

## Omer Meir Wellber: ‘A conductor is like a policeman inside a dream’

Following his Glyndebourne debut, the Israeli conductor continues his thorough homage to Richard Strauss as part of the composer’s birth anniversary

ALBERTO OJEDA | 12/08/2014



Omer Meir Wellber in front of Dresden’s Semperoper © Felix Broede

After leaving the Orquesta del Palau de les Arts – in which pit he replaced no less than Lorin Maazel – Omer Meir Wellber (Be’er Sheva, 1981) continued his journey. In May, the young Israeli conductor – gifted pupil of Barenboim at Milan’s Teatro alla Scala and at Berlin’s Staatsoper – made his debut at the Glyndebourne Festival, where he presented a much praised *Eugene Onegin* with the visionary Graham Vick as artistic director. He has also made time to pay proper homage to Richard Strauss in the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the composer’s birth. And he has done so in a very apt setting: the city of Dresden, where the Bavarian composer premiered the best part of his operas. **He meets El Cultural at the beautiful Semperoper, where he unveils his emotional connection with Strauss only a few hours before performing *Ariadne auf Naxos*, ‘one of his multiple masterworks’.** He will come back to the shores of the Elba river in September to unpack *Daphne*.

**How would you describe the importance of Strauss in the history of music?**

I bet that a hundred years from now he will be the only 20<sup>th</sup> century composer interpreted around the world. He is always new and fresh, and his sense of drama and operatic instinct is phenomenal. He gives continuity to Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner and Bruckner. He represents the last link in that chain of talents. **It is a difficult author for any musician, but such difficulty is rewarded with pleasure, which is not the case in other cases.** The

commemoration in Dresden is very important as this was, in some ways, his home. Many of his operas premiered here, and here too are some of his original scores, written by his own hand.

**Here in Dresden you will conduct *Ariadne auf Naxos*, one of his masterpieces.**

The thing about Strauss is that he has many masterpieces: *Salome*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Elektra*... but for me, **this score is tremendously beautiful, one of the most beautiful in the history of music. His genius is clear.** I for one have been surprised conducting it. It sounds as if I had 200 musicians in the pit but in reality I only have 30. All the characters come together to shape a philosophical vision.

**And then again, he merges comedy and tragedy in a most skilful manner...**

Yes. That is very striking, and he approaches it excellently. A group of wealthy men want to liven up an evening with two opera performances. One is a comedy and the other one is a drama. In the end, the host decides that both be staged jointly. It is a solution that enables saving money, something very typical of our age. Strauss anticipates how limitations in funds and time can impact works of art. He also teaches us an interesting lesson: how changes in perspective can lead to spellbinding inventions. **The way in which he plays with the idea of an opera within an opera is genius.**

**Some people state that opera in our age is under the conductor's tyranny... Do you agree?**

Yes, there is something about this. But it depends on the quality of the conductor. With the great ones there is no problem. You realise they know the scores thoroughly, they understand the music, they have studied the composer's intentions... but **as you start coming down the ladder, insecurities tend to creep in, and that is where problems and nonsense start.** In my case, when something doesn't fit, I simply leave.

**The DVD with the Fura staging that you conducted at Verona's Arena last summer has just been released...**

It was a terrific experience. They are a good example of what we were talking about: they are capable of the most unpredictable madness on stage, yet flexible and communicative. You can talk to them, say 'hey Carlus [Padrissa], perhaps this is too dangerous, perhaps it goes too far', and they will listen and bear it in mind. **They are the perfect mixture of madness and dialogue.** It is something the audience also notices. The Verona production was an acclaimed one.

**What memories do you keep of your time with the Orquesta Sinfónica de Valencia?**

Very good ones. The city is really interesting. **I spent four years there, during a very convoluted time, not only in Valencia but across the entire country. However, musically, I can only say good things.** In our last period we achieved great things: Mahler's Ninth, Brahms's German Requiem, Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin...

**You are an ambassador for Save a Child's Heart. To what an extent can music make the world a better place?**

I think it is not too convenient to be overly romantic: music is music and problems are problems. **Antibiotics are more important than music, but if after you have taken them you can listen to music, all the better.** I contribute to fundraising activities and other small

projects, such as a shelter centre for children that are obliged to spend a long convalescence before and after an operation. We have got them a piano and students from conservatories in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem come and give recitals. This is a good way for them to gain experience before an audience. These are all little things, but they have tangible effects.

**Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra is perhaps the greatest example, isn't it?**

Yes, it is indeed an exemplary project. **It is important for Palestinian and Israeli musicians to become allies with a shared objective: making music.** Yet, the idea Said and Barenboim had was even more important. The mere conception of this project was an eye opener.

**Incidentally, Barenboim was one of your mentors in your early years. What did you learn from him?**

Yes, he is a crucial reference for me. **What impressed me most was corroborating that he was a man devoted to music 24/7.** It was the first time that I had ever been with someone like that. At the beginning it was quite overwhelming, but once I got over the initial shock, I started to relax and absorb all his wisdom. I learned every single second.

**Do you see a way out in the Arab-Israeli conflict?**

I see a critical problem in the current situation: none of the two sides has a strong and clearly defined leader. On top of that, **the internal politics of Israel are not advancing in the right direction I don't think, and that of the Palestinians is far from clear.** Even so, I am optimistic.

**Within the miracle of music creation, what is the role of a conductor?**

This is a difficult question. I think what a conductor has to do, and this is what I try to achieve – sometimes successfully and other times less so – is to bring musicians to their highest level and have them deliver something even they didn't know they were able of. A conductor is like a policeman inside a dream. If you achieve this, it is magical, as **it is your presence that unleashes the greatest skills each musician have.**

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