



Jacques Loussier, April 13, 2003

Notes on the Program

by Larry Kelp

When France's Jacques Loussier Trio issued its debut album, *Play Bach*, in 1959 it went quickly from a curiosity to an international hit. That recording and subsequent albums by the trio have sold more than six million copies over the past four decades. Pianist Loussier had a knack for taking Baroque trappings and making them swing with inspired improvisations on J.S. Bach's original compositions.

Play Bach reached across musical and cultural boundaries much as subsequent break-out recordings did, albums that didn't fit any marketable style but by word-of-mouth quickly became best-sellers and trend-setters: the 1964 *Getz-Gilberto* album that took Brazilian bossa nova to the world, the Bulgarian Women's Choir with its haunting diatonic "harmonies" in the '80s, Paul Simon's blend of intellectual lyrics and earthy South African dance music on *Graceland* in 1986, and more recently Ry Cooder's jam with aging Cuban musicians on *Buena Vista Social Club*, and America's rediscovery of its own vibrant folk-country roots in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* These are a few examples that in spite of mass marketing approaches to determining public taste in what sells-music with heart occasionally breaks through on its own.

By 1960 Loussier and his trio (piano, bass and drums) found themselves catapulted into overnight celebrity, constantly on tour in Europe and America, then around the world. But in 1978, exhausted, Loussier retired the trio and went home not for a vacation, but to pursue other musical projects such as composing that didn't involve touring. Called upon to revive the trio with new members for the 300th birthday of J.S. Bach in 1985, Loussier has kept the group going, and has issued a new series of recordings.

Although he and his wife Elizabeth Note have visited the Bay Area in recent years, "The last time I performed in San Francisco was in 1964 or '65 on a concert with Marlene Dietrich," Loussier recalled in a recent phone call from France. It wasn't his plan to stay away so long. "I like America very much and San Francisco is one of the most beautiful cities in the world." But he hasn't exactly been promoting himself as a touring act. His current trio did play UCLA last year, and when San Francisco Performances asked him to do a concert here, he was more than happy to accommodate. However, his entire American tour this year is just two concerts, San Francisco, and State University of New York at Purchase, where he has performed annually for many years. Meanwhile, he continues to mount short tours through Europe and Asia at a leisurely pace. And while to

non-musicians the thought of world travel may sound appealing, Loussier admitted, "The concerts are marvelous, but I never liked touring. The travel is awful, you lose your sense of time, food is bad, you're always tired, and the actual time spent moving from one city to the next is boring."

Tonight's concert is divided into two sections: "The first half is Bach," Loussier said, "and the second half includes one of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, and works by French composers Debussy, Satie and Ravel." However, within those confines, Loussier says, "It is always different every time we play because the improvisation always changes."

Today Loussier and his wife live in the Swiss ski resort of Verbier, with another home in Cour Sur Loire, France. Born in 1934 in Angers, in northwestern France, Loussier took his early abilities at piano through the conservatory, and for a time afterward played classical piano in South America and the Middle East, working also as accompanist for such singers as Charles Aznavour and Catherine Sauvage. Then came 1959 and his Play Bach Trio.

"I don't know of anybody really doing this before," Loussier said, "but now many people have tried combining jazz and classical, mixing them up.

"For years I was trying to reconcile my love of both classical and jazz. I couldn't decide. I was a classical pianist, I was playing the great works, but I wanted to create my own way, and not have to play music the same way every time. I'm not a jazz pianist, not in the traditional sense of someone who plays standards and performs in nightclubs. But I improvise, and it is in the jazz idiom. And to change what was written, to extend the jazz harmonies, it was a disease I had."

There were role models for Loussier's approach. He cites especially the George Shearing Trio and Modern Jazz Quartet, both playing jazz in what could be construed as chamber ensemble settings. The Jacques Loussier Trio was, and remains, as much a chamber group as a jazz combo.

When Loussier began playing around with J.S. Bach he found the freedom he was looking for, and created his own voice and style in the process. He picked the Baroque giant first because he loved the music, and then, "because the harmonies Bach used were found in jazz. And his themes often were in the same number of measures-12, 16, or 72-that are in jazz. The improvisations are found in Bach and jazz, too. Bach's cadenzas-in fact most cadenzas during his time-were made for improvising by the soloists in the concerts. The artists was supposed to improvise. It's an art that has been lost to classical music mainly because of how it is taught now. This is why I left conservatory. I had great teachers, I got to play the music of geniuses, but it was the same way every time."

So Loussier began improvising on Bach with a jazz swing to the rhythm. "It's a different spirit, an attraction that is tense and deep. When you are in good shape and it goes well, it is very interesting. And hopefully there is value in the music and a sense of fun. It is not my desire to be very serious, although I am very serious about the music, but to have fun making music and to have listeners really enjoy it. I like the danger of trying to do something without knowing where I will go. It is always dangerous: where to put your fingers next?"

Some of that danger and fun came through in the concert recordings the original Trio made. But over the years of touring, of 60-70 dates in different countries every year, the spontaneity and freshness was worn down by the monotony of road life. In 1978 Loussier retired his trio, and moved into his home music studio where he composed, "everything from electronic to full orchestra." When he wasn't using the studio for his projects, he was renting it out to other artists, including Sting, Elton John, Yes and Pink Floyd. Pink Floyd? "Roger Waters (the Floyd's chief songwriter) was a good friend. We played tennis together. He recorded many of the voices for *The Wall* in my studio, and the rest of the band came in for the mixes."

In 1984 Loussier found himself inundated by requests from agents and concert promoters to revive the Play Bach Trio for the 1985 J.S. Bach 300th birthday celebrations. Well rested and ready for some fresh adventure, Loussier did not call on his former partners, but sought out new musicians to work with, hoping for yet new ideas to come into play in the music. But the year-long birthday party soon extended to recordings for prestigious classical and jazz label Telarc. Performing at a relaxed and sensible pace, the trio has been going for 18 years, with drummer André Arpino, whose long career includes working with artists from Charles Aznavour and Mirelle Mathieu to Ella Fitzgerald and Stan Getz; and Strasburg-born bassist Benoit Dunoyer de Segonzac, who joined five years ago.

"We have played together long enough that we know each other well," Loussier said. "We can improvise with a deep understanding. It isn't just three fantastic jazz artists getting together one time, but more like one mind in three bodies. At least that is how it feels to us, that when one of us introduces a new harmony or shifts the rhythm, the others listen and respond, and come up with something that is beautiful and, we hope, create the most perfect music. That is the goal."

The trio repertoire has expanded beyond the Baroque, mostly into French impressionists of the early 20th century, with Telarc recordings of Ravel's *Bolero*, Satie piano compositions, and Debussy, as well as Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. The 2001 release, *Baroque Favourites*, includes works by Handel, Domenico Scarlatti, Albinoni, Pachelbel and Marin Marais. The latest CD is last year's *Haendel*. The recordings have sold a respectable 500,000 copies so far, not quite on the scale of the original Play Bach hit, but far more than most of today's jazz and classical stars sell.

And just when it seems clear that Loussier is interested only in the high Baroque and French impressionism, he admits that his current passion is to add a Beethoven piece to the repertoire. "I'm thinking of doing the Alegretto movement from Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. It takes a long process before I am happy when I do this. It must be calibrated to do what I wish to do, to understand the music of the composer, and to come up with something that does not take from the dignity of the music, to reflect the colors of the composer, then to take my creative ideas and add them, and also to have fun. It is not like what I come up with is better than the original. It is different and tries to find new things in the music." That thought permeates everything Loussier has done, which now includes taking Bach and jazz into the 21st century.