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Interview with Bruno Vlahek

1- Let me say, first of all, that listening to your piano playing one can perceive the visceral coming out in all grades. Do you perceive music that way?

*It is a very complex question. I stay somehow flattered by your comment on my piano playing; I believe that giving all your being for the purpose of musical expression is something that stands on the way to true art-making. The way I primary perceive music is definately based on a level of sensation. In that sense, I perceive music as any other person who does not make it for living but simply loves it. However, as a professional musician, I cannot help myself but to perceive music on the intellectual level as well. The music or any other artistic expression is like a human being – made of concrete body-part which is directed by very rational brain and a soul-part which is something hidden and unique to each person. No one directs soul, it is what we truly are. I think the same thing is with music -composer cannot write a piece without using his intellect, a performer cannot prepare a good interpretation without it, but what really stands behind this processes is personal imagination, idea, temperament and state of emotion. Those are the things that actually move me and which I try to present in music.*

2- Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini by Sergey Rachmaninov, the piece you played in his last concerts in Spain is a challenge for a pianist, being one of the most difficult pieces for piano playing. Do you agree?

*Paganini's 24th Caprice for violin was through history among the various composers one of the most popular themes to set variations on it. Some of the best-known examples of such variations in pianistic literature are contributions by Brahms, Liszt and later Lutosławski. The original piece, also a set of variations by itself is a highly virtuoso, often called „demonic“ work and brings the violin technique to its extremes. In that sense, writing a variations on it naturally presumes that a piece should bring a challenge for the performer. Rachmaninov makes no exception here. The piece is full of tricky passages and explores all kinds of virtuoso piano technique. But in my opinion the greatest value of this piece lies in the fact that the technical aspect of the work is never goal for itself but is one of the most important utilities to create a broad spectrum of different characters, moods and ideas. By analizing it very deeply, I became stunned and fascinated how each note is there with an exact reason and has the meaning in the whole unity of composition. This masterpiece goes far beyond the original theme from the very first bars and creates a completely new world, complex and rich, which is so typical for Rachmaninov.*

3-A concert, or a concert with orchestra is an energy exchange with the public. How do you perceive this flow?

*For me it is one of the most exciting phenomenons that occur during the public concert. That energy exchange which I like to call „X-Factor“ does not have same intensity at all the moments of performance. Sometimes there is less of it, sometimes more, but that invisible yet magically present connection seems to erase a border between active (performer) and passive (audiance) body in the hall. The moments in which I can feel that whole audiance is breathing together with me, or even not breathing at all - are exactly the moments which stay intagliated in my mind for a long time after the concert.*

4-Your namesake, the great Argentine pianist Bruno Gelber said that the piano is his voracious lover, do you share it?

*I can understand such a thought although I sincerely cannot find myself in it. Perhaps it will sound less poetic, but I personally like to think about relationship between pianist and piano as a relationship between horseman and his horse. The horseman is the one that has the command over the horse but they have to jump over the barrier together. For a real success, their relationship has to be full of understanding and appreciation for each other, as well as they have to know exactly each other's limits. The thing with the piano is just very similar to that – it is my most faithful and helpful companion who shares with me the same path that leads to the point of musical creation.*

5-Why modern compositions do not manage to reach the general public as it happens, for example, with the great classics? Do you think that people, in that sense, are very conservative about classical music?

*We have today paradoxal situation with modern classical music. At the concert programs in past centuries there were always new works performed. Today, the situation is completely opposite – we can hear at the concerts mostly works of the past centuries - from Baroque to the first half of 20th century. Works of second half of the 20th century are very rarely being heard today in regular concert seasons. I think the reason for that is that audiance cannot recognize themselves in artistic expression of modern music. We live in a time of cell phones, fast food, traffic noise, each sort of public control; so, when people come to the concert hall, they just do not want to hear the same sounds they hear on the street or in subway. To the general public, most of such contemporary music represents only a meaningless bunch of sounds. After a hard-working day, people want to relax or feel some excitement, something to which they could relate to. This paradox is partially a fault of composers themselves but on the other side, we have to be aware that the music is just copy of a time in which we are living. So, what kind of art we have today, such is our enviroment at this very moment. Furthermore, what is also very important to say is that some things need a time to be evaluated properly. We have today masterpieces of modern music, on the same level as we have masterpieces from the past. From historical distance, one day we will be able to have a look on it in a true light and will have great works recognized the way they deserve to be.*

6-Currently, has the piano playing evolved? What are the differences that you observe between the pianists of today and those of the past century?

*At some point, the piano playing has much evolved but on some point not specifically. Today we have in the world much more people that decided to devote themselves to professional pianism than it could be even imagined in the past. It is a standard today that young students worldwide play extremely difficult pieces at very high level which I don't think was really so much expanded case before. However, truly great pianists, as is today, as were in past - are very few. While listening to the great performers of the past, I have an impression they had more spontaneous relation to the music; they managed to extract from the instrument somehow more meaningful essences than we perhaps hear of the contemporary pianists. We are today too much determined by different sorts of perfectionism which becomes a purpose of its own, especially in aspect of pure piano technique. I have a feeling that great pianists of the past have cultivated a slightly different kind of perfectionism – a one that follows a true musical idea. That is something that matters, and all other aspects are just tools to reach that idea. A society which we make part of, is one big competition which is every day getting bigger and faster. Classical music is unfortunately not excepted from that global phenomenon. Anyway, not to be misunderstood, just the same thing as I said about modern music, there are „great“ pianists who are active today as well, but to properly evaluate and compare them with those „greats“ of the past, we also need a historical distance.*

7- Finally, Lleida is a very special city to you, since in 2008 you won the first prize at the international piano competition Ricard Viñes, what do you remember those days?

*Well, first of all, I will remember the beautiful Auditorium Enric Granados where the competition took place. It was in July and those days were extremely hot, but inside the building was the feeling like in a big refrigerator. I remember very well my performances there and nervous expectances if my name will be on the list of those who passed to to the next phases of competition. Very special moments I spent there with my girlfriend Dubravka Vukalovic who accompanied me on the second piano in the Piano Concerto by Saint-Saëns which I played in the final round of the competition. Finally, I remember a fabulous monument, one of the most impressive places I ever visited in my life – La Seu Vella. The unique mysticism of that place made an extremely strong impression on me. Furthermore, I was invited to be one of the jurors at the same competition in 2009 which was my first job as a part of the jury. I got acquainted there also with some very nice people from the Conservatory and Auditorium, so all of that situates Lleida in a very special place in my heart.*