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SARA BASRA TALKS TO IVO VARBANOV

Pianist Ivo Varbanov was born in Bulgaria and lived in Italy from the age of nine. He studied in Milan with the Hungarian pianist Ylonka Deckers from 1988 to 1993. After graduating, he moved to England and studied with Sulamita Aronowsky, Frank Wibaut at The Royal Academy of Music, and Dennis Lee. Ivo and Finnish cellist Seeli Toivio won first prize and also a special prize in the XXV International Chamber Music Competition in Finale Ligure in Italy in 1998. His first CD (piano works by Mussorgsky) and second CD with Seeli Toivio (works for cello and piano by Ildebrando Pizzetti) had excellent reviews in *BBC Music Magazine*, *Suono*, *In Tune*, and *Kultura*.

In 2001, he founded the Voland Quartet with the Polish pianist Michal Drewnowski and percussionists Eti Kukudov and Christo Yotzov, specializing in contemporary music. He has performed at venues throughout the world including the Carnegie Recital Hall in New York; the Wigmore Hall, South Bank Centre, and St John's Smiths Square in London; and the Bulgaria Concert Hall in Sofia. Gega New has recently issued his third and fourth CDs with piano works by Johannes Brahms and 20th- and 21st-century works for two pianos and percussion.

Ivo, what are you cooking here?

Porcini, to go with pork fillets. It's dried porcini. I generally buy porcini in Bulgaria, because the quality is higher. They are more perfumed and dried in bigger chunks. And over there in the back pan I've made butternut-squash soup. When we have it, I'll add some white pepper and a few drops of 25-year-old *aceto balsamico tradizionale di Modena*.

A very fine vinegar, then...

Yes, the word *tradizionale* makes all the difference, since it indicates the real *aceto balsamico*—the way it is supposed to be made. What we find in supermarkets labeled as *Aceto Balsamico di Modena* is fake, not what it should be; it isn't aged properly, and generally contains an artificial coloring agent like caramel.

We'll finish with some *pecorino di grotta* from Tuscany, with a few drops of honey and white truffle. With these dishes I want to open for you a bottle of Williams Selyem Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2000 and a bottle of Basilisco Aglianico del Vulture 2001 [see Ivo's *tasting notes on the following page*].

What a treat. You have a great store cupboard. Where do you find all these lovely things?

My partner Fiamma and I are very spoiled in what we eat and drink. We really love to hunt out quality products from different sources. We regularly ship cheese, wine, and extra virgin olive oil from Italy—this pecorino came just a few days ago. Over here in London we buy from Borough Market or from specialized shops like Neal's Yard Dairy or Mortimer & Bennett in Chiswick.

Clearly you see cooking as far more than just fixing something to eat.

Cooking is an act of creativity and love. It also involves curiosity, generosity, and imagination. Cooking is very relaxing, but at the same time I'd say it's also a way of enriching your artistic personality. Your senses and your brain are fully functioning and stimulated by the aromatic and visual impact of food. What fascinates me are the possibilities for combining different ingredients, which are almost endless. My childhood memories of flavors from Bulgaria are somehow transposed into my way of cooking Italian classics. In a sense, my use of Bulgarian ingredients is a sort of discreet Balkanization of Italian cuisine.

Did growing up in Liguria with your mother have a great impact on you?

Every experience has an impact. Living the first nine years in Bulgaria taught me the importance of having a spiritual connection with the place where I was born. In Italy, where I lived between the ages of nine and 21, I learned to appreciate visual beauty and the sheer enjoyment of life. It also helped me to mature my sense of responsibility, since we lived in a foreign country and our family structure consisted only of my mother and myself.

And your mother is a musician, too.

Yes, she's a professional cellist. Her name is Malina, which means raspberry in English. As a musician, she has an important role in my life, because she is a person with a deep understanding of music. Her criticisms are always difficult to digest, but unfortunately

Photography courtesy of Ivo Varbanov

they are often merited. She taught me to dislike music and art that lacks moral and spiritual content. Probably she influenced me in my affinity with Brahms, a composer we both love.

What exactly draws you to a composer in that way?

Generally, the reason we like certain composers is not so mysterious. We simply have an affinity with the spiritual world of that composer; a performer who is sensitive is able to understand what lies beneath the surface. For instance, I feel a strong affinity with Brahms, but I also adore composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Prokofiev, and Debussy. Often it is not only a case of understanding a piece of music, but of having a physical compatibility with the work. Every serious pianist is able to perform different styles, but their performances of certain works are much more memorable than their renditions of others.

Can you explain a little more about this “physical compatibility”?

Well, for example, I would like to play more Mozart, but then I am constantly thinking that I shouldn’t, because the technique required is more delicate and feminine than the one I have. I’d have to adapt myself to Mozart’s light technique, and so I would not have such a natural approach. Making a comparison with viticulture, it would be like planting Pinot Noir in Sicily or the Barossa Valley. It would not be a natural thing to do.

Another aspect is the maturity of the performer. I have refrained from playing the late Beethoven sonatas in public so far, because I think that a young musician, no matter how sensitive he or she is, just isn’t able to understand what is beyond the notes of these works. It requires a few more gray hairs!

How would you describe learning a piece of music?

First, you have to know the musical score perfectly; every detail and nuance should be captured and understood. Really entering the spirit of some pieces can take years—or, indeed, a whole lifetime. Second, you need to master the technical side of the work. Good piano technique is not merely the ability to play quickly. It is more refined; it is the skill of controlling every aspect of sound through the keyboard. We should not forget that the word technique comes from the Greek word *techné*, which means art. The other important aspect is to be able to express your understanding of the work.

NOTES ON THE LUNCH WINES

Basilisco 2000 Aglianico del Vulture DOC

Deep ruby color with purple shades. Elegant aromas of prune, blackberry, and cherry, with hints of coffee. On the palate, the alcohol, tannins, and acidity are well integrated. It has a very pleasant, slightly bitter finish of considerable length.

Williams Selyem 2000 Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast

Transparent medium ruby color with garnet shades. Ripe cherries and forest fruits, with notes of licorice on the nose. The wine is elegant and feminine, with hints of well-integrated French oak and a velvety texture. Medium weight and length—one of the most elegant Pinot Noirs I have tried recently.

Altogether, you have three elements: brain, hands, and heart. These three elements need to be in perfect balance to render the piece correctly. Only when this balance is reached can the performance of the piece become something really special.

What are the most testing challenges for you in your music?

The greatest challenge is to learn a piece at short notice. It does happen, and it is stressful. Generally you are able to learn the piece correctly, but you do not have any profound insight into the work. As a result, you tend to forget it quickly after you have performed it. I do not like this. I prefer to have enough time in front of me. Learning Beethoven’s late sonatas can be challenging enough.

Do you feel fear before a performance?

It’s normal to feel nervous before a performance. People who pretend that they are not worried before a concert are not telling the truth. The most common fear is that of making mistakes or having a lapse of memory.

How do you deal with that?

My strategy is to distance myself from the audience and think only about the music I am playing. A greater sense of objectivity also helps keep the performance under control; music is not my only interest, and therefore playing the piano is not a matter of life or death for me. I’m quite certain that performers who have only music in their life can cope less well with the responsibility of performance. Of course, this does not mean that I’m light-hearted and superficial toward music. On the contrary, my interests in wine, food, cinema, theater, literature, visual arts, and several other very human activities make my understanding of music more complete.

The work of musicians is very similar to that of actors: We work with feelings and ideas we have previously experienced. We are artisans. We have a material way of expressing immaterial feelings and ideas. It is very important for us to identify ourselves completely with what we are playing, in the same way that actors do. And I do think that this identification allows us to forget fear and to drop tensions.

We met last year in Verona, at a vertical tasting of Ornellaia. Did you enjoy those wines?

I like wines that speak of the land they come from and tell us unique stories. I think that Ornellaia’s wines are superb, and their commitment to excellence is admirable. The only problem I see is that they try very hard to please every consumer. In order to do that, greater human intervention is necessary, and also a certain degree of standardization. In this way, there is always the risk of creating a supermarket wine for rich people.

How do you define great wine?

A great wine, like every form of art, should stand the test of time. I do not trust wines that are à la mode, because their effort to please the consumer is not very genuine. A wine should not aim at technical perfection over substance and truth: Often the charm of a wine is a tiny imperfection. As in a painting, some details might be considered as imperfections, but in fact they create a memorable unity.

Tell me about your vineyard in Bulgaria.

Over the past three years, my sister Toni, my brother-in-law Boyko, and I have created a small vineyard and winery in Bulgaria. It’s our

hope to build a small community of wine enthusiasts there. The search for a good location took us almost two years. In the end, we found a vineyard close to the city of Ljubimetz, near the Turkish/Greek border. Our first mentor was Professor Marin Penkov, a well-known soil scientist at Sofia University. We have learned a great deal from him. We visited the area with him several times and analyzed the soils. Despite his age—he is well over 70 now—he showed a strong and affable spirit.

What are you planting there?

This year we planted the first 6.6 hectares with Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Cabernet Franc, and over the next two to three years we would like to plant some Viognier, Fiano, and Mavrud.

Fiano is an unusual choice.

It was my idea, but it has been supported by Matthieu Lerch, the viticulturalist from Pépinières Guillaume in France. Generally this grape is planted on volcanic soils in Campania, but I have tried a Fiano from Viticoltori De Conciliis, which is planted on a soil type similar to ours, and I enjoyed it very much. I like the certain *qualità rustica* of the grape, but at the same time it has originality and vitality.

We are working closely with Pépinières Guillaume for the varietal and clonal selection. Our main consultant is Arrigo Depaoli, a young Italian winemaker from Trentino who has worked for Tenuta di Valgiano and Badia di Morrone in Tuscany. For him the challenge is to convince people in Bulgaria that things can be done differently from the way they have been over the past 50 years. I like his healthy directness and straightforward approach.

Yes, I know you feel it’s important that the project starts as a *tabula rasa*. Why is that?

The situation of viticulture and winemaking in Bulgaria is very complex and difficult. During the Communist period, the state created a factory-like wine industry, prioritizing quantity over quality. In this way, the standard was always average but never exceptional. The plantings that took place in the 1960s and ’70s probably used the wrong clonal selection and chose the wrong locations. In many cases, the valley floor was selected for cultivation just because it allowed mechanization of the vineyards.

Nowadays, a number of post-Communist wineries look much as they did 20 years ago but are in fact privately owned. Up until a couple of years ago, those wineries did not have enough vineyards to supply their production. Now they have intensively planted thousands of hectares. The mentality is: “You must have millions to make a winery and don’t bother with only 10 or 20 hectares.” Unfortunately, some of those producers are businessmen rather than true wine lovers, and I suspect that in the long run they will produce very average wine.

Moreover, the EU is not playing a very positive role, since 99 percent of European funds go to the big players, because they have the financial muscle to profit from the situation. I consider this the primary failure of the EU in Bulgaria. Projects like Sapard were meant to help the small and medium-size agricultural businesses, but that did not happen at all.

And yet I certainly believe that the terroir we have in Bulgaria could allow us to create very noteworthy wines. What is needed is a group of boutique wineries, to create a completely new approach. And also we have to educate the taste of consumers in Bulgaria.

Will you practice biodynamic cultivation?

Yes, I do believe in biodynamics as a sustainable form of agriculture. We should think about the next generation and what we are leaving for them. The barely civilized world is losing the battle to preserve the planet. In many cases, we are destroying beyond repair, only because we are greedy.

A clear example is cocoa. It used to be a luxury. Why? Because it required a biodiverse environment, and the product was very scarce. But in order to have a cheaper product that is accessible to everybody, we have created cocoa monocultures. In this unbalanced environment, cocoa trees struggle to remain alive and are given lots of chemicals. In the end, we abuse nature and we obtain hugely inferior cocoa beans. I think this is morally wrong.

Do you see wine as a form of art?

Without doubt. A wine is not a drink made of marmalade and alcohol, and we should not use it just to get drunk. It should be a natural pleasure to be tasted in a proper glass by meditating on its origins.

You have a very creative spirit—making music and making wine. What’s the fire that drives you?

Curiosity. Curiosity is so important for anyone involved in any kind of artistic endeavor. Art is never conservative and cannot be created with a closed and claustrophobic mentality. Of course, being “new” at all costs and at every turn does not necessarily mean that you are creative.

Do you see parallels between winemaking and playing the piano?

Yes, there are parallels. They seem so different, but in reality they aren’t. A pianist should always work in tune with his own body, in the same way that a winemaker must work with nature—not intervening heavily in the grapes, for instance. And although the “materials” of winemaking—the grapes—and of music—the notes—are always the same, the number and the variety of musical compositions is as immense as the number of different wines. Similarly, a memorable piano performance leaves the audience with a deep memory and an emotion that lasts long after the concert. I believe the same happens with a great wine, since you can recall the emotions it stirred even after a long time.

Can you recall one particularly memorable wine for us now?

In term of uniqueness, one of the most memorable white wines I have ever had was Josko Gravner’s 1999 Breg, from Friuli. It is a wine full of originality and surprise. The color is intense amber with some pink tones. On the nose, the varietal characteristics—of Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, and Riesling Italico—are stronger than usual; the wine is aged for 41 months in large barriques. At the first savory sip, one has an explosion of emotions. The length and persistence of the wine are unforgettable, and it closes elegantly with dried flowers and spices.

But in truth, my most memorable wine is probably not the best wine. Instead, it is the first wine I drank together with my partner, Fiamma, after she arrived in London in 2002 to live with me. It was a 1997 Firebreak from Shafer in Napa. The poignancy of this wine was that it was highly symbolic. Fiamma is *toscana* and was moving here; the grape of the Firebreak is Sangiovese—Tuscany’s grape par excellence—grown and vinified abroad. ■