

Eurovision's Golden Jubilee

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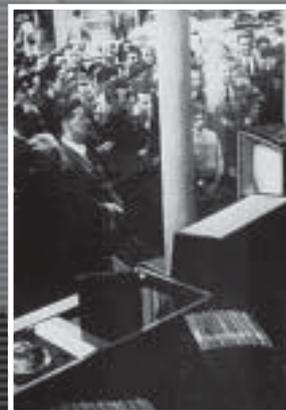
Jubilee

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On 6 June Eurovision will
celebrate its 50th anniversary!

... people were glued to the "box"



On 6 June 1954 Montreux, nestling between vineyards and Lake Geneva, was the setting for the first Eurovision transmission: an outside broadcast of the Narcissus Festival and a parade of 25 floats covered with flowers, yodellers, singers and a dozen brass bands. This was followed by a 90-minute guided tour of the Vatican, which finished with a homily, in Latin, by Pope Pius XII, on the promises and the dangers of television, before he blessed the audience, *urbi et orbi*, in six languages.

In the next few days there was the Palio in Sienna, a party for refugee

pean Television Season” of European programme exchanges, at the heart of which were the nine programmes exchanged for the World Football Cup. Watching these, people were glued to the “box” in homes and pubs and in front of shop windows.

“Lille Experiment”

Throughout these live broadcasts, engineers who had set up shop in the Lille town hall tower strove feverishly to prevent or repair network breakdowns. This control position gave its name to the operation: the “Lille Experiment”.

The impact of the Season was due not only to the programmes, some of which were not particularly striking, but rather to the intention to repeat the experiment. After all, the network that had been set up for the Season was of a more permanent nature than the circuits patched together for the coronation of Elizabeth II.

However, it was the coronation ceremony that released television from the straitjacket of different standards. It was then it became European, with thousands of French, Belgian, Dutch, German and, of course, British viewers witnessing – for the first time in history in such



The Narcissus Festival at Montreux and the Coronation of Elizabeth II

children in the Netherlands, an athletics meeting in Glasgow, a youth camp on the Rhine with the participation of Chancellor Adenauer, an agricultural fair in Denmark, a procession in the Grand’Place in Brussels, the Royal Navy parading past Queen Elizabeth, and a horse show in London.

Altogether, 18 programmes were broadcast during this first “Euro-

For everyone else it was Eurovision, a word invented by an English journalist, George Campey, who, in an article published in the London *Evening Standard* on 5 November 1951, had written concerning a BBC programme relayed by Dutch television: “*Eurovision is a system of cooperation for the exchange of television programmes between the countries of Western Europe, including Britain*”.

great numbers – the crowning of a sovereign.

After the first Season of exchanges in 1954, nothing could stop the tidal wave of Eurovision. Europe wanted to turn its back on the war, people were starting to travel again, to cross borders, to trade. International exchanges were the order of the day, and television reflected this new atmosphere.



Marcel Bezençon

The heads of Eurovision had set two key engines in motion: the main lines of international exchanges and the pooling of technical facilities. At the same time an ident was adopted: a starburst emblem accompanied by the opening ritornello from Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Tè Deum*.

People who had not thought of it before were considering buying their own set.

Pivotal date

To try and establish when the idea of Eurovision first germinated, we can go back to 8 September 1953. On that day in Lime Grove, in a meeting room of the London television centre, for the first time delegates from Europe's television nations got together and decided to organize the European Television Season in the summer of 1954.

It was then planned that each country should supply a programme to be relayed live in all the other participating countries.

The committee

At the meeting of the Administrative Council held in Monte Carlo in November, Marcel Bezençon (SSR) explained the reasons that had prompted the study group to request, unanimously, that a "television committee" be set up. As the delegates were not convinced of the usefulness of such a committee, the discussion dragged on and on. In the end, the Council proposed the setting up of a programme committee, which would be accepted by the General Assembly providing that the new committee concentrated mainly on television.

While planning for the Eurovision Summer Season in June continued, Marcel Bezençon – together with the help of René McCall of the BBC and Wladimir Porché of RTF – now started to prepare the Programme Committee for action.



World Football Cup

In February 1954, at the first meeting of the Programme Committee, it was decided that the Committee's Bureau should be run by the eight representatives of the organizations in the television countries (RTB/BRT/Belgium, DR/Denmark, RTF/France, ARD/Germany, RAI/Italy, NTS/Netherlands, SSR/Switzerland, and BBC/United Kingdom). Two working parties were established, one for the broadcasting of films on television (GTV/1) under Sergio Pugliese (RAI), and the other for live broadcasts (GTV/2), chaired by Jean d'Arcy. A planning group, chaired by Edouard Haas (SSR), had been added to GTV/2.

Problems

The first stumbling block the Programme Committee came up against was a concept for planning the programmes. At a television forum in Sandpoort (Netherlands) comprising television journalists from eight

European countries, only a few topics likely to be of international interest were found; the British journalists merely suggested "Another Coronation".

The clearing of films and technical equipment through customs posts proved to be a source of problems, not to mention the performers. For instance, the BBC was planning to contribute its famous variety show *Café Continental*, presented by unionized performers who, because of the expected increase in the audience figures (close on three and a half million viewers), demanded an increase of 50% in their fee. A compromise was found: the matter would be settled by the EBU Administrative Council. On the other hand, there was no agreement in Denmark with the Tivoli artistes. The programme *Rendezvous in Copenhagen* was cancelled and replaced by a prize cattle show, eliciting this comment from

Der Spiegel: "Thank God cows don't belong to unions."

Despite everything, the EBU was determined to make a success of the exchange season. The most reliable way of ensuring this was the planned coverage of the World Football Cup in Berne, for which Marcel Bezençon had negotiated the television rights with the Chairman of the Swiss Football Association, Mr Thomma. "How much are you offering?" asked the latter. "Nothing," said Bezençon. "Are you joking?" Marcel Bezençon was not joking, but nonetheless he offered to make up any shortfall in gate money to a maximum of 10,000 francs.

Leaflets announcing the broadcasts and advertising television in general had been published in the various participating countries. In Germany, the price of television sets was falling significantly. Obviously the television

