

—————IN MEMORIAM—————

## Farewell to Alessandro Alessandroni



The Most Famous Western  
'Whistle' in the World

by Valeria Rusconi  
and Ernesto Assante

First published on March 27,  
2017 by [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it)<sup>46</sup>

Reproduced with kind  
permission

Translated from Italian by D.T.

The composer, conductor and arranger Alessandro Alessandroni died in Rome. He had just turned 92. His very famous 'whistle' contributed to many soundtracks of the spaghetti western genre. **For a Few Dollars More** is his most iconic 'whistling'.

"It's very simple, said Ennio Morricone to me over the phone. Sandro, come on down for a moment, in the studio, we need someone to do some whistling. Well, it was really just a whistling, nothing more, but think of what happened next... When we saw the film, I have to admit that no one thought it would make any money." But on the contrary this 'whistling' did really change everything. Alessandro Alessandroni, the maestro – it's only right to call him that – recalls the genesis of the most famous piece of his career and most iconic one for western movies, that of **A Fistful of Dollars**, composed by Morricone, which made Sergio Leone's movies even bigger. "He was a true professional, we had a beautiful relationship", said Morricone to La Repubblica, "he knew very well how to play the guitar, and was truly outstanding as choir master. And he could whistle very well. He has worked on **A Fistful of Dollars** and on other occasions. Why did I choose him to whistle? By chance, I needed a whistle, I asked the musicians who worked with me who was able to whistle well and I liked less what the others did. He had courage".

The composer, conductor and arranger Alessandro Alessandroni died on March 26 in Rome, the city that gave him birth on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1925. He had just turned 92. The announcement came on the official Facebook page of the composer: "It is with

deep sorrow that I communicate the loss yesterday of Maestro Alessandro Alessandroni, born in Rome on 18 March 1925, composer, multi-instrumentalist, arranger and choir director. A commemorative concert will be held at home in

<sup>46</sup> [http://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/musica/2017/03/27/news/addio\\_ad\\_alessandro\\_alessandroni\\_il\\_fischio\\_piu\\_famoso\\_d\\_italia-161515205/](http://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/musica/2017/03/27/news/addio_ad_alessandro_alessandroni_il_fischio_piu_famoso_d_italia-161515205/)

*Swakopmund, Namibia, directed by his son Alex Junior Alessandrone*".

Alessandrone approached music when he was still a boy. At the time he lived in his mother country, in the province of Viterbo. He was 11 and kept listening, whenever he could, to classical music. He began playing the guitar as self-taught with assistance from a friend. He played in the most peculiar place. He said in an interview to the Planet Hexacord blog: *"I started in the barber shop, because in small countries it is a reference point: there were the instruments, the guitar, the mandolin. They worked a little, but they played a lot..."* While he was attending the last year of high school he formed his first ensemble, with which he toured for locals and dance halls. Fast to learn, he became in a short time proficient in several instruments, alternating during performances: as a teenager he was already able to play the guitar, the piano, the accordion, sax, flute, mandolin and sitar, one of the first Italians to try his hand on this complex stringed instrument. He obtained his diploma at the Conservatory in Rome, found a job in the film production company Fonolux. There he met the great Nino Rota, his senior by 14 years, who wanted him in his orchestra. Then came the whistle. It was almost by accident. Alessandrone, at some point, volunteered when Rota needed a whistled motif. Whistling became his new instrument to play with and one of the characterizing moments of the Italian western soundtracks. Music with all the effects: *"My whistled parts are on the pentagram,"* Alessandrone explained, *"and I'd better not miss the pitch, or make mistakes."* Federico Fellini also thought so, he who coined his nickname: Alessandrone for him was simply "The Whistle".

In 1962, he founded the Cantori Moderni, an 8-members formation that took the place of his previous group, the quartet Caravels. Together with himself, the band consisted

of soprano Edda Dell'Orso, Augusto Giardino, Franco Cosacchi, Nino Dei, Enzo Gioieni, Gianna Spagnuolo and, last not least, his wife Giulia De Mutiis.

Alessandrone's most important collaboration, long-lived and bound by a sincere esteem, remains until today the one with Morricone: besides the famous whistle of **A Fistful of Dollars**, he will also work on **For a Few Dollars More** and **The Good, the Bad and the Ugly**. Alessandrone is called by all the most important Italian composers of the time, in the sixties, such as Piero Umiliani, for whom he sings with his wife Giulia the fantastic motif *Mah-nà-mah-nà*, from the soundtrack of Luigi Scattini's **Svezia, inferno e paradiso** (1968), and maestro Armando Trovajoli. With the arrival of the seventies, for the ARC of the RCA, a label dedicated to the 'younger' Italian song, between beat and 'mondo exotico', he published a collection of the twelve songs that were in competition for the 1969 edition of Canzonissima. They were recorded, of course, in their instrumental versions. The work on the solo Hammond organ is credited to Ron Alexander, his pseudonym.

Among his most celebrated 'whistles' was also those included in the soundtrack of **Un sacco bello**, the film that marked the debut of Carlo Verdone in 1980.

The name of Alessandrone became cult transversally, across generations and musical styles, and especially conquered the library music lovers. Among the last ones to want him on one of their records was Baustelle, a band from Montepulciano, who chose him for one of their best albums. *"Alessandro Alessandrone is the oldest special guest"*, explained Francesco Bianconi, the singer, to Repubblica XL a few years ago, *"a wonderful 84yo whom we made play the sitar, the accordion, the acoustic guitar and the whistle"*. The song title, not surprisingly, was *Spaghetti Western*. And the album, *Amen*.

## -----INTERVIEW-----

In 1998, Patrick Ehresmann met Alessandro Alessandrone in Rome and interviewed him. The article was published in In MSV #87, January 2000, and is reproduced below with kind permission of the author. We thought it was a nice way to pay a tribute to Alessandrone, because it is a fan-made interview and it is not widely available.

# Incontro

*by Patrick Ehresmann*

Even though I entitled this article “Incontro”, this time it will not be a review of Piero Schivazappa's film **Incontro**. I had the chance to move to Rome a few months ago for my work, and I wanted to take this opportunity to meet some of the most active collaborators of Ennio Morricone. Just after my move, I discovered that I was a neighbour of Alessandro Alessandrone! I dared to call him, and he invited me to see him in his studio the next weekend. He very kindly accepted to answer my questions, and showed some good interest for our magazine MSV (he asked for copies of the back issues). The following article summarizes the different subjects that we discussed in his studio, and also in my house where I invited him to listen to some records.

### **How did you learn music in the beginning?**

*I am a true self-educated musician. I taught myself to sing and to play all instruments, except for the piano that I studied afterwards with a music teacher.*

### **How did your career begin?**

*I worked in so many fields, it is difficult to remember. I don't think there exists a musical style or a genre that I was never involved in. I made more than 20,000 performances, I worked with more than 2,000 musicians and composers for the cinema of course, but also for classical music, theater, ballet, television broadcasts, publicity and to accompany variety singers. For example, I remember well being a guitarist in the orchestra touring with Josephine Baker in the years 53-54. This may be less known, but I also played mandolin and guitar in classical concerts, for example Vivaldi's Concerti di*

*Mandoline e Chitarra, and concerts of Beethoven.*

### **When were you first introduced to singing in a choir?**

*At the end of the 50's, I was a member of the singing quartet 2 +2 of Nora Orlandi. Then I decided to create my own group: Il Quarteto Records, and then Il Quarteto Caravels in the years 59-60, with Guido Cincirelli, Anselmo Natalichio, my wife Giulia<sup>47</sup> and myself. We were singing and also playing instruments. The quartet was just renamed I Caravels when we added a drummer, Sergio Pissi.*

### **The choir 2+2 of Nora Orlandi also appears in some Morricone recordings. Was there a moment when singers were members of both bands?**

*Certainly not. When they were singing for me, they did not have to sing with another choir. There was a little competition between the different bands, but there was*

---

<sup>47</sup> Giulia De Mutis also performed under a « Nome d'Artista » Giulia Rei. She has been involved in numerous projects with her husband. For instance, Alessandro is proud to mention that on the original

single of Piero Umiliani's famous tune "Mahna mahna", Giulia and Alessandro Alessandrone are credited as voice soloists.

*enough work for everybody.*

### **How did I Cantori Moderni come to being?**

*One day, Maestro Franco Pisano asked me to add voices to the original quartet for one of his compositions. This is how the quartet became a choir, I Cantori Moderni.*

### **How were you recruiting new singers?**

*Initially, all the singers you know, like Edda Dell'Orso or Gianna Spagnulo<sup>48</sup>, were singing in churches, etc... I had to be extremely severe in the tests to recruit new singers. Those girls were not perfectionists in the beginning. You could find many girls with nice voices, but this was not enough for the kind of work we had to perform. They had to be able to sing in a choir, to perform right the first time almost without any preparation. You know, discipline is not a common attitude you can find here in Italy.*

*Therefore, it was a lot of suffering for the first two years to obtain a good sound from the choir. But I was very satisfied with the result we achieved after those two years of hard work: I could state that the choir sounded better than the orchestra. I remember very well this anecdote. One day, the choir was not in tune with the orchestra. There was quite some pressure, because you know, there is limited time during the recording sessions. But that time, I argued with everybody, saying "no, it is not my choir which goes wrong, it is the orchestra". I knew it because during the preparation and the recording of the choir which is always made separately from the orchestra, the sound was just perfect. Therefore, I made the musicians listening to the choir alone, and they agreed with me. We finally found out that it was the strings which were out of tune. In the end, the choir became so good, we were even capable of slightly adjusting the tuning to adapt to a given instrument (for example an organ, which of course is impossible to tune during a*

*recording session).*

### **Can we say that you discovered Edda Dell'Orso?**

*Well, not exactly. She was already singing before she joined I Cantori Moderni. But I remember well in which circumstances I met her for the first time. It was 5 or 6 months after I Cantori Moderni had been created. One of my singers came to me to ask for a raise in salary. She had a good voice, but nothing could justify to make her earn more than her colleagues. You know, at that time, there was a lot of work to do, and many talented artists were available. I had to keep the discipline in my choir, so I explained to her that she could leave. I had to replace her. It is another singer from I Cantori Moderni who knew Edda who called her to ask if she would be interested in the job. As soon as we met, there was an immediate symbiosis between the two of us. I think there was a mutual fascination. She is unique. Her voice is an instrument in itself.*

### **What was a typical day of work for I Cantori Moderni in the sixties?**

*We worked 6 days a week, from Monday to Saturday. Each performance was paid by the day, there was no contract, except when we were working for broadcasts with La RAI. The work started at nine in the morning, and finished at eight in the evening. I was responsible for the preparation of the choir. This is the most difficult task, because it is difficult to tune all voices together and obtain a good harmony. With Morricone, I negotiated to receive the partitures 3 days before the session to give enough time for the preparation. But those 3 days rapidly became 2 days, then 1, and after 2 years, I was receiving the partitures only 10 minutes before the recording session! You understand now why I had to work hard to obtain a good professionalism from my singers. My wife Giulia kept telling me*

---

<sup>48</sup> This is the correct spelling, and not Spagnolo, like

too frequently misspelled on record sleeves.

*"Why don't you stop directing this choir? Just play the guitar, it is much easier!" Also, it happened frequently that Morricone called me to do an urgent recording on Sunday, because the final cut of the film had already been completed, and there was just the music to add before sending the film to a festival, or something else. In this case, we could start at eight in the morning and not finish before midnight. We were really busy at that time!*

### **Do you remember the recording of *Per un pugno di dollari*?**

*Nobody believed in this film, RCA Italiana did not want to pay for the music. They showed us sequences of the film temp-tracked with pre-existing music arranged by Morricone from the RCA library<sup>49</sup>. Everybody was laughing, there were so many corpses lying on the ground, it was incredible for us. I was the soloist for the guitar, the whistle, and I directed I Cantori Moderni as well for this soundtrack.*

### **The electric guitar has a typical sound, easily recognizable from that period. How did you develop this unique technique to produce this sound with Morricone?**

*This guitar sound, it is the Fender Stratocaster. Look, I still have it, this is the original guitar which played *Per un pugno di dollari*, and the amplifier is the original one as well. It is a piece of collection today. Some time ago, some Americans offered me a little fortune to sell it, but I refused. I am still playing with it.*

*To make my personal sound with this guitar, I had a little trick: for the third string, rather than using a standard one, I was using another second string, thinner, but tuned to sound like a third string. This gave*

*a sweeter sound to the guitar. When you listen to the tracks, you can immediately tell whether it was me who was playing, or Bruno Battisti d'Amario. For *C'era una volta il west* for example, the electric guitar was played by Bruno. His sound is more aggressive. But for *Per un pugno di dollari*, this was me, with a sweeter touch. Ennio Morricone trusted me in the way I was adjusting my amplifier to find the right sound. I just had to call him and make him listen "Do you like it like this?" There was no problem, we had worked long enough together to know what was necessary to make the sound right, for the guitar or for the choir.*

### **And the whistling? how did you become THE official whistler of all Italian Cinema?**

*In the 50's, I was playing guitar for a recording session with Nino Rota. At a moment, he said that he had a piece to do with a whistler and he asked if somebody in the orchestra could do it. I said "I can do it".*

*When people heard my performance on record, they wondered how do I whistle so high. Here also, I have my secret. In reality, the trick is to whistle at a very low level. I can produce 90% of the sound with only 10% of air, while others would use 50% of air to produce only 50% of sound. You know, the microphone does not accept any blow of air. If you want a pure and clear sound, you need to whistle at a very low level. When you hear me whistling, you are surprised that it is so low. Then, it is the job of the sound engineer to amplify the recording of the whistle at a good level in front of the orchestra.*

### **Do you remember this track ? (I put on the hifi the track *Tramonto* from *Anche***

*suggested himself to use the whistle. This is possible, because we know that it is upon Leone's request that Morricone accepted to use the whistle again among the instruments which dialogue in the main theme from *Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo*.*

<sup>49</sup> It is likely that the song *Pastures of plenty* recorded with Peter Tevis was included in the temp tracks. We know that Morricone replaced Peter Tevis' voice with Alessandro Alessandrini's whistle, and this basically became the famous *Titoli* of *Per un pugno di dollari*. According to Sergio Leone, he

**se volessi lavorare, che faccio?)**

*No, I do not remember it. Who composed this, is it Morricone ? You know, I worked with so many artists, I did so many recordings. After one recording was finished, I was doing another one the next day. I do not keep records of all the things I recorded, I would not have time to listen to all of them. Yes, now, I remember this music. It is a Tramonto Romano, a typical tune from the region of Rome.*

**And what about that one? (I put El Mercenario on the hifi)**

*This percussion effect is obtained by knocking the strings over the guitar microphones. (Then starts the whistled section.) Oh yes, I remember that one very well. It was extremely difficult to stay in tune because of the semi-tones.*

**And the electric guitar now? (still El Mercenario, but with the theme of Curly)**

*This is Bruno, not me.*

**Do you remember this other track? (Peur sur la ville)**

*No, I don't remember. Who did that?*

**Morricone again.**

*Is that right? Sorry, I don't remember. I thank you for the opportunity to listen to these recordings that I have not heard for such a long time.*

**Now I play a favorite of mine (Il Buono, il brutto, il cattivo)**

*The first voice which answers the flute, this is Franco Cosacchi. He has a sweet voice, the same voice which sings "Sean, Sean" in *Giu la testa*.*

*(Then we hear the bass flute sound, and Alessandrone's whistle.) This bass sound, it*

*is an Arghilofono, an "Ocarina grande"<sup>50</sup>.*

*(We hear the electric guitar) This harsh guitar, it is Bruno, "Non e cosi cattiva, la chitarra mia!".*

*(We hear the two voices for the character of Tuco.) This voice, it is Enzo Gioieni, and then it is Cosacchi again who answers the "wha, wha, wha".*

*(We hear the trumpet.) This is Michele Lacerenza. With a sound of trumpet like this, it is him. A great artist. It is him who played the trumpet in *Per un pugno di dollari*. There is a second trumpet there. Who is it?*

**The record sticker says Francesco Catania.**

*Oh yes, he was a trumpet player from the orchestra of RAI. You know, Morricone likes to write for trumpets, it is one of his specialty. Good piece of music, that one.*

**At the moment you were performing such music, did you realize that you were doing something very special?**

*What do you mean?*

**It is like when Edda performed C'era una volta il west, did she knew that it was to become her most famous standard?**

*Well you know, we have been working for so many different composers. Some very good, some less good. We had to do our job. But when we had to record music composed by Ennio Morricone, of course it was a pleasure for all of us. When Morricone composes, he has in mind who will perform each section. It is only normal to have a special appreciation for a piece that was composed for you to perform. Consequently, we are motivated to produce our best performance.*

**Do you keep contact with most of the**

*can see villagers playing ocarina in the film **Novecento**.*

<sup>50</sup> The Ocarina is a traditional instrument of northern Italy, made of terra cotta, and called like this because it has a round shape like a goose (oca in Italian). One

### artists of the **Unione dei Musicisti di Roma?**

The U.M.R. is not active anymore, it is more a letter box now, because of cost reasons. You know, at that time, we were accepting to work hard for limited salaries. Those days are gone. And there is also now the competition of orchestras from Eastern Europe, which are good and cost less. So, for some recordings, our composers have the temptation to go East to work with those orchestras. But I still keep contact with most of the persons I worked with in the past, Edda, Franco De Gemini, etc...

### What are your activities today? Are you still involved in film music recording?

*When my wife Giulia died some years ago, I stepped back a little bit from all this pressure. What matters for me now is making my music in my studio. From time to time, I do some paintings as well. We are like that, the artists, keeping working is a matter of still having ideas, of keeping the mechanism of inspiration working.*

### What are your current projects?

*I still have some requests from different sources. For example, I have been contacted by an Anglo-Chinese production to do the soundtrack for a western film<sup>51</sup>. They wanted me to recreate that special sound of the sixties. I have one month to do it. I make most of the music here with my home studio, I record the electronic music on a 8 tracks tape recorder. Then I bring it to a studio to add the strings and the solo instruments. You know, there are certain instruments like the strings that you cannot reproduce with a synthesizer. You need to use the real instruments to get a good sound.*

### Can we expect to have this music on CD?

*Oh yes, Lionel Woodman will probably*

*publish it. I have different projects with him and with Roberto Zamori, for example a CD with half I Cantori Moderni, and half Alessandroni con fischio. Roberto Zamori has most of my tapes, we should release more CDs in the future.*

### Do you have other projects of new music to compose?

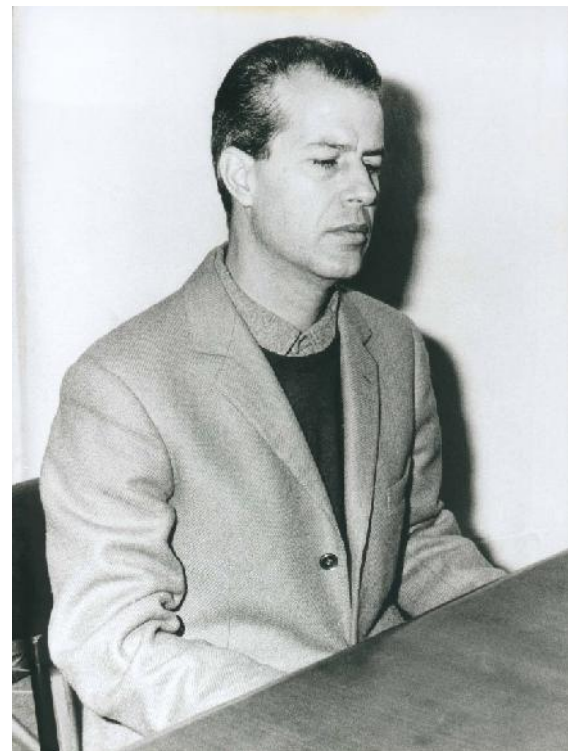
*I am preparing a record of “musica di commento”, some romantic music for RAI 3. Do you want to listen to it?*

*(He turns on the computer and the mixing table, and we hear a nice romantic track, with a typical Italian flavour.) Here, you will hear a real oboe instead. And there, I want to have Edda's voice. She is unique.*

### So, you are still working with her?

*Yes, we are still in contact. Would you like to meet her?*

**Of course I would, this would give me a good subject for my next article. Thank you Maestro.**



[Editor's note]

<sup>51</sup> This probably turned out to be **Trinity Goes East** (1998). Score released in 2000 by Hexacord.