



DEDICATED to the  
LIFE and WORK of  
DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH



No. 34  
January  
2011

# DSCH INTERVIEW

## Baudime Jam and *New Babylon*



by Alan Mercer

### *Novyy Vavilon (New Babylon)*

Directed by Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg

with Elena Kuzmina, Sergei Gerasimov, David Gutman, Pyotr Sobolevsky

1929 / USSR / 1h20

Original music by Dmitri Shostakovich, arranged by Baudime Jam and performed by Quatuor Prima Vista

Violin 1: Elzbieta Gladys; Violin 2: Anaïs Flores Lopes; Viola: Baudime Jam; Cello: Jean-Philippe Feiss; Clarinet: Béatrice Berne

Cinéma Balzac, tucked away in a side street just off Paris's famed Champs-Élysées has gained a reputation for combining the silver screen with its counterparts from the world of music. Live relays from the world's top opera houses juxtapose with typically French *soirées lyriques* and the inevitable seasons of cinematic gems from all around the world. The *ciné-concert* is a genre in its own right as promoted and realised by the Balzac. Classics such as Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, Murnau's *Faust* and *Nosferatu* bring both scored and improvised accompaniment onto the theatre's compact stage.

7 December last (2010) saw a 'premiere' at the Balzac not only regarding the choice of film – Kozintsev and Trauberg's *New Babylon*, but also in terms of the accompanying music, scored by the French violist and composer, Baudime Jam, for string quartet and clarinet. The following interview explains in more detail the rationale behind his work on this score: specifically in respect of Shostakovich's first film project and more generally as regards Baudime's work as an arranger/composer.

Thanks to the work of several contemporary musical protagonists (Judd, Strobel, Jurowski and Fitz-gerald are good examples) the score to the 1929 film has slowly entered into the Shostakovich repertoire. The version generally used is the one prepared by Rozhdestvensky, as John Riley explains in his book *A Life in Film* (Tauris Publishers, London, 2004):

*Pravda* January 27th 1976 reported Rozhdestvensky finding parts of the score in Moscow's Lenin Library. He compiled a suite which was published in Moscow in 1976 ...

According to Malcolm MacDonald the original score being lost, Rozhdestvensky's reconstructed a suite using a 'theatre' orchestration:

1.1.1.1 - 2.1.1.0 - Timpani. 3 percussion players: Triangle, Tambourine, Side Drum, Cymbals, Bass Drum, Tam-Tam, Flexatone, Xylophone, Piano, Strings.

Although Lev Arnshtam:

... claimed that Shostakovich wrote several variants of the score for different sized ensembles and describes the composer rushing from cinema to cinema trying to help the orchestras (*Soviet Film* 5/64). However the almost immediate failure of the film and the score makes it unlikely that there were more than two versions in addition to the piano score.





In Jam's arrangement the bulk of the thematic material is taken up, logically, by the first violin and by the solo clarinet, whilst much of the score's fundamental motif writing is assigned to the viola. The choice of the woodwind instrument proved to be inspired, the variety of timbre and expression available to the soloist lending itself extremely well to Shostakovich's highly motif-driven score. Soloist Béatrice Berne coped extremely well with the sheer length and intensity of the piece and appeared unfazed by the occasional need to suddenly slow, or to speed up with a view of 'hitting a cue' or simply maintaining ensemble. However, Béatrice's prowess notwithstanding, the hugely involved and consistently immaculate playing of the lead violin, Elzbieta Gladys, was the highlight; in terms of her musicianship, and the overall theatrical effect she injected into this ambitious arrangement. It's worth noting here that the Quartet's founder and the piece's arranger, Baudime Jam, effectively 'led' the other musicians by virtue of (i) his familiarity with the score and (ii) his eye line with respect to the projection screen.

The overall ensemble playing was tight and at all times in empathy with the film's many critical points, musically and visually speaking, itself an immense feat.

Finally, and lest you wonder, a piano was made available for the 2-minute *Old French Song* citation!

A mention for the 230-strong audience that filled the hall – never before have I witnessed such a level of participation, from gasps and groans to giggles and guffaws. Such is the genius of Kozintsev and Trauberg's visual 1929 imagery.



*Baudime Jam*

Baudime Jam was born in central France, in Clermont-Ferrand in 1972. He describes himself as "violinist, musicographer and composer". His musical education spanned several countries – France, Germany and the USA. His musicological writings, apart from various articles, include biographies of French composers Henri Thévenin and George Onslow. In 1994 Jam founded the Orchestre de Chambre Philharmonia which he directed until 1997, the same year in which the quartet known as the Quatuor Prima Vista was founded. Since then, the ensemble has given more than 700 concerts in France, Europe, USA and in Africa. Repertoires include: baroque, classical, romantic, modern and contemporary, in addition to jazz, klezmer, tango and film accompaniment. The other members of the quartet are Elzbieta Gladys (violin 1), Anais Flores Lopez (violin 2) and Jean-Philippe Feiss (cello).



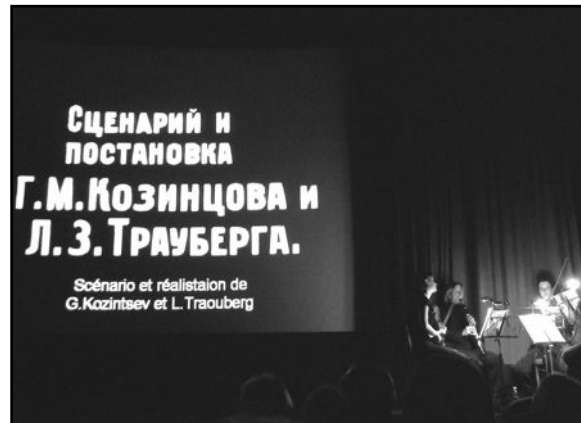
*Members of the quartet plus clarinetist Béatrice Berne*

## DSCH Journal: How long have you known Shostakovich's music?



Baudime Jam: Since childhood! I come from a family of musicians and for me Shostakovich's music is a fundamental part of modern musical culture. His music quickly became a part of my 'musical pantheon' including those composers whose music I admire, both from the point of view of a listener, and performer. What I particularly admire is Shostakovich's almost minimalistic harmonic writing – in particular in his string quartets. It's rare, the way in which he uses all four instruments to create complex harmonic structures – he uses his skill to create an intense sound universe through the use of almost parsimonious ensemble writing. I like on the one hand the wildness of his quartet writing combined, on the other, with the omnipresent poetry with which Shostakovich imbues his music. These moments are often fleeting, albeit conveying a tremendous expressive force.

Shostakovich is, along with Bartók (although so different, so far apart!) one of the true giants of the modern age: with Debussy and Ravel, their string quartets form the essential musical nucleus of the genre in the 20th century.



*Opening of New Babylon at the Balzac*

## DSCHJ: And *New Babylon*?

BJ: I discovered the existence of the film and of the score a year ago, when the director of the Festival d'Anères suggested I work on a transcription. Otherwise, as someone with a passionate interest in film music I had already acquired several of Shostakovich's film score recordings such as *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Counterplan*, *Alone*, etc. In many respects Shostakovich's orchestral music for the concert hall shares a great number of stylistic characteristics with those found in his film music. Hence, and notwithstanding the need at various times in his life to feed the family, it doesn't surprise me that Shostakovich worked throughout most of his creative life in this genre.

## DSCHJ: What specific preparation was needed prior to taking on this project?

BJ: First of all I had to obtain permission from the Shostakovich estate and from Chant du Monde (rights holders for the complete works). I met with Hervé Désarbre [French organist and jury member for the *Concours Chostakovitch* competition] in order to explain my project and submit my request – which was subsequently accepted.

I then had to decide on the scale of the ensemble, knowing that the organising festival's financial means were limited. First choice: the string quartet – the heart of the orchestra! Beyond this I was satisfied with the approach of only adding one more instrument – the clarinet. To my mind the clarinet boasts the greatest expressive range of all instruments, including a vast palette of nuances, from the slightest *piano* to a shrieking *forte*, from chamber-like intimacy to military-like fanfares; suave melancholy, dark irony and so on. Added to which, the instrument marries up extremely well with a string quartet ensemble.

Once I'd got myself a copy of the film on DVD as well as the orchestral score I began work on the transcription, which I was obliged to complete post haste, given my own concert engagements and also another commission I'd received –



again for the cinema but this time the project consisted of composing an original score – for a Chinese film, *La Divine*, which was also a commission from the Anères Festival. Although I've worked on a good number of string quartet arrangements over the last twelve years, *New Babylon* has proved to be the most 'delicate' in terms of overall approach, partly because I quickly realised that my goal was not simply to reproduce the original score in instrumental form, but rather to restore the spirit behind the music. If financial resources had allowed it, I'd have added a trumpet and percussion (triangle and snare drum).

But finally, these constraints obliged me to exercise my imagination beyond what I had previously experienced – a truly passionate experience!

As I mentioned, the *New Babylon* project came from a commission from the Anères Festival, which specialises in so-called 'ciné-concerts'. The piece was premiered at the festival this year [2010] on 21st May. The Paris performance, on 7th December, will therefore be the second performance of the piece – after which we'll be in the hands of concert organisers elsewhere. Unfortunately it tends to be jazz or improvised or highly repetitive scores that tend to be chosen by those that decide these things, rather than scores for films that already have their music composed.



**DSCHJ: Did you base your version on the orchestral version of the film score, or that for piano, or...? Did you listen to many different interpretations of the score?**

BJ: I used the orchestral score – it was vital for me to be able to base my work on all of the expressive and instrumental elements that Shostakovich deploys. In terms of timing and general interpretative latitude, the constraints placed upon the musicians from the point of view of the visual content they aim to illustrate means that these were very limited.

Generally speaking I avoid listening to different interpretations prior to preparing a performance. For me, a close study of the composer's score is entirely adequate. In the case of a transcription, the objective is to create a 'new sound' – to my mind therefore it would be entirely irrelevant to seek to 'mimic' the original version, rather my objective is to retrieve and represent the music's inner spirit.

**DSCHJ: Do you think that Shostakovich would have applauded your version of this score and would have positively encouraged a performance of same?**

BJ: This is a difficult question and one in fact that I believe every composer of musical transcriptions should ask him or herself. In my opinion it touches on the very legitimacy and honesty of the artist, creatively speaking.

Legally speaking I obtained permission from the rights owners, but musically speaking of great value to me was the validation of my project by Hervé Désarbre, given his status as a specialist in the works of Shostakovich. As far as my own thoughts on the subject are concerned, there will always be room for improvement (the version we'll perform at the Balzac Cinema will indeed have already been slightly reworked as compared to the version performed at Anères) but it's important for me to emphasise that the original score has in no way been altered in respect of its core musical content (harmony, phrasing, expression, tempi etc.). Through my knowledge of Shostakovich's string quartets and through my

determination to remain faithful to the original score, I hope to have created an honourable piece of work. That said, if Shostakovich were around I'm sure he'd be the first to suggest changes!



As to whether Shostakovich would have approved, or encouraged this initiative, I believe that it's probably the case that he would have: you know, composers are often less reticent than so-called 'specialists' who too often adopt a radically inflexible stance to musical composition and for whom such exercises are inescapably blighted infidelities as compared to the original score. Our work is dismissed as useless or scandalous by these 'experts' who position themselves as defenders of composers' integrity! They see fit to ignore the fact that the art of the transcription is one whose position is often at the centre of musical life! Indeed, whether a piece is conceived out of didacticism, pragmatism, experimentation or out of downright fun (as Busoni wrote "out of amusement") – transcription constitutes a significant part of the work of the musician.

Didactic? We know that Mozart spent a great deal of time in copying scores by J.S. Bach for his own erudition and was one of the first to transcribe a certain number of Bach's fugues, for strings, in an attempt to imbibe the older composer's stylistic rigour, in a gesture of some considerable humility.

Pragmatic? The major music publishing houses of the 19th century made their fortunes from the publication of piano reductions of orchestral and lyrical masterpieces by famous composers of the classical and romantic repertoire. Not forgetting those transcriptions for all kinds of combinations of instruments but whose *raison d'être* was to allow music lovers to discover repertoire that would be normally inaccessible to them, pre-gramophone records and the pre- the radio.

Exploratory? Most readers will know of Webern, Schoenberg and Stravinsky's superb transcriptions of the baroque repertoire (Bach in particular) as part of their striving for a neo-classical rewriting of musical history. Also the numerous transcriptions for string orchestra of chamber works by Schubert, Brahms and Shostakovich, not forgetting the wonderful work carried out by Ravel on scores by Debussy and Mussorgsky and such outlandish transcriptions such as the *Sacre du Printemps* arranged for four pianos by the Amsterdam Quartet!

Fun? There are many magnificent examples, but to name a few: Richard Strauss' *Till Eulenspiegel* arranged as *Grotesque Musicale* by Franz Hasenöhrle for five instruments; Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* parodied by Hindemith for string quartet; in Mozart – the *New Look Mozart Fantasy* by Jean Françaix for string bass and wind instruments based on a serenade from *Don Giovanni*; "cartoon" transcriptions by Spike Jones of the classical repertoire (Tchaikovsky, Bizet, Liszt, Offenbach and Johann Strauss) and also the legendary transcriptions from the 1950s by the very British Gerard Hoffnung.

### **DSCHJ: How do you address the challenge of 'fitting' the music to the images on the screen?**

BJ: I've been composing original scores to accompany silent films for more than ten years now and perform them with the Prima Vista Quartet – hence I've developed very special skills and techniques in respect of the methods of synchronising the music with the on-screen images. But in actual fact the challenges involving synchronisation are far less problematic at the stage of performance than at the point of writing the music. It's the task of the composer to 'calibrate' the score as best he can so that the performers encounter the minimum of difficulties when it comes to ensuring that the music coincides with the projected images, while at the same time giving the impression to the audience of a natural 'marriage' between the two entities.

In the case of *New Babylon*, this is in fact the first time I have accompanied a film whose score I didn't actually compose, meaning that from a point of view of synchronisation, things are slightly trickier, given that I have to 'reconstruct' the necessary 'impulses' to make this work well, rather than my having built them myself through my own score. Of course the time I took to work on the transcription allowed me to acquire a great deal of familiarity with the score – invaluable as an interpreter/leader of the performing group.

### **DSCHJ: Has your quartet performed much of the Shostakovich standard chamber repertoire?**

BJ: Our Quartet has been together now for 12 years and in that time we have performed many of the Shostakovich quartets on several occasions – these works are an entirely indispensable part of the repertoire.





**DSCHJ: Which of the quartets pose the most technical or interpretative challenges?**

BJ: Shostakovich's music is much easier in terms of accessibility, technically speaking, than that of Bartók or Schoenberg: a performance of Shostakovich's Eighth Quartet will take a great deal less time than Bartók's Fourth Quartet or Schoenberg's Second; but this is a product of the style of writing and certainly not that of a stylistic 'simplicity' of which Shostakovich is sometimes accused. Beyond the score there are colours, atmospheres, and the spirit: all of which demand a great deal of work, whatever the composer.

**DSCHJ: What are the motivating factors behind your arrangements of various symphonic works for string quartet?**

BJ: I've been transcribing a whole range of pieces for 12 years now and with the goal of having the resultant works performed in public. For me, it's a process born out of a combination of hedonism and militancy! Among my favourites I'd cite Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*, Mozart's 'Linz' Symphony, Beethoven's 'Eroica' and Fourth Symphonies, Chopin's First Piano Concerto, Musorgsky's *Pictures from an Exhibition*, Schumann's 'Rhenish' and Brahms' Second Symphony, Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* overture, Suk's Serenade, opus 6, J Strauss's overture to *Fledermaus*, Vierne's *Les Djinns*, airs by Mozart, Rossini, Auber, Meyerbeer, Onslow, Massenet, Gounod and a multitude of operetta aria by Messager, Planquette, Léhar, J. Strauss, Kalman and Offenbach.

**DSCHJ: Do you know the arrangements by Barshai of some of Shostakovich's string quartets?**

BJ: I do indeed, help by the fact that I have conducted Opus 110a, Barshai's transcription of the Eighth Quartet. I have also directed arrangements of Shostakovich's Third Quartet by Dmitri Sitkovetsky as well as my own arrangement of the Tenth Quartet. I have also made arrangements of the Eleventh Quartet for string orchestra and the First Quartet as a Concertino for violin and strings (these arrangements were approved by Madame Shostakovich and are in the Chant du Monde catalogue).

**DSCHJ: Could you tell us more about your work on these arrangements? How did you choose the pieces to arrange and are you satisfied with the results?**

BJ: There are very precise reasons behind my decision to work on a transcription of the First and Eleventh Quartets. Firstly this corresponds to a time when I was conductor of a string orchestra and therefore had the ideal opportunity to take the score to the concert hall. From numbers 2 to 14 of the cycle I find that the works form a homogeneous whole, stylistically and in terms of creative expressiveness, whilst the first and last of the cycle lie somewhat outside of this 'whole'. I am particularly fond of the First Quartet (opus 49) which strikes me as a kind of homage to the ethos of Schubert's chamber music. The delicate opening theme in the initial Moderato and the *brio* of the Finale are marvellous references to the past, none of which disguises the work's unmistakable twentieth century character. In this work the first violin's voice predominates, as in the quartets of the 18th century and so I thought it would be a good idea to prepare a version of the work for solo violin accompanied by a small string ensemble in the form of a Concertino.

The Eleventh Quartet is probably the least known of Shostakovich's cycle. The writing that supports the intimate nature of the piece is one of the best examples I know of the minimalistic approach that I mentioned earlier. Through very fine layered writing he is able to create an astonishingly poetic universe of sound. It was a labour of love, and of pleasure, to realise the transcription for orchestra and to conduct the piece myself; before performing the original, many times, since then.

**DSCHJ: Which works by Shostakovich appeal to you the most – and the least?**

BJ: I adore the quartets, all of them, as well as his chamber music in general (the Quintet is an extraordinary piece!); but also his symphonies and concertos.

However I have to confess my ignorance when it comes to Shostakovich's operas, piano works and songs. So much to get to know – which is wonderful!