

Milestone in Pop music history

Jon Lord, Deep Purple's organ player, performed his legendary classic rock concert from 1969 in Nikolaisaal (24.01.10)

From Karsten Sawalski

Translated by Monika Schwarz

Jon Lord is a gentleman. The man who shaped hard rock together with Deep Purple and who was touring the world in private jets during the 70s, has nothing of a diva. Saturday afternoon, some minutes before dress rehearsal, all of a sudden he is standing on stage in Nikolaisaal: wearing a plain wintercoat, his snow white hair, braided at the back of his head, frame his open face over the meanwhile bulky body.

The „Maestro“, as he is called in rock circuit, is immediately in conversation with all performers. Unceremoniously he is setting his paper cup with coffee on the polished piano, is chatting with Deutsche Filmorchester Babelsberg's conductor Scott Lawton, is greeting Deep Purple coverband „Demon's Eye“'s young musicians and is addressing the female string section with some kind words.

The concert that's supposed to happen this evening is sold out since months and months. As not to disappoint all the many fans, dress rehearsals were made public. A great idea. With the venue filled with two thirds, attendants do have the rare occasion of watching a pioneer in crossover-idea at work. Only twice did Jon Lord interrupt dress rehearsal run. Once he suggests another bridge to drummer Andree Schneider, the second time guitar player Mark Zyk has missed a cue. Jon Lord corrects determined but friendly – as a gentleman.

As a composer he seems not to be up to defend his opus to the last note. On Youtube there can be found many current tv clips where Jon Lord can be seen frequently in conversation with musicians from orchestras. He leaves room for their own ideas to performers. On Saturday, with Babelsberger Filmorchester, he achieves an interpretation which might provide material for several movie scenes.

„Concerto for Group and Orchestra“ is a milestone in pop music history. Most of the older hardrock-fans might remember more clearly the performance than the record, though. British TV did record the encounter of Deep Purple and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra on 24 September 1969 at Royal Albert Hall, and some years later it was broadcasted in German TV.

„At he least they could have cut their hair“ was one of the typical comments of that time. There was a vast social gap manifesting in music at that time: Orchestral musicians clad in black tailcoats ogled long-haired boheme-rockers down from their higher seats. Jon Lord appeared in suede-vest, drummer Ian Paice wore a pink shirt and sunglasses, whereas Ritchie Blackmore had his black shirt unbuttoned down to his navel. Blackmore is reported as having gotten himself into the classic-projekt only reluctantly.

The guitar player was afraid of a loss of image and created the distinctive riffs for „Deep Purple in Rock“ thereupon. Such record provided international fame for the band. But the blend of rock and classic didn't develop into something distinct. From Metallica to Hip Hop there are quite some records with classical musicians nowadays, but mostly the orchestras involved are just accessorial. Nor is Jon Lord's „Concerto for Group and Orchestra“ a convincing symbiosis. But Potsdam's performance sounds much stronger than the one from 1969.

Then it was more a battle between serious music and modern music. Nowadays generation gap is of no relevance any more. Babelsberger Filmorchester begins the first part, „Allegro“ in a lively way. Clarinet is improvising an old popular tune. Part two is intoned softly. Singer Steve Balsamo is contributing his experiences in musicals, his voice reminds in higher register more of Deep Purple's first singer, Rod Evans, than Ian Gillan's whiskey-experienced rock-belter.

Part three is introduced grumblingly and rollingly by French Horns, E-guitar is taking over the task of a solo-violin and the drum solo was shortened to the essential. Even though some of the passages still appear constructed and necessity for the use of electrical instruments is not always obvious, Jon Lord and Babelsberger Filmorchester do let merge rocking and classical structures for long periods.

Anyway, attendants are thrilled by the actual „Concerto“ and are rewarded during the second part of the show with a Deep-Purple-classic. Already for the first notes of „Child in time“ there is a round of applause. But singer Steve Balsamo, who seemed to be in a poor health, can do the high notes only with the help of young female Polish singer Kasia Laska. Nevertheless: to watch dress rehearsal with orchestra and band was a pleasure and Jon Lord in Nikolaissaal was a sensation.