

## **National Assets Should Be Appreciated**

An interview with Ivari Ilja

*By Ia Remmel*

*The Estonian Music Council awarded its annual music prize to pianist Ivari Ilja for outstanding international concert activities and successful teaching.*

*Ivari Ilja is one of the most noted Estonian pianists. He started performing as a student of Laine Mets at the Tallinn State Conservatoire and later of Vera Gornostayeva and Sergei Dorensky at the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatoire. At the same time he gave first successful performances at and received prizes from several competitions, including the Chopin competition in Warsaw and Vianna da Motta contest in Lisbon.*

*Beside the career of soloist, Ivari Ilja is also the most outstanding lied pianist in Estonia. His collaboration with world-famous Russian mezzo-soprano Irina Archipova began when Ivari Ilja was still a student and lasted for 15 years. At present, Ivari Ilja is performing with Maria Guleghina and Elena Zaremba; he is also a long time lied partner to Dmitri Hvorostovski. Concert tours have taken him to the Salzburg festival, Wigmore Hall in London, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center in Washington, Mozarteum in Salzburg, Musikverein Hall in Vienna, Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire, Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, La Scala in Milan and many other notable halls.*

*Ivari Ilja is a Professor and the Head of the Piano Department at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. Several of his students have started their careers as soloists and won prizes in international competitions.*

***What were the musical ideals like during the time of your studies? What are they like nowadays?***

The ideal at any time is hopefully the same: a desire to achieve a soulful, artistically sound and technically impeccable performance. This isn't easy, because interpretation is a highly complicated activity and consists of many complex details. Every musician will sooner or later understand that the most critical information is not written down in black and white and it is indeed the invisible secret behind the notes, which determines whether or not the performance will be a success.

***What kind of a performance is a good one?***

A memorable performance is born when a musician resonates with the energy hidden in the notes. Every one of us has experienced exceptional concerts that will never be forgotten – I will always remember some by Victoria de los Angeles, Jessye Norman, Richter and Pollini, when I sensed a distinct energy triangle between the composer, interpreter and audience. This kind of experience leaves a mark for the entire life. I believe that it causes the listener to be a better person, enriches him, gives the ability to see and sense things that earlier were invisible. Unfortunately, these kinds of concerts are rare. What kind of a performance is a good one? Good performances can be heard at almost every concert because, as a rule, bad musicians are not allowed on stage.

***In contemporary interpretation there is a tendency for perfectionism and also a very meticulous observation of written music.***

Indeed, perfect performance is very common nowadays. Since it is possible to achieve absolutely impeccable recordings, the fact has heightened the expectations.

The endeavour to perform flawlessly is a good one per se. No one wishes to err on stage. But perfectionism could also set some restrictions. The matter of flawlessness is very important during competitions. Jury members regard this as one of not too many concrete criteria at their disposal. Judging by other qualities is subjective in any case.

Following the text exactly is also very important. The scale of attitudes toward the text is quite broad, ranging from sloppy, condescending and wilful to manic punctiliousness. Probably the best would be to stay between the extremes.

***How do you regard the competitions?***

I believe that competitions are very useful to a young musician. A competition builds stamina and allows testing the nerve and the ability to focus. I don't think that broadcasted concert or active concert giving at a later stage is less stressful than participating in competitions. A young person is often inherently competitive and perhaps even enjoys it; because of competitions, the works are mastered quicker and with more motivation, etc. But it is only a stage on the path to becoming a musician. No one studies the instrument in order to be able to participate in competitions, we do it so that we can give concerts and perform for people.

My favourite form of making music is giving concerts for live audience. And I'm not convinced that competitions are all that good for one's career. Perhaps one or two top competitions do open necessary doors...

Many famous pianists have made it without noted competitions – such as Lang Lang, Kissin, and Volodos. There are also those who have won prestigious awards and then disappeared. Of course, it's easier to reach the zenith as a comet than to remain there and offer something worthy for a longer period.

***In your opinion, what part does classical music play in our society? Doesn't the entertainment culture have a destructive influence on it?***

Classical music is a permanent value of the Western society and has a great importance. Nowadays we hear that everything is culture. However, the functioning mechanisms of entertainment culture and classical music culture are totally different. Nobody would think to state that Shakespeare and comic books have the same value. Some similar claims have unfortunately been made concerning music.

I also find it regrettable and disquieting when classical musicians and mediators of classical music try to approach the entertainment industry. Obviously they wish to make classical music accessible to larger audiences. Perhaps this wish would be better served by educating the masses, heightening their ability to understand classics, not by subjecting the high art to the rules of market economy. It is important to understand that being a human is a luxury and costs extra.

***Which European cultural events do you miss in Estonia?***

The years after we regained independence were economically hard, concert halls were empty, many people were impoverished, interest in culture declined. Compared to that time, we may be very happy with the current situation and developments. Surely Estonians have not lived so well ever before and I hope that people will soon feel it necessary to invest into their cultural (not entertainment) needs.

I hope to see that our concert organizations and institutions will develop greater responsibility for Estonian music and Estonian musicians.

As a pianist I must remark that the pianos in our great concert halls are in very poor condition; what they are like in smaller halls, I shudder to think of. Unfortunately it seems to

be a general belief that the existence of a piano is quite enough. Concert hall Estonia is the only venue that has a more or less tolerable piano.

In old Europe – Germany, for example – going to classical music concerts is a tradition, a natural part of life even in smaller towns. Hopefully there will become a day in Estonia when a string quartet concert in Tartu will draw a full house.

***Is there something of value here in Estonia that we might offer to the world?***

Our asset is our own music and I believe that we should appreciate our art treasures more. Instead we tend to underestimate them and often seem to be rather ashamed of what we have. I trust that the children's disease of idolizing everything foreign will pass; the signs are already there.

***Is it good if the student is excessively dependent on the teacher? Will a musician ever be absolutely self-sufficient?***

Teacher's goal should be to raise a student who will become totally independent. On the other hand, a musician of any age at all still needs feedback. Interpretation consists of countless choices. On stage one must be certain of actions, of choices, since the audience will sense every doubt. On the way to this kind of certainty, many musicians need feedback, whether in the form of a nod from a trustworthy person or something else.

***How can a teacher influence a student?***

I believe that the greatest influence comes from a flow of energy in the background. As the most important information is not written in notes, so the most important aspect of teaching is the one that cannot always be expressed in words: perhaps a cognizable moment, a certain "wow"... At least so it has been in my experience with my teachers.

Of course one must dispense information and directions, recommend interpretational choices, yet not restrict the student with stereotypes.

***What to do when a student is having a developmental crisis?***

Making art is an extremely fragile occupation. It takes the greatest courage to put oneself out there, in front of an audience, in front of judges. One must be convinced in having something important to convey and being worthy of stepping on a stage before all the people. Every now and then this belief may become undermined. And so at one or another stage of their lives,

many artists have periods of doubts, insecurities or personal crises. A teacher may offer assistance, but each and every musician has to go through the dark tunnel on his own.

*What is the quality that most delights you in a student?*

I find the greatest delight in a student who performs in such a manner that I no longer feel as a teacher. When I enjoy the moment and forget that the source of the artistic experience is my student. I've had such moments.