



The Modern Jazz Quartet Plays No Sun in Venice

Original Film Score by John Lewis



october

5.30 am - a cold wind across the podium then the charnel of the early morning meat market. A tall man in a puffer against a classical column howling like a banshee. I step over a urine stream. I'm excited - I'm on my way to Venice...!

Way back when I was almost an architect - I'd at least heard of James Stirling, but not been sufficiently aware to know the music of John Lewis and the Modern Jazz Quartet - least of all to envisage how a casual introduction to high architecture, modern jazz and *'La Serenissima'* could lead to the timing of my life by a pendular rhythm of pilgrimages.

The narrow stair to the lecture room in Liverpool had echoed with the painfully haunting echo of Milt Jackson's vibes. *'Cortege'* from Roger Vadim's *'Sait-on jamais'* re-christened *'No sun in Venice'*, remains as powerful an evocation of this seacity of the eastern 'edge' as does Mahler's adagietto to Visconti's *'Death in Venice'* masterpiece. Only after Stirling and Gowan's seminal talk introducing the architecture of the then largely unknown Louis Kahn, did I seek out the origin of the music, and become obsessed with the word pictures contained in Italo Calvino's evocative *'Invisible Cities'*.

But behind all the excitement of our arrival there lurked a worry hopefully not to become a personal premonition. There are many films and books about Venice and all seem to cast a shadow over the magic of the place. Maybe like the great literary tragedies it's just too beautiful a city to survive drowning in a sea of tourists, salt water and pollution.

Films like Franco Bruscati's *'Dimenticare Venezia'* (forget Venice) or Nicholas Roeg's disturbing *'Don't Look Now'* seem part of a psyche which needs to accept the inevitable.

So we head directly to Carlo Scarpa's school of architecture gate and then sit down for wine and pasta. I've been in the bookshop trying to explain that on my 50th birthday friends and students had given me a nine coloured square poster by Belgian artist Jo Delahaut which then became an emblem for a risky new architectural venture now established, but always (in my mind) connected with the 'city of masks, boats, bridges and canals'. We are happy - there is comradeship and we move on towards our destination, the 2018 Venice Biennale.

After San Giorgio and Tadao Ando's Punta Della Dogana we are lost in contemplation - confused by direction.

We stop by the little bar on the alley that leads past the Guggenheim to Santa Maria della Salute. This is where I celebrated my half century birthday, The Guggenheim is closed, but even that expresses the sadness of the unfinished Palazzo Venier - site of a 1980 student/artist collaboration involving the idea of a hologram of Shakespeare's Ophelia lying still under the water - the model taken overland from Liverpool to the Biennale in a Citroen hearse....

The barista brings out prosecco and we toast re-living events. The next day, in the Giardini, I find a less celebratory meaning hiding behind a veneer of jostling tourists with iPhone cameras - the boat stages creaking with their weight.

All the life and perpetual movement that has been this city for more than a thousand years ironically heralds the inevitability of change. The poetry of sunset, tides and the rising sea will inevitably lead to a 'Cortege' for the city itself.

The music of the MJQ will then outlast Venice - eerily supplanting architectural history with reflective echoes...

But the Venice Biennale is what we're here to see - arguably the world's foremost two yearly art and architecture show with it's collection of permanent national pavilions set in the 'Giardini' alongside the lagoon and looking towards the Lido. It's theme this year has been set by RIBA gold medalists Grafton Architects; 'Freespace' concentrates on architecture's ability to contribute to collective harmony through the design and use of public spaces. A fascinating show that I am privileged to enjoy on an all too brief Venetian afternoon.

But finding that the GB pavilion consisting of nothing but empty rooms certainly stops me short... a white ghost of an interior; freespace yes, but on this sunny afternoon having just been around the excellent Italian show, 'Gran Bretagna' seems lonely, languishing totally without life, as if its inhabitants have fled some kind of tsunami or hurricane.

Climbing the high scaffold to the large flat roof and finding a small tea stall chills me further... I realise that here is a statement meant to portray our own island symbolically sinking. A metaphor made more intense by the plight of Venice itself - a city whose future lies beneath the waves...

For me our pavilion is an analogy for the bankrupt ideology of BREXIT. A subtle creation by architects who knew exactly

what kind of impact such an enigmatic installation would have on a world audience. Architecture is a powerful medium never to be underestimated...

Later in London, an empty last train brings me to where I started, tired and a little sad. Retracing my steps I find no meat market detritus, no wailing man - just empty buildings and streets. London is a city of all nationalities and cultures, with many fine freespaces. It remains apart from the nihilistic vagaries of 'Gran Bretagna's' current political chaos.

A seminar held by The British Council after my return confirmed the diagnosis. A sophisticated idea - GB sinks, but also 'freespace' is provided for whatever activity might be appropriate. Unfortunately when I visited nothing was happening - apart from mugs of tea on the 'Roof with a view'.

So our expedition was over - my introduction to Venice over 50 years ago having been by virtue of two young architects' choice of filmic music which infused my architectural persona with the kind of intensive almost painful nostalgia that fixes such places permanently in the memory.

Italo Calvino's invisible city - keeping watch over the ceaseless movement of vaporette against the white silhouettes of churches and palazzios.

And the oddly discordant clanging of bells ringing backwards in time - calling believers to Mass.....

*Memories have huge staying
power, but like dreams, they
thrive in the dark, surviving for
decades in the deep waters of
our minds like shipwrecks on
the seabed.*

J.G. Ballard



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