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Interview with Boris Benko of Silence (Slovenia)

by evereve

How did it all begin? Whose idea was it to start making music together?

It was my idea, actually. I played no instruments back then, neither could I sing. My goals were therefore adequately humble: I just wanted to make the best band in the world and change music as we know it.

In the beginning there were three of you, now you are a duo. What was the reason why Matjaz Ferenc left the band? And what, by the way, were his duties in Silence?

This is a question for Matjaz, not us. He played the guitar and sang back vocals. He was also a talented songwriter.

Did you play bands other than Silence?

Yes. In elementary school, Hladnik and I had a band called Deadline. We wrote only two songs: Omega Man (inspired by the sci-fi movie with Charlton Heston) and The Ballad of Love. Horrific music but nevertheless charming in a peculiar way. The musical equivalent of Ed Wood movies.

Why it's called Silence? Who did suggest this name (are you aware that there are at least 15 other Silences in the world :))? Is there some special story or conception behind it?

Not really. It's a nice paradox, that's all. As for other bands named Silence: who could blame them, it's a sexy name.

Why did it take so long to release the first album (almost 5 years)?

Well, it was probably due to our relentless perfectionism. Or maybe we were just too shitty to get a label.

Do you have any special musical education?

Hladnik has some classical training, I'm a self-taught musician.

What bands/music inspired/influenced you in the beginning of your musical career?

In the beginning, we listened to what teenagers listened to in the 80's. We've broadened our taste a little over the years, but we still get excessively emotional and suffer a dramatic loss of objectivity whenever we hear the music of our youth.

Do you listen to electronic music (something like synthpop, industrial, ebm, etc)?

Occasionally. Hladnik has a fetish for the German dark scene (Wolfsheim, Deine Lakaien...). As for me, I listen to so much Silence on account of our work that I prefer silence in my spare time.

What's your attitude towards heavy metal music?

No specific attitude. A general rule applies to all types of music: it's either good or bad.

What Russian music do you know (apart from the classical music and Kalinka-Malinka :))

What do you mean, apart from classical music? Is there anything more original, modern and brilliant than Mussorgsky, Skriabin and, above all, Prokofiev? His scores for Eisenstein's Alexander Nevsky and Faintsinner's Lieutenant Kijé are probably the finest music I've ever heard.

What do you like the most from the last listened to?

We're currently studying the early works of Armando Trovaioli, Piero Umiliani, Ennio Morricone and John Barry for a play we're working on. Incredibly sexy music.

Do you feel like you belong to the so-called «dark scene/schwarze scene» (as you are signed to a specialized label, toured with notable representatives of the scene, etc.)?

I'm not really sure. I have a fetish for industrial landscapes, I'm a proud pessimist and I have a subconscious inclination toward minor keys. On the other hand, I like Vangelis and my eyes always brim with tears whenever I watch Singing in the Rain. I'll let you decide whether I'm a true darker or not.

Do you manage to earn a living by making music?

Yes.

Do you occupy yourselves with something other than music? Any hobbies? Can you imagine what would you do if you didn't start playing music?

It's hard to nurture hobbies due to the time consuming nature of our work, but we try our best. If I weren't a musician, I would probably be a comic artist. Or Batman. Or a gardener.

The overall quality and hit potential of your songs can easily outdo most «stars» of the modern synth scene. Nevertheless, Silence still remains rather little known. What's that – a deliberate position or just lame promotion?

A bit of both, I guess. Being a rather obscure theatre composer has its advantages – you can make stylistically diverse projects and not worry about pissing off your label and alienating listeners. However, being famous also has its charms. For instance, it enables you to piss off your label and alienate your listeners with stylistically diverse projects.

In Russia it's almost impossible to get your albums on CDs, that's why the majority of your fans simply download them from the Internet. What do you think about such illegal distribution of your music and media piracy in general?

I don't mind. I'm a romantic, I believe music – culture in general – and scientific knowledge should be free of charge and available to anyone.

Now let's turn to your musical works. Is it true that the name of your second album Unlike A Virgin is a sort of allusion to Madonna's Like A Virgin (1984)? If so, then what did you mean by that?

That's a question for my father. He's the one who came up with the titles for our first and second album.

When and how did you come up with the idea to create such a grandiose mystification as «Matej Smolnik»? What did you want to say by that? Do you feel satisfied with the results?

I will avoid answering this question, for there is nothing more unattractive and disappointing than hearing the truth behind the myth. There's no specific moral to draw from Vain. People see so many meanings behind it, probably because of the amoral nature of the project. It's easiest to find morals in amorality.

In the lyrics section on the Vain page there is lyrics for the song called «Losing Faith». Is there any chance for us to hear this song someday?

Perhaps, some day. Don't lose faith.

You sing predominantly in English. Is it just because you want to reach a wider audience? Or is it just more difficult to write good lyrics in your native language? Do you have any plans for an album in Slovene only?

We do it to address a wider audience. Our next album will – for this reason – most likely be in Chinese. As for the album in Slovene: last year, we've released *Ljubezen na smrt*, a theatre soundtrack with 15 songs in Slovene.

Until 2003 you worked with a producer. Now you produce your music yourselves. Why did you decide to go on without external help? What do you think are the pros and cons of such freedom?

We ditched producers in order to keep all the money for ourselves, naturally. No, seriously – we're not too crazy about producers. Mostly because they've become just another example of the philosophy of today's society – form before contents. The music industry has elevated the producer's role to absurdity; we now have singles from Timbaland featuring One Republic. Charmingly perverse: the author and performer of the song presented as a guest of the song's producer.

Could you tell us a little bit about your work on the latest Laibach's album Volk. What was your role in creating the album? Many fans of Laibach didn't accept Volk due to its more mainstream and pop (in comparison to the previous works) sound. At the same time, many of your fans welcomed Volk just as another Silence's album, only with a leading guest vocal. So what's the difference between Volk and Silence? Or, put the other way round, how much Silence is in Volk?

Our influence is doubtlessly audible; after all, we've written and produced 13 from the 14 songs featured on the album. However, the album's elaborate concept – an idea we would never consider using in a Silence record – and Milan Fras' vocals are distinctive elements that turn Volk into a typical Laibach album.

In 2006 Accession records released Key – a 2CD anthology of Silence, which you described as containing «less faulty tracks and most interesting failures». Yet what do you think is your «least faulty» song? And «most faulty» one?

Our least faulty song hasn't been written yet. Songs are always perfect in your mind as ideas, as the future. Once they are recorded, they become history. Hence, they are faulty.

As far as I know, Primoz doesn't like playing «Skin». Why it is so?

He claims it's not a real Silence song. You'll have to ask him for a better explanation.

A few questions concerning your theatre soundtracks. Do you feel any difference between the process of writing a score for some play/performance and writing songs for your own albums? How do you choose which play/performance to write music for?

In theatre, the guidelines and concept for creating the score are provided by the script. Making solo albums is somewhat harder, for it is our obligation to come up with a concept. As for the second part of your question; the commissions we accept are usually selected by our schedule.

Among your theatre soundtracks there are some for children's plays. What is more difficult – to compose for adults or for children?

There's no real difference. Is there any difference between children and adults? Adults are just oversized children that have replaced one set of toys with another.

Your latest work The Passion Of The Cold consists entirely of classical music pieces. Could you tell us a bit more about this work? Why did you decide to compose classical score for exactly these two plays?

The Passion of the Cold consists of two CD's with 30 tracks from (or inspired by) Tomaz Pandur's plays Barroco and Caligula. The music was performed by the Young Symphonic Orchestra of Madrid, the Croatian Cantanti Trasfigurati mixed choir and a fistful of remarkable international soloists. The album also features several electronic adaptations of the themes. The record is conceived as a 32-page hard-cover book and contains – apart from the CD's – a selection of play-related texts and photos. Only 500 numbered and hand-signed copies can be ordered exclusively at our site, www.silence-zone.com. The idea to record these soundtracks with classical ensembles was proposed by the director.

Is there any chance that your fans will be able to listen to other soundtracks, which still remain unreleased, in particular those for children's plays?

I'm afraid the chances are slim.

In the Unreleased section of your website you have several live performances. Are there any plans for releasing a Live/Unplugged album?

I don't believe we'll release these recordings due to their poor quality.

At least one of live shows was recorded by the television. Are there any plans for releasing a DVD? Another interesting variant for a DVD release could be Tesla Electric Company play. What do you think?

These are all nice ideas. The tricky part is finding labels as enthusiastic as we are to realize them.

What's your attitude towards playing live and touring? It seems like your tour life is not that intensive, right?

I wish you were right. We played 30 theatre performances last year alone. Hladnik had about 80 gigs with Laibach, I appeared as guest in ten. We even managed to squeeze in a few Silence concerts.

What kind of concerts do you prefer to play – «plugged» or unplugged?

Electronic gigs are loud and physical, acoustic ones are more exacting and intense. Both are hard work. We're both hairsplitting assholes - there's little rock'n'roll in our veins - so it's hard for us to find gratification in the oftentimes guerillic nature of live performances.

What about visiting concerts of other bands?

I'm not too fond of concerts.

You took part in Laibach's latest show in Moscow. Was it your first time visiting our country? What impressions did you get in general?

I visited Moscow and Volgograd with theatre performances a couple of years prior to the Laibach gigs in Moscow and St. Petersburg. To comment a massive country like yours based on three short visits and not sound banal is a difficult task, but I'll try: I liked the spaciousness of the cities, I loved the widespread habit of reading books in public spaces, I enjoyed Soljanka and pancakes with caviar, I loved the ubiquitousness of history and the sense of treading the same streets Prokofiev used to tread. I was also seriously impressed by (the passion of) the cold.

Would you mind visiting Russia again, but this time as Silence?

Of course not.

And finally one of the most «burning» questions for your fans today: Is there any plans for the next «true» Silence album on the Accession records?

Knowing the future, where's the fun in that?

Thank you for the interview! A few words for your Russian fans?

It's nice to know you exist.