

## **Prix Italia - The Thomson Years**

The first starburst lit the air, followed by the crack of yet another rocket until the sky above the rocks across the narrow strip of sea on Capri was aglow. It was the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of Lord Thomson of Monifieth. A thoughtful PR man from Yorkshire Television, Geoff Brownlee, had clambered over the grey rocks to ensure that the birthday of the Chairman of the Independent Broadcasting Authority, responsible for the ITV licences in Britain, did not go unmarked.



**Lord Thomson of Monifieth**  
**President of Prix Italia 1989, 1990**

It was 1988, the height of British participation in the Prix Italia, as the year of TV licence applications approached. Seventy marked the customary retirement age for people in public office in Britain. For Lord Thomson, it was just the beginning of his impact on the international festival he so enjoyed. It was, indeed, the support given by the IBA that drew the attendance of so many senior British figures in ITV, often matching those of the public service BBC. In some ways, at that time, the Prix Italia was the late-summer gathering point for top British broadcasters, especially those keen to demonstrate their support for the public service broadcasting ethic which the IBA imposed with vigour on the commercially-funded channels.

The lightweight suits of the controlling influences of ITV could be spotted in the narrow streets of Capri, or on the boat rides to the Blue Grotto and other places of interest. My abiding memory is not of the VIPs but of Grace Thomson – Lady Thomson – swimming serenely in the pool at the principal hotel on Capri, head never touching the water, in so many ways, her demeanour the epitome of her Christian name.

We watched and discussed the programmes simultaneously with the juries, for that was the practise at that time. There seemed more leisure then, although people were often busy. But it was a time before the internet and there was no stream of messages demanding instant response. Was it a better time? That question should be left to history. Let's just say it was different. But in that era, people felt it was perfectly acceptable to gather at the Prix Italia, learn what the rest of the broadcasting world was thinking, and return refreshed and informed.

The 2008 economic crash was two decades ahead, when the collapse of budgets- not the drifting down of sparks from a fireworks display- would dictate social attitudes, to a point where it would make headlines if a BBC or ITV group was considered, by the rest of the media, to be too large for overseas party-going, especially, in the BBC's case, on licence fee.

Unless one lived through it, it might be difficult now to appreciate that the world was still recovering from various conflicts, 'hot' wars or 'Cold'. The importance of international gatherings, especially in the case of the Prix Italia, which never allowed the Iron Curtain to disrupt its range of attendance, was professionally accepted. That is an important point, for it is a significant factor in understanding why the numbers attending the Prix Italia gradually declined from their peak.

Phrases like 'the world's principal broadcasting festival', the one where one had to be seen, were of their time, a time that has slipped into history, like the finned American cars, or bankers in black jackets and pin-striped trouser, who had never seen a computer.

### **Embracing the New**

What we must recognise is that the Prix Italia has successfully transformed itself, remained true to its original concepts, but has learned to embrace the

new and be part of the astonishing digital world that, in the early days, was beyond our imagination. In that transformation, we have learned to live with the fact that the Americans have developed their own, national festivals, Natpe, The Emmys, Banff and the rest; as the bankers had their lessons to learn.

One other factor was at work, in ensuring the Prix Italia retained its values. Lord Thomson of Monifieth, former member of Britain's Labour government, then European Commissioner, was to become President of the Prix Italia. He fitted the appointment like a hand in a glove, for he was intensely proud of a Scottish up-bringing founded on integrity and proper behaviour. Indeed, he at one time headed the UK Parliament's Committee on Standards of behaviour.

I remember now, Michael Johnstone, the long-serving BBC delegate, and I wondering whether we dare suggest to the Secretary General, Pier Giorgio Branzi, that he consider recommending to Rai the appointment of Lord Thomson, who was approaching retirement from the IBA, fearing a rebuff from such a mighty figure in UK broadcasting. We need never have demurred. George Thomson loved the international broadcasting world. (The formal process, of course, required the approval of Rai, who would present their decision to the General Assembly. But it all began with a pondering over names).

## **Venice**

Venice was our winter resort. It was usually February, when the delegates would gather at Palazzo Labia, on the Grand Canal. Year after year, Michael Johnstone and I would attend the theatre, La Fenice, as I recall, to see a repeat of the same opera, Wolf Ferarri's 'Four Seasons'. By the third occasion, it had become a little tedious. I solemnly declare now, that neither Michael Johnstone nor I were responsible for the fire that, tragically, burned it down. Even in the years before the theatre was splendidly rebuilt, Venice, on its magical lagoon, was its own theatre, as the world knows.



## Prix Italia Venice 2006

One occasion comes vividly to mind. I was about to enter the conference chamber, with its remarkable Tiepolo ceiling, when I saw a young woman, leaning against a wall, obviously upset. She was Pilar Miro, Director General of Spanish Television, who was about to chair the Winter Assembly. We took our seats and waited and nothing seemed to be happening. Presently, one of the Secretariat approached and asked if I would, temporarily, take the chair? I was astounded. Words of protest were forming in my mind, then I thought: no, I must do my duty, since it seems I am trusted to do so. It was not an easy meeting. I remember, seeing agreement would be hard to come by, calling a lengthy coffee break, so that we could sort things out. Somehow, we got through it.

There had been a problem in Madrid. Pila Miro feared she could not go ahead with chairing the meeting, since she felt that, in the longer term, she would be unable to fulfil her duties as President. That, unfortunately, is how it worked out.

It was into this sophisticated but diverse world, of often large variations of opinion, that Lord Thomson was later to burst upon the scene. He was the European Commissioner incarnate. Thoroughly at home with the international scene, he skipped masterfully through difficult areas and brought the meeting to an early close. Actually, it gave us all time to take a walk through the canal-side streets, savour one of Europe's most ethereal cities, in the winter mist off the sea, before dinner with our new President, thoroughly relishing the checked table-cloth and red wine of the era.

## Palermo

Lord Thomson was President in Palermo, in 1990. How different the atmosphere then. It was the year the 17 ITV companies in Britain had to re-apply for their licences. The government, under Margaret Thatcher, had decided to wind down the IBA and replace it with a 'lighter touch' Independent Television Commission, under Sir George Russell. Both regulators attended the Prix Italia that year.

Once more, the planes were laden with ITV executives. There was much at stake. The licences were this time to be auctioned, a disturbing departure for those concerned. No one was really sure how it would work. Sir George had persuaded Mrs Thatcher to insert a clause allowing the ITC to make a 'quality judgement'. It was a lifeline, so impressing the authorities with 'quality' credentials, such as attending the Prix Italia, was a must.

On the plane in which I flew out was Richard Dunn, the handsome, Icelandic CEO of ITV's principal company, Thames. The two Georges, Lord Thomson and Sir George, arranged dinner for the UK representatives. I remember taking a hand in the process, as ITV delegate, then, dutifully, sitting at the foot of the long table, at the opposite end to the hosts.

Richard Dunn entered the room. He moved, naturally, towards the top table, only to see the two hosts signalling him away, lest his presence next to those who could decide his company's future, could be misinterpreted. It was Lord Thomson at his most prudent. I pulled out a chair beside me and welcomed Richard, thoughts of the future racing through my head. (In the event, Thames lost its franchise. Not long afterwards, Richard died at an early age).

The drama played out throughout the week. I think there were at least four Heads of Corporate Affairs, from ITV. There was no lack of social occasions. The following year, in Urbino in 1991, the licences having been awarded and many of those who had attended the previous year, casualties of the franchise round, there were large stretches of empty chairs, where the ITV contingent had been. Bruce Christensen, the amiable head of PBS, in Washington, had taken over from Lord Thomson, as President. It was lonely being ITV delegate at that time.

But the Thomson Years did not end there. There was more to follow.

## Seeking a President

I was sitting in a street café in Rome, with Carlo Sartori, undoubtedly the most memorable of the Prix Italia Secretary Generals, now sadly passed away. Frank Freiling, of ZDF, polished, sophisticated, thoroughly at home in international relations, was approaching the end of his Presidency. Who could we recommend to take over? The job of representing the international delegates, working in harmony with the Secretary General, conscious of the influence of Rai, the Italian State broadcaster who sponsored the festival, called for leadership qualities, allied to a well-tuned sense of diplomacy.

I remember offering a bench-mark to Carlo Sartori: that the President of the Prix Italia must be someone who could address their country's Minister of Broadcasting by their first name. I had watched Frank Freiling do it, at a gathering of Ministers of Culture, which took place alongside the Prix Italia, in Sicily. (I was fortunate in knowing the UK Minister, Lord McIntosh, whose wife was a Channel 4 commissioner; while Mrs Thatcher's Secretary of State for Culture and the Media, Lord Inglewood, was a neighbour in Northern England.)

We pondered. I suggested Caroline Thomson, Chief Operating Officer of the BBC, daughter of Lord Thomson, someone who had worked at Channel Four, gaining a knowledge of both sides of broadcasting. Carlo shook his head, somewhat wanly. The name had come up in discrete conversations among those attending EBU meetings, the sort of place that served as an unofficial consulting ground. It was an excellent idea but the consensus was that she would be far too busy. Dedicated to the BBC, a potential DG, working at the heart of the corporation, she would never have time.

I agreed with the description but demurred at the conclusion. She would make time! 'Well', said Carlo. 'You could try, since you know her'. Mobile phones were still something of a novelty at that time, in 2004. I recall stepping aside, away from the noise of the Roman traffic and managed to get through to Caroline straight away. We had known each other many years, for I had received enormous help from her father and mother when I had been President; and Caroline and I had worked together in the BBC. I guess it was the weight of history that swung the decision. Did I appreciate how busy she was? Yes; but we'd find ways to help. A pause, then firmly: if asked, she would do it.



**Caroline Thomson**  
**President of Prix Italia 2005, 2006, 2007**

I turned back to Carlo, the tiny coffee cup empty, a moment of expectancy. 'She'll do it', I said. He smiled. I could sense what he was thinking, for we had discussed the British temperament many times before. 'These Brits. You never can tell when duty calls!' He was right. It was to be the first time a daughter had followed her father as President of the Prix Italia.

## **Milan**

Caroline took office in Milan, in 2005, and was President in Venice and Verona, remarkable years. Carlo Sartori, always full of vigour, bright ideas and bonhomie, had moved on to a senior appointment. Alessandro Feroldi, the new Secretary General, welcomed us to his home city, Milan, where his family was well-connected to the city's ruling elite.

The Prix Italia took place in an amazing cooling tower, part of a former factory estate, which had been converted into offices, with a large open space at its base. It was not the only surprise.

Alessandro Feroldi had arranged for a group of dancers to provide a welcoming performance, setting the scene for a cultural occasion. The figures danced off the stage and moved towards the audience. In a trice, there was one more dancer! Caroline found herself swept off her feet and into the movement of the dance. It is an incredible tribute to her quick-witted adjustment, not to mention sang froide, that she took up the dance beat without a moment's hesitation. It is a scene etched in my memory. How prescient! How could we



have known then, that she was one day to be appointed Executive Chair of the English National Ballet?



**Carlisle Cathedral: UK Hon Presidents of the Prix Italia Caroline Thomson and Jim Graham, Hon Fellows of their home university, the University of Cumbria.**

We began to recognise Milan's position as a northern power house, personified, perhaps, by the presence of La Scala, whose voice - as with the city - could be heard across the world. It reminded me of London, in some ways. I presume, as such, there might be the odd tension with Rome. Alessandro always kept in close touch, even though that led to some interesting phone calls. Since I live in the Canadian Rockies, near Vancouver, half my time, we had a nine-hour time gap with Italy. I never asked who was calling, when the phone rang in the middle of the night. 'Si Alessandro?' But the calls were always welcome and we, with Caroline, enjoyed our time together, although within a year he too was offered another post, in his beloved Milan.

As with a change of monarch, a new era inevitably opens up when there is a new Secretary General. I met Guido Paglia at Rai headquarters in Rome, when he was appointed. Outgoing, impeccably suited, he reminded me of the senior sales figures who, in a sense, paid my wages in ITV. It was consequently a



convivial meeting but I wondered whether he would want to get as close to programmes as others in the post? In the event, an old friend appeared on the scene.

Pier Luigi Malesani knew everyone. Immensely experienced, he understood the Prix Italia instinctively and he and Guido Paglia arranged to make it work together. I could see immediately that he and Caroline would make an excellent team. It was 2006 and that year, under Pier Luigi's guidance, the Prix Italia turned towards its old venue. We were to go to Venice.

## **Venice Once More**

Who would not want to go to Venice? When the announcement was made, there was a palpable buzz and, as the telephones rang and messages flew, anticipation grew higher. It was where Lord Thomson had first held court in one of the multitude of restaurants in the narrow canal-side streets leading off San Marco. It was where his smiling daughter was now to welcome delegates and jurors in what felt like a return home.

For me, it breathed on the embers of so many memories: Prix Italia lunches on the islands in the lagoon. One instance I recall. I had to leave early to catch a plane back to London. A tall, blonde Scandinavian lady shared the boat. I was concerned about the possibility of a company take-over. She was concerned about the possibility of a take-over of the Baltic states bordering on what was, at that time, an unstable Russia. Both fears were, in the end, unfounded.

It was the image that struck me: her hair blowing back in the slipstream over the windscreen, a classic image of haste towards some crisis. And I thought: we can never completely disassociate the Prix Italia from the history of Europe, which is its home; and we must always remember that, bringing people together, learning about each other, directly and through our programmes, we are part of a unifying force, a force for good.

There was a sense of renewal in the converted Post Office building that Pier Luigi had secured as the venue that year. I joined a group for coffee, inside the mellow stone walls. Someone said: 'This is how it should be.' It seemed we were back in the old days. I understood. But at the same time, I was aware how the world had changed, in technology and in the economics of

broadcasting. Things would never be quite the same. There had been a point, before the decision on Venice, when Pier Luigi had phoned me to say, memorably, that we were 'the last Japanese soldiers on the island!' Nonetheless, our friends rallied round. There was more good news to come.

## **Verona**

After the triumph of Venice, Pier Luigi arranged for the following year's festival to be held in Verona, the beautiful city where he was personally well-known and influential. It was also near where he was born. It was 2007. Prix Italia delegates were once again to walk across the wide square, next to the Roman amphitheatre, home to stunning open air operas, to the city council building where we had been invited to conduct events.

Ursula von Zallinger, longest-serving of the delegates and former Director of the Prix Jeunesse, was faultless in selecting social venues, along with Frank Freiling, making an influential and engaging German team. They soon identified the best restaurant, facing the square, with a large, well-appointed dining room. That was where a number of old friends were to have dinner, celebrating the fact that we were all together again.

The dark clouds of the economic storm might be brewing on the horizon but it had not yet arrived and we were in buoyant mood. I cite one dinner of many, over the long years. I remember Richard Hooper, former head of the Radio Authority in Britain, and his author wife, my own wife, Annie – a long-time Prix Italia supporter – Caroline and Sue Lynas, of the BBC, as well as Pier Luigi, and Louis Heinsman, NOS; and so many more, whose indulgence I beg if I do not remember all the names. It was how we kept together. How the jurors, delegates and contributors from distant parts of the world became a family.

We thanked Pier Luigi who, as a son of Verona, could seemingly wave a magic wand, for he had arranged for the wine-maker, Tomassi, to offer a tour and dinner, in the next few days, to the Prix Italia. The wine was superb. As Mr Tomassi toured the tables I complimented him on the excellent vintage and, jokingly, said the only place I knew that could match it, was the Okenagan vineyards near Vancouver, which I had visited shortly before flying out to Italy. 'Don't worry', he said teasingly. 'I have also just flown back. We supply the best

wines in Vancouver!' I accepted the admonition but the interplay endorsed, once again, the enduring international reach of the Prix Italia.

The Thomson Years came to a close, only in a formal sense, when Caroline completed her three years in office. As with all good series, the last sentence must say 'more to follow'.

**James Graham OBE DL**

**Hon President, Prix Italia. 2015**