

ULLA MIILMANN:

WHAT PREMIERING A FLUTE CONCERTO TAUGHT ME

In the spring 2021 orchestra manager of The Danish National Orchestra, Kim Bohr contacted me, offering me the possibility to premiere a flute concerto written to me and The Danish National Symphony Orchestra (DNSO). I could pick any composer I wanted. Within a few days I received a mail from Kim Bohr with the names of numerous contemporary composers. The common denominator for all these composers was their desire to explore new sounds, new instrumental challenges, new structure (or lack thereof), a desire to expand and to leave the past behind.

As this was during the Covid period with either full or partial lock down of society, breaking boundaries, exploring new territories and breaking free from the past, was not resonating with me. I longed to connect with music, which roots were firmly planted in our Western musical heritage. I longed for traditional harmony, a beautiful melody, representing human emotion using recognizable dissonance and consonance. Interestingly, my longings for these “old fashioned” sounds brought feelings of almost shameful character; was I reactionary? was I not intellectual enough? Well, I knew I couldn't be that unique an individual, being the only person in the world with these “old fashioned” longings for newly written music. So I decided to shut the self-critical part of my brain down and go for my gut feeling - risking judgement of banality, hoping for beauty in simplicity.

My search on YouTube was quickly fruitful. I stumbled over Bechara El-Khoury and his Concerto for horn and orchestra. I immediately resonated with his musical language. As I later texted him in our communication about the new flute concerto; “your music is my love, is my pain, is my breath. The best tool in playing your music is the heart and since everyone has a heart, that's how your music transcends all people, no matter colour, culture or nationality”. My request for El-Khoury was accepted by the DNSO's orchestra management. The initial part of the process had begun.

As expected, I didn't hear from El-Khoury about the any new instrumental possibilities. He seemed to be a composer, receiving inspiration from a quiet, but rich inner source with no need for inspiration from other people. He would contact me, telling me his visions he had had in his dreams about the music he was to write - and then in a frenzy notate big parts of a movement. There seemed to be an unfiltered, natural directness flowing from his heart, making him vulnerable to the reception of his music. He often asked me if his flute concerto would live up to the expectations from me, from the orchestra, from the audience - as if his hearts musical desires was not valid enough.



The more I sensed this concertos sensitive and fragile birth, the more I had to prepare my strength on the flute. I had already seen drafts of the music and it was full of long tones; expansive sounds that had to express a multitude of feelings depicted in colours, oscillations and dynamics. In other words, I had to be stronger than ever before, to have the courage to dig deeper in what might at first glance seem as simple melody, but contained the depth of a suffering soul.

As El-Khoury, I too faced doubting myself - for my part my ability to leave my known territory as orchestra musician and to now having to step up in front of the orchestra and function as a soloist. Was I “good enough?”. A question that kept ruminating my mind. This vague “Not good enough” seemed to be a returning fear in my life, creeping into any given performance I made. This time, midway in life, I was getting really tired of it and I set out to find a way to combat this lifelong irritant.

My first challenge was finding time. Working full-time in the orchestra and juggling an associate professorship with 13 students, plus a busy chamber music life - and a family life, left me with not much time to myself. Daily time I needed to dedicate to practice my instrument. There was only time for a good chunk of undisturbed practice between 6 am and 9 am. I had no choice but to dedicate myself to this new schedule.

Secondly, how would I want to structure my time? How could I create a practice schedule that would heighten my technical skills over the next year before the premiere? And what would my “why” be, that would get me up in the dead dark at 5am and face a 12 hour, some days 17 hour work day? The questions piled up and seemed overwhelming to me. All I could do for now, was just try and get up at 5am and take it from there.

I soon realised that a committed strict regimen of exercises was needed to keep my wandering mind in check. Paradoxically, all too often my mind had let me finish practice early by convincing myself that it sounded “good enough”.

It most likely did sound good enough, but I had to change the structure and commitment of my practice to get rid of the “not good enough” feeling I encountered just as often. I needed to remind myself that my progress would not be perceived on a daily basis and that sticking to the schedule would give me the frames needed to measure my progress over a year.

Over the next couple of months, the early hours spend alone became my favourite time of the day. I created a 5 day workout, I would complete in a week, allowing me to have some flexibility in my planning. The feeling of having practised 2 hours of fundamental flute playing and one hour on preparing repertoire, before starting work in the orchestra at 10 o'clock, gave me a feeling of being ahead of the game. I would take my seat in the orchestra with a much deeper sense of validity, regardless of how I played at the rehearsal. In other words, even though my performance at work wasn't the best, I knew I



was on an upward trajectory. Being committed to the daily practice gave me the necessary trust in the process, liberating me from placing constant negative judgement on my playing. The morning practice had now become a virtue!

Not only had it transformed my “not good enough” to an “I am enough”, but it had also through its ritualistic nature, created a newly found purpose of the practice. As a matter of fact the practice had become just as much the purpose, as the result of the premiere of the flute concerto was.

One of my great pleasures of teaching during this time, was inspiring my students to try for themselves what this form of morning practise with a very specific practice structure would do for them. We were all committed to the same drills and helped each other staying on the path, sharing with each other what was challenging and what was rewarding.

The commitment to getting up and getting started every morning was the primary goal, the results of the practise the secondary. It was the promise to oneself to honour the process, not placing judgement on any given single day, but trusting the daily contribution, however small or big, would eventually get us on a higher level. Lo and behold, all the students bottom line was drastically increased - both mentally and instrumentally.

First rehearsal with the orchestra was approaching and I knew I needed to align myself with people who could give me honest and clear feedback. There was no doubt in my mind; my students would be my best teachers! Armed with copies of the score and a sharpened pencil, the students faithfully took notes of my performance. They generously offered me all the feedback I needed: questions of balance between flute and orchestra, intonation challenges, stage presence and musical intent. They challenged me to my fullest and it was exactly what I needed. Their enthusiasm in offering the best advice was heart-warming, leaving me with no doubt for the quality of these young musicians and future teachers in the making.

The circle of life in music through generations felt completed that day, leaving me with a feeling that stepping on stage and premiering the flute concerto was about so much more than just the performance.

