

## Interview with Bengt Forsberg

Jury member in the category Duo for Voice and Piano (Lied)

Interviewer: Jennifer Ronyak, Senior Scientist at *Institute 14: Aesthetics of Music*

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JR: Thank you so much for joining me for this interview, and for serving on the jury. Given that your expertise is as a pianist, with respect to the lied, the question of collaborative piano comes up. How would you describe the role of a collaborative pianist in performing art song?

BF: Well, first of all, I'd like to say, that I am not a lied pianist. I play chamber music and solo much more. But I have been playing for a couple of years with Anne Sofie von Otter and other singers of course. Do you mean what is necessary to think of?

JR: Yes.

BF: So much – depending on who the singer is, if it's a singer who needs much support. The support can be something that you encourage and you strengthen, using the ideas that you have in common. And you can, as a pianist, if you have a good instrument, give the illusion of playing with all the energy that is possible, without playing very loud, because you have to think about when the singer is singing in a low register and so on. Cheating almost. It is intense playing, and giving impulses, but not being too loud. But that's quite a challenge.

JR: Yes, I think Gerald Moore titled his memoir *Am I Playing Too Loud*.

BF: Yes. Because that is how you are not playing too loud. Because there are terrible examples of pianists who just sit there and play something too weak. I met recently here a couple, a duo that were taken out in the first round, because they were not ready for this at all. But the pianist there, she had been told: "Ah, you are playing Schubert songs! Pianissimo, pianissimo!"

JR: Oh Lord.

BF: And she had a teacher who would dictate the rhythm to "Auf dem Wasser zu singen" metronomically [beats unpleasantly on the table], saying "Keep the time." So I helped her to get out of that s\*\*\*. So incredibly stupid! And non-musical instructions to a pianist like her.

JR: I didn't see anyone in the competition doing this, but I think that some people feel very uncomfortable very often, even opening the piano fully. Because of this issue of dynamics vs. control.

BF: Yes, as I said to dear Joseph Breinl, I surely think that a grand piano is better than the C model that we have here, because the C model makes a lot more noise, actually. A smaller piano often does. And a big piano has control of color, and the richness of sound, and then if it's a good piano, you can have the open lid. When you only use the small stick, it is a psychologically good feeling, that you feel that you might be able to give a little more without overwhelming the

singer. But I don't think the difference is really a question of dynamics, more that the sound is less rich when you close the lid.

JR: Yes, definitely. So on that note, this competition really emphasizes the duo, and not the individual singer and pianist. Who do you think working today as a duo provides a very strong model for very inspiring or successful song interpretation?

BF: You mean like Anne Sofie von Otter and I?

JR: Yeah, sure.

BF: We are the only ones [laughs]. No, no, no. Well, I don't follow that field so much. I remember when you listen to Ralf Gothóni, he is so interesting, the risk is that he is too interesting and that he steals the show of the singer. It is not really my field.

JR: Moving on to another related question. You are very active as a solo pianist. How do you feel that solo playing informs chamber playing, or vice versa?

BF: I love to do both. As a solo pianist, you just take responsibility only for yourself, and the music. Obviously things like listening to the others, and understanding the dynamic interplay between the musicians are important to chamber music. I am happy to do all three: solo piano, chamber music, solo with orchestra. And the lied is a very special kind of chamber music, you have so much to consider.

JR: One factor would be the text of the song and how it's set. And it makes me wonder a bit, for the pianist. For the singer, it seems clear, that the responsibility for handling the text is essential. How much do you feel the pianist can contribute to a reading of the text?

BF: You can contribute a lot. There can be examples of people who contribute too much. They try to make a thing of every single word, or be so delicate that they lose all perspective. But it can be very nice too. To me, what is important is that you can tell a story, and be as eloquent as possible and very, in cases its needed, emotional and touching. I want to be touched by people. That's important I think. Not just showing off. That's why we are doing this strange thing, this competition here. It's not sports, we can't talk about exact results, it is only what affects us. Primarily it is what I love to hear. Or, "That voice I don't want to hear anymore." Because there is too much trouble in it, or the higher pitches are too loud, or they confuse this with opera.

JR: This is an interesting point, because I spoke earlier with Roberta Alexander about distinctions between lied and opera in performance, and what one might bring from one to the other. And you mentioned that it is possible to confuse song with opera.

BF: Well, I may be wrong, but I think that an opera singer standing on the stage in a hall for 2000 people has to project enormously through a big orchestra. What I say is not Einstein. But it is another way of thinking, where you must project to the last row in the back, and go out, and be obvious and clear for everybody to understand. While the lied is subtler, although it can range from the subtlest pianissimo to an enormous shouting, aggressive shouting, in four *fs*. But not the

whole time. And some singers want to project the whole time, and they make awful grimaces with their faces, in also quite simple songs. They could be more neutral, but they look terrible coming directly from operatic stage techniques.

JR: Yes, there is a kind of acting that also tries to reach very far away.

BF: So, that's one of the differences. And you need to paint a picture, or a scene, a drama of two minutes. How do you do that, in so short a while? It is fantastic, exciting. But difficult.

JR: Certainly. I also wanted to ask you a bit about the repertoire of the competition. There has been a new song composed for the final round of the competition, which the duos must learn in a very short amount of time. What do you find valuable or useful in this exercise in a duo preparing something in so little time?

BF: I think it is very good for you to have that ability. To try to...even if.... I looked in the score, it is quite complicated. I am sure that one or two or three can make mistakes in that short while in which they have to prepare it. We just want to see if they can make something convincing out of such complex material. And I think that is valuable to have that ability also in your professional life. Sometimes you are asked two days before – it is nice to have that ability. And then you talked about repertoire.

JR: Oh yes. The theme of this competition, being Schubert and Modern Music, leaves the question of Schubert. It may not be clear for certain singers what to choose. And then with more recent song, there is wide field of interpretation for what would suit that part of the competition. Could you speak about some of the choices of repertoire, or new repertoire, that you found exciting?

BF: I think that you can benefit from both. If you say that the Romantic way of singing Schubert could use some of the modern way of doing modern music: more aggressive, more spikey, then in contemporary music you can use Romantic means. It benefits both sides to be able to sing the other. I'm not so sure I understand singers and musicians who only do contemporary, and are learning from new scores all the time. It is very complicated. I've done that – I was in a contemporary group in Stockholm for a time – it was very exciting. But not having any time to play Schubert! It was nothing for me after a while.

JR: Yes.

BF: But as you know, this competition focuses on Schubert and the twentieth/twenty-first century, with nothing in between. That is an interesting perspective. We have the beginning of the century coming from Berg and Schoenberg.

JR: Given that big gap between Schubert and this other repertoire, what did you feel was important for the duos when they were putting together short programs for the competition?

BF: It seems that some of them have given a lot of thought to make a great program, although it's only half an hour. They say something – speaking about the moon, or about death, or love,

for that matter. That's very wonderful. And many of them have given this really good thought and created beautiful and exciting programs. For example, starting with two verses of a Schubert song, and ending with the two last verses of the same song. And going sometimes *attaca* between songs, so we are really not sure – are we listening to Wolfgang Rihm or is it Berg? So that was interesting. Thank God we had the music on the jury!

JR: That's wonderful when even just the matter of a pause or no pause can change how you hear the music.

BF: That's because there is some connection. It has been thought out very carefully. I don't think that is absolutely essential for composing a program. One of them had very humorous songs, from beginning to end. It can be quite dangerous, but it shows that they were quite confident in themselves: "We will go to the next round and then show them something else."

JR: I was wondering about this, watching some of the second round itself, whether it was better to, in that short span, to have a unity of thought or, to think this is a competition, I need to show all my best sides.

BF: Risk taking – I appreciate that.

JR: I understand also that in your work in music as a pianist yourself, that you've put some emphasis on lesser-known composers. You don't like to stay in the center of the canon that everyone knows. Could you speak about the importance of this as an artist, or perhaps for young artists – taking chances?

BF: I have to admit that I don't play as much contemporary music any more. There are very many wonderful pianists and musicians who do that, and the composers themselves can defend or support themselves. I am looking for the dead ones who can't say anything more. But if, pianists play Debussy, Ravel, I would play Fauré, Pierné ... Forgotten ones. I mean Fauré is not forgotten, but very much of his piano music is never played. And it is gorgeous, wonderful. If people play Rachmaninov and Prokofiev, I play Medtner instead. That's my objective.

JR: How do you feel it is for audiences in your experience? Because some of the reason that people are more conservative in their programming choices is the expectation that the audience would like to hear certain things that they are very familiar with. So what kinds of interactions have you had with audiences about these choices?

BF: My experience is that people generally are very happy to hear something they didn't know. I have a series in Stockholm in a wooden church for three hundred people. I try to give a mixture of common, well-known beloved music, that you must hear all the time, because it is so great, and unusual music. And people appreciate that. But if we play only the Nobel prize winners in music, where are we then? To appreciate Brahms, you have to play Herzogenberg, or Fuchs, or Joachim Raff.

JR: Yes.

BF: Well, maybe not Joachim Raff! He wrote too much. Or Carl Reinecke – to appreciate Brahms at his fullest, to see how deeply original he was. And strange, and crazy, and wonderful. Like Schubert.

JR: Thank you, I think we have come to the end of our time.

BF: Thank you.