

Left: Giorgio Magnanensi at the Cluster Festival in Winnipeg.  
Below: Graphic scores from his One-Page Score workshop this spring.

PHOTO: AARON SIVERTSON/SIGHTLINES PHOTOGRAPHY



# A Musical Engagement

GIORGIO MAGNANENSI WORKS TO BUILD AN INCLUSIVE MUSICAL COMMUNITY

STORY BY IAN MCLATCHIE

**I**N GIORGIO MAGNANENSI'S MUSICAL universe, people hear with their eyes and see with their ears, and trees and spiderwebs sing. It's a place where journeys are more important than destinations and beauty counts less than the sheer joy of making noise.

Since moving to British Columbia almost 20 years ago, Giorgio has helped define a revolutionary new role for music within the larger community. He has created forms and performance environments which break down traditional barriers between audience and performer, music and sound, contemplative art and spontaneous modes of expression.

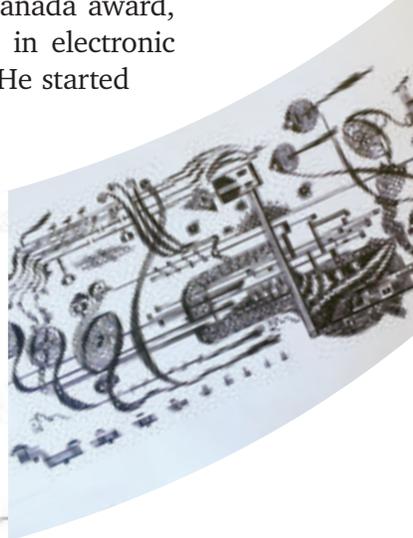
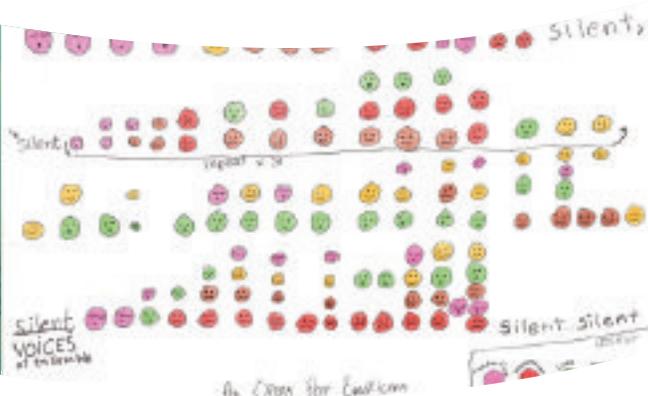
Giorgio's early musical life followed a more conventional path. Born into a musical family in Bologna in 1960, he began serious training in piano at age ten and went on to earn a string of music degrees, including a doctorate in composition from the National Academy in Rome. He served as principal conductor of several Italian orchestras, created electronic soundscapes for La Scala and was a guest lecturer in Japan, Ireland, France and Syria.

By 1990, Giorgio held a tenured professorship in Parma and conducted two ensembles in Bologna. His future was secure, but he felt a growing unease with the autocratic role that was thrust upon him.

"I'm not here to tell people what to do," he says. "I like dialogue and exchange and sharing because I'm willing to change my mind, willing to put myself in a different position."

Giorgio felt estranged from the prevailing view of music as a specialized discipline. "Music is not the privilege of a few," he says. "In other traditions, music is part of everyday life, a form of living, not just an object that we exercise as an aesthetic form on special occasions."

From his first visit to Vancouver in 1995, Giorgio sensed the potential for an alternative approach to music, one which drew inspiration from the natural environment and created new and deeper forms of creative engagement. After winning a Government of Canada award, he began postdoctoral research in electronic music at Simon Fraser in 1997. He started teaching at UBC in 2001 and ▶



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Vancouver Community College three years later. With his wife (artist Heather Gatz) and two young sons, he moved to Roberts Creek in 2004.

Since 2000, as Artistic Director for Vancouver New Music, Giorgio has commissioned and presented new works by Canadian composers and hosted appearances by performers from around the world. In 2006, to develop projects that did not fall within the more narrowly defined mandate of the VNM, he founded the Laboratorio Arts Society. Over the past decade the group has presented events that have actively involved the audience in the creative process. As Giorgio says, "I'm using large spaces where people can, or need, to move around; otherwise nothing happens. They have to reclaim a certain creative energy, without just being there sitting down and applauding."

He also uses many strategies to put musicians off their guard by having players switch instruments, say, or staging performances in busy public spaces. He often combines professional and amateur performers and cares less about technical mastery than about physical involvement.

"When musicians find themselves dislocated in a different sound world," he says, "they have to find different ways of being and discovering. It's about focusing on sound, listening to your body. It's mainly an exercise of attention to how we engage with sound."

For musicians, the effect is often galvanizing. As long-time collaborator Kedrick James says, "You don't work with him and expect to come out having the same idea of yourself as a musician. You expect to come out with a renewed understanding of what music means to you and how you engage with it."

For the 2015 Sechelt Arts Festival, Giorgio created a display in which the convoluted grains of a large block of cedar were converted to acoustic signals amplified and projected through a pair of thinly planed cedar panels. With photographer Nicolas Teichrob, he has also produced the beautiful Spun Spectra series where prismatic images of spiderwebs emit a dazzlingly complex array of sounds. In the simplest terms, the two dozen large images are filtered to show the light spectra of the webs (think light refracted through a prism), which



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The grain of this large block of cedar was converted to acoustic signals.

are in turn sampled to produce sounds that threads of this length, density and thickness would produce (think Aeolian harp).

This spring, Laboratorio held its most ambitious undertaking to date, a three-day One-Page Score workshop. Working with a pair of local artists, participants created graphic scores which were then interpreted musically by a twelve-piece ensemble before an audience of over 120 at Roberts Creek Hall.

Even among such diverse projects, Giorgio sees a common thread. "One is the sonification of a natural object produced by spiders, one

is the sonification produced by human beings expressing their imagination through graphics and signs. It's a slightly more complex process, but it does have a similar quality of connecting the visual and sonic imagination and connecting people through that activity."

Performers who have worked with Giorgio speak admiringly of his lasting influence on their own practice. As Sechelt musician and educator Steve Wright says, "The main thing I've learned from Giorgio is that to be a good, thoughtful musician is to support the people around you, to really believe in them and say, 'Anything you do, I can engage with you.'"

For Giorgio, such engagement is the key to building an inclusive musical community in which all participants can experience and contribute to the transformative power of art. "I want to show people that it's not about the object, the final thing," he says. "It's about the process of being involved in this beautiful behavior in a creative way. If that's possible, we will be much better in our relationships with ourselves, our environment, our families, the things that we surround ourselves with."

For more about Laboratorio, visit [laboratorioartsociety.wordpress.com](http://laboratorioartsociety.wordpress.com).