

October 2006

Conversation / Robertson and Shaham

BY ORLI SHAHAM



CHRIS LEE

Brothers in Music

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David Robertson: And you thought, "Was it something I said?"

GS: [*chuckling*] They said, "Don't worry. David Robertson is coming to conduct." We hadn't met before. David flew in from Cologne the next day; I felt that we really connected. It was all a new experience for me, and I was sort of intimidated by everyone else around, except for David. He was easy to talk to, very supportive.

DR: I thought you were really talented, and hoped to be lucky enough to play together again.

What is it about playing with the New York Philharmonic that's so special?

DR: The thing that I really like is the tremendous virtuosity that each individual player brings. It's like stepping into a perfectly tuned, high-powered, precision sports car. That makes accompanying with them a delight, because you can shift and follow the inspiration of the soloist very quickly.

GS: When you make music with people, you can bond very quickly. You're following people's cues on a split-second level, and you try to match and support and enhance. I've been so lucky to play with the New York Philharmonic over the years, and I feel we have that bond. I got to know many of the players [as a student] at Juilliard and around New York, and now when I go on stage it's really making music with friends.

It's a little bit like a baseball player joining his hometown major league team.

GS: Yeah, that's exactly right.

DR: For me one of the best parts has to be getting to sleep in my own bed!

GS: Absolutely!

David, I know you spend a lot of time thinking about programs and how they work together. How did this program come about?

DR: I think it was conceived in order to torture Gil [*both laugh*]. Seriously though, it originally came about because of the Stravinsky Violin Concerto. Gil liked the idea of pairing this with a Mozart concerto. It seemed perfect to accompany the concertos with orchestral works, by those composers, that were about the same size. [The *Linz* Symphony] has a quality of boisterousness — the last movement sounds like people dancing with boots on — yet at the same time the slow movement is practically an opera scene, complete with recitative. I feel it parallels many of the gestures in the Stravinsky, albeit in a completely different fashion. I also like the harmonic openness of it, like the very opening chord of the Stravinsky.

GS: Both [concertos] are in D major, with similar violinistic writing, with very singing middle movements. There's something very happy about these two works, about the experiments that happen in them. Like David said, from the first chord of the Stravinsky, he's obviously pushing the violin to new limits. I think that's similar to the kind of experimenting that Mozart was doing. He wrote the violin concerto for himself to perform, playing a little bit higher and with bigger leaps, pushing the instrument to its limits in a very fun and violinistic way.

How does being brothers-in-law affect your onstage relationship?

GS: I think it's a lot easier.

DR: There's instantaneous comprehension of all of the jokes that are going on. I remember when I did the Sibelius [Violin Concerto] with you and the New York Philharmonic [in June 2005], you had this great move with the left hand on an open G-string, doing the "Force" [from *Star Wars*]. I think in one performance, I managed to put the "Force" gesture right in at that point, because of course it looks like a conducting gesture. Not only did I see amusement, but also tremendous jealousy cross your face.

[*Gil explodes in laughter*]

Now that we've got the serious questions out of the way, could each of you share with us one quality of the other that you know only because you're now family?

GS: There are so many things. I'll always remember when we were in Lyon and you took my son Elijah and walked around with him and put him to sleep on your shoulder. I haven't seen any other conductor do that.

DR: *[chuckling]* I think I'd have to say it's the kind of determination Gil puts into things. It's clear with the violin, but I've seen your books in Chinese; seen the horn that you started to learn because you like the instrument; or your treadmill, where you trained for a marathon that you actually ran.

So where do you see each other most often these days?

DR: Probably at my mother-in-law's.

GS: Yeah, I think at mom's place.

Pianist Orli Shaham juggles performing worldwide, hosting the weekly radio feature Dial-a-Musician for CPRN, writing for numerous publications, and, when time allows, actual juggling (three balls maximum!).