
VIEWS

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TRIBUTE TO ISIDORA

It is a rare and thrilling moment when you encounter a truly great musician. Someone who appears to act as a conduit enabling music to materialise out of thin air. This was Isidora Žebeljan.

When the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh implored Beethoven:

“Maestro, why do you insist on writing these crazy violin parts that neither I nor anyone else can possibly play?”

He replied impatiently:

“Do you think I spare a thought for your wretched violin when the gods are speaking to me!”

The same could be said of our first meeting with Isidora.

We were in Belgrade to give the first performance of *Song of the Traveller in the Night*, the clarinet quintet she had written for ourselves and Joan Enric Lluna. Unused to the complexities of her highly original and deeply personal writing, we were collectively struggling to lift the music off the page. You see, despite possessing an unmistakably unique voice – like for example, Janáček or Bartók – her, and their music, looks similar to lots of other music. Not-

withstanding one or two distinguishing features, like those little notes with dots and lines followed by those all important rests, we, the interpreters are confronted by the same hieroglyphics, the same code that we are always faced with. Meeting and working with Isidora transformed how we saw and felt the music in an instant.

Take the “Traveller” for instance. We were busy trying, quite rightly, to imbue every single utterance of that introduction with as much beauty as it deserved. While she was thankful for, and praised that approach, she also showed us that of paramount importance were the harmonic shifts from bar 1 to bar 4 and eventually to bar 17. The music lost none of its whimsical beauty but structurally, became so much stronger for this insight.

The scenes that this traveller witnesses on his/her journey are numerous and varied. Isidora does not pour over them laboriously, instead she chooses to give us snapshots of these experiences, rather like polaroid shots of the events. The music therefore takes on a manic quality, shapeshifting at the rate of knots.

As a performer, this adds to the already demanding nature of her writing. The very real technical challenges involved in playing Isidora’s music endanger the music becoming stodgy and earthbound as the players become tied up in their own difficult worlds. When Isidora leapt to her feet in that very first rehearsal, ran to the piano and gleefully explained: “It goes like this!”. She then proceeded to play the entire quintet from memory, singing and dancing as she went. All those frantic, complicated rhythms were instantly transformed into what they really were, euphoric dances; those wild, soaring lyrical lines, overexcited banshees singing their hearts out.

We would probably have got there in the end, but this mesmerising display of brilliance and pure joy did more for our understanding of her music than any amount of words could ever explain. Here was someone who embodied the very essence of everything I have ever thought about music – it is about song and dance.