. There are two real abodes, an ancient one and a new one, that was built about only 15 years ago. There is also a porticoed facility: it is the workshop where Andrea loves to devote his time to manual work.

Every house and every meeting CasAntica has experienced is linked to a multi-sensory memory that goes far beyond the simple “vision” of the house. We can remember visits crowned by local meals: flavours from Tuscany, Emilia, Sicily, the Alps... Those houses, in our memory, spread their roots in “taste”. We can remember tours in houses surrounded by gardens in bloom, trails of lavender, rosemary hedges, scent of undergrowth, gardens stippled with herbs. Those houses become one with “smell”. We can remember buildings immersed in a metaphysical silence, sometimes filled by the sounds of nature: a gurgling stream, the insistent call of a peacock walking around the garden... These places become one with “sound”.

The house we are going to consider in these pages is a unique case, because the auditory fascination it provoked didn't fade even in the months following the interview, until it magically became music. Because the friend that welcomed us is - in the most ample, complex and deep sense - a great musician. Composer, arranger, conductor, impressive guitarist... He has performed solo, in small chamber groups, big and huge orchestras. **Andrea Benzoni** goes beyond any definition or

classification in which music is often confined. He embodies music in its entirety, combining the extremes: classic and light, academicism and jazz fluidity, exquisite technique and pure emotion, past and future, matter and air...

The oldest building dates back to the mid 1800's. The floor, the walls and the beams of the ceiling are all authentic, renovated by Andrea himself. The house is introduced by a nice colonnade full of surprises. Here, waiting for us with a delicious luncheon, were Andrea's wife Anita, and Margherita, one of his two daughters.

This article – dedicated to Andrea's house – took shape listening to his music. A unique, unprecedented combination that deserved to be solemnised. Any other hurried journalist would have just listened to the arrangements absent-mindedly in whichever moment. We, instead, have waited for the creation of the article, for the selection of the pictures taken some months before, for the rediscovery of the emotions felt on that occasion. We played one of the two Cds - very different from each other – Andrea had given us and, magically, a breath-taking auditory world opened for us. Especially listening to *XXX*, a performance recorded live in November 2012 where Andrea's guitar converses with the electronic background by Marco Mantovani. Andrea's arrangements are full of metaphysics and untouchable suspension. His *fingerstyle* – or *fingerpicking* – touch comes in atomized clusters: percussive and rhythmic, they expand in continuous, swarming, well-structured, complete organisms that evoke chromatism, plastic effects, strength, elegance and always different specific gravities. A very personal musical language.

We did not expect such high quality (who is writing – forgive my self-reference – listens to tons of music – *editor's note*) and such enthusiasm has a clear *raison d'être*. For those who want to experience it there is a website ***www.benzoniandrea.com***.

We felt proud in the presence of Andrea's talent. The spark of friendship had already sprung and, beholding what he had done in his house, it was joined by admiration. Listening to his music it was joined by a mysterious fascination.

Andrea's house is located in Civitella di Romagna (FC). It's in the heart of an eleven-hectares small farm on the hills of Romagna, in the valley of Bidente river, in the district of Nespoli. It can be reached through a wonderful uphill road in the woods. There you can experience pure intimacy, surrounded by aromas and silence. The property has a name: ***Azienda Agricola Raggioletto***. “*This area has historically been known by this name at least since the 1800s. Consulting even older maps, I've discovered that previously it had a different name*”, Andrea told us.

The harmony between us and Andrea sprang up since the very first telephone conversation. We had been invited a very long time ago. But we never forget worthy houses. So, as soon as the geographic conditions make it possible, we are the ones to step forward. A surprised Andrea welcomed our call with special warmth. A few weeks later, when we met, he revealed that our call had come at a very important moment. He told us why. And we were impressed. We are not going to reveal the reason, it will always remain a magic, intimate memory between us and Andrea. We can only say that sometimes coincidences can hide a touching background. Andrea, just like his music, can enclose a thousand different shades.

Some glimpses of the entrance and the kitchen. The house is characterized by an austere, simple beauty, lacking any glossy affectedness. It is sincerely and actually timeless.

In one of the rooms several portraits of relatives and friends hang on the walls. They are all by Ulisse Bugni, Anita's father, Andrea's father in law. Andrea explained us the original structure of the house, that included the current kitchen, living room and hallway. "I found a stone reporting the date 1853. It was in what today is the second hall".

During our first meeting, we went through both exciting and touching moments. Andrea has had a fascinating and cosmopolitan life: he was born in Forlì, where he lived until he finished high school. When he was 18 he moved to Oregon, US, where he got a degree in music. He then lived in Paris for a year. He graduated in musical composition and, later, in electronic music. *"I have many models. I have no limitations. I would say I can range from "liscio" (Italian traditional folk music) to Brahms, from Pat Metheny to Luigi Nono. What really matters is the quality of the material, its ability to communicate a feeling. Because art is communication. Unfortunately, it is getting more and more difficult to find something that is real art, and not just a commercial product"*. The same artistic purity we perceived in Andrea's music can be found in his house. Raggioletto includes two distinct buildings. The first, a very recent one, was built about 15 years ago. The other, much older than the first, has an austere beauty, full of timeless simplicity and deep credibility. There is no trace of trendy superfluities, no sign of pseudo-antiquity or en-vogue commercial affectedness. When you step through the door you actually feel immersed in a past setting. There is no trace of artificial representation of the antique. The past you can feel is the one – both sweet and strict – of a grandparents house. A true home.

Andrea took the reins of *Azienda Agricola Raggioletto* seven years ago. Unlike many other aficionados, Andrea didn't start from scratch. For many years the farm belonged to his father. *"My*

father, Giorgio, was deeply bonded to this place. But as he grew older, it became more and more difficult for him to take care of everything. I wanted to take the reins, it was a moral obligation".

Andrea admitted having an intense relationship with his father – a successful lawyer – since he was a boy. *"We clashed and argued a lot. I soon learnt to live by myself, without asking anything from him, even in the hardest moments".* The Raggioletto farm was a turning point: *"this farm has represented a meeting point between me and my father. I wanted to give continuity to this place in respect for him. It's because I deeply believe in the importance of his work in the course of almost 50 years. This was a shelter for him. He truly loved this place. He used to live here at least three months a year".* For Andrea this was an emotional and internal turning point. *"I worked as a bricklayer for four years and a half. Several months in the name of hard work, of total dedication, of refinement and the discovery of the antique... It was a colossal commitment. At the beginning it was not easy to explain this intimate necessity to give continuity to my father's adventure.*

The hall with the fireplace. Observing carefully, the delicacy of the touch can be noticed in the details. From the choice of the materials to the antiseismic expedients (like the tie-beams in the bedroom). All doors have been restored, "one, in the bathroom, has been coated with a double layer of cementite".

The bathroom and the bedroom were added to the structure in a later period. A writing on the bedroom wall catches our attention: it's a dedication that Andrea's father wrote for his son - thank you Andrea -: "this was my father's room – Andrea told us – and that's how he wanted to thank me".

But I am inspired by challenges, and I have learnt a lot from those engaging four and a half years. I learnt a true philosophy of life. Here I can't turn on the heating just by pressing a button. There's only a fireplace. If I don't get wood, I'll freeze". An almost unintelligible thought for those who consider the antique as a simple "scenography", just an aesthetic alternative to contemporary comfort. Few are fully aware of what you can learn behind the scenes of the antique. *"Before starting work, I can remember rusty iron, decaying rooms, plaster coming off the walls... I decided to restore everything, treasuring everything that was already in the house, from the wood to the tools. And most of all, I tried to truly understand what I really had to do. Such things can be learnt only by living these places in loneliness, intimately internalizing them".*

Anita, Andrea's wife, a psychotherapist, and their daughter **Margherita**, a pharmacy student specializing in herbal medicine, were there to greet us too. Only **Milena**, a psychology student in

Parma, was missing from the group. **Nella**, Andrea's mother, lives in Verona. And “mother” **Bruna**, father Giorgio's wife, was there too. Andrea told us about her with fascinating delicacy: *“Bruna, only 11 years older than me, might be the most helpful and faithful woman I have ever met. She felt great love for my father. She always followed him in total dedication. It was not easy. Because my father was a very strong person. He was probably proud of my role as a musician and of my achievements, sometimes at international level. But I think he came to understand me and respect me watching me work, while I was reawakening the beauty of this place. Today I consider it the succesful result of a four-handed work”*.

In short: this timeless sight is all thanks to Andrea and his father, the fruit of a conquered, and for this reason twice as precious and touching, harmony. *“Certainly the antique can only be learnt little by little. Two friends helped me in this: **Giorgio**, a 70-years-old bricklayer, and **Attilio**, a jack-of-all-trades farmer. They are both from Cusercoli, a Civitella district. They taught me al lot”*.

There is also a hosting dimension at Azienda agricola Raggioletto, but it is scented with artistic purity, without any “commercial” contamination. Something that is worth to be considered. In the past, we happened to visit some B&Bs and Holiday Farms where the owners only seemed to be interested in advertising themselves. How can we explain these hoteliers that the aficionados of the antique (including their potential guests) are far more fascinated by poetry, by the direct experience and by the family atmosphere rather than by the sterile listing of what is included in the Stay Package?

Andrea didn't even mention the hosting vocation of Azienda agricola Raggioletto, demonstrating such a pure approach that says a lot about his passionate nature and the intimate meanings of this experience. He only said: *“I like that people feel welcome here”* We know that the farm produces wheat (*“Just a few years ago we had aout a thousand cherry trees”*), chestnuts, fruit and wine. And then, of course, there is a nice vegetable garden. For those who would like to know more, the website is www.raggioletto.it

In many ways the rediscovery of the antique has meant a rebirth, and it has sealed a new departure and a new awareness.

“I decided to allow myself to take a break from music. I just can't accept that commercial needs always avercome the artistic side. But the old Andrea is still here. I think that musical creativity and shaping a place in your image might be surprisingly similar”.

The cellar and other working environments can be entered from the outside. From behind the older house, walking down a slope, you can reach a second building, that was built 15 years ago. The constituent materials, starting from the floor, clearly reveal an anything but antique expression. "I did my best to give value to it, recovering old doors and anything else I could". Our eye is caught by the ceiling, from which an old bike, and even a small wooden cart are hanging.