



Theme & Variations

BRUNO BORRALHINHO

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.

Epilogue?

Writing a monthly column has been an extremely enriching adventure. From the choice of subjects, to the search for prestigious guests with a special connection to these same subjects, I was able to collect unique information, opinions that justify my own ideas and experiences, or others that made me see a certain matter from a completely different perspective. Sometimes unexpectedly. There were twelve chapters (this is the thirteenth) of a really new story in my life, but that the same life now requires me to conclude or at least suspend to make room for other tasks and challenges.

My intention was to make at this stage a kind of synthesis, perhaps highlighting four or five topics and reasoning or just remembering others. The present, however, urges me to take another path and put my finger on a very old but much current wound, which has never healed over time and which will probably remain alive forever: is music political or non-political?

Much has been said and written about this problem in recent days and weeks, many interesting ideas and points of view have emerged, some coming from protagonists of the music world more or less exposed in regard to the invasion of Ukraine by the Kremlin troops. From the initial impulses of isolation and exclusion of everything that was Russian, there currently seems to be more balance and rationality in the decisions made and by now almost everyone (regretfully not all of us) has realized that it is absolutely unreasonable and ridiculous to ban

works by Tchaikovsky or Rimsky-Korsakov from concert halls and theatres as a form of protest, pressure or anything else. Likewise, it is unreasonable and unfair to systematically ban artists or even young musicians from any competition or candidacy, without even giving them the slightest chance to speak out, simply because they are Russians.

More complex is certainly the matter of the relationship of musical and cultural agents with responsibilities in the "west" which have direct and assumed ties to the government of Vladimir Putin. The most mediatic cases were certainly conductor Valery Gergiev, "fired" from the Munich Philharmonic, the Edinburgh Festival or the Festival with his own name in Rotterdam, and the soprano Anna Netrebko, who withdrawn from several productions in New York and Berlin, for example. As a protest for the protests over his apparent abstinence of opinion, conductor Tugan Sokhiev ended up resigning from both Moscow's Bolschoi and Toulouse.

Returning to the heart of the question or the question that floats at the heart of the discussion, it is therefore pertinent to ask ourselves about the place of music in this very complicated world we live in. I dare to put the issue on the table and it is certain that it particularly interests me, for example because I have spent some of the last few years researching and studying the relationship between power and classical music in Portugal throughout the twentieth century. It is imperative to underline that each case is a particular case and that, sometimes and wrongly, we try to find easy solutions to much more sophisticated problems with multiple variants. Furthermore, it is not a question of carrying out a musicological-expert analysis and discussing whether a given work or composer has a political connotation or does not – for that, nowadays a quick search on reliable Internet perimeters or a look at quality literature is more than enough.

What I think is at stake is the official and public attitude (or lack of it) of people and institutions in the music world about an absolutely unacceptable aggression from one sovereign country towards another. I am well aware that the issue may not be so simple and that there are backstage events and tensions accumulated over several years even involving other world powers and the always inevitable economic interests, I am well aware that in the very recent past there have been other similar conflicts both in European territory and around the world that we simply ignored or forgot, certainly due to the lack of media coverage to match the gravity of these same conflicts. But none of this excuses what we are experiencing in the present, what Ukrainian (and Russian) citizens and soldiers are facing at the moment.

For all this, yes, it is understandable that public figures and great references in the music world such as Gergiev and Netrebko, mainly because they are known and assumed friends of Putin, should retract before the atrocities for which the Russian leader is responsible. If they didn't do it at this point, it's because they won't exactly be at odds with their buddy. Of course many fear reprisals and even for the safety of family and friends in

Russia, but why do some take the step and others don't? It is in this dilemma of changing ramifications that music and musicians become political actors, inspiring or defrauding their audience, their colleagues, the world. The deafening silence of some becomes unbearable when it consents to the pain of others. In a time like the one we are currently experiencing, to hide in words of convenience – the same ones that defended music is not mere entertainment, after all, now they only make music to generate instant happiness and pleasure – it's anything but non-political.

As if nothing strange is happening, Gergiev conducts *The Ring of the Nibelung* in March and April with an exclusively Russian cast in Moscow's fantastic Sarjadje Auditorium, which he himself inaugurated in 2018 in the presence of his esteemed Vladimir. Irony of fate or perhaps not, Siegfried will once again fight for freedom and a better world against greed and the blind power of the gods... will the love of Siegfried and Brünnhilde triumph in Moscow too, and fire will finally destroy the abode of the damn gods and return the gold to the maidens of the Rhine?