

Interview with Ida Bieler

Jury Member in the category String Quartet

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

JR: Thank you for being here and for serving on the jury. Could you start out by speaking a bit about your educational background as a woman violinist, especially in relationship to pioneering aspects of your early professional career?

IB: I went to the North Carolina School of the Arts for my high school, and then Julliard for the other degrees. It was the age where the orchestras were boy-girl-boy-girl: I have beautiful pictures, we all looked adorable! I was substitutional concertmaster; if I was the best in a student group, I was only substitutional. When I was a little girl, my mother saw that I was frustrated by this. And she was very philosophical: “Don’t worry Ida, without the second violin there is no first.”

JR: Earlier in your career, you won several major competitions, and now you find yourself on the jury for this international competition. Could you describe a bit about what was important to you in the process of winning those competitions, or what you think the significance of such competitions is now for young competitors?

IB: Well, these are many aspects, exactly. I would say that competitions were a gathering together of my personal forces—where I pushed myself in my artistic goals and my physical preparation absolutely to the limits of my ability. I tended to always pick the most challenging works in each category, and put myself through really extreme preparation. I think every fine musician does that. And I think that is actually the real prize of a competition, is the preparation for it. Because you learn not only repertoire, but about yourself and about your artistic abilities through that preparation. The blood, sweat and tears that you go through in that is part of what builds you into an artist. And how you prepare your concert life, as well.

JR: Yes.

IB: The ability to get a major solo program together, or, in this case, a major chamber music program gives you a fundamental idea of how much repertoire you’re going to need to carry around with you in the world, and it will be more than you expect. Always. You know from this experience that you can handle it. Or you will discover the limits of what you can handle. Four concertos in a year and four recitals, fine, but it might be that fifth that flips over. So you learn actual practical value for the occupation.

JR: I see.

IB: For myself the challenge was central and to prove to myself that I could do it, survive it, and grow stronger from it, whether I lost or not was not very essential. I always tell my own students that when I won a competition it was like icing on a cake. The cake has to be good, the preparation. And when I lost it, I learned. I learned more from losing than winning. From the other students I heard playing I adored, and playing I found interesting and less admirable, and I learned what I didn’t like. So from either positive or negative I constantly learned. And I feel that it is a part of our education,

so that's why I very much encourage my students and help them prepare for these challenges. Because it is totally educational, if you do it right, and if you are open to winning and losing, and see that there are benefits from both sides.

JR: That's very profound. You were one of the first women concertmasters in a major European orchestra, and since then maybe some things have changed, maybe some things have not. I'm wondering if you could share with us some of your thoughts on gender dynamics in today's orchestras or, also, perhaps in the world of string quartets, since that's the subject at hand.

IB: After a period in the United States after my initial study in Europe, I came back to Europe, and I sent out applications to orchestras, and I had studied here, and so I did have some friends and acquaintances, and I knew basically how it worked, though not everything, and I consistently did not get any invitations. And my personal story is that I bit the bullet in this situation, and I decided that, ok, I'll audition for a tutti job, instead of a concertmaster job. And I had been informed that there was a first violin tutti position open in Cologne. And I asked them if I could come and play, I was not invited, but I was sent, on a couple of a day's notice, the materials, the orchestral excerpts that they wanted to hear, I prepared them in a few days, which was fine, and I arrived, played my audition, and no one knew my name, and no one knew where I was from, because there was no application. I had just been sort of pitied, I think, by the head of the orchestra. And the orchestra unanimously offered me the concertmaster job, even though I played for the tutti.

JR: That's an amazing story.

IB: And this was actually the big surprise. I took the job, actually, without the experience of knowing what a *Kulturorchester*—an orchestra that really plays every night, that plays opera and symphony concerts—really is like. The dynamics of changing artistic decisions—in our case, for violinists, bowings, were unfamiliar to me. I had to learn the ropes of changing the bowings that had been there for thirty years. The long history of playing *The Magic Flute*, and the turmoil that it would cause to change bowings for something that was running in repertoire. And so, of course, I had a rough time at times. I don't think that was a matter of gender, though, I think that was more a matter of experience. I don't think I had any gender problems once I was there.

JR: Did you encounter such problems elsewhere?

IB: For example, I won't give names, but I did get a letter from one of these European orchestras that really asked me for my forgiveness that they would not invite me for an audition. They actually said that it was because they did not want a woman on the first stand. I still have this letter—it will go in my book, which I will never write—but of course, it was a surprising thing, and of course at that time, there were not the limits [that there are today]. So basically a girlfriend of mine was the first one to get a concertmaster position, a German girl, who was a few years older than me, and was a very fine violinist, she had gotten the first job, I was the second, and we watched over the years as these barriers broke down. More girls studied violin in *Hochschule*, and it became a natural process, after this beginning time – which was just shocking for people.

JR: Let's turn now to the matter of what you see today with chamber music playing in terms of gender dynamics or gender representation.

IB: Well, I don't know if I feel qualified to speak about what happens in modern groups today. It is really a new generation. You see all kinds of dynamics. They are really personality things.

I never felt a disadvantage as a woman in an ensemble. In fact, I felt often in an ensemble—since several quartets that I played with were otherwise only men—I was actually able to diplomatically deal with things, I think in a way that, perhaps, because of my being feminine was simpler for me. It was perhaps simpler for me to allow my difference to bring something positive into those groups.

JR: That's really interesting.

IB: Yes, I really do feel that. I feel that I worked this way with the men in the Melos quartet, for example. I've also had a wonderful piano trio for fifteen years with two outstanding, well-known women. And, I think in a funny way, we had to deal with our dominance or non-dominance, in a sense more current today, with more presence, because there were sometimes some envy, some jealousies. When people feel they are competing for the same thing, whether women and women, men and men, or women and men, it just doesn't matter. In general, today, though, when it comes to tension in ensembles it is really a matter of personalities and strength of character.

JR: Thank you, that is interesting. We have time to move to one more subject, I think. For round two, in light of the "Modern Music" aspect of the competition, the string quartets were asked to present a piece composed after 1990, with the additional stipulation that it might represent their own country or culture in some way. How did you feel that contestants did in bringing out that aspect? Was that present, bringing out this aspect of their home culture?

IB: I can't speak for the contestants, if they felt really attuned to what they chose. They all did a really good job on those pieces, all of them. I must also say that I appreciated their choices. I might have liked one composer more than another, but I personally love this idea, I think it's marvelous. You know, here at our school we basically ask for a piece written after a certain year as a requirement for graduating for bachelors and masters. We have international classes here, and I find that they find a very strong affinity, and I encourage them to bring a composer that they love from their home country. It has brought beautiful stuff to us, and I find that the students are very committed to it.

JR: Yes, absolutely. To kind of cap it off, directly concerning the competition, is there any way to say a few things about what you're looking most for in the final?

IB: I think all of us, I think we all want an outstanding artistic performance and connection to the compositions. Not self-serving musicality, but serving the great composers and the works themselves. And of course we all love and appreciate the technical ability to achieve that.

JR: Thank you so much for your time.