

# Itamar

REVISTA DE INVESTIGACIÓN MUSICAL: TERRITORIOS PARA EL ARTE



AÑO 2021

7

 Facultat de Filosofia i Ciències de l'Educació



VNIVERSITAT  
DE VALÈNCIA

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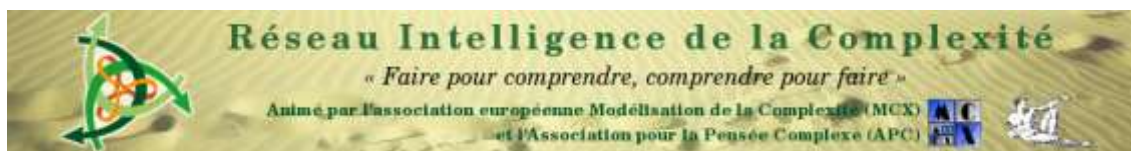
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# ***Territorios para la conversación***

## Interview with Nimrod Borenstein, composer

Giusy Caruso  
Concert pianist and researcher  
Musicology, Arts, Music and Theater - University of Ghent, Belgium

Nimrod Borenstein (1969) is a British-French-Israeli composer based in London. Recently, his last publication for Chandos won 5 prizes for the BBC magazine. His music is widely performed throughout Europe, the US, Canada, Australia and Japan and is becoming part of the repertoire of many ensembles and orchestras.



Nimrod Borenstein. Composer

**Let's start our interview by speaking about your last publication for Chandos that won 5 prizes for the BBC magazine. It comprises the works Concerto for Violin and Orchestra opus 60, The Big Bang and Creation of the Universe opus 52, If you will it, it is no dream opus 58 (2017) performed by the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Vladimir Ashkenazi, and with Irmina Trynkos as solo vio-**

**linist. How did this project come out and how did you start the collaboration with Ashkenazi?**

When I was a child I listened to many of Vladimir Ashkenazy's recordings on the piano. I loved his recordings of Chopin's Etudes, Rachmaninov's concertos and Beethoven's sonatas as well as his collaboration in chamber music with Perlman and others.

15 years ago, after hearing a television interview of Maestro Ashkenazy talking about composers he had known personally (like Shostakovich) I had a feeling that he would like my music. So, I wrote to his agent asking if I could meet him and introduce my music to him. After just a couple of days I received an answer saying that he was very busy but would be interested to meet me for 5 minutes after a rehearsal with the Philharmonia orchestra. I was very excited and thought hard about which piece to play to him in the 5 minutes I had. I thought that I would bring a score with me, as well as a recording and portable CD player. After a couple of weeks of waiting, Maestro Ashkenazy arrived in London and I went to meet him. I played my 5 minutes of music on the CD and he said: "Very beautiful. Can you play me something else?" We stayed together a lot longer than the 5 minutes I had expected. Eventually Maestro Ashkenazy realised that it was late and he had to meet his wife at the hotel. He asked me if I could drive him there and, as I had just passed my driving license not long before, I thought to myself: "What about if crash the car now with Maestro Ashkenazy in it?!" Fortunately, it all went well and this was the start of a very exciting collaboration. Maestro Ashkenazy performed and premiered several of my works and after a few years told me that he would like to record my music for a CD. It was a nice coincidence that this CD was recorded at Henry Wood Hall, the place I met Vladimir Ashkenazy for the first time with my CD player!

**Some of your compositions have specific titles. This recalls the idea of 'program music' inherited by Berlioz or Liszt or Holst. What do you think about the relationship between music and literature? Are you strongly inspired by external elements when composing music? Which place do you give to imagination in music composing and listening?**

My answer may surprise you, but for me music is totally pure and abstract. Composing, for me, is playing with sounds and rhythms in my head to create a world. More importantly, it is about creating Beauty and Perfection. By perfection, I mean that each note is the only possible note at the only possible place, because both emotionally and aesthetically, it is absolutely needed there. You can see that I don't believe in relativity in art. It is difficult to explore the matter in a short space here, but if your readers are interested, a few years ago I gave a lecture-concert about *Music and the Absolute* with the British philosopher Adrian Moore at the London School of Economics and a video is available on YouTube.

However, I should answer your question more fully and explain why many of my compositions have specific titles. When I give a composition a specific title,

it is usually because it is for a one-movement piece and you have to give it a name. This is why my concertos, which have several movements, are simply named after what they are for: violin concerto, cello concerto, saxophone concerto, piano concerto etc. This also true of many of my multi movement pieces: Sonatas, Piano Trios etc. However, the single-movement piece on the Ashkenazy Album, *If you will it, it is no Dream*, had to have a name because you cannot just call it piece number X!

For my one-movement pieces, after I have completely finished composing the piece, I usually try to find a title that is evocative of the atmosphere of the composition. If we take one of the other pieces on the Askenazy CD, *The Big Bang and Creation of the Universe*, the reason I did not call this work Symphony No.1 is that with its prominent, nearly soloistic vibraphone part it was almost like a vibraphone concerto. Being somewhere between a vibraphone concerto and a symphony, I had to call it something else!

**Originally, the Études are compositions that explore instrumental techniques. Nowadays, with composers like Messiaen, Sorabji or Ligeti, the Études are becoming forms to explore compositional expedients. What is your approach to this form and can you explain your project specifically dedicated to the Études for piano?**

In my opinion Etudes have always been divided between the practical teaching material (Burgmüller, Czerny & Hanon...) and great art (Chopin, Liszt, etc.). I have loved and admired the Chopin Etudes since I was a child and, whilst other composers have written great Etudes (Liszt, Scriabine, Rachmaninov), Chopin is the only composer to have managed to write so many, with each of them inspired. So, for me, Chopin's achievement has been the initial inspiration of my Etudes journey and this is why I wanted to write my own 24. Of course, the number 24 has an important history before Chopin which must have inspired him too, with the 24 preludes and fugues of J.S. Bach and the 24 Caprices of Paganini. Mentioning Paganini brings me to an important point. Some of my Etudes could be perceived to concentrate on the development of new virtuosic writing for piano (*Arpeggio Étude, Half Moon Étude, Chords Étude, Staccato-Legato Étude*) others on some musical aspects (*Ostinato Étude, Toccata Étude, Hidden Melodies Étude*) and you could say that some Etudes have even been inspired by Literature or the countries of origin of the performers (*Kangding Qingge Étude, Méphisto Étude, Brazilian Étude, Japanese Gardens Étude*). However, all these pieces are Etudes because they are challenging to play. As human beings, we always try to categorise things and put them into orderly boxes, but the truth is that the only thing that can be said with confidence about an Etude is that it is a short one-movement piece. For example, one could easily mistake some of Scriabine's Etudes for Preludes and vice versa and I recently thought that my *Water Droplets in Venice* opus 75 No 2 could easily have been included in my Etudes.

To finish answering your question, I would say that if I had to single out one aspect of my Etudes piano writing it would be the very complex rhythmic counterpoint which could be described as multi-melodic. Polyrhythm would not be a

precise enough description of it, as what is important here is that many voices are present simultaneously, but each with a different feel and length.

**Your compositions reveal a link with the traditional tonal music language. Which is your idea regarding the dichotomy of tonal and atonal music and how do you define your music in respect to both systems and the contemporary avantguard?**

For me, writing something new has always been of prime importance, from the age of six, when I started composing, to now. When I was 8 years old, I started composing using my own 12-tone system. I did not know Arnold Schoenberg and thought that I had invented it. When I was in my twenties, my palette got gradually larger and larger. The real dichotomy is not between tonal and atonal music, but between music that seeks to create absolute perfection and music that views things in relative terms - creating something perfect in an imperfect world: beauty.

It seems that we have a funny situation today: a large majority of composers writing in an idiom they all share, using a 100-year-old system of belief. Surely they cannot be modern or novel if all they do is copy one another? It is enough to go to any music school in the world and witness how composition is taught to see that what is often described as the "contemporary avantguard" is in fact today's academic writing, "academic" being what is taught in... Academies!

To be in the avant garde is to go against the trend and have the courage to write what is not expected of you; not to write like 200 years ago, not to write like 50 years ago, not to write like today even, but to write something that no one else is writing. I have always tried my hardest to do that, as I see it as what it means to be a composer.

**In which direction is your research on melody, harmony, rhythm and timbre oriented ?**

For me melody, harmony, rhythm and timbre cannot be separated. You can recognize the music of Beethoven (or any of the other great composers) after listening for a few seconds because the essential Beethoven was always there, from when was 30 years old to when he was 50. However, as you get older you try to renew yourself all the time and find new things. That is what I am trying to do every day I compose. I am trying to find new ways to write melodies, new harmonies, new rhythms and timbres, but what we do consciously is only the tip of the iceberg and, of course, much happens in our unconscious mind. Composing has, from time to time, its Eureka moments but is often full of subtle changes that matter over time, much like how we grow old... hopefully gracefully!

**Any future projects?**

Many! Starting with my *Cieli d' Italia* for string quartet which was commissioned by the Quartetto di Cremona, premiered in Italy in October (part of the Unione Musicale season, one of the oldest concert seasons in Europe) and released on CD in November (Avie Records' album *Italian Postcards*). The Quar-

tetto di Cremona will now perform the piece worldwide, starting in the next few months with concerts in Firenze (Italy), Ulm (Germany), Geneva (Switzerland) and London (United Kingdom) amongst others.

During the next few months there will also be several world premieres including *Odysseus* opus 87 for violoncello and piano (commissioned by the International Jeunesses Musicales Competition for violoncello, Belgrade, to be performed by all the semi-finalists of the competition), *L' Oiseau bleu* opus 89 for solo harp and string orchestra (performed by Anne-Sophie Bertrand, solo harp at the World Harp Congress, Cardiff, UK) and the Piano Trio no 2 opus 90 (commissioned by The Joy of Music Festival, Hong Kong). There are also the world premieres of several of my piano Etudes which have been delayed by Covid and will take place in Hong-Kong, Israel and Italy. I also have several local premieres in many different countries. For example, I am excited to be conducting the U.K premiere of my Poème op.64 for violin and string orchestra for the Shipley Arts Festival in June with the Bernardi Music Group Orchestra.

I am also delighted to have several CD recording projects ahead: the French pianist Pascal Rogé is recording my piece *The Dream* in March for his forthcoming album on the Sheva collection label, the pianist Tra Nguyen is recording 12 of my piano Etudes and other pieces for an album to be released on Grand Piano Naxos during 2021 and I have 3 other CD projects which I am not at liberty to divulge yet!

If we look at the next two or three years, I have many commissions and projects, including, of course, my 24 Etudes project to continue (twelve done, twelve to go!) but also two concertos, pieces for orchestra, chamber music and an opera - so it looks like I will be very busy!