

”Renaissance and rock are periods of spontaneity”

Serge Lang on music (mainly)

So do you come to Bonn every year?

Yes, every year. It’s like writing up history. You know how many years I have come to Bonn? I’ve come here regularly since 1958! So that’s 44 years.

Do you travel to many countries?

Well, I used to go to Paris also to see the French mathematicians. Now it’s basically that I come to Germany, to Bonn.

And you also went to Berlin a couple of weeks ago, is that right?

Yeah, several years now I’ve spent one week in Berlin.

How important is it for you to stay in contact with students in general?

Well, if it wasn’t important I wouldn’t be talking to you! Don’t forget to put that in your interview!

Your book ”Algebra” is very popular with students, not just here. What does it feel like to have your book standing inside the homes of so many students? Is it flattering or just the way it is?

[laughs] It’s the way it is!

What other interests do you have? Do you like music, films...

Well, I used to do a lot of music. I played piano and Lute. But now for about 20 years I haven’t done any music and I do troublemaking. [see book ”Challenges”]

But do you still listen to music?

Not much.

What kind? Classical?

Okay. So let’s go into that. You know about the Beatles?

Of course.

You know Cat Stevens?

Yes.

You know ”My Lady d’Arbanville?”

Yes.

So what song is ”My Lady d’Arbanville?”

It’s a love song.

But what’s the style of the music? It’s not Bach, it’s not Beethoven, it’s not Mozart!

It’s pop music.

Ooooooh! First, the title suggests the French Renaissance. The first twenty seconds it's completely ambiguous about the century where really you wonder where is it gonna go the rock beat or the straight renaissance song. And then it slides into the rock beat which is a beautiful moment. But it still keeps something, some elements of that renaissance music. And "My Lady d'Arbanville" is not the only example! Do you know "Ding Dong the Witch is Dead"?

It's from the film "The Wizard of Oz".

It's from the film, but there is a 45 recording, a single, in 1969 by a group called "The Fifth Estate" which is nondescript, it's nothing, with one exception, "Ding Dong the Witch is Dead". And what do they do? Try to get the record! They rock up the song a little bit which is okay and then they put in an instrumental part between the vocals. They alternate the vocals with the instrumental part. That instrumental part is lifted from one of the dances of Terpsichore composed by Praetorius in 1612!

Wow.

So Praetorius hit the Top 10 in 1969! And you see, the Beatles... take Penny Lane. You have the trumpet part. That trumpet part is in the style of Renaissance trumpet! And it's of course very well played! And you know who plays the trumpet in Penny Lane? The first trumpeter of the London Symphonic Orchestra! So I've given you examples now. But what happened in that decade from "I wanna hold your hand" to Cat Stevens, from '62 to '72/'73 is that in the rock period... now rock goes from acid rock to very lyrical rock like The Beatles, Cat Stevens and The Rolling Stones, well, a few pieces of them are very lyrical like...

Wild Horses?

Well, there are a couple of very lyrical songs. But if you get to the very lyrical part of rock, so The Beatles, Cat Steven and this piece "Ding Dong" with Praetorius they rediscover ways of conceiving and composing music which were prevalent in the Renaissance period and which were absent, mostly absent, from the classical period. So they jump over two or three centuries to do something which was prevalent, say, in the Shakespeare period, 1600 and in France one and a half centuries earlier because the Renaissance moves up from Italy so it takes 150 years to reach England and northern Germany and then it stops. And this lyrical part of the rock period rediscovered this way of conceiving music. And so one can verbalise the analogies. Of course, the ultimate test is through the ears, durch die Ohren! Entweder etwas ist schön oder... one can verbalise. And I can make a presentation but I need records.

That would be a good idea for next year!

Well, but I need the records, it's not so easy, I cannot play that myself. Now, the music, first, is rooted in dance music in both periods.

Lots of influences come from dance music.

Yes, but not universally so. Most symphonies, Mozart symphonies are not really rooted in dance music! Or a Brahms symphony. They give the appearance of spontaneity. Well,

St. Matthew's passion is a great piece of music but it does not give the appearance of spontaneity.

No, it sounds very constructed.

Very constructed. I mean, it's wonderfully constructed but it's constructed whereas those periods, Renaissance and rock are periods of spontaneity. If you take syncopation, the accent on the second beat, it's a natural rhythm in the Renaissance and rock but it's only for sporadic effect in the classical period. It exist, but only occasionally in the very rare effect whereas in the renaissance and rock it's standard all the way through. In one period Renaissance you have the Lute and the guitar in the rock period. So one can go on, verbalise similarities between the two periods. You see, I can play records for one hour where I alternate a piece composed in the decade '62-'72 and a piece composed in the Renaissance period like 1600 or 1500 or 1400 in Italy or France. And the extraordinary thing is, this alternation by three or more centuries, the pieces don't go against each other. One cannot say that one is better music than the other.

But that is very subjective as well.

No, not really! If you had a random audience... ask 30 people to come from your friends! I've done it! This will be their reaction! But the conservatories, the music schools, they never tell you this, these analogies between the lyrical rock and the Renaissance period. Because it jumps over the classical period. And so on the square up there, they play Bach and Mozart sometimes and they also play Jazz and some rock sometimes but they don't play Renaissance.

That's really neglected then.

That's bad.

A scandal.

So you should give them a hard time and tell them to play Renaissance.

We should make it a little more popular here.

Well, you see, for the Praetorius, you can buy the record "Ding Dong" by The Fifth Estate but you also want a recording of the original Praetorius by a group of musicians who have gone through conservatories. That exists, there are several recordings, but they're no good because they play this like dead music. But there is one fantastically good recording on the Archive collection, Archive Records. Or, this another one called "Golden Hits from 1600". So it's the Bourée from the dances of Terpishcore so you get these two Archive recordings, one or the other, and you get The Fifth Estate "Ding Dong the Witch is Dead" and you play them one after the other. And then you will understand.

So we now learn that music scientists should never treat music as dead, no matter how old it is.

I don't know, I didn't speak in big time generalities, I don't like big time generalities, I speak of the very concrete situation; the similarities between Renaissance and rock and Praetorius hitting the Top 10 in 1969. I didn't draw any generalisations of what they

should do or not do. I told you what they do do and what they don't do. And what I suggest is you getting those records of Praetorius on the Archive recording of the Bourée and "Ding Dong the Witch is Dead" and listen to them side by side. And the composers of the rock period knew that their antecedants were of the Renaissance period because they give hints, they quote it in their own words. I mean, "My Lady d'Arbanville" is a title that refers directly to the French Renaissance. The trumped in Penny Lane, it's obvious, it's the same style as the Renaissance trumpet. The Beatles quote "Green Sleeves" in "All You Need Is Love" so they quote these antecedants. So they tell you "we know what our musical ancestors are! It's not the classical period, it's those people from the Renaissance!"

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