

# FOUR ITALIANS

DANILO REA, STEFANO BOLLANI, ENRICO PIERANUNZI and RICCARDO ARRIGHINI are some of the best jazz pianists you've never heard.

The much-discussed “globalization” of jazz is not always apparent down here on the ground. Take Italy, for instance. It boasts arguably the strongest jazz scene outside the United States, yet most American jazz fans would be challenged to name three Italian jazz musicians. This essay, if it achieves nothing else, will enable them to name four: Enrico Pieranunzi, Stefano Bollani, Riccardo Arrighini and Danilo Rea. If any one of these men lived in New York, he would be the next big thing on jazz piano.

Enrico Pieranunzi is the oldest of the group at 57. Like all of these players, he was schooled in classical piano from early childhood. Also like the others, his discovery of jazz as a teenager led to a piano style in which jazz and classical languages are unconsciously and organically interwoven. “I love Bach like I love Bill Evans. I love Mozart like I love Paul Bley. For me, piano music is piano music,” says Pieranunzi. He

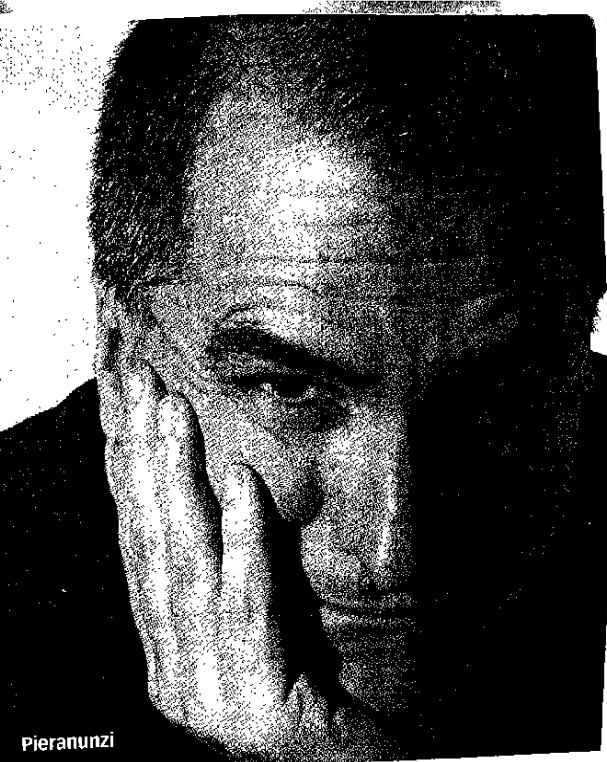
is largely self-taught in improvisation, and speaks of learning to “decode” jazz by studying Erroll Garner records. His single most important influence was Chet Baker, with whom he played frequently in the '80s.

“Chet and I exchanged maybe 10 words in all the years I knew him,” Pieranunzi says. “We never talked about anything but the titles of songs. Before I met Baker I had been a very extroverted player. But Chet played so few notes—only the essential ones. He was so melodic that he helped me learn something very difficult: to make the piano sing.”

Pieranunzi's albums are easier to find than those of the other three pianists here because he records for the well-distributed CamJazz label. He worked for years in Roman film studios, and three of his best CamJazz recordings find rich, untapped sources for jazz in Italian film music (*Play Morricone*, *Play Morricone 2* and *Fellini Jazz*). The recent *Ballads* and the double album *Live in Paris* (on Challenge) are among the essential piano-trio recordings of the new millennium, because Pieranunzi's vast technical expertise is creatively informed by a single purpose: to make the piano sing.

Stefano Bollani looks like a younger, handsomer version of Roberto Benigni (the ebullient Italian actor-director who won an Oscar for *Life Is Beautiful*). He has that same mad glint in his eye. His occasional antics onstage and his bent, deadpan song introductions have led to comparisons with Frank Zappa. But Bollani's chops are deadly serious. He was schooled at the Luigi Cherubini Conservatorio in Florence, where he swears that his *maestro*, Antonio Caggiula, used a stick to punish errant fingers. Bollani had the talent to become a major classical concert pianist, but he couldn't “cope with the unconditional fidelity to the text,” so he chose jazz.

Humor is only one element in Bollani's eclectic arsenal.



Pieranunzi



Arrighini

# FOR REALE

BY THOMAS CONRAD