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Ennio Morricone Discusses 85th Anniversary Before Moscow Concert

By Aliide Naylor

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Morricone surveys the audience prior performing. The composer celebrated his 85th birthday on November 10.

"When I was a child I was cured by a doctor — he was very famous because he cured the children of Mussolini and other members of the contemporary government. His name was Ronchi; he was a fascinating person. At that time, I wanted to become a doctor," recalled Italian composer Ennio Morricone ahead of his Moscow performance at Crocus City Hall.

Given his contribution to the world of music, having produced the scores to over 500 films and selling over 70 million records, a significant portion of the earth's population is apparently ecstatic that he never chased up this fleeting dream.

Morricone is best known for his collaborations with director Sergio Leone, having written the scores for the films of the Dollars trilogy, with his score for "Once Upon a Time in the West" selling more than 10 million copies alone. He has received a wealth of awards

and accolades across his extensive career, including nominations for five Academy Awards, eventually winning a lifetime achievement Oscar in 2007.

The Crocus City Hall show will see Morricone assuming a humble, yet serenely dignified stance on the conductor's podium on Nov. 13 and 14 as part of his 85th anniversary celebration tour after highly acclaimed appearances in both Kiev and Minsk.

In front of the Maestro will be the same orchestra that he conducted last December on his previous trip — the Sofia Symphonic Orchestra. "We collaborated a year ago," Morricone said, jolting a table upon which three glasses were resting, and delightedly noticing the rhythmic clink it produced. In addition to the orchestra, Morricone will be bringing six of his own Italian soloists.

Attendees will be experiencing a slight twist to the program on this new visit. "I have added a somewhat complicated, interesting piece to the program — an academic variation on a police signal — that people will not expect."

The piece in question begins with a bone-razing oboe solo of just four notes. "Varianti su un Segnale di Polizia" has a syncopated, staccato opening, and while the original theme is pervasive throughout, Morricone escorts it through an incredible adventure of instrumentation, styles, and conflicting times signatures.

"As far as I understand, the public audience in Moscow have a high cultural level and are great listeners," he said, adding that he hoped the piece would resonate with them.

Morricone does not often spend time exploring the cities in which his performances take place. "When I go to work in a city, I don't visit it — I made an exception for Moscow," he pondered, expressing his reaction to visiting the Kremlin. He spoke of a discovery he made.

"In one open space in the Kremlin, I discovered a musical ensemble of five voices. They were a small choir, singing such delicious, beautiful music, that when I arrived in Italy, at the Istituzione Universitaria dei Concerti [in Rome], I gave the institution their details. And they were called, and enjoyed great success there."

While citing Bach as a primary musical influence, and his admiration for Stravinskiy is also well known, further Russian influences are vaguer. “There is another contemporary Russian composer – a woman,” he said. “I don't remember her name, it ends in -lina.” Morricone reeled off some potential collections of consonants ending in – “-lina”, lending his impassioned Italian emphasis to the ‘i’.

"She works in Russia, and she steps out of the schema of Russian music. She writes music which is similar to that of contemporary European music," he said, adding that she is 'not so young' anymore.

Morricone could well have been referencing the modernist composer Sofia Gubaidulina, who expressed religious sentiment in an era when it was still dangerous, and who ended up being one of "Khrennikov's Seven," a group whose music was denounced as "noisy mud instead

of real musical innovation."

"If she had written in Russia more than 40 years ago, she could have been killed by Stalin or would have been sent out of the country," he said.

Morricone will likely be making further forays into Russia's history. An upcoming film from Italian director, Giuseppe Tornatore, entitled "Leningrad," will be set during the 900 day Nazi siege of Russia's "northern capital." The film is actually based on a project that Morricone's old friend Sergio Leone proposed shortly before his death 1989, and work on the score is finally expected to begin toward the middle of next year.

"So I was told," Morricone said cautiously. "I have never signed a contract." Morricone has frequently collaborated with Tornatore since their first pairing on Cinema Paradiso in 1988. "There is a relationship of mutual respect between us — we are very good friends," he said.

"He told me about his next film, but it is not Leningrad. The next-next film will be Leningrad." He added. "Tornatore is very reserved and superstitious so he never tells the story before the contract is signed." The film reportedly secured its $100 million funding in 2011, according to Variety magazine.

The absence of legally binding papers confirming his current commitment to the project reinforces his statement of conviction that for him, even after all these years, composition is "only a passion. Then, if I get paid, it's a good thing — but it's really only a passion."

Over the years his methods have developed in a way that he deems to be a continual improvement. "It is natural that the latter half of the career is better," he said.

"I always look for progress in writing. I reflect and I experiment, and try to mold it into progress," he said. "Then I wait for the occasion to apply it to the music ... like in the last film of Tornatore," he said. However, he stopped short of declaring the latter era of his career superior to his earlier compositions.

"I can't possibly say absolutely better, but I have to say, the things I do today are different from the things I have done before. In creative professions an individual always tries to look for something new. Sometimes they find it, and perhaps sometimes they might not."

While Morricone does not generally answer the question of which work he deems his personal best, out of politeness he stated that Tornatore's last film — ''La Migliore Offerta'' (The Best Offer) — was a "very important one" for him. "It is the result of different experimentations," he said. Morricone was named European Cinema Composer 2013 by the European Film Academy in October for his work on the score.

"There is music in this film that doesn't correspond to any of my other music that I have done before ... and it doesn't correspond to the music of other authors, my colleagues from the world of classical music," he said.

In regards to his creative process, Morricone is still unsure of exactly how it unfolds. "You are asking me for a secret that even I don't know," he laughed.

"Something influences me, and channels something inside me ..." he continued, elaborating

in a way deemed very complicated by his translator. "All of these things have to correspond a little bit to the feelings that one film provokes in me. Then in the moment, when the message arrives ..." he paused again. "The problem is always to put one thing after another ..." he finished.

Enormous thanks to Oksana Konoval for English/Italian translation.

Ennio Morricone will be conducting the Sofia Symphonic Orchestra at Moscow's Crocus City Hall on Wed. 13 and Thur. 14. November at 8 p.m.

Contact the author at artsreporter@imedia.ru

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