

INTERVIEW / ALDO ROMANO BAPTISTE TROTIGNON

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MUSIC

Aldo Romano: Why music? Pleasure, necessity, ambition?

Baptiste Trotignon: Pleasure for sure, necessity no doubt, and ambition maybe. To make music, there has to be pleasure, you need it.

A.R.: But pleasure isn't necessarily synonymous with quality. Very bad music can be played with a lot of pleasure!

B.T.: Yes, that's true, you're right! I'd say then that in my relationship to music, pleasure is a necessity!

A.R.: Talking of the notion of necessity, I was thinking more of that which connected to the «job», to the profession. The social, material necessity... Has earning your living as a musician, whilst actually getting pleasure out of it, has that never seemed unjustified to you? Do you consider that you «deserve» it?

B.T.: Even if the word «lucky» is often wrongly used (people often believe that when something good happens to you, it's always luck, as if the effort that you might have put in so that these things happen didn't exist), I know that I have been lucky, and I am aware that you need some luck to meet the right people at the right time, etc... But I also know that I have done real work, on the music, my instrument, and on myself. I remember that as a teenager, while my mates went off to play in the café after school, I went home to work on the piano, not out of necessity as it happens (obviously at 13 or 14, when you're bursting to learn things, you don't calculate that you need to work to make a living later on), but out of exactly that need for pleasure. It's a choice. I probably needed that too, to create a sort of bubble for myself, a world I could escape into in a family situation where I was having quite a hard time, a classic attitude in adolescence.

All that to say that if now I can manage to live fairly well from what I do, I don't have any complexes about it, no sense of usurping something. So, YES, I do consider that I «deserve» it!

A.R.: That's good! For me, it's something that was a problem at one time, less so now.

B.T.: It's true that it's a subject that is sometimes a bit taboo. If I do have any doubts (and I do!), it will be more about my relationship with the music itself, what I'm capable of playing or not, of achieving as a musician, of living up to a sort of ideal that we don't want to betray, but not in relation to the material side. And the necessary part of luck, it's also something you can work on, you can learn to generate it.

A.R.: There's something completely abstract about it, it is not often quantifiable, I don't think it's necessarily the result of work...

B.T.: Not work then, but an intuition. A form of intuitive more than a mental intelligence

A.R.: Yes, that's it!

B.T.: And for the part that escapes us, you need to trust in life... Even if I have often lacked self-confidence (less so now), I have always been convinced that I have a guardian angel who is never far away!

A.R.: When I met you a few years ago, I felt a sort of terror in you, a fundamental anguish, and that's almost disappeared now, as if it was under control.

B.T.: I was also more conceited then than now. And the terror has faded to leave room, probably, for more humility and confidence. Like a sort of scale, rebalancing. Let's say that now the positive side has the upper hand!

A.R.: And we can feel it in your music too.

B.T.: To come back to what musicians do, there is therefore work, luck, as well as a part of talent...

A.R.: ...the gift...

B.T.: ...and the work in fact is as much about going and finding in yourself this element of the gift as it is about

the acquisition pure and simple of know-how, of a language. There is a part of choice in whether you go looking for it or you don't!

A.R.: It's also knowing when to abandon things that you have learnt.

B.T.: Maybe. Learning the rules, then unlearning them so that you can get beyond them... Yes, it's a process that comes back often.

A.R.: It's what allows you to dig deeper.

B.T.: Yes, wherever you are, you always need to dig. When you start digging less, or you can't any more, it's maybe because the musical instinct is running out of steam, it's what more or less scares us all as musicians.

A.R.: I was thinking of «digging» in the sense of «creating a hole», making a place, creating a space. Creation does not necessarily mean piling things up, it's also making space to put things in. Often, the mistake, is piling stuff up...

B.T.: It's something I started to feel as I developed the solo piano.

PIANO SOLO

A.R.: On your solo albums, I've felt quite clearly that there was an enormous change between the first - «Solo» -, and this recent recording at Pleyel. In the first I heard a lot of exercises, as if you were trying to prove something, a fear of emptiness, and it's much less lyrical than afterwards. The use of compound time, maybe you're less obsessed by that now. It's an image of course, but I'd say that you have become more «Dinu Lipatti» than «Gould»!!

B.T.: (laughter!) Scared of emptiness, no doubt, yes... At the time I hadn't really done much stage work alone, didn't have much experience, and as you know, there are things that you can only learn and integrate by going on stage. It's afterwards therefore, as did more concerts, that I got a taste for it and started to enjoy this very strong sensation of «manipulating» silence, and to no longer be afraid: being alone means that when you take your hands off the keyboard, you create a sort of «tension in the silence», and this silence then becomes almost palpable. This comes back to the idea this idea of holes that you were talking about, instead of piling things up, you leave some space...

A.R.: I always think on this subject of that Jankélévitch quote «Silence is to music what poetry is to prose». You take the quintessence, you press it to try and keep the best of it.

B.T.: It's in this space that the next phrase is created, it's the whole essence of the notion of improvisation.

A.R.: About the exercise of the solo piano, it seems to me that it's quite a recent thing in the history of jazz?

B.T.: Do you think so?... Perhaps there's just more simply because quantitatively there are more pianists than at one time.

A.R.: Yes, but you have the impression that now it's like a sort of ambition for all pianists sooner or later to make a solo piano album.

B.T.: Curiously, personally I never felt it as a «final» ambition. At the time when I wanted to do it, it seemed quite obvious to me. Even if the first time I was alone in the studio, I was petrified, I never doubted the choice, once it was made, to record that album. Often when you really want something, you're less scared of it, it's almost like an act of love! Some people I was working with at the time had more doubts than me about this choice of a solo album, I had to convince them! As well as jazz, the Afro-American culture, I have always liked, listened to and worked enormously on so-called classical music, let's say European music, with a great deal of admiration and love for all the performers of these works. Recording and playing my own compositions solo on the piano was therefore also a form of homage to that, a bit like a need to compare myself with that or to make, in all humility, with my imagination, my own little contribution.

COMPOSERS...

A.R.: With that in mind, would you define yourself as an impressionist pianist?

B.T.: Ah, impressionism... this will probably surprise you, but for a long time I wasn't interested in that at all. It's beginning to change though, Fauré and Ravel move me enormously, but Debussy still often leaves me cold, the piano pieces especially really bore me. It has never carried me away.

A.R.: That's funny!

B.T.: Recently I heard Radu Lupu on stage playing Debussy's Preludes, magnificent piano work obviously, splendid tone, acoustic perspectives perfectly subtle, and then suddenly, I realised that if I'm not carried away by this music, it's probably because I have the impression that I'm hearing a jazz pianist with perfect pianistic skills (quite a rare thing), but totally arhythmic and «debluesified»! If what I play on the piano is nourished by these impressionist colours, it's probably more thanks to jazz pianists, who have integrated them directly into their language, Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock for example, but in their case, it was with a rhythmic idiom that belongs to jazz and improvisation in jazz.

A.R.: They have been directly inspired by these colours, so indirectly you have been influenced too...

B.T.: With Ravel, two things «reconciled» me to him: first, the re-discovery of «Daphnis et Chloé» (what beauty as soon as the chorus comes in, it almost made me cry!), and then a concert with Nicholas Angelich, where I had the chance to play «Ma mère l'Oye» (Mother Goose) with him. In contact with Nicholas, perhaps I understood certain things about Ravelian expression, his sensitivity, that I hadn't perceived before. But we also often forget the contribution of Russian music: there's an enormous amount of Rachmaninov in Bill Evans, almost more than the French impressionists. I love the Russian composers.

A.R.: Prokofiev...?

B.T.: Yes, of course I love him, these are the loves of youth! it's very lyrical, inventive, theatrical too, and above all there is a feeling of juvenile freedom and a lack of taboos that has always deeply excited me! On the other hand, Stravinsky I find deeply boring. Of course I can admire his «destructive» genius in the creative sense, but it generates no emotion in me. A bit less to the east, Bartok seems to me much more fascinating and touching, in particular because the tension, the violence in it is very expressive, a bit like with Beethoven, whereas In Stravinsky I see it as fabricated. I can hear, of course, all that know-how, those brilliant inventions, rhythmic and harmonic, the orchestration etc... But I don't hear the inner song. There is the shop window, the appearance, and then there's the interior. A piece of music «sounding» good (the shop window) is not enough to make it beautiful and expressive.

A.R.: What's astonishing in this evolution between your first solo album and now, is that you have become both more «classical», and at the same time more free. A paradox that we could compare in the world of painting to a sort of lyrical abstraction.

B.T.: I like this notion of abstraction in music. For a long time I was quite hostile to the notion of descriptive music, in particular because by putting images on music through words («The sea» ...), you «close off» the perception of the listener. Nowadays, it has become more and more difficult for the public to listen to the music without them wanting at all costs to put words, an idea, an image, a concept...on it. It's a pity. A few years ago, I had a sort of feverish need for music to be the expression of the soul, the psyche, and nothing else!

A.R.: Romanticism ... which describes feelings, whereas impressionism describes the elements more.

B.T.: Exactly. I am more at ease with that now, I am perhaps more open-minded, I accept much better the idea that music can describe things other than internal emotions, the paradox being that music like «The sea» (to stay with the same example) obviously talks about plenty other things besides the waves on the ocean!... But I have always felt closer to composers more obsessed by the «line», Bach of course, where we find this form of abstraction in the instrumental music especially, then the Romantics, Schubert, Mahler, who are kind of my «bedside» composers, the ones you always come back to... Obviously, you can say it's a harmonic, rhythmic and melodic vocabulary that is quite far removed from the one we jazz musicians use, but it's «what it says» more than the language in which they say it which has been and still is a source of inspiration for me.

CLASSICAL / MODERN

A.R.: And yet in spite of all that, you are often rather catalogued as an impressionist pianist, with a fine technique and a sort of classicism, a little bit like a sort of ideal son-in-law! For me, as someone who knows you well, this is not at all what I see, but it's a more or less the idea the critics have of you, sometimes...

B.T.: You know as well as I do that sometimes when the critics find an image that works for an artist, it's very difficult afterwards for him to get rid of it, or rather to change it. That's how it is... Maybe because it's reassuring, I don't know...

A.R.: And that way, there's no need to make an effort, it's all wrapped up! Actually, is modernity an important issue for you? Do you want to be or to define yourself as a modern musician? In the sense of avant-garde.

B.T.: It's a real issue that, yes, I do feel concerned by (even if it's not an obsession). Today we can no longer defend a «modern» music like we used to just a few decades ago. It brings me back to the notion of the shop window: the notion of modernity is often distorted, because it is seen only perceived in its visible forms. What is modern!? Beethoven is very modern!

A.R.: Yes, but in the field that you work in...?

B.T.: Being modern in 2008, wouldn't it just mean being free in relation to a certain musical heritage that has to be assumed. What is difficult is knowing how to assume that heritage, and if being modern means breaking it at all costs, then no, I'm not modern. Those who refuse it are going nowhere, it seems to me.

A.R.: For example, what does Cecil Taylor mean to a musician like you who plays solo piano?

B.T.: Magnificent! Especially solo. Now that is a modern guy, but his is a modernity precisely that assumes the Afro-American heritage very well, it's is not a «disembodied» modernity, like with some others who claim to be modern. Even if he has chosen to overlook the notion of swing in the traditional sense, you can hear Duke, Monk, the blues etc... mixed in there with the Vienna school! There is there real understanding of a heritage, whilst wanting to go beyond it, maybe that's what being modern is. Sviatoslav Richter in his autobiography, which I like a lot, said: «It was by locking myself in that I found freedom». Freedom (and in particular creative freedom) only exists and only has value in relation to constraints, and you cannot apprehend one without the other. Freedom, constraints... empty and full... yin and yang! It's like the eternal duality between technical know-how and emotion: the belief that rigour and work empty music of any emotion is absurd (on the contrary, they just protect it from any risk of banality). If there is a form of modernity that I wish to practise, it's that of a freedom that assumes the heritage and its constraints, do you understand?

A.R.: Absolutely!

STANDARDS

A.R.: Something that has intrigued me: on your records, in particular the solo ones when you play other things than your own themes, you play almost no jazz standards. Will you record an album of standards one day?

B.T.: It's true that although I often do it on stage, I haven't really done it on record since my first albums with the trio, almost 10 years ago. I don't have any immediate plans to do so, but one day, probably... As a solo artist, I have always wanted, from the outset, to assert the link between improvisation and writing. Martial Solal told me that when he listened to my first solo album, at certain moments it was hard to tell where the theme, the writing finished and the improvisation began, which I was pleased about because it's exactly what I was looking for!

A.R.: I'm asking this question because in France I find that you are one of the only pianists who really knows the standards, who masters the language and who knows how to play them...

B.T.: ...Thank you! Perhaps precisely because I love them, I'm sort of apprehensive about recording them, there is something that I don't completely assume. What I'm going to say might seem a bit mysterious to some people (but so clear for others!): I believe that knowing to play these standards, practising this language with taste, is not a question of «ability», of knowing how, you just need to be in love with the sixths!!! It's an image, but it is one

that says a lot!

A.R.: Yes, I understand you very well! They're no longer played very much these chords now... You need a sense of placement, this way of improvising over the scales whilst remaining within the theme, it's at once very easy and not easy at all.

B.T.: In master classes, I often tell students to signify the scale more than to play it. This of course involves the notion of voice leading...

A.R.: ...whose essence often boils down to few notes, in any case in «simple» standards, songs.

B.T.: But this notion of direction that you give to a scale, a harmonic sequence, it's something that I continue work on a lot on the piano through the classic works too. Leading a phrase, whatever the music you are playing, is always the basis.

A.R.: Yes, but for me, it's a gift that you have for that, some people have learnt it, sometimes very well too, but in you it's natural.

B.T.: If it's true that I haven't yet really dared to fully face up to the idea of recording the standards (maybe also this eternal apprehension of the reference to the models), it's also true that I simply don't have or haven't taken the time. I try not to hurry too much in developing my projects, to be careful not to cut corners. At the beginning 2 albums with a trio, then 2 albums solo, for the last 3 years I've been concentrating more on co-leading, with you in a trio or in a quartet with David El-Malek, stories that will soon be finished whereas I am starting a new one with my next album that I'm preparing ... each time I try to go deeper into a story before moving onto the next one. In the era of zapping, it's important!

SPIRIT

A.R.: What do you mean to say through music? A certain vision of the world, a story of your own...?

B.T.: For a long time, I wanted to say «ME»! And now or gradually over some time I've been looking more and more for... how can I say this?... what can't be said...

A.R.: Mystery...?

B.T.: Let's say a sort of spiritual energy, which you could give loads of names to... the being, the All... This energy that passes and circulates through the creative energy of an individual, this vibration that gives art all its power. It passes through man's body (and this is what gives him his nobility), but it comes from elsewhere, from somewhere farther away, or deeper... I'm not trying to learn that, but to connect to this energy which already exists.

A.R.: Is it a conscious thing with you or not?

B.T.: Yes this search is conscious, but afterwards, when you're playing, you are always drifting between an awareness of what is happening, the control of the sounds, the body, the action, and a form of unconsciousness, of abandonment, of letting go, to let this energy go through you...

A.R.: To talk in psychoanalytical terms, is it therefore more your EGO or your ID that's playing? ID plays or I play!?

B.T.: ... I'd say ID plays! But these terms should be used with care. I was thinking more of a spiritual approach, but it's true that there are bridges possible with psychoanalysis.

A.R.: The spiritual is something more expressible, even if it is an unknown. The unconscious isn't spiritual, it's a shambles, an enormous magma...

B.T.: I don't agree, the unconscious is spiritual! But to come back to the moment when you're playing, the situation of creation, I believe that the idea is in a way to «de-ego», to come out of your ego, and even if it really is the body that's playing, then we can trust this energy that runs through us, it's easier to let yourself go.

A.R.: You PUT your trust in, you don't just trust.

B.T.: Yes, HAVING trust in yourself is another thing again, here effectively we're talking about PUTTING your trust in another thing. It's this other thing that often gives music its beauty, its mystery, as you were saying. It's up to us as artists to make sure our body can convey that. When we talk of spirituality in jazz, we often mention

Coltrane, of course...

A.R.: The last albums «OM», «Expression»...

B.T.: I remember one day after a concert you pointed out to me that I had gone over the top a bit with the notes repeated in 2s! ta-da ta-da ta-da ta-da... I think that precisely what inspired in me this taste for this slightly incantatory motif, was the «Selflessness» theme on «Kulu Se Mama» album that I listened to a lot when I was a teenager. We all have our «licks», you just have to be careful not to overuse them, it's like ingredients in cooking, it's not because you put all the spices that you like in the same the dish that it will be good!

A.R.: That said, in this last period of Coltrane's, it becomes more emphatic that lyrical...

B.T.: It can happen, yes, that the emphatic kills the lyricism. Although obviously I recognise the genius of some people in this domain, it's probably partly why I am not a great opera-lover...

A.R.: To come back to the notion of the story: what is the story you wish to tell?

B.T.: Already the idea of telling a story... I'm not saying I always manage it, but in any case it is something that I feel very strongly about. Whether it's during a solo, a piece, an album, a concert... A lot of musicians don't pay enough attention to this. Telling a story is perhaps one of the characteristics of this European jazz, one of the things that gives it its identity.

A.R.: In some ways, the question says everything, here we're touching on the literary, and the Americans never refer to literature. Often they have fewer «complexes» regarding their bodies and know how to use it better, but there is still something missing for me.

B.T.: I understand, but it's also that side that I like. Lyrical abstraction!...