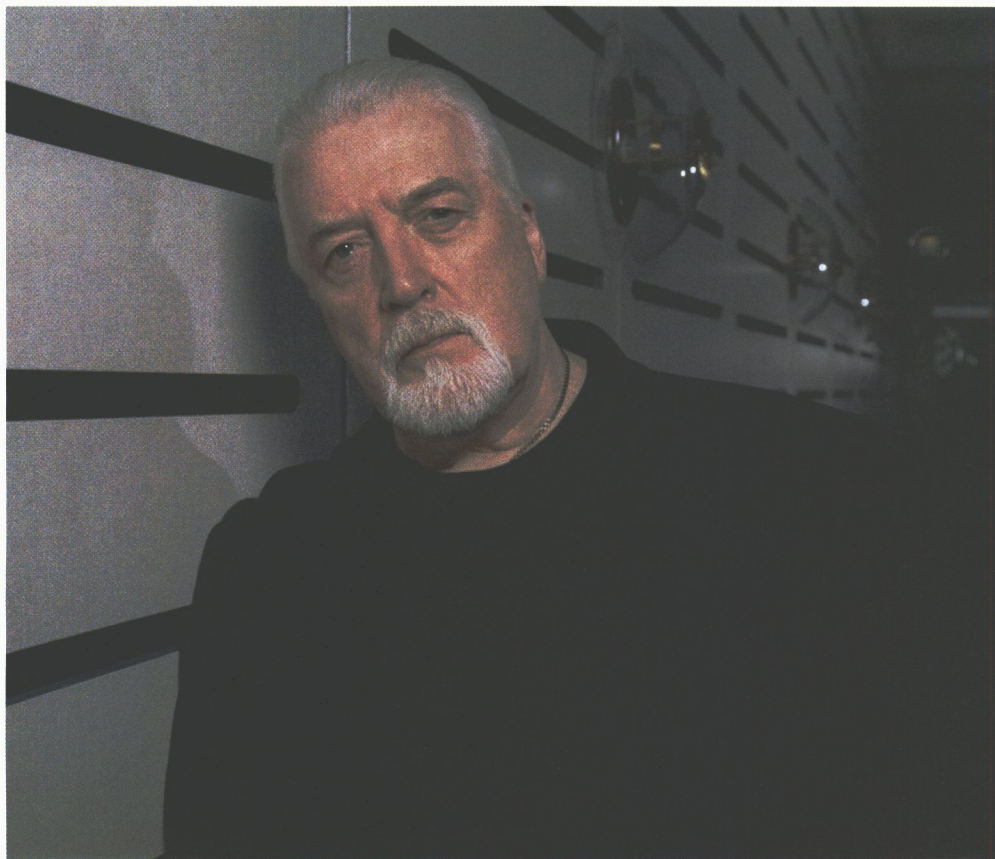




LORD OF THE STRINGS

Depending on your viewpoint, it was either a glorious marriage of rock and classical music, or an overblown travesty by proggers who had lost the plot. Now, Deep Purple's fabled 'Concerto For Group and Orchestra' is coming to Ireland. Its creator Jon Lord talks about the piece – and the controversy it created

WORDS **Roisin Dwyer**



Celebrated keyboard maestro Jon Lord is in top form, “How the devil are ya?” he booms by way of greeting. The ex-Deep Purple dignitary is preparing to bring his ‘Concerto For Group and Orchestra’ to the National Concert Hall, Dublin later this month to mark its 40th anniversary.

“I did it ten years ago in London on its 30th birthday. This is a quirky way to do it, in Dublin, which is a terrific city. I have been in that lovely Concert Hall of yours a few times,” he enthuses.

The Concerto was first performed in the Royal Albert Hall London by Deep Purple and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra to very mixed reviews.

“Some classical music critics thought it was brilliant, and others thought it was a piece of crap,” he laughs. “That was also the reaction from the rock critics. It did exactly what I hoped it would, which was cause a fuss!”

Recalling the celebrated evening, Jon notes, “I remember feeling that strange mixture of terror, excitement and pleasure that any performing artist gets when they are breaking barriers. I was only a young slip of a lad, but I was aware that what I was doing was not part of the established norm and not what people would expect from orchestras. Certainly not what people would expect from a rock group! In the hall, the response was astonishing.”

The following year, the Concerto was brought to the Hollywood Bowl for its first birthday.

“What a barn!” exclaims Lord. “What a dreadful place! I suppose it’s a splendid location in the Hollywood Hills, but the sound is bitty. The orchestra was the Los Angeles Philharmonic, a brilliant orchestra, but they were just too cool for school. It was so far beneath them. But again the audience loved it.”

The Concerto score went missing shortly after the Los Angeles performance, and was brought back to life in a rather peculiar manner.

“I was playing with Purple 10 years ago in Rotterdam, and was approached in my hotel by a young student,” recounts Jon. “I was feeling grumpy at the time, I had just had been through a seven-hour hurtle down icy German roads with a driver who thought he was Stirling Moss. I was tired and told the student to come back the next day. He said he wanted talk to me about the Concerto. I said ‘What!’? And he said ‘Well I think I’ve recreated it’ Well I said, ‘Sit down lad, have a beer!’ (Laughs).

The young student was Marco De Goeij, who had written his thesis on the Concerto. Having searched in vain for the score, he decided to recreate it and spent two years watching and listening to the original recording.

“It’s an astonishing piece of musical detective work,” marvels Jon. “I recognised quite a lot of what he had done, and it helped me remember a few pieces that he had not got quite right.”

At the time of the original performance, the

media reported that it caused conflict within the group. This was not the case.

“The band loved it!” Jon says. “Reports of a schism were not true, it wasn’t ‘Jon was doing his classical thing so he wasn’t concentrating on the rock band’. People forget that during that time, we were inventing hard rock, and during the time of the Concerto we were writing *Deep Purple In Rock*. I don’t think that anybody would listen to that album and say that it wasn’t committed. The story doesn’t hold up. Forgive me for saying this, but it was a journalistic invention, it was a good story. ‘Jon wants orchestras, the rest of the band don’t. Split in Deep Purple!’”

Deep Purple In Rock is perhaps one of the best examples of the famous Lord/Blackmore call and answer technique.

“When I was at drama school, I had played quite a bit of modern jazz, and was a fan of that call and answer style,” he explains. “In those days, Richie was tremendously open-minded and versatile. He’s still tremendously versatile of course. He’s one of the great guitarists. He and I just loved that unpredictability. You never quite knew what was going to happen.”

Jon was famously loyal to the Hammond organ (which he combined with the RMI 368 electric piano), in an era when his contemporaries such as Rick Wakeman and Keith Emerson were mastering the ubiquitous Moog.

“I felt I was better on the piano and the Hammond, I always wanted to be good at playing the Moog, and I had dabbled with them, but they never got deep inside,” he reflects. “They always seemed to be cold calculating machines, and I have never been a terribly cerebral or intellectual person when it comes to technical matters.”

In 1978, when Jon joined former Purple bandmate David Coverdale in Whitesnake, he momentarily embraced the synthesizer.

“Yes, I incorporated synths then,” he admits. “I had a string machine and a few synths and a slightly more synthy-sounding organ. I over-amplified it. I put huge Marshall amps into the Leslie speakers and changed the speakers in the Leslie, so it became this overblown Hammond sound. When I returned to Purple in the mid-’80s, I went back to straightforward Hammond.”

The Concerto has weathered the years well, and is still in demand. In the last decade alone, it has been performed almost 50 times.

According to Jon: “I get e-mails and letters from all over the world saying ‘I hated rock music until I heard the Concerto’. Or young rock fans saying ‘I thought orchestras were boring until I heard Concerto, and now I’ve become a fan of classical music.’”

This must cause him to swell up with pride.

“I didn’t mean for that to happen,” he smiles. “I was really not expecting for it to do more than cause a temporary ruckus. Here it is 40 years later, and it has endured and done its job!”

Jon Lord and the RTE Concert Orchestra perform *Concerto For Group and Orchestra* in The National Concert Hall on September 24.