

A Royal Farewell

The chimes of Big Ben, the giant clock overlooking the River Thames and the Houses of Parliament, is probably the best-known sound in Britain. Its chimes – slightly off key – have been heard by generations listening to BBC radio and later ITN's News at Ten. It is the iconic sound of London and reflects the ancient traditions of the Palace of Westminster, which accommodates the two Houses of Parliament. Palace it may be but, among the traditions there is one which requires the Monarch to send a messenger, Black Rod, to knock on the door for permission to enter

Big Ben was chiming when the members of the Prix Italia Winter Assembly, in effect the festival's parliament, arrived at the entrance. They had been invited to hold their annual meeting in London by Caroline Thomson, then President, and Chief Operating Officer of the BBC. The dinner had been arranged by Lord Thomson of Monifieth, Caroline's father, himself a former President, the only father and daughter to have held the office.



“Big Ben was chiming when the members of the Prix Italia Winter Assembly, in effect the Festival's parliament, arrived at the entrance”

I arrived by taxi with Frank Freiling, of ZDF, whose colleague, Ursula von Zallinger, was to become the focus of the evening, on her retirement as Director of the Prix Jeunesse, the international broadcasting festival for young people, which she had nurtured and developed to global dimensions. It was 3 February 2006.

Ursula was the longest-serving delegate of the Prix Italia, her memory of the competition stretching back some 40 years. She was one of the few who could recall the days when Charles Curran, Director General of the BBC, undertook to act as the first President, helping to intertwine the BBC's history with that of the Prix Italia, which it had always staunchly supported. How could we let the opportunity go, to say farewell to someone who had, in her own way, come to be regarded as 'queen' of the international broadcasting community?

The delegates filed in. I recall Sir George Russell, chairman of the government broadcasting regulator, the Independent Television Commission, Pier Luigi Malesani, a senior RAI official who was to take the post of Secretary General of the Prix Italia, Louis Heinsman, of the Dutch broadcasting service, NOS, along with colleagues from Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland, others from France, Spain, Poland and a host of European countries. I was given the privilege of proposing the delegates' thanks to Ursula for her achievements in the broadcasting world, a world which, for her, had stretched from Shanghai to New York. It was in New York that I remember joining her, accompanied by another former President, Bruce Christensen of PBS, as she conducted a session at the Goethe Institute. Headly days!



Countess Ursula von Zallinger

I felt them all come flooding back as I did my best to sum up an outstanding individual contribution to the festival world, at Prix Jeunesse and the Prix Italia, where her elfin smile and command of languages made her an enviable dinner companion at many a Prix Italia function. But would a summary be sufficient to represent an historic evening in the annals of the Prix Italia? I perused the speeches again, which Uli had thoughtfully kept, a small illustration of her administrative skills. It did not take long to come to the conclusion that, by reproducing the speeches, we might recapture something of the atmosphere, in the ancient building that houses the Mother of Parliaments. We might also re-open, verbatim, an enlightening page of Prix Italia history.

James Graham, Hon President, Prix Italia,

Lord Thomson, Caroline, my good friends. How do you say farewell to a lady? Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns, suggested with 'Aye fond kiss'. Perhaps not here although, to judge from the British press, political dalliances are not unknown in this place! To stay with the political theme, Robert Menzies, Canada's wartime Prime Minister, was so overwhelmed when our young Queen ascended to the throne, in 1953, that he used the quotation: 'I did but see her passing by and yet I love her till I die'.

Ursula von Zallinger passing by? How often have I observed her, always elegant in black and superbly composed, in the canyons of Manhattan, in London, in Rome; down tiny cobbled streets in Assisi, or the narrow canal sides of Venice in the ghostly light of winter, as I recall now, to an unforgettable supper hosted by Lord Thomson during his Presidency. No Prix Italia gathering was ever complete without Ursula, that delightful - if occasionally complex - individual we honour tonight. A personal memory I shall treasure is of a boat trip on Lac Lemman - Lake Geneva if you prefer - with my wife Annie and the distinguished columnist of the 'New York Times', Les Brown, towering over us at some 6ft 4 inches, as Uli has towered over Prix Italia gatherings in her own special way. I said complex but in the most complimentary way.



A visit to the 'Golden Rose' festival, at Montreux, on Lac Lemman. Waving the Prix Italia flag, as it were, are the late Les Brown, Television Correspondent of the 'New York Times', towering over Ursula von Zallinger, former Director of the Prix Jeunesse and longest-serving Prix Italia delegate, James Graham, President, at the rear, and Annie, Graham.

I was introduced to Countess Ursula von Zallinger by Micheal Johnston, of the BBC, more than a quarter of a century ago, and was immediately corrected by Ursula. 'My name is Ursula', she said. It was later I heard her answer to Uli and, I think, from Frank Freiling as 'Sally'! Les Brown? Not the European Oorsula but Ehrsula, New York style.

In her many guises, we have traced the geography of Italy together, etching unfading memories of the companionship the Prix Italia brings to all who attend the festival in that beautiful land. And for that we must offer unalloyed thanks to RAI through their representatives here.

It has been an interesting experience, exotic in some ways. In Perugia, jostling with the Crown Prince of Monaco and Gina Lollobrigida and, it seemed a cast of thousands, for a cellar buffet. In Rome, in 1990, wondering whether the festival would take place, after an impassioned appeal in which Uli played a central role, where we urged RAI to set aside its judicial problems of that time and keep the festival going.

Ursula prompted a letter to RAI from Bruce Christensen, chief executive of PBS in Washington and President of the Prix, expressing our fear that we had not made it sufficiently clear to RAI how much we appreciated what they had done and how important the international community regarded the Prix Italia. It may be that these sentiments hold good today and, if so, perhaps our friends will take that message back to Rome. I have mentioned two names who could not be with us tonight. Both Bruce Christensen and Michael Johnston send their fondest good wishes.

There have been moments of excitement, high drama even. It was Michael Johnston, at Lucca I believe, who fought so hard to prevent the entry of Channel Four, which was to go on to become one of the festival's most prolific prize winners. There was the moment in Palazzo Labia, in Venice, where Pilar Miro, Director General of Spanish Television, stood sobbing in an ante-room because a serious problem in Madrid made her feel she could not chair the Winter Assembly that day. Nor did she. I was asked to step in – and have often suspected Uli to have been behind that move. There have been celebrated battles: Count Zorzi versus Sergio Borelli, whose left wing values caused him to wear a worker's cap in protest. Zorzi was the last descendant of the Doges of Venice; Borelli was the mainstay of CIRCOM. The fact that Lord Birt - John Birt - and I were members hints at our political leanings in those heady days, part of the rich history of the Prix Italia, where the name Ursula von Zallinger runs through like a silver thread.



A moment of celebration. Ursula von Zallinger marks her retirement from the Prix Jeunesse, at a reception in the Palace of Westminster, London, home of the British Parliament, during a visit to London by members of the Prix Italia. She is accompanied by James Graham, Hon President and his wife, Annie.

But there may be one more justification for the term complex. Uli, whose home is in Bavaria, is in fact Austrian and, for reasons that baffle the British, she contends that her Austrian background gives her a special insight into the minds of Italians. Lord Thomson, there are European connotations that we offshore British cannot pe-netrate!

With Frank Freiling, she has been an exemplar of the trustworthy stability and support that are the hallmark of the German delegation. And they threw some wonderful parties! Where was it we climbed a hill, the approaching path lit by candles in the earth, to what seemed like a cave? Assisi, I seem to recall. And there, in the looming dark, I encountered the considerable presence of Dr Albert Scharf, of Bayerischer, Munich and President of the EBU. There can be few who could handle that indo-mitable personality like Ursula.

But, then, she has been charming influential men all her life. Charles Curran of the BBC was one. I think only Uli and I, and perhaps Caroline's father, will remember him. He was President of the Prix Italia in the earliest days and ultimately Director General of the BBC. If you would allow a digression: he once considered firing me as an editor believing, wrongly, I was a 'red under the bed' for my sympathy for the miners' cause in a great strike we had in Britain. I cite that as an illustration of the vulnerability we share in broadcasting, trying to interpret the great issues of the day, that is one of the things that binds us. Uli knows about vulnerability, as budgets came under increasing pressure when she knew there was so much still to be done.

She has been a great friend to the British, co-operating when we held our dinners, always a lively companion at table, whose company was enjoyed by regulators such as Lord Thomson, Sir George Russell or Sir Robin Biggam and last year, Richard Hooper of Ofcom, an admiring friend.

Uli was with us when Piergiorgio Branzi took delegates to meet Pope John Paul at Castelgandolfo; and knew a host of Prix Italia secretary generals and festival directors, from Alvise Zorzi to Alessandro Feroldi, who has been with us most recently and asked me to apologise that a late administrative change prevents him offering you his warmest good wishes in person.

How often have I sought her counsel, as President and more frequently as a fellow-delegate. Her advice was drawn from a deep cultural understanding of Europe and always based on what was good for the Prix Italia and the programme makers whose finest work deserved the highest quality of judgement. The open jury debate is Uli's concept.

I have remarked before: the Prix Italia is a European festival that belongs to the world. Only someone with a profound comprehension of that most European art form, the opera, could comment, at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York: 'You know their stage settings are so wooden'! But then, Countess von Zallinger's father was the great influence behind the calibre of the Munich Opera House for years. Permit me: I flew back from Vancouver a few days ago to find the BBC running a month of Mozart celebrations and was tempted to think: they've discovered Uli is coming to London!

So we piece it together: Austrian, from Germany, with a special relationship with the Italians, opera lover, power behind the throne at the Prix Italia; and above all an outstanding contributor to children's programming on a global scale, as Director of the Prix Jeunesse. It was a post she held for decades, and to which she has added enormous prestige and respect, and from which she retired at New Year. Children's programming the world over owes her a great debt, for she drew attention to it, was committed to it, and enhanced its appeal among nations.



The photograph shows, left to right, the late - and much loved - Carlo Sartori, Prix Italia Secretary General, myself and Ursula von Zallinger, retiring Director Prix Jeunesse, with Roberto Zaccharia, President of Rai, far right. These were key figures at the time of 'A Royal Farewell'.

I have spoken of travels in Italy. Ursula's passport has been embossed at airports across the Americas, Europe and Asia, carrying her ideas, for instance, to the heart of China. She did it with a tiny staff. And carrying an even tinier suitcase. She can pack like a princess in a carry-on bag; and she always turns heads, when she turns up, ever in black. This idea keeps intruding: turns heads.

Just one more recollection: Ursula can spot a poorly turned-down bedsheet in an hotel from 500 metres! Luciano Pinelli, director the Prix Italia when Carlo Sartori was Secretary General, told me, in some dismay: 'Ursula von Zallinger always wants to change hotels'. I feared they might fall out. How wrong I was. There was that little-reported, long railway journey from Bologna to Rome, this slim, attractive, Countess von Zallinger exuding Austrian charm, who stepped on the train with the urbane Dr Pinelli. And who stepped off? Luciano and Uli, lifetime friends!

How many uncountable miles have you flown in the cause of quality programming for the children who are to be the world's future citizens? How many take-offs in the early dawn, or airport approaches in the dark over glittering cities? And now, it comes to rest. A pause, I trust, for there will always be those who will need you and there is no final goodbye for good people.

You have given so much to broadcasting across four continents and so much to the Prix Italia that you have, and deserve, countless lifetime friends. Thank you, not just for what you have achieved, but for what you are: one who, in the very essence, brought a confidence and the lilting charm of Austria to every group that was uplifted by it.

So au revoir, Ursula, but not adieu. The stage would be empty without you.

Ursula von Zallinger

Lord Thomson, Caroline, friends.

La sola ragione per la mia lunga vita con il Premio Italia era la mia ambizione di amigliorare il mio Italiano... For those who still struggle a little with their Italian, the rough translation for this is that only because I wanted to improve my Italian have I spent so many years with PRIX ITALIA.

The truth, of course, lies somewhere totally different: When my festival, the PRIX JEUNESSE, was launched 40 years ago, PRIX ITALIA already could look back to a sound career as the outstanding and prestigious Radio and TV Festival. It served as a model not only for PRIX JEUNESSE but for many other festivals around the globe.

When asked by ARD's top executives to represent ARD-TV in the PRIX ITALIA Working Group, I was more than honoured. At the start of my new side-job career, Gert Haedeke and Hans Kimmel from ARD and ZDF were the ones to take the floor. These two experts designed the role of the two German telecasters in a most constructive and diplomatic way. For me it was to slowly but steadily grow into my role which meant – at least for quite a while – to keep my mouth shut and listen carefully.

I have met them all, the PRIX ITALIA Secretaries General, starting with il Conte Zaffrani who also was a board-member of PRIX JEUNESSE. Later on it was il Conte Zorzi and his "Peppone" Sergio Borelli who actually was the one to develop the never-ending jury-calendar. I worked very closely with il professore Carlo Sartori who gave PRIX ITALIA a very special colour during the turn of the century period.

With PRIX ITALIA we went up and down and East and West in Italy. If I know this country better than any other, it's because we were not only confined to meeting rooms but taken around to unique monuments, churches, palaces and whatnot. PRIX ITALIA always rolled out the red carpet and splurged on us in the most gracious way. I never will forget our tour to Agrigento for the final evening of a Palermo PRIX ITALIA.

And yes, I have made friends at PRIX ITALIA. Some have long left their jobs but quite a number are still around. And may I say that I have made two quite special friends who are both with us today. Both carry the very special title of "honorary president".

Thank you all for your friendship, for your support, for your graciousness and your indulgence whenever I was too pushy in a meeting. Working for PRIX ITALIA was great fun, I will miss it.