

MUSIC AS A MIRROR OF EXPERIENCES

Interview to Bruno Vlahek

by Ona Jarmalavičiūtė

You are a professional pianist as well as a composer. How do you balance all activities in your every day life?

It is a matter of good organization and deadlines. To be at full productivity, I found that I need to have many projects coming on. I can work very fast and efficiently especially if I know that until certain date the specific composition has to be done, or that I have to play a new piano concerto very soon. It is very stressful however, and I find it exhausting, but at the same time I work at my best. On the other hand if I have a lot of time, the work stretches over too long period and takes too much time to get the final result. I don't have any special rituals, neither performing or composing, it all depends on current projects and situation.

You are a laureate from many international competitions. Would you say that competitiveness is healthy in the field of music? How do you understand piano competitions? Since your first win was at the age of 11, what impact would you say competing had on you as a pianist, as well as a music composer?

It is an ambiguous issue. The competitiveness forms part of a human nature and I don't think there is something wrong with that as long as it stays healthy. The problem with art competitions is that, once the candidates are all at the very high level, the juror's personal taste can prevail. Thus it is very uncertain to determine who really is "the best". What is very clear in the world of sport, in the art becomes blurry. There are so many wonderful musicians who don't fit the image of "competitors" and it is a shame that they are not heard of. But I must say that competitions have an important dimension for a young artist in terms of recognition. It is hard to get heard of you if you don't take part in important music competitions. It is a good opportunity to go to other country, to see where you are standing in comparison to others, to make new contacts. Also, it is important to prepare for some goal, to learn a big program and do your best in it. It certainly makes you better and stronger. Winning a prize gives to young person a publicity, new concert engagements, or composition commission – it is how the things usually get started in one's career.

You have received first piano lessons at the age of 9. Was that the beginning of your pull towards music? How could you describe your relationship with piano playing? How did it change or evolve during the time?

I come from a non-musical family and my gift for music was discovered by chance. Through piano I made my first touch to music. Although originally I wanted to play organ – an instrument to which I still dedicate my time occasionally, the piano is my most direct way to communicate through music. As each other person, I constantly evolve and it is definitely reflected in my piano playing. It is not only matter of skills, but mentally too. Sometimes I listen to my old recordings and I think to myself: "well, I would certainly play this place differently now". But that's how I played it then, how I felt it then, and it is alright. I fell in love with classical music primary by listening recordings, going to numerous concerts, by improvising and studying many scores of different styles and tendencies.

You have been developing as a composer since 2004. How did you discover passion for music composing? How did this change of career in your life happened?

There was a point in my life in which I got saturated by pure reproduction. There was an urge inside me to express myself in a more direct way. Playing other people's music is fantastic and very creative. It is incredible to be able to reproduce masterworks from the past, to learn from them and simply get fascinated by them. It is a music that will live forever. Same goes for famous paintings, books, or architectonic wonders. But you have to respect always the composer's idea that is behind it and of course, that makes you limited if you feel that bunch of ideas inside you. To express those ideas composition is the only way that sets you free. Today I manage to balance well between playing and composing, with priorities set according to the upcoming projects. In the meantime I also started to teach which added a new dimension to my music activity. Now I cannot imagine my life without any of those aspects.

How could you describe Croatian music traditions? What would you say are the most associated features? Is there Croatian music identity? What forms it?

Croatian history is very long and complex. Throughout history our nation was ruled by many foreign powers, yet we always managed to protect our identity. However all those different influences left a strong mark on our culture. Croatia is small country but very colorful and versatile. I was born in Zagreb – a strongly central European city, but for example, due to a specific geographic position southern parts of the country are under Mediterranean influence. All this versatility reflects in our music. Each part of country has its own specific dances, folklore instruments, even scales. There is a strong medieval and renaissance tradition, especially in Dalmatia, while the baroque music has a long tradition in northern Croatia. Music is very important to our nation and we gave many wonderful composers and performers.

What do you value the most in the music performance?

Authenticity of expression, honesty in regard to composer's idea and fascination by power of music.

You have toured and performed in different countries. Did you noticed any major differences in different cultures on how they organize concerts, rehearse?

The professionals keep their standards everywhere, no matter the country or culture. However there are some differences which make all this experiences charming. In China, for example, they will open a piano for you while wearing gloves – an expression of utter respect for an instrument and artist. In Switzerland everyone is very concerned to have pianos perfectly tuned and maintained. In the UK the rehearsal times are usually very short. In Spain it is not unusual for concerts to start very late in the evening, especially in the summer, 22:30 being a normal hour to play a concert. In Russia all the pieces from the program will normally be presented by the presenter, while Dutch or English public likes you to do it by yourself – having thus an intimate contact with performer. The audiences tend to have their special behaviors: somewhere they shout "bravo" and ask for encores, others seem to be much colder and reserved, but eventually you find out that they liked you even more than the first ones, so the things are not always as they seem!

What kind of impact do you want to have to the listener? If you knew that you had only one last opportunity to express yourself creatively, what message would you want to convey to others?

Depends if I am in the role of performer or composer. If I'm performing a piece, then I would try to do my best to transmit to the listener the same fascination I have for that specific work. To try to show him its beauties and secrets, hoping that I will be able to do it and that he will receive the message. If it is about my own piece, then I'd try to craft the score in such a way that the idea behind that piece arrives directly to listener's heart. A clear instruction is however necessary from the composer to the performer. That's why the score has to be as perfect as possible: so the future generations could understand it only by reading it. It is a magical triangle: composer – performer - listener. The idea has to pass fluently between them. Messages can be different though – emotions are always there, but it can be an invitation to think about specific issue, to be evoked spiritually or to be transmitted to another reality.

Define inspiration – does it exist? How does it manifest in your everyday life?

It certainly exists. Comes as a sort of superpower phenomena in which you feel that you need to do a certain thing. It just opens in front of you. You have the clear vision. Sometimes it comes very easily, sometimes I have to work hard and deserve it, but I'm sure that it didn't come from me. Many times I have a look on my past compositions and I notice things inside that I didn't put there on purpose – it is a miracle how did they turn out in that way. I believe it has to do something with inspiration, a sort of inexplicable factor that the art's aura is made of.

Have you ever doubted your talent? How did you work through your doubts?

I had my ups and downs. Many times I asked myself if it is a correct path to take; if I'm good enough; what would happen if the things went the other way. I've learned that not everyone will give you a good advice, no matter how esteemed that person is. There are many interests that rule the world. It can be a difficult process until one realizes that, especially for young people who crave for recognition. But I believe that deep inside we all know the answers to the crucial questions that bother us, we just have to listen carefully.

How do you define creativity?

Creativity is something a person bears inside him. It is a way to resolve tasks in a way that is different to the common solutions. Creativity (and love!) is the power that leads the world forward. Without it a world would be a very boring place. Have a look on the city of Barcelona for example. It is full of gorgeous buildings. But which of them are really the special ones? The ones that attract tourists from all over the world? Those of Gaudí. And why? Because he used his creativity in shaping the objects in a way that is not common. Where other architect would put a plain wall, he made curves. Each detail is well-thought and made with imagination; their appearance is as if they came from a fairy tale. And humanity needs more fairy tales!

Please describe your state of mind when you are composing music.

The time between the birth of an original idea and the final piece of music on the paper can be quite long. Actually, the process of thinking about the new piece, improvising its parts on the piano, singing them and crafting them in the head usually takes more time than writing them down. Once I'm on it, I get completely obsessed with it. It gets hard to think of any other thing while working on some piece of music. I could easily forget about food or rest while composing; it's good to have my wife around who puts me back in order.

What is your guilty music pleasure?

Andrew Lloyd Webber's music.

How being the pianist had influenced you as a composer?

Piano is an instrument of incredible possibilities. It is the most versatile of all the instruments. The repertoire written for it is enormous, one would need several lifetimes only to read sparingly through its pages. Therefore it is a most natural way to be introduced to the world of composing through instrument that has it all – harmony, polyphony, complete range of registers and wide range of possibilities to make an illusion of the elements that it can't originally create (e.g. a singing tone). It is an instrument which gives complete freedom in exploring the world of music.

What is the difference of performing your own pieces and pieces written by other composers?

I tend to say that each performance is an interpretation – no matter if it is my own or other composer's work. A personality keeps evolving, changing, learning... - it all reflects in one's playing. So the interpretation is always different and new. If my work has been written in a certain moment of my life, that moment stays petrified. My thoughts and feelings of that moment are perhaps not the same as those of today. There is a certain reminiscence that works as a flashback to the moment of creation, but the question is if I'm going to take the same path as before, or will I put it in today's perspective. So, I become an interpreter of my own music, and the interpretation depends on many factors, not only the creative one. The challenge is even greater because one expects from the composer to be the authentic performer of his own work. Sometimes it is true; but sometimes the performing part of the personality takes its tribute. As a composer, I give my work as a gift to the others, while as a performer I try to approach my own work with the same humbleness I'd approach any other piece.

What did you learned from your teachers - Vladimir Krpan, Jean-François Antonioli, Vassily Lobanov, Dmitri Bashkirov? Maybe they have shared some wisdom which is guiding you even today?

Each of them made a unique contribution to my understanding of music. I had luck to get knowledge from all major piano schools through my studies. Vladimir Krpan was a pupil of great Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli who is representative of Italian piano tradition. I owe large part of my love for French music and music details to Mr. Antonioli who was a student of Pierre Sancan in Paris. Through Vassily Lobanov who was a composition student of Alfred Schnittke, while on the same time representative of Heinrich Neuhaus' teaching, I got in touch with this part of Russian piano school. Dmitri Bashkirov's strictness is legendary by itself; but himself being a pupil of Alexander Goldenweiser, whose ancestry leads from Alexander Siloti, over Liszt and Czerny to Beethoven, explains a lot and makes this family tree even more interesting. Their words of advice became part of my musical being and I am thankful for

being able to have them guiding me on my music path. It was a constructing point from which I could have built my own musical thinking and which I can transmit to my own students.

What do you think that your career gave you the most? What do you value the most in the journey?

I guess my answer would be: the journey itself. I do what I love and that is already a blessing. Music is a universal language that connect and unites people of different cultures and ways of thinking; makes them better persons. What could be more beautiful than this?

How much of your own life is reflected in your work?

There are definitely many aspects of my life reflected in the music I write. Music is a mirror of the experiences collected from the real world. I love to travel, to go to the nature, to work out, to experience new cultures, new food, to investigate about history, religion and other arts – all of it is somehow present in my music.

Are there any future projects that excite you the most?

This year is very special for me because 5 CD's of mine are being published and that's something I look forward to very much. Three of them are for piano solo – "Touches" with works by Bernstein, Ligeti and Stravinsky; then the complete recording of Rachmaninov's "Etudes-Tableaux"; and disc with unedited sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti – a real gem with some of his sonatas which have never been recorded on modern piano before. Some of those sonatas are still held in manuscripts in libraries and monasteries in Italy, Spain and Portugal and I hope this pieces will get a recognition they deserve. There is also a disc of Croatian sonatas for violin and piano with violinist Goran Končar; and finally a piano duo recording "Scaramouche" with my wife Dubravka Vukalović with our beloved repertoire of Leonard Bernstein, Alfi Kabiljo, Manuel de Falla and Darius Milhaud.

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