



Theme & Variations

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Monthly column about the world of such music that people usually call *classical*. Subjects of abundant subjectivity and, at times, little free of controversy. Those that all musicians talk and discuss about, but never come to firm conclusions.

Those that allow the enthusiastic public to satisfy its curiosity and, by the way, to build communicational bridges and viaducts between the stage and the audience. And so that no one dares to take the themes less seriously, the variations will be commented and discussed exclusively with some of the best musicians on the planet.

The ideal instrument: a part of a whole

The dream instrument is much sought, but not always can be found. It is a kind of eternal battle that very few manage to win and, on the other hand, a fundamental and enriching experience in the path of the instrumentalist himself. One of the greatest examples is the famous Brazilian cellist Antônio Meneses, whose fantastic career included nothing less than a Guadagnini, a Guarnerius, a Landolfi, a Gagliano, a Villaume and two Goffriller. In addition to the vast catalog of old instruments, he also has an appreciable list of modern replicas of Stradivari, Maggini and Montagnana models by makers such as Phillip Cray, Filippo Fasser, Fabrice Girardin and Luiz Amorim. To the trivial question «why?», Meneses confesses with unusual frankness that «there are far superior cellos» to those he had the opportunity to play but that, in any case, «there is not a perfect one». Furthermore, he admits that he was carried away by the «need» of finding the most appropriate instrument for a given «moment of (his) evolution as a musician» and that, fortunately, he always had «a certain easiness» to adapt to each one from them.

FEATUREDGUEST

Antônio Meneses



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Winner of the International ARD Competition in Munich (1977) and the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow (1982), the Brazilian cellist has an excellent and versatile career. He performed and recorded as a soloist with the world's leading orchestras under the baton of conductors such as Karajan, Muti, Jansons, Abbado, Prévin, Chailly, among many others. He was a member of the celebrated Trio Beaux-Arts and is a professor in Bern, Switzerland.

To spice the arguments on this topic, it is worth remembering the various studies and blind tests that confront modern and old string instruments, although, taking into account the contradictory multiplicity of results, I prefer not to try to understand if they are sponsored by modern makers or old instrument dealers. It is not necessary to write much about the absurd differences in monetary value between some old and other modern instruments, despite the fact that many of today's makers have the courage to ask for authentic fortunes for their latest creations. On the contrary, it is still phenomenal as we are often well lunched with a roast chicken leg and french fries, but we keep looking with disdain at the neighbor's delighted face, while he tastes his tiny but attractive *foie gras*. Supposedly exempt from these concerns, are the singers and the conductors, whose "instruments" are originally installed, or the wind players because, in general, their branch is more pragmatic and they usually prefer brand new instruments, already with the latest improvements and technical novelties, over older instruments tending to lose quality due to age and usage.

«I've heard Stradivaris that sounded bad because the musician did not have the ability to get the ideal sound from the instrument.»

ANTÔNIO MENESES

One of the remarks that I dare to define as indisputable, is that the choice of the instrument is or should be a very personal decision. In addition to more or less consensual parameters such as the volume of sound and a solid and reliable construction, personal taste and ear naturally push instrumentalists to a plunge into an immense sea of possibilities. Regarding his current cellos, Meneses affirms that his Goffriller «sounds like a tenor», but that his Montagnana-replica «resembles more of a baritone» - sensations that, moreover, fully fit the characteristics associated with these makers and models. However, the appreciation of instruments is not always uncontroversial or unambiguous: what sounds dark and smooth to me, may sound sad and insipid to others, what sound brilliant to some, might sound strident to others. We will hardly be able to get rid of these quarrels, even as some prejudices related to styles, schools and traditions have been overcome in the last decades.

Another important point is the importance of having a competent (and patient) *luthier* or *chalumier* who knows how to monitor both the purchase and the subsequent maintenance. Essential and with an almost equivalent relevance to that of the instrument itself, is also the careful and thoughtful selection of a considerable number of "accessories". Depending on the instrument's family, mouthpieces, reeds, bows, strings or the like, are primary and decisive characters in this process and even the serially manufactured production does not guarantee an infallible cloning: the musician must look for a material that harmonizes with the own ambition and the characteristics of the instrument.

As if such an adventure were not enough, pianists and percussionists are faced almost daily with the reality of playing absolutely unknown instruments or for which they were given only a few hours or minutes of complicity before an important recital or concert. Somewhere sitting in an audience and listening to comments like «this pianist has a special sound», I modestly wonder what percentage of merit the pianist has and how much is due to the instrument itself, even though the formidable parallel art that pianists are obliged to develop by the strength of circumstances -some better than others, it is certain- is commendable and even herculean.

«A good instrument certainly helps, but it is not enough.»

ANTÔNIO MENESES

But then, where do we stand? Is an instrument by itself a guarantee of success? Or is it rather of little use if talent and technique are lacking? Neither one nor the other. Antônio Meneses underlines that «many young instrumentalists want to acquire a great instrument very early, even before creating a special sound in their mind and soul» and that, instead, «playing on a low quality instrument can help, during training, to fight more for that unique and individual sound». I must fully subscribe. Despite the manifest importance of having a good instrument, this in no way replaces the player himself as the contriver and creator of the sound and the music associated with it. Likewise, an instrument is just another element of a complete pack, as well as an ally or lead wire that, more than disguising supposed limitations, should highlight and enhance the best qualities of the instrumentalist. Correction: of the musician.