MuseNews

Interviews with Musicians

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Backstage with Marino Formenti

In Southern California in late May, Marino Formenti is an ubiquitous, benevolent presence. At the Los Angeles Opera he is assistant conductor to Kent Nagano in a new production of Puccini1s Turandot. Eighty miles to the north, in the idyllic valley that served filmmakers as the Shangri-La in the original Lost Horizon, he delivers three stupendous piano recitals of cutting-edge new music at the 56th annual Ojai Festival, including one in which he performs simultaneously (!) on two pianos tuned a quarter-tone apart. Another Ojai event is a marathon piano recital, four hours of killer repertory ending after midnight with innovator Morton Feldman's 80-nonstop-minutes For Bunita Marcus.

Formenti, 36, born in Milan, now based in Vienna, has become one of Europe's most fearless and ardent proponents of new music. In the weeks after Ojai he performed in Vienna, Berlin and at Gidon Kremer1s Lockenhaus Festival in Austria—another idyllic musical outpost comparable to California's Ojai. On August 4 he invades the revered Salzburg Festival, not exactly regarded as welcoming territory for musical innovation, with an all-Austrian recital of brand-new works.

At his American debut, at the Los Angeles County Museum in 2000, he astounded all ears with a performance of Jean Barraqué1s Piano Sonata, long considered the Great White Shark of contemporary music, in about half the time other pianists require—fast but complete and amazingly clear. He has yet to extend his conquest elsewhere in the U.S.; in Southern California, however, to which he has frequently returned, he is a hot-ticket. Briefly relaxing at Ojai, the diminutive, but big-eared champ had brunch—pastries and orange juice—with MuseNews correspondent Alan Rich.

MN: You lost a couple of folks during that Feldman piece. Walkouts bother you?

MF: Well, when I played it in Vienna, not so many people walked out early. But there were only 35 people at the start.

MN: Can you remember how you first became involved in contemporary music?

MF: Oh yes; it was right after I sat down at the piano for the first time. I banged down on some notes—some chords, actually—and then I immediately wrote them down on paper. Playing the piano and composing have always, for me, been the same thing.

MN: Here at Ojai you've played mostly new music. But you also played Beethoven and Schubert at that marathon concert. Was that also an act of composition?

MF: Yes, absolutely. Playing music, for me, involves two separate aspects. The one is the technical aspect. Once you learn the notes of the piece, they are always there for you—in your fingers and in the rest of your body—and they don't really change. The other is the spiritual aspect. This happens when you can look past
the notes and find the personality of the composer—Beethoven, Schubert, Feldman, anybody. That person is never the same from one day to the next, and I am never the same from one day to the next either. From that standpoint, every performance becomes an act of composition.

MN: You seem to be making a whole second career in conducting. How did that happen, and how important is it in your future plans?

MF: It happened at Lockenhaus—five, perhaps six years ago. Gidon Kremer was playing a new concerto, and he thought that he could get by without a conductor. But then he decided he needed one, and so he asked me to try. I had studied some conducting at Vienna's Hochschule für Musik. Anyhow, I was surprised at how much I liked it. I don't know where I'll be going with this new career. I do know this, however: every time I play the piano, I bleed—not actually, but inside. And every time I play, I think it's my last performance.

MN: You grew up in Milan; then, about twelve years ago, you moved to Vienna. I would have thought, for someone as involved with innovative music, that Vienna's famous passion for nostalgia might work against your ambitions.

MF: I won't deny that the great Vienna tradition involves looking back rather than ahead. But I think that is changing. In Vienna I play with the new-music group called Klangforum Wien. Actually, my first time in Los Angeles was with that group; we played in some dingy abandoned theater in Hollywood

and not too many people noticed. But Klangforum is very popular now in Vienna, and they've done a lot to support today's young composers, and to make them think that they don't have to move somewhere else—as Arnold Schoenberg once did—to become recognized.

MN: Do you think you might move somewhere else someday? To America, perhaps?

MF: Yes, definitely. Every artist has to move and keep moving, because there is so much variety in the musical life from one place to another. One of the things I love about Vienna is the way music permeates life here. Every cab driver has an opinion about who should be running the Staatsoper or conducting the Philharmonic. Sometimes, in fact, they seem to know more about music than driving, but that's the risk you take.

MN: You wouldn't find that so easily in, say, New York. Would you be concerned that there might be several Marino Formentis competing for the one place in the sun, one concert booking at Carnegie Hall?

MF: There is only one Marino Formenti. June, 2002

Backstage with Gidon Kremer

Gidon Kremer guides the bow of his 1730 Guarneri with laser intensity whether the piece is by Bach or Piazzolla. During particularly thorny passages, he often crouches down low, his large body and fleshy face contorted in unfathomable ways while unearthly tones issue from his instrument. He was recently in residence at the Verbier Music Festival, in the green bosom of the Swiss Alps, where he played the Violin Concerto by Alban Berg, a warhorse of the 20th-century repertoire, with the UBS Verbier Festival Youth Orchestra under the baton of James Levine.

After the rehearsal, MuseNews's Robert Hilferty sat down with the 55-year-old violinist to speak about music, politics, and his six-year-old music ensemble, Kremerata Baltica.

MN: How did growing up in the Soviet Union form your musical personality?

GK: Living in a totalitarian system was not a holiday. But it gave me the sense that what I do in music should have some meaning—even a spiritual and ethical meaning. My teacher David Oistrakh taught me to remain loyal to music.

MN: You left the Soviet Union, like so many other artists, and became persona non grata. What is your relationship now with the ex-Soviet Union?

GK: I was one of the first Soviet artists to travel back after the breakup. But since 1991, I consider myself a Latvian artist, since I grew up in Riga—and even more so now since I formed Kremerata Baltica, which gave its first performance there in 1997. However, my ties with Russian audiences have remained. I even was awarded some important Russian prizes, such as the Triumph Prize.

MN: What does it mean to be ethical as far as music is concerned?

GK: Well, I never considered myself to be a "dissident"—such a popular term. I just thought to do my duty and defend the values of music, as well as the composers and compositions I believed in. What sells best is not always a product of quality, and the merchandise in classical music is very often the wrong one. People are made to believe they are getting a big star,

when, in fact, this so-called star has quite little to deliver. They are just perfect players—and too much emphasis is placed on perfection, not enough on real artistry.

MN: What is real artistry, and how do you arrive at a valid interpretation of music?

GK: Creativity is a process in which you must constantly question yourself, every day, every hour, every minute. It is too complicated a question to answer, so I'll offer you a negative example.

One of those highly acclaimed stars of our day said recently in an interview, when asked how he arrives at an interpretation, "I listen to the recordings of my esteemed colleagues and take the best of that." It's no secret that nowadays many conductors and soloists learn scores not by studying them but by listening to recordings. So you can't in fact differentiate one performance from another because there is no personal imprint. But if you do music, it should be for a purpose, to give your audience an injection of some novelty and expand their vision. That's why I created the Kremerata Baltica.

MN: What kind of impact is your ensemble having in the Baltic region and around the world?

GK: I spend much more time with them than I spend anywhere else, including my home. Not only is the ensemble artistically potent, but it also gives talented musicians from the Baltic region a chance to see the world, and to remind the world that there are three Baltic states. I see it also as a culture mission.

MN: Your recordings with the group offer a unique experience, juxtaposing classics with newer music by composers from your neck of the woods. In your "After Mozart" album, for instance, you even employ startlingly modern and jazzy cadenzas in Mozart's works.

GK: Familiar things are placed in a new light when we listen from the perspective of contemporary music. It's just a positive flame to set off the classics and not to do any damage to them. Marcel Duchamp put a moustache on Mona Lisa, but I'm not going so far. I want to preserve the classics—I just use the free space without altering the piece.

MN: Of all the classical musicians who tackled the spicy tangos of Astor Piazzolla, you're the only one

who pulled it off convincingly, with fire and blood.

GK: When you flirt with something and you don't love it passionately, then the result is awful. I took Piazzolla seriously, so I did his music with passion. I started before the trend, then became part of it.

MN: Do you have a general philosophy of music?

GK: Music makes sense if it's an interpretation and not an imitation. It's the same the difference as between precious stones—which are pressured deep in the earth and multifaceted—and cheap costume jewelry that can be multiplied in lots of nice fashion things. I orient myself towards the real gems of art, and indulge in their depths instead of just riding the surface.

The Kremerata Baltica's most recent release on the Nonesuch label is devoted to the music of Romanian great George Enescu. For more information on Kremer's travels and recordings go to www.gidon-kremer.com

August, 2002

Backstage with Mtsislav Rostropovich

Even before MuseNews's Robert Hilferty was formally introduced to him, Mstislav Rostropovich came over and spontaneously smothered his face with kisses. The man was on a high, having just conducted a stunning performance, recorded live, of Shostakovich's 11th Symphony with the London Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican. After embracing a few more people, he sat down with Hilferty and talked about his amazing life and his 75th birthday, which he was celebrating in London with a series of concerts devoted to his musical heroes Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Britten.

MN: First of all, how does it feel to be 75?

MR: I don't feel 75. I feel three times 25! I can't explain it. I work much more than ever before. I only need four hours of sleep a night.

MN: Do you fear death?

MR: I don't worry about my death, because so many of my friends, so many dead, are with me.

MN: One of them, Shostakovich, has a special place in your life. You first met him when he was your composition teacher.

MR: And I learned from him that I was not a composer, but an interpreter.

MN: Can you tell me something about how he composed.

MR: Sometimes when I spoke to him, he'd unexpectedly throw his head back, look up and close his eyes. This might last several minutes or so. I immediately would stop speaking to him until he was finished, until he "woke up." That's because he was composing during this time, working out some musical idea. He also composed while walking. And he never used a piano when composing. Never, never.

MN: Did Shostakovich have a musical hero of his own?

MR: On his small composing table, under glass, was a picture of Mussorgsky, his big face swollen by alcohol. Well, I asked Shostakovich, "Tell me, why do you have a picture of Mussorgsky, and not Bach or

Beethoven?" And he said, "Slava, it's his eyes. These eyes have so many times forced me to throw away many compositions in the garbage can under the table." Extraordinary. Shostakovich believed that Mussorgsky was the greatest composer in the history of Russia.

MN: You were caught up in the vortex of the Soviet maelstrom. When you had to leave your country in 1974 with your wife Galina Vishnevskaya, after having sheltered the dissident Solzhenitsyn, you made a promise to Shostakovich.

MR: Maybe that was the most tragic moment in my life. I told him that I would make sure to perform and record all of his symphonies. Then Dmitri thought about this for a second, and said to me, "Slava, maybe you could start with number 4?" (laughter)

MN: Shostakovich wrote and dedicated two cello concerti for you while you were in the U.S.S.R. When you were exiled, did he ever write you a piece?

MR: He said, "Slava, if you receive somewhere a score without the name of the composer on it, don't immediately throw it in the garbage!" He wasn't allowed to send me anything. But he died in 1975, unable to complete a piece for the opening of my season with the National Symphony Orchestra in 1977.

MN: That must have irked the Soviet authorities, that as soon as you left the U.S.S. R. you become the director of our national orchestra?

MR: Enormously! But nobody was allowed to know what I was doing after I was stripped of my citizenship in 1978. I was a non-person.

MN: How was Shostakovich able to maintain his artistic integrity while constantly being policed by watchdogs?

MR: Always, Shostakovich made some candy for Soviet government, so then he could compose the music he really wanted to make. That's why his life was tragic. That's why he made Symphony No. 7, the "Leningrad." When it was premiered, the government officials said, "Oh, that's genius!" And then he used this moment to compose the best of his symphonies, No. 8. But in 1948, the officials denounced this masterpiece. So he composed a symphony dedicated to Lenin, No.

12—not the best symphony. But then he followed that up with No. 13, “Babi Yar,” a great serious work.

MN: His music was a double-edged sword, and profoundly tragic. Why does the music of Prokofiev, who lived through the same era, lack this tragic element?

MR: Of course, that is personality. But beyond that, Prokofiev did not understand the situation at all. It didn’t compute. But Shostakovich understood the tragedy of our country.

MN: What would you say is the ultimate goal of your music-making?

MR: I would like to make a good transmission of the composition as the composer intended. I’m not interested in expressing my own personality—that’s why I don't like the term “conductor” except in the electrical sense.

April, 2002

Backstage with Jordi Savall

Without Jordi Savall, a great deal of sublime early music might have remained undiscovered. It was Savall who provided the outrageously successful sound-track for Alain Corneua's 1991 film "Tous les Matins du Monde" in which Gérard Depardieu played the 17th-century viola da gamba master, Marin Marais. Suddenly a lot of people became obsessed with the uniquely haunting, subtle sonorities of this fretted relative of the cello. (The louder cello elbowed the gamba out of existence. It was only in the 1960s that a few European pioneers began to rediscover the instrument and its repertoire).

Barcelona-born Jordi Savall was one of the first to abandon the cello and concentrate entirely on the mysteries of the viola da gamba. The charismatic Catalonian has become the undisputed high priest of his instrument, inspiring and enlightening generations of students. Though hundreds of gifted gamba-players now perform around the world, nobody rivals Savall for sheer mastery of the instrument. With barely any discernible physical effort, Savall coaxes his gamba into an extraordinary range of emotional expression, from throaty lament to ringing jubilation.

This April, Savall is Artist in Residence for Berlin's brand-new Zeitfenster festival. MuseNews talked to him during a flying visit to the German capital. Dressed in stylishly casual black, with a splash of color from his scarlet scarf, Savall talked with characteristic animation about his vision for a musically unified Europe.

MN: You recently gave a press conference in Warsaw challenging the EU to form a cultural policy. What kind of policy do you think Europe needs?

JS: We musicians already began European collaboration years ago. Our group, Le Concert des Nations, was founded in 1989 with musicians from 12 European countries. Ever since then, we've worked together without a cent of subsidy from any country, because we are not enough musicians from any one country. The European Union doesn't support any really European projects in the area of music.

The principal musical institutions of Europe were all founded in the

Romantic era, and are almost all exclusively dedicated to the big repertoire of the 19th and 20th centuries. There's almost no money left to support the many, many small groups working throughout Europe to discover and preserve the enormously valuable European heritage of music from the medieval, Renaissance and Baroque eras. The big romantic symphony orchestras are fully subsidized, and the early music ensembles are left on their own, to earn what they can from festivals and recordings. Of course the orchestras are full of fantastic musicians, too; but it's simply not a fair situation.

MN: Why should that be on the European agenda?

JS: What is not natural is that a country like Spain, with its golden age of music from Alfonso El Sabio in the 13th-century until Goya at the end of the 18th-century—with so many extraordinary composers, from Vittoria and Morales to Jose Marin—has no institutions of any kind to help preserve this music, no schools where you can study it, and no political initiatives to make this repertoire known to the rest of the world. All the subsidies go to the big orchestras, which play mostly German or English music or modern Spanish works. What about the 800 years between the 11th and the 19th century? Europe needs to clear up the fact that music history is not only about the past 200 years.

MN: Perhaps early music is still seen as too much of a minority interest?

JS: The music of the Renaissance is something for everybody. Composers of the time made no division between classical and popular music. They'd work with typical melodies from popular village dances, and they created very beautiful pieces. Everybody today can understand this music, because it's full of spontaneity, poetry, sensibility and contrast. And it's written to be played with a lot of improvisation, so that in some ways it's like jazz—it's only possible to play this music as a creative act. This music is anything but elitist. It's music which you can understand even if you're analphabetic and tone deaf. It appeals directly to your emotions.

MN: On the other hand, we can never know today how the composers of the time really would have heard their music played.

JS: Of course not. All the important composers, from Frescobaldi and Monteverdi to Mozart and

Beethoven, were fantastic players and fantastic improvisers. People who heard them play used to comment that the written music they left behind was nothing compared to the way they performed—the printed notes were just the crumbs that fell from the table of the musical feast. We have to approach it with this idea. You have to spend your life studying the style, learning the rules. But at the moment when you are playing, you have to forget it all, otherwise you could not be creative.

MN: What kind of a political message does Spanish Renaissance music hold for today's European Union?

JS: You have to appreciate that Spain was influenced for 700 years by the presence of Muslims and Jewish people. That explains the richness of Spanish musical culture. You can see it also in architecture and in gastronomy—it's a mix of a lot of different influences. Spanish Renaissance musical ornamentation in the 16th-century was strongly influenced by the monodic playing of Arabic melodies. It was a time of illumination. We have to see culture not as an inanimate body, but as a constant mix of several influences that are always evolving. Musicians in ancient times were always traveling, and always meeting and influencing one another. It's exactly the same now. And we can see now that wherever we go—Taipei, Warsaw, Washington or Buenos Aires—we can make people happy if we play this music the right way—and this is a marvelous message!

www.zeitfenster.net

March, 2002

Backstage with Jean-Yves Thibaudet

He's smart, handsome, talented and French. The fairy godmother hovered a long time over the cradle of Jean-Yves Thibaudet, even tossing in the nice gene before finally moving on. Now forty years later, Thibaudet is the perfect pianist—praised for his thoughtful virtuosity and adored as well for his sartorial excellence. He exudes confidence, charm and happiness as he flies around the world (yes, even now), a welcome guest in the top concert halls either as soloist or accompanist to other stars, among them Cecilia Bartoli and Renee Fleming.

MuseNews editor Manuela Hoelterhoff talked to him on the telephone in Paris where he still keeps his student apartment though he's more often at home in Los Angeles. He was a little out of breath having raced in from his garage. You can't leave a Maserati out on the boulevard.

MH: Are you stopping traffic?

JYT: Well, a little. But it's a beautiful model and the looks aren't nasty—I think—as in man, that's really vulgar. I change cars every year; you turn it in with less than 5,000 miles and you get a good return for it.

MH: What was your last car?

JYT: The Jaguar XKR convertible which I did keep for one-and-a- half years, but my schedule was a little hectic.

MH: How's your view?

JYT: Marvelous. I am one privileged fellow. I am looking at the stained glass windows of St. Severan in the fifth arrondissement, the student quarter.

MH: What kind of piano do you play at home?

JYT: I had a Hamburg Steinway flown in to Los Angeles. But when I was a boy we had a little Peyel at home. My first grown-up piano was a 1910 Steinway which I received as a gift from an old lady who heard me play in a competition. I kept it until the end of my studies and stayed in touch with her until she died.

MH: Many of your colleagues cancelled engagements after September 11. How has what happened affected you?

JYT: Everyone has started thinking more about priorities. I was in Paris celebrating my fortieth birthday in a blissfully decadent way and suddenly the world collapsed. I knew I must fulfill my contracts. I had concerts in the U.S, and tried immediately to get on the first plane. I missed a concert in Utah—I couldn't get on a plane for days. But then I got out and flew to St. Louis. They were a little surprised and happy to see me. And I was thrilled to be there. They seemed hungry for music. Afterwards, we all stayed around the talked about the atrocities. I haven't seen much of a drop in attendance. It's a cliche, but thus true. Music is a balm. The most wonderful compliments I heard were from people who came up to me saying: "Thank you for taking me to another planet."

MH: You've just released Night Songs with Renee Fleming. What's next?

JYT: The complete piano works of Satie! How about that! A very funny man, taken a little superficially these days. The directions in the scores are esoteric and amusing. For instance, he wrote something called the bureaucratic sonatina, which contains descriptive cues like: He makes his way to the office; he is in love with his pen holder; he reflects on his promotion. And the titles! Three Pieces in Pear Form or how about this one: Dried Embryos!

MH: You're fortunate to be recording at all given the seeming collapse of the industry.

JYT: I know, I'm lucky. Decca even gave me a lunch the other day when I renewed my contract. Part of the problem is repertoire and then marketing too. We need to play new pieces or unknown pieces. I'm looking myself at forgotten virtuoso concertos. For instance, a concerto by Katchaturian.

MH: You'll be spending part of the fall in the States. What about Europe?

JYT: I'm back in December in Copenhagen and Barcelona.

MH: In your ceaseless travel anything surprise you or amaze you lately?

JYT: I am no longer surprised, but increasingly enraged by cell phones going off in the middle of a concert. I recently had a duet going with a

cell phone in the middle of my cadenza. I want these people found, dragged to the stage, and booed.

MH: I hear you've become interested in preservation issues.

JYT: Yes, I want to devote some of my time to the culture of France, perhaps giving special benefit concerts. People think I've left the country and that's not true. I am French

November, 2001