

## Alla Boara: creating soundscapes from history at CMA (Jan. 24)

by Max Newman



If there's one thing that Ohio-based group Alla Boara can do, it is allowing their listeners to explore the past by relishing in the present. And for those who packed into the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium on Wednesday, January 24 for the ensemble's performance celebrating the release of their new record, that is exactly what they got.

It was an evening of storytelling through word and song.

Bandleader Anthony Taddeo, the group's composer and drummer, based his arrangements off of a series of Alan Lomax's 1954 field recordings of Italian folk music. Throughout the night, Taddeo and other band members laid out historical context to the pieces on show with a backdrop of original images from Lomax's Italian journey. It gave the audience a clear snapshot of Italy in the mid-1950s, and created an authentic atmosphere for each song played. It was clear that each musician was acutely aware of this background — you could see it in the passion on their faces, and hear it in the enthusiasm of their performances.

For all of these connections to history, though, the music on this night was certainly modern. This was apparent from the beginning of Alla Boara's self-titled first selection, a jazzy composition that is driving, rhythmically complex, mysterious, and features a brilliant jaw harp intro. The musicians did not hold back, reaching into seemingly endless

reserves of energy for the entire evening, without the merest dip into complacency. It was a concert that was on the move, 100% of the time.

Something that was also apparent from the beginning was the chemistry between Anthony Taddeo and guest percussionist Patrick Graney. They were the flawless force behind each song, dazzling with serpentine, tambourine-heavy rhythms. Their communication was evident in their body language — facing towards each other, grinning with every satisfying fill and glorious tambourine flourish.

All of the musicianship on display was impressive. Ian Kinnaman was stellar on the double bass, in particular on the sparse, haunting *Maitinata*, written for the purpose of seeking alms. On piano and accordion, Clay Colley played with panache, accuracy, and delicacy, and his lush piano solo stood out in *C'Avanti C'e*, a work traditionally sung while gathering olives. Dan Bruce was a frighteningly good guitarist, at times putting the whole band on his back with rhythms that bounced each arrangement excitedly forwards, and at times adding beauty with rapid soloing that sounded as if it was the soundtrack to a piazza at midday.

Perhaps the biggest standouts, though, were the leads: trumpeter Tommy Lehman, guest violinist Caitlin Hedge, and vocalist Amanda Powell. Lehman and Hedge were beams of light, shining through each arrangement like sun rays. Or, at times, like rain bursting through clouds. Their soloing chops were outrageous. Even more impressive was their blend, their tones almost sounding identical. That created a psychedelic effect, especially during their duet in the cacophonous *Fimmene Fimmene*, a song championing the strength of women.

Powell was superb throughout. Her vocal tone and versatility were almost reminiscent of Beth Gibbons, the vocalist of 1990s British trip-hop duo Portishead — her words seemed to float ethereally through the concert space, burrowing into the ears of those in the audience. She was capable of love-drenched crooning, as in the slow and beautiful *La Montanara*, but also of haunting, cathartic soloing in *Fimmene Fimmene*. She also captured the drama in the energetic *Almond Sorting*, a tune traditionally sung by female almond sorters while melodically gossiping. By the end of the concert, when Powell called on the audience to join in the singing of *U Leva, Leva*, they were in the palm of her hand, more than happy to oblige. A mesmerizing performance.

But no song summarized the evening better than *Maggio Delle Ragazze*, an arrangement that conjured images of skipping through narrow, old cobblestone streets on a sun-kissed afternoon. It was a combination of all of the group's standout qualities. Lehman, Bruce, and Hedge all took impeccable solos. Colley and Kinnaman were as solid of a backbone as you would ever see. Taddeo and Graney crafted ingenious backbeats. Most of all, it

was clear that everyone in the group was having fun — smiles etched upon their faces, a playful bounce in their bodies to each and every beat. And the audience felt it too — it was an atmosphere that was infectious.

Alla Boara creates soundscapes from history that you can live in today.

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