



Rising Israeli maestro Wellber loves Strauss, accordion too

By Michael Roddy

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(Reuters) - Omer Wellber says it's usually after the second question that journalists start asking him what it's like to be an Israeli-born conductor. He doesn't say how long it takes them to start quizzing him about his love for the accordion.

At 32, Wellber is undoubtedly the first "sabra" - an Israeli-born Jew - to make a huge hit conducting Verdi's "Aida" in Padua, Italy, where he stepped in at short notice in 2008.

He has conducted, as Daniel Barenboim's assistant, at La Scala and the Berlin Staatsoper. He also has conducted at the Israeli Opera, the Valencia Opera House, the Dresden Semperoper and will make his debut at England's posh summer opera showcase at Glyndebourne in May conducting Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin".

And yet what do interviewers ask him about?

"As an Israeli, you are always an Israeli," he said. "This comes first, the music comes second."

It has been a fast and furious trajectory, taking Wellber, who lives in Italy, to a world far away from his upbringing in the Negev Desert town of Beersheba. He admits he is hyperactive.

"I call my mother and only by saying 'hello' ... she can feel the hyper thing."

His late father was the leftist head of Israel's powerful teacher's union and was close to the Bedouin community, as a result of which Wellber has a first name used by Arabs or Jews.

He showed musical talent at an early age and was playing piano at age five. He also took up the accordion and sometimes will play an encore with the instrument beloved of gypsy and klezmer bands but rarely heard at symphony concerts.

"The sound is the most beautiful sound ... it opens my heart completely, this thing," Wellber said, chugging water in a Dresden cafe recently after conducting Richard Strauss's two-act opera "Ariadne auf Naxos" straight through, without a pause.

From the experience of playing accordion at hundreds of weddings, Wellber can attest that it "gives you spontaneity" - something he put to use in "Ariadne".

Sensing that soprano Romy Petrick, singing the role of the flirty Zerbinetta, was in good voice, Wellber decided to pick up the pace. "She took it well so I thought, 'We're on the horse'," Wellber said, his eyes still glowing with excitement.

NAZI TAINT

If a conductor playing the accordion seems incongruous, and a little known Israeli making a splash in Italy with Verdi is unusual, how about the sabra conducting Strauss, who famously lived and worked in Nazi Germany throughout the war, at the opera house where nine of Strauss's operas had their premieres?

Again, it was a last-minute call that brought Wellber to Dresden in 2010 to conduct Strauss's one-act opera "Daphne". But it was something else when the opera orchestra invited him back to conduct during Strauss's 150th birthday year in 2014.

"I had an amazing experience when I did 'Daphne' ... and after that, I don't know how to say it, it changed the whole proportions of the country because I met here such wonderful people and such an interesting orchestra and theatre - but I'm talking about a man-to-man basis, not about Germans or Israelis.

"The people responded to me and this was something that was very strong," he said.

The legacy of musicians who lent their prestige to the Third Reich is a fraught issue, especially for an Israeli.

Wellber's take on Strauss is that the man who described himself as a "first-class, second-rate composer" was arrogant, childish and made a bad choice to remain in Germany. But, he said, "what is more important is the message, the art."

LESS FORGIVING OF WAGNER

He is less forgiving in the case of Richard Wagner, whose music, dear to Hitler, was played constantly on the radio and in concentration camps. To this day his music is boycotted in Israeli concert halls, much to the chagrin of Wellber's fellow Israeli Barenboim, who thinks Israelis only hurt themselves.

"I'm sure the Israeli boycott is stupid, on the other hand I'm sure we shouldn't play Wagner in Israel ... I think the people are not ready for it and this should be the reason for it. The reason should not be political," Wellber said.

And what if the Dresdeners should ask Wellber to conduct a work of the virulently anti-Semitic Wagner, who died before Hitler was born but whose music is inextricably linked to him?

"For me, it's complicated. If tomorrow someone asked me in Berlin or whatever to do 'Tristan' (Wagner's doomed-love opera 'Tristan und Isolde') ... I'm not sure if I'm ready. On the other hand, I'm sure that the answer will go back to the human level.

"Because if I'm going to become really good friends with these musicians, and I have a project of three years, being here two months of the year, I can imagine that in three years if they ask me to do Wagner it will be a different question."

Thinking out loud, he made it clear that one answer to what it's like being an Israeli conductor is that he is playing to two audiences - one in the concert hall and the other in Israel.

"Maybe I could have a discussion before the show," he mused. "We can deal with it as a complicated question and not just come and appear as someone who is simplifying the argument."

(Editing by [Tom Heneghan](#))

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/27/us-germany-wellber-idUSBREA2Q0H220140327>

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