

## Michael Occhipinti & The Sicilian Jazz Project: *MUORICA*



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*Alayne McGregor, Ottawajazzscene.ca (Ottawa Chamber Festival review)*

"Sicilian tempers run legendarily high, but inhabitants of the Italian island—and their descendants—have a matching appetite for fun. Even a downpour couldn't have dampened this sextet's raucous energy.”

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“Michael Occhipinti's miraculous sounding guitar, Don Byron's warm and woody clarinet, and the magnificent voices of the ineffable Dominic Mancuso and the divine Pilar. No pomp; no circumstance; just wonderfully and magically made music.”

*Raul da Gama, JazzdaGama*

Michael Occhipinti's Sicilian Jazz Project has been dazzling audiences world-wide with an intriguing mix of rare Old World Sicilian folk material and the New World sounds of electric guitars, chamber music, funk and reggae grooves, and modern jazz. Using music sung by Sicilian fishermen, sulphur miners, and folk musicians as a starting point, the music is like a trip on the Mediterranean that somehow manages to detour to Mali, Jamaica, and Toronto.

Michael Occhipinti's work has been called “a masterpiece of cultural fusion” and his album *The Sicilian Jazz Project* received a 2009 JUNO Award nomination. The recording also resulted in the prestigious Ragusani nel Mondo Award being presented to Michael and his co-producer/bassist brother Roberto Occhipinti in Ragusa, Sicily in 2009. In 2010 Michael Occhipinti received a Chalmers Fellowship to live in Sicily and explore the folk culture further. The fruits of that trip form the basis of the group's new album *Muorica*, featuring a large cast of Canada's best musicians and special guests that include the astonishing Rome-based vocalist Pilar, brilliant American clarinetist Don Byron, and the acclaimed Cecilia String Quartet.

*Muorica's* bold songs and arrangements reflect the diversity of his native Toronto, and a professional career that has seen him work with great musicians across all genres. The physical album comes with a stunning 40 page book that documents Michael Occhipinti's experience in Sicily, with stories for each song, beautiful photographs, and even some travel advice and recipes to make it a unique album package. The group recently journeyed to Sicily to film both a video for the song *Amuninni Razzietta*, and to film their concert in the beautiful Teatro Garibaldi in the city of Modica.

Michael Occhipinti and The Sicilian Jazz Project toured extensively in 2015 and 2016, and the group has brought its captivating and infectious live show to a range of festivals across Canada, Italy, the USA, and Mexico, including the Festival Cultural de Zacatecas, Mexico, The Rochester International Jazz Festival, Ottawa Chamber Music Festival, and Toronto's beautiful Koerner Hall. Mixing a unique repertoire, great story-telling and stellar musicianship, the band is not to be missed live. The Sicilian Project is now booking 2016 dates for Canada, Europe, and the United States.

An nine-time JUNO Award nominee, Michael Occhipinti is a modern guitarist with a broad sonic palette, and a composer/bandleader interested in creative music of all kinds. Michael is one of few guitarists leading a 16-piece jazz orchestra (NOJO), and his other groups include Shine On: The Universe of John Lennon, instrumental funk group The Triodes, and Creation Dream: The Songs of Bruce Cockburn. Michael has performed with such notable musicians as Sam Rivers, Bruce Cockburn, Joe Lovano, Jeff Coffin, The Gryphon Trio, Elizabeth Shepherd, and long-time colleague Don Byron.

## THE GEORGIA STRAIGHT - MUSIC NOTES

### Great year for talent at the TD Vancouver International Jazz Festival

by Alexander Varty on July 2nd, 2015

It was a great year for talent, but the 2015 edition of the TD Vancouver International Jazz Festival will likely go down in history for its accompanying weather. Record-breaking high temperatures were the norm, with nary a cloud in the sky—until the very final moments of the Sicilian Jazz Project’s outdoor set at David Lam Park on Sunday (June 28). With thunderheads threatening in the west, a few timid onlookers left, but many more refused to budge, receiving only a light and refreshing spritz for their bravery.

Oh, and some deeply enjoyable music, too. The Sicilian Jazz Project is the brainchild of Toronto guitarist Michael Occhipinti, whose premise fuses the serpentine, almost Arabic melodies of his ancestral homeland with deep funk grooves and wild jazz improvisation. It’s a winning mix, especially with clarinet virtuoso Don Byron onboard, but the most engaging performers on-stage were singers Dominic Mancuso and Pilar, the latter having arrived here “direct from Roma”, according to Occhipinti.

Mancuso’s bluff assurance and Pilar’s laser-beam high notes were especially potent on “Amuninni Razzietta”, inspired by scenes Occhipinti witnessed growing up, in particular those Friday nights when his bone-weary father, a construction worker, sparred with his stay-at-home mom about going dancing. “Are your parents having an argument?” his friends would apparently ask. “No,” the young musician would reply, “They’re just discussing their plans for the evening.”

Sicilian tempers run legendarily high, but inhabitants of the Italian island—and their descendants—have a matching appetite for fun. Even a downpour couldn’t have dampened this sextet’s raucous energy.

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<https://ottawajazzscene.ca/reviews/35-show-reviews/10787-pilar-and-the-sicilian-jazz-project-replaced-jazz-cool-with-passion-review>

## Pilar and the Sicilian Jazz Project replaced jazz cool with passion

Alayne McGregor, *Ottawajazzscene.ca*

Wednesday, 19 August 2015

Pilar and the Sicilian Jazz Project, Ottawa Chamberfest, Chamberfringe series

Saint Brigid's Centre for the Arts, Kildare Room Saturday, August 1, 2015 – 10 p.m.

In many jazz shows there's a subtle distance between the performers and the material. It's part of the jazz cool: a way of looking at the music both from the inside and the outside, of standing apart. Pilar and The Sicilian Jazz Project were having none of that, in their late-night Chamberfringe show August 1. Rarely have I seen performers – and particularly singers – who immersed themselves in the music as much as Franco-Italian vocalist Pilar and Canadian-Sicilian vocalist Dominic Mancuso did in this show. In almost every song, their voices, their faces, their hands, and their entire bodies were communicating the intense emotion in the lyrics and music. It was an emphatically “hot” concert – both the vocals and the concentrated, jazz-fusion-flavoured instrumentals.

The project is the brainchild of Toronto jazz guitarist/composer Michael Occhipinti, and is based on his own Sicilian family heritage, as well as field recordings made by musicologist Alan Lomax in Sicily in 1954. It's a rethinking of original folksongs through the lens of Occhipinti's jazz sensibility, rhythms, arrangements, and improvisation. In 2008, Occhipinti released *The Sicilian Jazz Project* album, which received considerable critical acclaim, including a Juno nomination. Over the next few years, he continued to tour the project and write further material for it. In 2010, he received a Chalmers Fellowship to live in Sicily to explore its folk culture further. Last year, Occhipinti said, he had the chance to hear an album by Pilar and was so impressed by her singing that he invited her to perform with the project – for the very first time, without ever playing together – at the 2014 Ottawa Chamberfest. The combination was such a huge hit that Chamberfest invited them back again this year.

In May, the group – Occhipinti on guitar, his brother Roberto on double and electric bass, Mark Kelso on drums, Louis Simão on accordion, Kevin Turcotte on trumpet, Ernie Tollar on flute, and Mancuso on vocals – released their second album, *Muorica*. Pilar guested on the CD; so did clarinetist Don Byron, who also appeared in last year's Ottawa concert. A string quartet added a more classical feel to several pieces. About half of the tracks were specifically written with Pilar in mind, Occhipinti said. Occhipinti and the group (minus Byron, Turcotte, and Tollar) have been touring the album since its release, mostly with Pilar. By the time they hit the stage before a packed house at Chamberfringe, it was a tight and well-rehearsed show.

As in previous shows, Occhipinti took pains to introduce and explain the music, almost all of which was sung in the dialect of Muòrica (aka Modica), the small city in Sicily from which his parents emigrated. All but three of the songs they played were from the new album. The songs were generally more upbeat (pirates and love, rather than disaster and famine) than the first album.

They opened with “Sacciu Chi Parla A La Luna”, a mixture of swirling accordion lines from Simão and alternately delicate and dramatic vocals from Mancuso, all telling the story of a woman who, in her sad state, can only sing to the moon. Then Pilar appeared, looking as though she had stepped out of a Pre-Raphaelite painting by Edward Burne-Jones or Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Her voice was equally angelic, soaring over the accordion accompaniment, as the band paid tribute to the steep streets of Muòrica through Occhipinti's setting of a local poem.

In a dense concert which lasted more than 90 minutes, I was particularly impressed with two pieces: "Lingua e dialettu" and "The Soldier and The Siren".

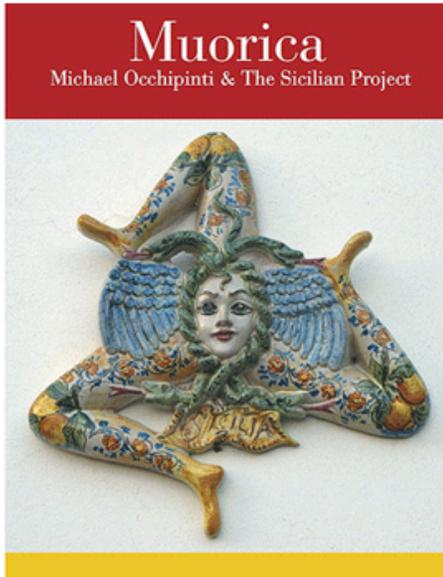
"Lingua e dialettu" was a piece Occhipinti wrote especially for last year's Chamberfest concert. It's based on a poem by a Sicilian writer, whose message was that one can only enslave a people by taking away their language – like a guitar which loses a chord every day. Over a muted guitar riff and light cymbals, Pilar first read the poem, simply and eloquently, and then started singing the words, her voice becoming richer and more intense. She then stopped singing and started clapping out the rhythm, as the band played a fluid jazz fusion-like melody. The instruments quietened and she returned, almost pleading as she sang, and then the music built up again before ending abruptly.

Occhipinti gave "The Soldier and The Siren" new lyrics, based on the experience of the Canadian soldiers who accepted the bloodless surrender of Muòrica during World War II. He noted that many of those soldiers never

returned home again after several later battles in Italy. The piece began softly with light guitar and the deep moans of Roberto Occhipinti's bowed bass, and Pilar softly singing the haunting melody above. Slowly it became clearer, Pilar eventually singing a wordless, high lament which sounded like Cassandra bewailing fate. Throughout the concert, Pilar and Mancuso alternated songs and also sang together on several pieces, such as the lyrical love song "Nun Ti Lassu". They closed with "Amuninni Razzietta", a friendly musical argument between husband bone-weary after a hard week of work and a wife who needs to get out of the house and wants to go dancing, based on conversations Occhipinti heard as he was growing up. It was a bright, rhythmic piece which ended with Pilar singing exultantly and dancing in place. The audience clapped along as she and Mancuso sang their final duet.

The audience then jumped to its feet to give the group a standing ovation. This was definitely crossover music. It combined art song, folk music, and jazz in an entrancing and well-produced mixture – which of course made it particularly appropriate for Chamberfest's late-night Chamberfringe series.

to be moved by so little is to show in perfectly appropriate terms the very nature of these pieces, and a rare and special event on any disc (let alone one made in a dialect of Italian). But the phrasing and articulation of this music by Michael Occhipinti and his iconic Sicilian Project are so precise yet carefully understated, and of a kind of total acceptance simplicity, that the music is given space to 'sing' and 'dance'. All of this aided and abetted by Michael Occhipinti's miraculous sounding guitar, Don Byron's warm and woody clarinet and the magnificent voices of the ineffable Dominic Mancuso and the divine Pilar. No pomp; no circumstance; just wonderfully and old-fashioned magically made music.



At no point in this dignified performance does Michael Occhipinti resort to 'oversharing' or even 'overshadowing' fellow members of The Sicilian Project, or even listeners, to make his point. He is simply revered for his musical intensity – setting a fine example for the rest of the group – and even when it isn't as obvious here as it may be in his *Sicilian Jazz Project* or his voyages into other musical idioms, and quite rightly. This is pure passion for and of music. One of the qualities best served by his respectful withdrawal from the soul-baring front line of the music – to let the vocalists shine, basking in the poetry and lyricism of the music – is that the dance identity is so joyfully evident. The phrases relay into each other like a figure skater moving from pose

to pose; the end of each never experiences a heavy footfall; and the openings of many are so graphic that you can almost see the (imaginary) dancers bowing to each other before they begin (I see this especially in *Muorica* and the two parts of *Lingua E Dialettu*). The musicians, especially Michael Occhipinti and Don Byron, are so fleet of foot, even in the slowest movements, that it is not long before it becomes clear that this performance is a master class in passionate restraint and musical altruism. The musical interpretation itself is almost transparent – nothing disturbing the millpond, save the knowledge that the tranquility of its performance is in inverse proportion to its depth.

Michael Occhipinti plays on a sweet-toned guitar, and his refined finger technique produces a delicate and crisply elegant sound with richly rounded, plum-like trills. The gentleness of his touch shows beautifully in the strummed chords and the plucked single note lines that seem to glide out of the tips of his fingers. There is a rare and convincing lilt in the phrasing of *Lingua E Dialettu* and an exquisitely slight *inégalé* illuminates the music of *Spunta Lu Sole*. Elsewhere there is a tendency towards flexible rhythms and this can seem relentless in some of the profounder music on this disc. Where it works better is in *The Soldier And The Siren* or in other lighter dances that can run themselves like dynamic giges, which Michael Occhipinti and The Sicilian Project executes with compulsive flow.

It's easy to think that the definitive recordings of these important pieces could not only be studio recordings but also live ones. However studio may work better where every phrase has been scrutinised and, if necessary, retaken. But the very least Michael Occhipinti's living, breathing manifestation of a lifetime of study can do is make the listener reconsider whether the most three-dimensional way to present such profound music is, in fact, to prepare in private but trust to luck in public. I, for one will be looking forward to the latter as well.