

INTERNET

By John Naughton

Why have over a million people looked at a coffee pot in Cambridge?

Seen in the flesh, if that is the right word, the most famous coffee pot in the world seems a mite drab. It is a Braun 12-cup filter machine, of the kind seen in millions of kitchens and offices. It sits in a drab corner of the Cambridge computer lab. Yet this mundane receptacle is the focus of worldwide interest. Each month, for example, around 32,000 people ask to view it, and since it first went on display in 1993 over a million browsers have checked it out.

Just why the pot should be so fascinating is one of the mysteries of the age. What is indisputable is that the photograph showing its current state is one of the most popular destinations on the World Wide Web (<http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/coffee/coffee.html>). What began as a private joke between a small group of graduate students is now apparently a global obsession.

Way back in 1991, when the Web was little more than a glint in the eye of Tim Berners-Lee at Cern (the particle physics centre in Geneva), Quentin Stafford-Fraser and his fellow students at the Cambridge Lab were forced to share a single coffee machine. 'Being highly dedicated and hard-working academics,' he recalls, 'we got through a lot of coffee, and when a fresh pot was brewed, it often didn't last long.' The problem was exacerbated by the fact that the lab is a labyrinthine building and some students had to navigate several flights of stairs to get their caffeine fix. By the time they got to the machine, the shameless hackers who worked nearby had often drained it.

In frustration, Stafford-Fraser mounted a video camera on a retort stand and ran the wires under the floor to a networked computer which had a 'frame-grabber' attached. Another student, Paul Jardtetzky, wrote a 'server' program which captured images of the pot every few seconds and Stafford-Fraser wrote a 'client' program which connected to the server and displayed an icon-sized image of the pot on everybody's screen. 'The image was only updated about three times a minute,' he says, 'but that was fine because the pot filled rather slowly, and it was only greyscale, which was also fine, because so was the coffee.' The whole thing took only 'a day or so' to rig up.

The students christened the coffee information system 'Xcoffee' (because it ran under X-Windows, a networking system which originated at MIT) and went back to work. Stafford-Fraser, who now works at the Olivetti research lab in Cambridge, describes the system as 'rather more useful than anything else I wrote while working on networks.' But he moved on to other things, the elderly frame-grabber hardware eventually gave up the ghost and Xcoffee would have followed punched cards into oblivion had not two other members of the computer lab, Daniel Gordon and Martyn Johnson, taken pity on it. They treated the coffee

pot to a new frame-grabber and decided to make its current state available not only to computer lab insiders, but to the entire world. They put the pot on the Web and the rest is history: it's now the most famous 'Webcam' site on the planet.

Watched pots never boil. Why then does this one simmer in the imaginations of so many distant viewers? One can understand why the camera on the seventy-seventh floor of the World Trade Centre in New York (<http://www.wtca.org/view.html>) would be a popular Web site. Likewise the one atop the Fairmont Hotel on Nob Hill in San Francisco which gives a panoramic view of the bay (<http://www.kpix.com/80/live/>). But an intermittently updated photograph of a jug of filtered coffee? Is this a variation on the craze for virtual fish that people have as screensavers on their personal computers? Or are the Web tourists who visit the Cambridge pot simply reformed caffeine addicts who cannot resist an occasion of sin, however distant? To cater for nocturnal visitors, the folks at the computer lab now leave a spotlight on the jug when they've gone home for the night, but add an injunction: 'Apart from the fares to get here, you need to be a member of the Coffee Club before partaking.' There's no such thing as a free drink.

VIDEOS

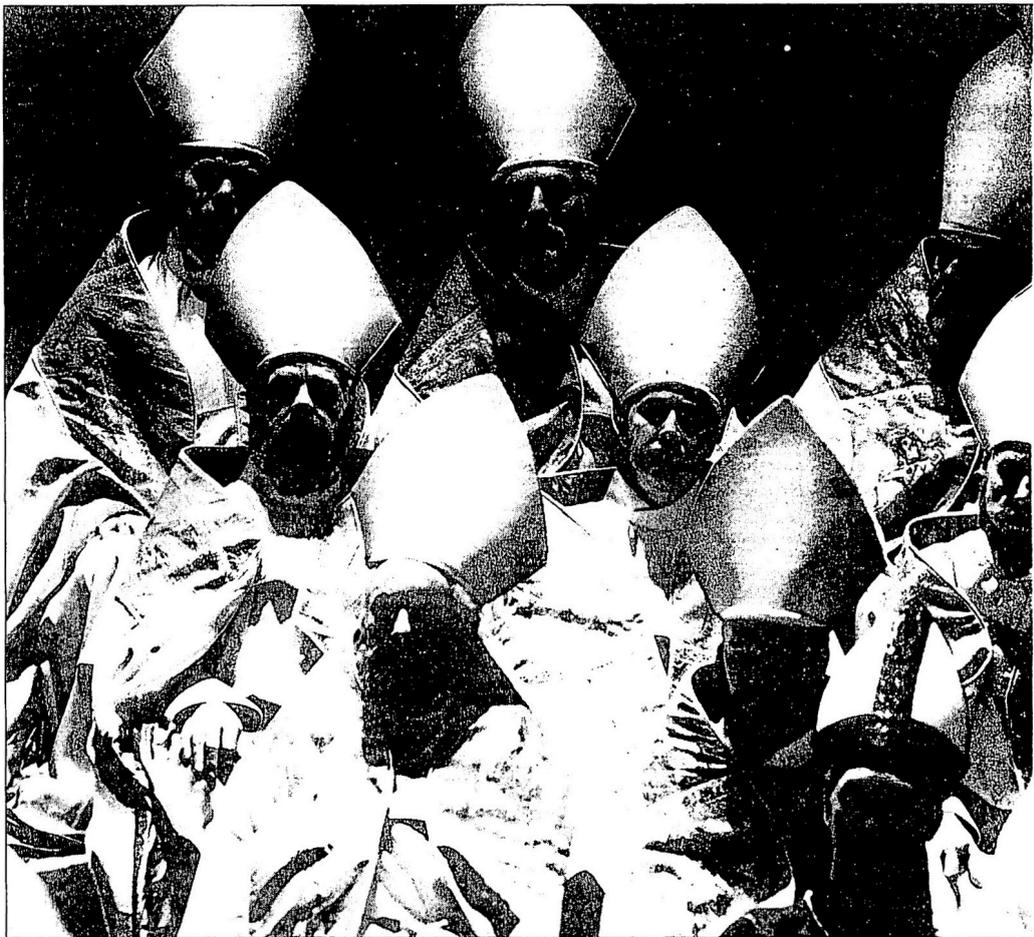
By Philip French

Streepy weepy

The Bridges of Madison County (1995, 12, Warner, Retail) The leaden prose of Robert James Waller's turgid novelette has been transmuted, if not into gold, at least into good honest pewter by director Clint Eastwood and screenwriter Richard LaGravenese. Eastwood plays the middle-aged photographer who brings some late romance into the life of Iowa farm-wife Meryl Streep, and both give substance to their roles. The film allows you to devour their slice of romantic adultery while having your cake of lifelong marital devotion.

Sabrina Fair (1954, U, CIC, Retail) Intermittently sparking Billy Wilder comedy, a modern Cinderella story in which a chauffeur's Paris-educated daughter (a delightful Audrey Hepburn) pursues and is pursued by the dislikeable sons (Humphrey Bogart, William Holden) of her father's rich New York employer. More snobbish and slick than satirical and sophisticated. Released the same day as Sidney Pollack's inferior remake, *Sabrina* (1995, PG, CIC, Retail), with Julia Ormond an inadequate replacement for Hepburn.

Devil in a Blue Dress (1995, 18, Col-Tri-Star Rental/Retail) Walter Mosley's first period thriller lovingly brought to the screen by writer-director Carl Franklin. Denzel Washington is perfectly cast as the black private eye Easy Rawlins, who goes down the mean streets of a Chandlersque 1948 Los Angeles, casing the city from its sordid lower depths to its squalid aristocracy. The movie's special quality is the way its black perspective corrects our view of the classic period of the hard-boiled thriller and the Hollywood film noir.



A clique of cardinals in *Palestrina's* second act which highlights the plotting and backstabbing that went on at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. Photograph by

Art of the three-minute Pope song

CLASSICAL

By Andrew Porter

Many operas - from Monteverdi's *Orfeo* to Harrison Birtwistle's *Mask of Orpheus* - have illustrated the powers of music in action when united to words and scenic representation. Some - Rossini's *Turco in Italia*, Strauss's *Capriccio* - have been operas about the making of an opera. Others have exemplified a creator's conflicts as he strives to reconcile tradition with potentially iconoclastic thought, or justify devotion to art when action seems a more urgent imperative. Such works are *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Hans Pfitzner's *Palestrina*, Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*, and Peter Maxwell Davies's *Taverner*.

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg has been on Covent Garden bills since 1899. *Taverner* was created by the company in 1972. A version of *Mathis*, the action transferred from sixteenth-century Germany to modern America, appeared last season. And now the Royal Opera has produced *Palestrina*, to replace the British premiere of Henze's *Enchafed Flood* originally planned. It is a co-production with Rome and Düsseldorf.

Pfitzner's opera had its premiere in Munich, conducted by Bruno Walter, in 1917, and has held German stages since. Famous singers - Patzak, Wunderlich, Hotter, Schöffler, Lotte Lehmann, Sena Jurinac - have

been famous interpreters of its roles. Pfitzner called the piece 'a musical legend'. The *clou* is the 'legend' - a simplification of musical history, but drawn from essential truths - that by composing his limpid, serene *Missa Papae Marcelli*, in which the sacred text is audible and lascivious secular ditties play no part, Palestrina averted the Council of Trent's threatened ban on polyphonic church music.

In Act I of the opera, Cardinal Borromeo urges Palestrina to write the Mass, and the weary composer, reluctant to 'write to order', refuses. In the shadows, his great predecessors - Josquin, Isaac, and others unnamed - materialise and talk of duty. Then angels appear, singing the first strain of the Mass; and in a flood of inspiration, accompanied by a heavenly choir, he writes the work. At Covent Garden, his speed-writing, covering pages more swiftly than a dot-matrix printer, looks absurd.

Act II is the Council of Trent: a brutal, unidealistic world of rivalries and *realpolitik*. The Covent Garden programme - Alison Latham's, informative, alert handbook - juxtaposes plates of the Council and the House of Commons. To Pfitzner's Trent came proud cardinals, clowns, politicians, pious prelates, saints. He composed a wondrous, high-spirited, bitter scherzo in the modern manner, with episodes entertaining, others stirring and elevated, and at the last a manifestation of brutality.

Act III is brief. Act I has last-

ed almost two hours, Act II an hour. Now, in a half-hour, Palestrina's achievement is hailed through the streets of Rome - the Pope himself comes to praise him - but the composer sits pensive at his little house organ, sounding a single D as the curtain falls. A 'legend', yes; but a great one. Pfitzner musicked it in *Meistersinger*-honouring strains that run the course of consonance, dissonance, and cadence from Palestrina to Wagner, and on to Strauss. His music captures and enraptures musical listeners.

Covent Garden did *Palestrina* (as it did *Mathis*) a disservice by shrouding the wordy, word-important opera in an original-language veil. But it did *Palestrina* proud by engaging what must be an expensive international cast, with many eminent performers. Did the money then run out? The first-night show seemed to need a week or two's more busy rehearsal. The Trent scenes offered clumsy village-hall enactment, pardonable in a shoe-

string St Pancras show, unexpected at the Royal Opera. I've admired Nikolaus Lehnhoff's work in San Francisco (the *Ring*), the Met (*Salome*), Glyndebourne (*Makropoulos*), and the ENO (*The Prince of Homburg*). But his *Palestrina* was flimsy, superficial, and stazy. Not once, which would have been once too often, but four times were Palestrina's precious manuscript pages tossed high into the air and scattered. The women playing youths - Ruth Ziesak as Palestrina's son Ighino (true, sweet, but non-legato) and Randi Stene as his pupil Silla (ditto) - struck principal-boy poses. At the Council, wild overacting was evidently encouraged.

Lehnhoff's intention was perhaps to question, to debunk, the elevated aspects of the lofty work. He scrapped the composer's stage directions. The close was not Palestrina musing at his organ but a tenor bleakly stationed before a black curtain, miming with a finger the note D that closes the score. Pfitzner's detailed and

carefully imagined long be posed their slighted. The first act was blithely upstage; communicative contact, behind proscenium table, no great nant portrait. Lucrezia, no h a vista of the l

When the appeared to P. ically garbed, l from the thi onward, l the flowing white of a centuries was lost. Each and elevated not Palestrina self. Homag. Either way, a

The simple Tobias Hohe bring the seco forward, pro as if on a mod there were so cials. Kim B. (I'd like to he-

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The Observer Hodge Award 1997

Death of a Salesman

By Arthur Miller