



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 concertmaster: in search of balanced leadership

The concertmaster of a modern orchestra is the one who guides it with the proper energy and body language, with more or less incisive gestures or even just with an enlightening look, and the one who works as a link between the conductor and the other musicians during the rehearsals and the concerts. He is also the one who plays the violin solos, taking the lead in some of the most important works in the History of Music. It was certainly not by chance that for example Richard Strauss chose the concertmaster as the main character of his celebrated symphonic poem *Ein Heldenleben*.

In larger orchestras, two, three or even four musicians alternately fill the position of concertmaster, while in chamber orchestras the concertmaster is sometimes more than a mere first violinist and assumes the complete musical direction. That means, in the old-fashioned way, bearing in mind that until the beginning of the 19th century it was general practice for the concertmaster to accumulate the role and the duty of *Kapellmeister* and even of composer. In any case, the concertmaster is and

FEATUREDGUEST

Daniel Stabrawa



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Daniel Stabrawa was awarded at the Paganini Competition in Genoa and became concertmaster of the Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra, in Krakow, at the age of 22. In 1983, he was admitted to the Berlin Philharmonic and, three years later, he took on the role of principal concertmaster, a position he would hold for 35 years. He was a founding member and *primarius* of the Philharmonia Quartett Berlin, with which he carried out an outstanding international career.

has always been a top reference in the orchestra's hierarchy, working as a representative of the institution itself, even outside the stage. An extraordinary example of an institution within the institution is certainly the Polish violinist Daniel Stabrawa. Recently retired, he was a member of the Berlin Philharmonic for 38 years, 35 of which as its first concertmaster, having been chosen for the post during the mythical era of Herbert von Karajan and leading the orchestra in the reigns of Claudio Abbado and Simon Rattle, until the present under the direction of Kirill Petrenko.

Stabrawa emphasizes that the concept of the hierarchical structure of orchestras has changed substantially in recent decades, now being a «less rigid» system in which «the orchestra has more rights and the authoritarianism of the conductor has been decreasing.» This broadly means an increase in the «power of initiative and responsibility of the concertmaster», but above all in Europe, because in the United States there is still a certain «authoritarian status of the conductor, to which the concertmaster must obviously submit to.»

As it is certainly the most exposed place in the orchestra at all levels, it is sometimes not easy to manage the balance between artistic demand and human relationships. On possible outstanding experiences in this regard and in relation to conductors, Stabrawa highlights that «with the best conductors, conflicts do not happen because a good conductor has no doubts or problems.» Instead, «with conductors who doubt of themselves during the rehearsal, the concertmaster has to assume a strong position to save the concert.» Without mentioning names, Stabrawa narrates an example where this happened: «a conductor was furious because I made a suggestion in a rehearsal, he handed me his baton, said *you conduct then* and left the hall. I confess that I was glad because I thought this would be better for everyone. We did the dress rehearsal without conductor, it went very well, but then he came back to conduct the concert... so-so.» On an opposite episode, Stabrawa says that Karajan «noticed somewhere in a rehearsal that a musician on the last stand of second violins was not satisfied with the bowing. He challenged him with the sentence *then show us how you think it would be best* and the musician exemplified it in such a fabulous way that Karajan had no choice but to say to the orchestra *everyone like that, please.*» In this case, the conductor was even inspired by a *tutti* from the second violins, but Stabrawa underlines that «if the concertmaster has an idea for a phrasing and can demonstrate that his idea is helpful, a good conductor will certainly be grateful and accept it.»

What will it be like to always be in focus and to manage this pressure and responsibility in your day-to-day relationships with your own colleagues? Stabrawa admits that «it is not easy» to reach the ideal balance «because the human factor must always be taken into account. But even on stage you can say something specific and exercise criticism without having to point the finger at someone in particular. It is an exercise in commitment, not least because each musician is different and reacts in a different way.» It therefore requires great talent and great sensitivity in the social aspect. Regarding internal competitiveness, Stabrawa recognizes «based on his experience with (his) orchestra, things have

changed a lot internally over the last few decades, as the level of each musician has risen very much and the *tuttis* have the feeling that they would also do the concertmaster work well themselves. And that is actually true, they are really good!» Still, he believes that «if you do a good job as you get older in the concertmaster position, you end up turning the resistance of the younger generation into respect.»

But after all, how can the ideal concertmaster be profiled? For various reasons, no doubt that impressions and judgment can differ drastically from the point of view of the audience listening to a concert or from a fellow musician sitting three or four stands behind or right next to the *candidate*. For Stabrawa, «a concertmaster must be evaluated in the two positions of the first stand, that is, both in the concertmaster's chair where he has to show initiative, and in the chair next to him where he must be able to show some initiative, but also to adapt to the concertmaster in terms of sound.» I subscribe to the idea and to the reasoning: «of course the most important thing is to be able and to know how to lead, but it is also important to be flexible and show that you are a good chamber musician. This is often the most difficult task there can be for a concertmaster.»

So, is the tradition or mentality of the concertmaster playing louder (noticeable, for example, in the overwhelming majority of older recordings) and moving more than other musicians completely outdated? I confront Stabrawa with the personal impression that, at times, the concertmaster or other section leaders show immense drive and initiative in terms of body language, but the orchestra or the section does not absorb or process these impulses. Stabrawa confirms that it is «crucial to observe the extent to which the orchestra understands and "accepts" the concertmaster's gesture and that excessive movement is a waste of energy and, more than constructive, can even become irritating.» And he confesses: «in the beginning I moved a lot and then I significantly reduced these movements because I realized that they were not necessary at all, because both the colleagues and the conductor looked more at my bow than at my body.»

With all the subjectivity inherent in these types of matters and never forgetting the wise old saying *neither feast nor famine*, I cannot help but to agree with Daniel Stabrawa. The excess is excessive and the body language must be balanced and minimized almost to the strictly necessary. Because in the end, the important thing is to make music in a natural and coherent way, and the attitude and leadership of a concertmaster should be a reference and a stimulus for the entire orchestra, for the conductor and even for the audience.