

A Curious Mind

by *Rose Sperrazza*

There are challenges a writer encounters when interviewing someone who lives in another country and speaks a different language. The luxury of talking over the phone does not exist in such a situation. The nuances, pauses, and inflections; which typically reveal volumes, are lost and so it becomes necessary to rely solely on text. Thankfully, the written communication from Andrea Massimo Grassi, was an exception to the rule. Even with my limited knowledge of the Italian language, I was able to recognize one fact immediately: Andrea Massimo Grassi is a true scholar. His finely crafted words and ability to communicate with crystal clarity are a testimony to his obvious respect for the process of learning and the acquisition of knowledge. In particular, he speaks of his fascination with Brahms.

He begins by relating that even as a youngster, he was drawn to the music of Johannes Brahms. «I was first introduced to Brahms when I played his clarinet works. Immediately I felt an affinity with his music, so much in fact that even as a young student I acquired the parts of his *Clarinet Quintet*».

His acquisition of the parts for the *Clarinet Quintet*, opus 115 was a foreshadowing of how Andrea's academic and musical life would play out. Eventually, Andrea went on to complete a critical comparison of several original source materials from opus 115. Among the sources he compared were the autograph score, the engraver's copy, and Brahms' personal copy of the first edition in score. This detailed comparison culminated in Andrea's *Urtext* edition of the *Clarinet Quintet*, which was published in 1999 by G. Henle Verlag. Though representative of an enormous amount of work and

energy, it was a labor of love. Andrea describes the music of Brahms as «a significant gift of joy coupled with great intellectual satisfaction».

The more Andrea learned of Brahms, the greater grew his curiosity to know the peculiarities of his writing and creative activities. He researched the genesis of his works and the compositional process. He studied the handwriting of Brahms in order to correct errors due to incomprehensible, hurried writing. In short, Andrea has devoted many years to knowing Brahms as both man and musician. At this moment, he is working to complete his doctoral dissertation at the University of Cremona on the *Sonatas*, op. 120 of Brahms. «I am studying this with particular interest because Brahms' handwriting and revisions reveal many of the author's thoughts. For me, this is a passionate study indeed».

Andrea's knowledge of the historical and theoretical aspects of music is of great importance in his teaching. Rather than focusing on a specific set of books or methods, he encourages his students to evolve into musicians with a knowledge base extending beyond clarinet works. «Just as it is inadmissible for an actor to be unfamiliar with Shakespeare, or for an artist to not know Michelangelo, it is not admissible for a musician to not know Bach. Schumann considered the study of Bach to be daily bread».

Another potential danger he strives to avoid is too much monophonic playing. Without a foundation of harmony and familiarity with contrapuntal voices, Andrea believes a young student may come to think the music lacks something. Along with technical facility on the clarinet, he gives his student an overview of the composer and the time period. «When studying the Mozart

Clarinet Concerto with a pupil, I push him to also know Mozart's last concerti for piano and orchestra which were composed during the same period and under the same circumstances».

Andrea urges his students to continuously study music, always asking the how and the why of everything. Acting as a guide through the process, he encourages them to explore in order to discover the answers on their own. This is an effective way, for instance, to help a student discover «the sense of solitude in the opening notes of *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen*».

Andrea is passionate about chamber music and has founded two successful performing ensembles. Amarilli is a trio with forming cellist Cecilia Radic and pianist Maria Luisa Gori. The Quintet Selene features four strings and clarinet. To increase the groups' repertoire and programming options, they often add instruments or modify existing parts so they are able to play works such as Mozart's *Gran Partita*. His chamber groups play a significant role in his future plans. «I am interested in continuing to work with my groups as we have always done. We are constantly studying and discovering something new every time we play or approach new repertoire. This year, Amarilli will complete 10 years of activity and the Quintet Selene will complete seven. Together we have played hundreds of concerts. My main objective is to celebrate together 60, 70, 80 years of activity!».

As a native of Milan, Andrea has the good fortune of having the most famous opera house in the world at his disposal. He initially began attending concerts at Teatro alla Scala when he was a first year student at the Conservatory 'G. Verdi' of Milan and has since accumulated many cherished memories which he considers to be true lessons in great music. He was also fortunate to have the opportunity to play in a musical review of chamber music that was organized by Teatro alla Scala.

At home, Andrea admits that his wife, Isabella, is a strong presence. She is a violinist and a musicologist who sometimes offers Andrea advice or assistance. He is happy to discuss all of his musical issues from interpretation and playing, to choice of repertoire. «I also give Isabella many of the articles and text which I have written. She always seems to find a way to say something better».

Finally, Andrea acknowledges his parents for helping to instill a love of music. Though not professional musicians, his father studied piano and his mother studied violin. Apparently they have given him a lasting gift. «In our house, the music was always resounding. I must thank my parents for initiating a love of music which I consider to be a constant and great source of joy».