

Listen & Harmonize

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*Plato said "Philosophy is the highest music"
Beethoven said "Music is a higher revelation that all wisdom and
philosophy".*

Could music be the highest philosophy?
Experiencing the Cyprus' International Music Festival and an
interview with
one of the artists opens the doors to musical enlightenment...

In the magnificent setting of the ancient Kourion theatre, the annual International Music Festival celebrated its first year of "beauty through music and landscape" this summer. Founders and organizers, Teresa Dello Monaco and Paolo Cremona, did a tremendous job of selecting world renown musicians, and combining various musical styles (the festival is open to classical, jazz, traditional and avant-garde music) with a setting that evokes deep-felt emotion. Comprising of three evening concert performances, the festival, this year, hosted Daniel Levy who offered us a fresh, new perspective of classical works; the Jacques Loussier Trio who enthralled us with never-heard before alchemies of jazz and classical melodies; and the gypsy jazz energy of the fun and young Zaiti ensemble.

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Fade in. An open-air amphitheatre, perched on a cliff-top amongst ancient ruins, set against a backdrop of the Mediterranean Sea. The night sky is dark and sprinkled with glittering stars. In the distance lies a faint outline of the horizon. The wind whispers through the air while waves can be heard crashing upon the shore below. A crowd gathers on the stone seats of this intimate venue. There is a buzz of excitement in the air. Daniel Levy is about to perform on the black polished Steinway lying alone in the middle of the stage.

Levy caresses the keys softly before his slow commencement of Brahms. The music softly creeps up on you, without the need for amplifiers, as his fingers scurry over the ivory bars. When he pauses, the vast silence of the venue engulfs you. Levy's expression matches the music's vivid character. He makes what is difficult to perform, look easy, delivering piece after piece with clarity and concentrated melody. He teases us gently with his pianissimo, amazing us with his accuracy. Every single note is played with extreme care and attention to detail.

Mesmerizing us with his Chopin performance, Levy captivates his listeners with his skillful rendition of the Barcarolle. The second half of the recital contains more recognizable music from Chopin and Schumann - works with a more romantic feel to them - a perfect complement to the enchanting surroundings. During Liszt, Levy's left digits rumble over the keys like rolling thunder, his right fingertips like raindrops tinkling on glass. Keeping us on our toes with changes of tempo, he delivers a memorable ending to the piece, then entrances us with his encore, an improvisation surprisingly played solely with his left hand. The finale is a dramatic display of musical flair as Levy ends the performance like a storyteller finishing a tale with gusto.

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Not only a master of music on stage, but also a kind, intelligent and interesting man, the renown Daniel Levy inspired me during our interview:

You have said that "Music is a language". Can you elaborate?

Not only is music a language, but language itself comes from music. In India, grammarians are musicians - they understand grammar from their love of music. The origins of words are often derived from music. Take the word "accordo" in Italian, rooted in music and adapted into everyday language. Same with the word "sympathy" - often the tone of one's voice is described as being sympathetic. How about "strings"? Have you ever heard of the expression: "pulling/tugging at one's heart-strings" to denote emotion? This epitomizes the link between music, language and feelings. Even the word "heart" is very close to the word "heard". When you say you learn things "by heart", you mean that you hear it, and then remember it... once again to do with sounds and listening.

Music is literature without words. The ballad represents a poem, the 'novellette' is a short novel in small parts. The composer doesn't tell you what the story is (in words), but you can hear the 'voices' in the music. Actually, the great composers were inspired by novels. Liszt's 'Vallée d'Obermann' is a great example of this - the music was inspired by a book of the same title, which tells the story of a man (Obermann)

who went to Switzerland to a valley (not an actual place but more of a philosophical state) to find himself.

You chose to record Schumann's works and perform him at the festival this year? What do you find so unique and inspiring about his music?

Schumann was a sympathetic man, which is why so many listeners were affected by his music. There was a sense of singing and poetry in his works, and he was inspired by children and nostalgia, all of which give his music a sense of freedom, intuition, and purity, which attracts me. His compositions may not appear to be difficult to play but they are in fact more complicated than other "acrobatics" on stage, which seem to have more music packed into a piece. With Schumann there is so much yet to discover. In 2010 it will be his 200th anniversary - celebrated by musicians all across the world. My aim is to bring some of his less popular works to light. There is no motivation to do this amongst managers of music - it is always the same pieces which are performed and recorded, and yet he has so many other compositions. Using a celebration as a reason to discover more of his work is a great way to get to know him better.

How about Chopin?

The thing about Chopin is that the pieces that are usually performed are usually "spectacular" and seem difficult to play. The Barcarolle is a little different as it seems easier and yet it's not. I believe it's harder to play a very good *pianissimo* than a *forte*. Also velocity is not the most important indication of difficulty either. Something *andante* and without noise is more challenging to impress people with. It's like being naked on a stage.

How do you see live performances evolving in the modern world?

The 'concert' as we know it is quite recent. Piano recitals were the continuity of poetry, begun by Liszt. In fact in the 19th century, it was not uncommon to have 4 hour long performances with singers, sonatas and orchestras - it was not until the end of that century when the focus was shifted to one artist for each recital. These days, music has become a pause, an interval. It is hard to capture all that the composer was trying to say in just a couple of hours. Although I do believe that is it not only about how long the piece is, but how intense it is for both the audience and the performers, we cannot deeply appreciate what is happening, when we don't have enough time.

I believe in the influence of music on human beings: in taking time out, in making a choice to listen. Music is a mirror of time - it is impossible to shorten the time it takes to listen to a sonata - it takes as long as it takes. You just cannot squish the story. What's also important is that music must sound, even if it is an old composition, as

though it were something that is happening - and relevant - now. Each time you hear it, it could be interpreted differently.

How does recording in studio compare with live concerts?

Sometimes a truly well executed recording of a piece can give you a different yet equally satisfying experience of the music compared to a live performance. There is something to be said about listening alone versus listening with people. With live concerts, sometimes because of technicalities or conditions not being right, they may not turn out as perfect as is desired. I love playing with an orchestra, as well as doing solos, but actually working with the ensemble rather than just showing up on the concert night and playing without rehearsing with them beforehand. When it comes to the audience, I can tell during the performance if they are "willing to listen". There is a difference between hearing and listening.

Is this part of what you have written about in your novels, as well as what you are trying to teach in your newly founded Academy of Euphony?

Yes. We think that we listen very well, simply because we have ears, but that's not true. We learn to talk, write, and read at school, but how about just listening? The great composers all had so many things in common: they were all deep listeners, completely aware of the music, of its role, and what it can evoke in you. When you first study the composers it seems that they were simply romantic and poetic, when in fact they were simply aware that one can transcend themselves with music.

You cannot discover such things in a regular academy, which is why I have founded the Academy of Euphony, a place to share, accessible to all. We are all musical instruments in an orchestra - each of us with a different pitch. We can all offer something to one another, no matter what our background is - as long as we feel the necessity. It would be a borderless form of teaching, with no divisions, where each person can take or give as they wish, educating themselves in the process. The challenge is to: i) Experience sound, ii) Listen, and iii) Go beyond. The idea is to explore harmony, as the body itself is a harmonic human unity... a true musical chord.

Pythagoras originated the idea of the enlightening and healing power of sounds and music thousands of years ago, however you seem to be the pioneer in bringing the idea of Euphony as a state of consciousness to the attention of modern society. Why now, and how will you succeed when so many others have failed?

So many people in time have tried to do this, but silently, without listening. Music was not *essential* before... but it is the right moment now. It seems that there is greatest necessity to address this issue now that there is so much 'noise' in the world. Recognizing that this sort of education could be essential to each one of us is a

natural reaction to this. The Dalai Lama said: "In a moment of so much communication, and yet no communication...there are so many windows, but nothing in the room".

One doesn't have to be a musician in the professional sense - we are all musicians in the essential way...we have music within us. We are all able to appreciate it; something resonates inside us when we hear music, even if we don't understand it completely, and that is a marvelous experience. *We* are the musical instruments, we are sound... I mean we use sound in our voices, when we speak and in song. Have you ever thought: why and how is it possible that we can produce certain sounds like this so naturally? Maybe we need to have more responsibility about this power. We must swim against the current. The fear of finding ourselves, leads us only to become less human.

You have definitely been a great mentor to others. Do you prefer teaching or performing?

They are so different that you cannot compare - it's like "a different frequency" altogether. Having one without the other would not be good. Sharing is important - it is essential to hear what others have to say. Just playing would be like being of touch with reality; you wouldn't have a clue what people are searching for in music, what they need. If we don't listen to people first, why should we listen to music?

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As the performance ends, the last notes of music drift up the theatre and dissolve into the atmosphere. The roaring crowds explode into applause. Smiles adorn the faces of musicians, as laughter rumbles amongst the delighted audience. The lights dim and the people climb up the rocky steps, emptying the amphitheatre. There is an overall sense of satisfaction intermingled with a touch of sadness, as it will be a whole year before the ancient grounds of Kourion host the International Music Festival again. Fade out.

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