

Bologna

Bologna holds a special place in my recollections of the Prix Italia. It was not just the Black Madonna, the beautiful town squares, the enjoyable dinners held by either the Brits or our German friends. Often, it was the small things.

I remember sitting in the central square, having coffee, the fuel that kept the festival going. Carlo Sartori, his swooping 'Si-i-i-i' the theme that echoed through so many conversations, would say: 'Would you like a shot?' I guess it was an Americanism he had picked up in one of his favourite locations, New York.



Prix Italia Honorary President Jim Graham and Secretary General Carlo Sartori celebrating the Bologna Festival

I was sitting with my wife, Annie, in Bologna's principal square in, the year 2000, when a young man we both knew from the BBC came up and joined us. It was Mark Thompson, always eager to know what was happening. What programmes had we seen? What was

outstanding? What did we think of the BBC entries? Mark was to go on to become DG and after that, take charge at the august 'New York Times. Such encounters were one of the rewards of attending the Prix Italia, a little broadcasting history among the swirling coffee.



Bologna's enchanting main square - Piazza-Maggiore

There was a splendid hotel, whose name escapes me. We made sure Steve Morrison, managing director of Granada, one of ITV's original companies, a good friend and an engaging one, stayed there. His support was hugely helpful when I became President and for many years after. I preferred a small, hotel not far from the square which Luciano Pinelli had fixed, because he knew I liked to live 'above the shop', close to the festival centre and enjoyed smaller, more personal places. It was called Il Capello Rosso, as I remember: the cardinal's Red Hat.

One would sometimes hear the phrase Bologna Rosso, a reference to the left-wing government in the historic city. Granarolo, the milk products company, were there. They ran their own television awards and, for some years, contributed handsomely to Prix Italia funds, thanks to a deal struck by Carlo Sartori. It was an impressive organisation, but the awards were not televised and the relationship faded when Carlo moved on.

My wife and I attended one year, as did Ursula von Zallinger, to show solidarity. It was the year Granarolo invited one of the mothers who had lost a child in the terrorist attack at Beslan. She told us the family lived in a block overlooking the school where terrorists were holding several hundred children. It was the time of the war in Chechnya.

The mother said she saw the security forces firing before they reached the school windows to check who they might hit. One of her children died in the rescue. She spoke out about this later, in essence saying one could not beat terrorists by behaving like terrorists. A profound thought, clearly from the heart.

I understand the fact that her views were beginning to gain support was not welcomed by the authorities and she did not make an appearance on television. So Bologna invited her so that she could speak out. Someone had commissioned a metal sculpture. Shaped like a small tree, it depicted the mothers with their arms outstretched like branches and with angels above, their dead children ascending to Heaven.



The Tree of Grief: Memorial to the 2004 Beslan School Siege Massacre

Maybe it has always been like that. Maybe it always will be. But what is important is that there are organisations, like the Prix Italia, which keep the light of honourable behaviour alive, its programme entries frequently drawing attention to the eternal decency to be found in mankind, no matter how people are treated.

But fundamental emotions, like seeds buried for years, can survive and show signs of life generations after events. It happened one day in a public debate in Bologna.

The Prix Italia always maintained good relations with the universities in the cities where it was being held. Bologna was an outstanding example. Carlo Sartori was a professor at the University of Rome, known for his books on Quality Television. I accompanied him when we met the Rector, who I discovered, held the courtesy title 'Il Magnifico!

A debate was set up involving Umberto Eco, professor at Bologna and, if memory serves, Laurent Beria, who had devised 'music concret', with others taking part. One of the questions put to the panel before an invited audience at the university, was 'what was the outstanding radio broadcast, in your recollection?' It was about that time that we had celebrated the 100th anniversary of Marconi's first signal, at the original studio

The Prix Italia put out a memorable CD, to mark the occasion, 'One Hundred Years of Radio', so the question was pertinent and contemporary. It was the response of the audience that struck those deep chords of European history once again.

Umberto Eco said a Christmas broadcast by the Germans, early in the war, had seemed to him, an outstanding technical achievement. It had linked German forces outside Leningrad with submarine crews in the Atlantic and soldiers in the Western Desert. Simply to have achieved this marked an historic stage in the development of radio, in the Nineteen Forties, well before the development of television, when radio was the principal means of communication. At that, half a dozen people stood up. I could not make out the Italian comments but there was no doubt about the intensity of their objections, for a number walked out.



Italian Semiotician, Essayist, Philosopher, Literary Critic and Novelist Umberto Eco

No matter how much one might plead the case that this was an academic comment, in a discussion in a university, human emotions run deep, as they must do in so much that is locked into the radio and television programmes entered, year after year, in the Prix Italia. These programmes are a reflection of the world we live in. It is an ever-changing world. Since that time, there have been many programmes that have shown the process of reconciliation that are the hope for the future.

There is one example. I was a relatively young journalist when I accompanied a reporter from The BBC's Panorama programme as we walked through one of the more notorious streets in Belfast when I first felt the crunch of broken glass under my feet, as The Troubles began. There was a stream of programmes on Northern Ireland for some years at the Prix Italia. I sometimes wondered at the ability of international juries to unravel the complexities of the situation but they did.

I am not the only one who could never have imagined then, that I would one day see the Revd Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams, polar opposites during those terrible times, sharing a joke, in government.

That debate, in Bologna, brought the tensions of history to the fore. I marvel that documentary juries, each year, assess and overcome the stresses of history, politics and emotions, to reach rational judgements. But year after year, that is their achievement: that is the hallmark of the Prix Italia.

James Graham, Hon President.