

BONESANA,

Bonesana
by Matthieu Cortat
Gestalten Fonts
www.gestalten.com

BÓNĚŠAŇĀ,

BONEΣANA,

БОНЭСАНА.

PROFESSIONAL (PRO)

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INTERVIEW

with Matthieu Cortat by Michael Mischler / Gestalten Fonts, June 2009.

The below interview text has been set in Bonesana.

Michael Mischler: Can you give us an introduction to your work?

Matthieu Cortat: I work at the 'Musée de l'Imprimerie et de la Banque' (Museum of Print and Bank) in Lyon and look at old type and lettering every day. Many of them are nicely made and carefully cut, but that doesn't necessarily make them all interesting in today's context. A lot of font designers glorify the old days but I refuse to believe in a 'golden age' of type. Contemporary printing processes are no better or worse in comparison to classical printing methods from hundreds of years ago aside from the fact that we're able to print in larger productions now. As a type designer myself, I try to find and use typefaces which help to express the 'spirit' of the text whether it's typesetting for books or catalogues or anything at all. If I don't find the typeface I want to use, I draw my own.

So you work as graphic designer and as type designer. Is it difficult to be both? For example, you start a graphic design job and you realise that you have to draw a typeface for this job. It takes so much time to develop a good, working typeface, so how do you precede in a situation like this?

Drawing a typeface correctly takes time – sometimes years for some cases (like Bonesana). I generally only create typefaces over a long period of time. For example, I'm a member of the graphic design team at a small publishing company in Switzerland (Éditions de la Société jurassienne d'Émulation, www.sje.ch) and for a few months now, I've been working on a typeface for a new collection of books. We don't have strict deadlines,

so it makes this kind of thing possible. In the case of Bonesana, I created detailed refinements such as the dotted letters for Arabic transliteration for example, and the Greek letters as a second step, when the publishing house (Éditions de l'École Normale Supérieure Lettres et Sciences humaines, Lyon) asked me to create them for one of their publications.

Can you tell us about the font, the concept (idea) and its background?

Bonesana is similar to the transitional serif type Baskerville, but slightly narrower. It's curves and proportions are quite 'reasonable' and comparable to the transitional typefaces of the early 18th century. As an admirer of the works of Pierre-Simon Fournier, I tried to find a certain 'step' between his works and the early neoclassical forms of Bodoni (a series of serif typefaces designed by Giambattista Bodoni in the late 1700s).

Can you tell us about the weights? Can you explain why you didn't create Bonesana in the bold weight?

Creating different weights for a small font family is a 'modern' thing. Bold faces appeared in the 19th century, especially for advertising and newspapers. Bonesana is not made for advertising and newspapers, but mostly for books (which don't necessarily need bold faces). That's the first reason. Here is the second one: I don't like bold serif faces. A sans serif font grows richer with weights: it gives it possibilities for titling, posters, etc. but for sans serif typefaces, it just provokes very bad usage by people who don't have a lot of imagination in setting text. 'Putting it in bold' is easy. What about italics? small caps? different body sizes? and so on...

LATIN CAPITALS

a few samples.

A
B C
D E F
G H I J
K L M N O
P Q R S T U V
W X Y Z and so on...

GREEK

capitals, lower cases, small capitals.

A

B Γ

Δ Ε Ζ

Η Θ Ι Κ

Λ Μ Ν Ξ Ο

Π Ρ Σ Τ Υ Φ

Χ Ψ Ω Ω Μ Σ Ω

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α β γ δ ε ζ η θ ι κ λ μ ν

ξ ο π ρ σ τ υ φ χ ψ ω ι υ ä é

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Α Β Γ Δ Ε Ζ Η Θ Ι Κ Λ Μ Ν Ξ Ο Π Ρ Σ Τ Υ Φ Χ

Ψ Ω Α Β Γ Δ Ε Ζ Η Θ Ι Κ Λ Μ Ν Ξ Ο Π Ρ Σ Τ Υ Φ

Χ Ψ Ω α β γ δ ε ζ η θ ι κ λ μ ν ξ ο π ρ σ τ υ φ χ ψ ω ι ύ ä é ή ό ú ώ

Further, these ‘post-modernist bold’ faces are often poorly drawn. The third reason is more of a historical one – trying to find the spirit of late Fournier to early Bodoni-style – I couldn’t draw bold faces since they didn’t exist at this time! Making bold versions of fonts like Garamonds, Jenson or Bonesana is kind of nonsense.

How would you describe the character or creative potential of your typeface?

It was first used for the reprint of the book *Dei delitti e delle pene* (On Crimes and Punishment) written by the Italian philosopher Cesare Bonesana, Marquis of Beccaria in The Age of Enlightenment. Hence the name of the font. The typeface was created in the same spirit reflecting universalism, clarity and reason. So, the creative potential is quite wide: Bonesana has character sets for ALL European languages, including Greek and those using Cyrillic characters. When drawing these different versions, I tried to follow all the localities since for example Cyrillic lettering is not exactly the same in Russian, Ukrainian, Macedonian, etc. Of course, all the signs are also available in small caps as well as ornamental capitals in the taste of those of Jacques-François Rosart, or FournierleJeunehimself. Withitsdifferent possibilities of ligatures and figures (old style, tabular or lining), including 1641 glyphs, this type is mainly designed for books, but it is also perfectly legible and beautiful in big body sizes.

Yes, it is a marvellous typeface. You have managed to create a striking balance in creating a contemporary interpretation of classical typefaces. Beautiful!

Thanks. Like music, typography is about ‘interpretation’.

Does developing a typeface start with the character (the individual letter) or are there intermediate stages in which a kind of rhythm develops?

Personally, each typeface I create begins years before the final drawings. I sketch letters all the time – on restaurant tablecloths, ticket stubs, opened mail, etc. I don’t find it very useful to draw them too perfectly. In the end, you need to totally reshape them on the computer anyway. So, I make tons of bad looking and invading little letters until I have a clear idea of what I want. Then I start the final drawing, directly on the computer.

That is very funny. I work in the same way on my own typefaces. All of the drawings in my sketchbooks plus my collection of

types that I find around me are mostly for inspiration to fill my head with different input. Then one day, your head is totally full and you feel something, like a need to draw a typeface. You start to do all these small sketches to provoke yourself and shape what was initially only an idea into a real picture. Perhaps this is a typical Swiss procedure or is it the same for graphic designers who design typefaces?

Is it really ‘Swiss’? In every art school (and not only in Switzerland), students are encouraged to use sketchbooks. Perhaps this is more of a generational thing. As far as I can remember, I don’t think any of my type teachers did this. I don’t know.

How do you decide to develop a new typeface?

I don’t have any special rules. Sometimes I’m working on a book and can’t find a typeface that matches the design I want. This is when I start thinking about new types. Sometimes I see interesting old signs when I’m walking down the street. I’ll forget about it and then two month later it’ll come back to me at which point I start to draw. There are a couple of fonts I’ve been working on for years. The initial ideas were good, but I’ll drop them if I’m not happy with them, even after working on them for some time. But perhaps I’ll pick it up again later. You never know where inspiration can come from.

I think this is an interesting moment in type design. Type designers can always go back to their library or to old drafts as a starting point to develop a font for a client or any project. It’s an ongoing process.

Exactly. Letter drawing is always an ongoing process. I think type design today is similar to your own handwriting or calligraphy in a way – it changes and develops throughout your life. Hot lettering on lead plates in the past was a different story. Once it was cut, you couldn’t make any alterations in the production phase.

And isn’t it tiring that a typeface is never actually finished? A book has to be printed at some point, but you can always find something that’s not quite right about a typeface, or is it precisely this that is the challenge?

A font is never perfect and it would be wrong to pretend the opposite. This is something you have to accept for example with calligraphy. Even if you work all

your life to perfect your strokes and write the purest letters, you will at the same time be more and more sensitive to their imperfections. With type design, there's always room for perfection. In a way, I think it's vain. Typefaces like Univers for example, are too designed for my taste – I find them boring! A piece of printed text is also made from its imperfections. I had the opportunity to see a typesetting manual made in the 19th century, in the late Didot style. The author who was also the printer didn't like hyphenations, therefore he wrote and set his text without any hyphens, and set them with perfect spacing. To me, that is rigid, cold and totally off the point in the framework of typography.

My idea is more about searching for perfection, not finding it. Perfection does not exist, unless they are machine-made. But we're human. We read texts as words: they're not to be analyzed as pure design. John Ruskin said 'you must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both.' I quite agree. Even if it were possible to find the perfect solution, I think it would be a boring one. A lot of things are interesting because they are imperfect. It's the little differences that make interesting moments.

And we don't have to forget the notion of time. Maybe you'll find the PERFECT solution at a certain moment... and read the text again a few years later and find it ugly!

How did you get into typography? Did you have a deciding special experience?

Tough question. At the École d'art de Lausanne, we had an introduction to type design course with François Rappo. It wasn't easy! I needed almost 3 months just to begin to understand what I was doing! And then, with reading books (Tschichold, Mandel...) and also meeting type designers with very different ideas (Underware, Hans-Jurg Hunziker), it became more and more fascinating. I finally decided to do my diploma about type design. Encouraged by François Rappo and Hans-Jurg Hunziker, I went on to Atelier National de Recherche Typographique in Nancy, France, which was a great experience. Perhaps there was no deciding moment – I think I was interested with the idea of service from the very beginning. Typography is not self-fulfilling – it's there only to serve the text with its tiny detailed refinements.

It places the type designer somewhere between craftsman and artist, which I find interesting. I also love books and literature – a good reason to make types, don't you think?

Are there any Swiss classical figures that have been influential for you? If so, how have they influenced you?

Of course, the work of Adrian Frutiger can't be ignored. His precision and his sense of balance make him a classic master. I learned a lot about rhythm and counterpunch with Hans-Jurg Hunziker. Now, about pure design, I feel closer to French type designers (José Mendoza y Almeida, Ladislav Mandel, the Antique Olive of Excoffon) or the English (the great classics Edward Johnston, Eric Gill and William Morris) than of the Swiss scene.

How does a typeface start to emerge for you? What triggers it, or are you always addressing a particular design problem?

First of all, I would prefer to talk about 'design questions' rather than 'design problems'. Questions call for answers and problems call for solutions and I don't think there are solutions in type design, only answers. Of course, all typefaces are designed for specific use and generally work in most circumstances. So it is logical to choose them.

But, nevertheless, I think it's not possible to understand all designs. I'm not sure I can admire graphic designers who can switch from one typeface to another without any problems. What triggers a typeface is perhaps, time. You have to learn, test, try, print, set, reset, and reset again to finally understand its spirit. So, maybe, a well understood typeface in the wrong medium is better than a well-drawn one used without a sense of its shapes. For example, I prefer to see Times New Roman cleverly set in a book (even if Times was designed for a newspaper, printed on bad paper), than a new beautiful font poorly set in a trendy magazine.

You are completely right. You have to discover typefaces and learn how they work. When it comes to your own fonts it's a bit different since you have a close relationship with them – you don't have to discover the font the same way you would with other typefaces. That makes it easier sometimes. But on the contrary, you become blind to certain things and often don't see what's possible with your font. I am often surprised and amazed when I see my typefaces used by other

CYRILLIC

capitals, lower cases, etc.

А

Б В

Г Д Е

Ж З И Й

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П Р С Т У Ф Х

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designers. Does this happen to you as well?

Yes, and I like it. After drawing, we have to let the baby bird leave the nest. I'm very curious to see what people do with Bonesana.

With so many new fonts coming out, would it make more sense to revise existing fonts that work well and improve them?

When you 'revise' Garamond (there are tons of Garamond reinterpretations at the moment), you can work on shapes, on spaces, curves, etc. to make the perfect improved version. When it comes time to print, you're met with a slew of questions. What about the stamping? and the paper? Isn't it almost dishonest to print 21st century texts, in 21st century language, with 21st century printers, on 21st century paper, but set in a 16th century typeface? Wouldn't it be more honest and interesting to find new designs better linked to our world? You can refer to the past (as I did in a certain way for Bonesana), search its spirit, but not simply copy it.

What do you think about the future of type design? What aspects do you think will be interesting in the future, also from a technical point of view?

I'm not exactly an expert when it comes to the technical side of things. I don't want to rely too much on the technical rules: tools are only tools. What's important is the result.

So, about the future – an interesting point is the design of multiple character sizes, with different drawings for different sizes. I did work on this with the typeface Stuart. But, this kind of things seems to be useful only for professional customers. Common

type users generally don't understand the reasoning for this.

When I look at ordinary design (and also VIP graphic designers' posters) on the streets, I think that for the future, what's important is not necessarily the design, but above all, educating people. Almost everybody can read, but there are really only a few people who are able to see the difference between two type designs, between and “, ° and °, REAL SMALL CAPS OF RESIZED CAPITALS, and so on. Some people are used to stretching out texts, making deformations, etc.

FIGURES,
punctuation, and other glyphs.

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e non le cose per le parole?