

A Age of Artists

Interview

Lubnan Baalbaki

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This Interview was conducted by Dirk Dobiéy (Age of Artists, AoA).

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Introduction

Truly passionate about music and raised in an artistic environment, Lubnan Baalbaki started by studying violin at the national conservatory of Lebanon, before pursuing musicology studies in Lebanon at the Saint-Esprit Université with the aim to become a conductor. The opportunity to reach his goal appeared when he travelled to Romania and met Petre Sbârcea, a maestro who would be his first teacher and mentor. This is now almost fifteen years ago but the story did not end there. Today, Lubnan Baalbaki is permanent conductor of the Lebanon Philharmonic Orchestra and still in love with music.

Interview

Age of Artists: How did you get into art and in your case into music?

Lubnan Baalbaki: I come from an artist family. My father was a painter and my sister is a singer in Lebanon. She started singing in 1987, back then I was still a kid. I was six years old. Just like this, I started to show interest in music. After few years, I started studying violin at the national conservatory in Lebanon and this is how my journey started. After the conservatory, when I finished my school, I started musicology studies, also in Lebanon at Saint-Esprit Université. After this, in 2003, I had a project with an orchestra from Romania. I met the maestro Petre Sbârcea who became my teacher after this in Cluj-Napoca in 2004. It was a very interesting meeting. He just took my hands like this, and he told me, with a very nice smile, "you have the hands of a conductor". That is how I started the whole thing.

Age of Artists: Did you go to him with your violin?

Lubnan Baalbaki: No, I went to an interview and I told him "I want to study conducting". This was more than ten years ago. He is now 84 or 85. He had a lot of energy and he was very direct and to the point. He just sat at the piano, I remember that he played Mozart, the symphony n° 40, and he said, "Please conduct this". I knew nothing about the whole thing. I just moved my hands. He said that it would be fine for me [laughs]. This is how we started working together.

Age of Artists: Do you think that you would have become a conductor without your first teacher from Romania?

Lubnan Baalbaki: Actually, I wanted to study this. I was certain to do it. I don't know if we can believe in destiny... I think it was just my way of doing it. I mean, it was the best way to do it, because he is a fantastic teacher and he had a huge experience in this domain. I studied with Collin Metters in London and recently with Kurt Masur in Sweden. Each time I study with another teacher, I realize what a great teacher I had in the beginning of my studies, because I see how much good basics of conducting I got from him. He was also a student of (Sergiu Celibidache). So he had a very good teacher as well.

Age of Artists: Would it be correct if I say that your determination met the right environment?

Lubnan Baalbaki: Exactly, yes! Everyone asked me "Why did you choose Romania?" and I always answer, "I did not choose it, it chose me actually" [laughs].

Age of Artists: You describe your journey into the art as a linear process with your background and your family, but how did you come up with your personal decision?

Lubnan Baalbaki: I never thought of doing something else. I never ever thought of doing something else. Really. In my school, I studied economics. I went to the School of Economics to do a Baccalauréat [High school diploma], but I never thought of doing

something else than music. I had Violin and then conducting. It is very important for a musician. Music doesn't accept anything else. If you want to do music you cannot think of doing something else. There are many musicians who do music and something else. Then, it becomes more a hobby in my opinion. Music really needs much time. Always you need to know new things, to learn new things, to go to classes, to study different courses, to go to concerts, to go to rehearsals, to do your own rehearsals, to do your own concert, to plan things. It takes a lot of time and investment to do these things.

Age of Artists: Given your focus on music and your background, do you see any commonalities across art genres? Do you think there is any characteristics or even practices maybe that span across the art genres as per your observation so far?

Lubnan Baalbaki: It is a bit different. Even between musicians. If I compare myself to my sister, she is a singer and I think it is a totally different life for a singer than for a conductor. You need a great voice, a great talent... It is the basic things. For conducting, you need the talent, but you need to work so hard all the time. It is quite a different life actually.

Age of Artists: So you don't see anything, which are similar?

Lubnan Baalbaki: There are many similar things. I spent so much time with my sister when she used to prepare for concerts. So for me, going on stage was not as stressful. I did not really have the stage fright the first time, because I was already used to prepare, how to go on stage, how to meet your audience. This made things

easier for me. I think for art in general, passion is the theme. Passion is very similar even in different kinds of art. I think passion is the basis for any artist to do his best. Otherwise it is quite different. She [his sister] sings oriental music and I work with classical music, which is really different. Both views of the music are very different. The way to listen to these two different worlds of music is again so different. So yes, there are many different things, but it gave me more richness and a wider angle to see the whole musical spectrum.

Age of Artists: You just said determination and focus on music are very important, but at the same time, you said you had these other ideas. It sounds a little bit like a contradiction. Can you maybe expose how that fits together?

Lubnan Baalbaki: It fits, because different experiences are always richness for any artist. Sometimes it does not have such a direct influence in your life but it does influence you at some point. In my case, growing up with my father who was a painter and used to work at home, growing up in that world... It maybe did not influence me directly in classical music, but it was the sense of seeing art, how a piece of art is built, what the main structure is etc. It is like you go to the school and you study mathematics and sometimes you ask yourself "why am I studying this, I will not use it in my whole life!" But now, you use it: your way of thinking changes. I think there is something common between arts even though I think it is very different as a conductor, a singer or a painter. There are too many differences between the three personalities, but there is something common inside. Sometimes you use some other experiences, maybe not in a direct way, but it

gives you a more open vision of everything about art, because the structure of art, how to build an artistic work, is very important. There is something common between these things even though it is not the same to build up a symphony or to make a painting, but in the spirit of it, it is very similar. It starts from a small structure but you have already the big vision. You know how it will be before it is done. It is a quality that any artists need to have I think.

Age of Artists: What is your working process?

Lubnan Baalbaki: The biggest part is that I am trying to find an image that makes the whole idea clearer. As an example you have your iPhone, which you use and you enjoy so much with your applications, but inside that telephone there are lots of small electronic things, which are so complicated to understand. This happens to the conductor also. Long before the first rehearsal, there are lots of stages of preparing a certain work and preparing the symphony. From the moment you buy the score for the first time and you open the first page, then you start researching and discovering the structure, the main melody, how to interpret this melody, whether it is grammatical or lyrical or tragic? How do you see this music? It is really interpretable. Even a major key sometimes is so dramatic. Sometimes it is a minor key and you can use it in more positive ways. The message is not always so direct. All of this preparation is essential to find out the mystical spirit of any theme. Then to work also directly on the score discovering the real structure of it: how the composer started writing the first notes, the first accords, and how was his imagination about the structure of the music? What are the differences between this symphony and another symphony from his work and other works?

What are the similarities, what are the influences? I get to read about the composer I usually conduct. Let's say, if I am conducting Beethoven, any symphony, I read about his life and his period. Many composers wrote letters during working on their symphony. For example, Beethoven, Mozart, Schumann or Mendelssohn, they used to write letters. It is very precious to get to read this, because it shows you in which state of mind the composer was and what period they were living in. This gives more life to the score or to the musical idea. We cannot separate music from the state of mind of the composer when he wrote it. This preparation happens all long before the first day with the orchestra. Then you have all these packages inside you and you go to the first day of rehearsal. Orchestras are very different with very different individuals. You come very prepared to this, and maybe before they were playing something else, so they don't have the same state of mind, which you have about this piece and you have to start getting them into this. There are two ways: the conscious and the moral. In other words, there are the practical and the spiritual ways of working with the orchestra. The practical way is reading the notes, knowing where are the difficult parts, where are the cues, which the conductor might give etc. Then it is about giving a colour to the music they are playing, making them believe in your vision about this music even if you can't get them to live the same state of mind that you have or that you imagine the composer had. It gives another color to the music. This I experienced very deeply now when I worked with Kurt Masur. I discovered how important this state of mind is to change the whole color of the notes, which are written in a score that can be extremely cold and to make them alive in only few minutes. There is a deep secret there that I can't really explain. I even asked Kurt about this very thin line that

changes the whole thing whether he is there or whether somebody else is there. It is amazing. Preparing a piece takes too many stages but the biggest stage is the one when meeting the orchestra. It may take one to three months preparing a piece, even more sometimes and then in a couple of days you have to prepare the orchestra. There you can become pragmatic or spiritual - all at the same time to get to the other side of it.

Age of Artists: In another interview, you also mentioned the time before you meet the orchestra: You talk about describing, commenting, annotating, discovering etc. This is basically that preparation phase. Is it fair to call it the searching phase?

Lubnan Baalbaki: Yes! Actually, it is to live through the whole thing before it happened.

Age of Artists: If you say you have a vision or an intention, how much of this vision becomes your reality throughout all the process? How much the results is difference from the original vision?

Lubnan Baalbaki: Actually, it is all related to your imagination or it is a kind of a belief that it will turn out a certain way. Sometimes the result is better than what you expected. It is due to a certain moment, a certain relation with the orchestra before and during the concert time. I believe that there is one true version of what an orchestra with a conductor can play for one piece for example. Working the same symphony, the whole week, there is one true version that will be, and I prefer to keep this for the concert. That is why during the rehearsals I work in a really practical or

pragmatic way. Then in the concert, I let them and I let myself serve the music from our different point of view.

Age of Artists: In a sense, you leave the door open for a certain result?

Lubnan Baalbaki: Sure, music expresses itself. We, musicians, just serve the music. As an interpret and as a conductor, I try to serve the music as close as its reality. Religions serve god and humanity. They do it as loyal as they can. The same thing an interpret, and especially the conductor does: we serve the music and we try to do it as loyal as we can, to be loyal to the composer and to the music, which is written. I believe sometimes a composer writes down things that he couldn't imagine before. It is also the same thing with a conductor. Sometimes on stage I do things that I could never imagine. It is always a different experience but it is about serving the music as loyal as we can.

Age of Artists: What about your ego when it comes to creating?

Lubnan Baalbaki: I think ego is the biggest enemy of art and especially music. It is a contradiction here. As a conductor, to do a certain piece, you should be extremely convinced that this is the reality about the music and that there isn't any other reality. Celibidache, for example, used to say that there is one, only one, reality about music or about a piece and there cannot be two realities even though there are lot of conductors and different visions of different pieces. Every one of them was convinced that this is the reality. The reality is something conventional. Each one thinks that this is the reality and this is for a certain moment the

important thing to be convinced that this is your reality at least. When I do music, I think that this is my reality. I am sure that there are lots of other people who may not agree or think differently. Some of them might be surprised by my point of view. But for me, in that moment it is my reality. If you take any other conductor, and compare the pieces, which he conducted at an early age and after twenty years, you'll see that there are different realities in those pieces and in that music. It depends on the moment. It is a momentary reality, but still you have to believe in it. At this moment, I believe that this is the reality of the music and I would play it like this. I don't know if this is ego or if this is a part of this job. When you stand there in front of so many musicians you cannot really open discussions about whether it is this way or that way.

Age of Artists: You said that there are two levels: the conscious side, which is about the practice, and the mystical side. What do you do on the conscious end of the spectrum together with the orchestra?

Lubnan Baalbaki: There are two main aspects, which we have to cover during our work together. It is the interpretation of the notation of the composer and the articulation of any piece. There are two main signs of articulation going from the Staccato to the Legato, to Tenuto and Forte Piano and many of them look the same or could be very similar. So here you need to work on a very conscious and very technical aspect just to get the best out of what you think the composer wanted and why he wrote this. Notation and signs are symbols. They were just developed by the need of a composer to express a certain mood or feeling or colors,

which they wanted. The notation and symbols don't reflect the reality of the music actually. Sometimes it is not enough. That's why it is so developed. Some composers created some combined symbols just to express a certain idea. That idea could be very simple and you just try to do many things there just to explain what the idea of the music is. So the interpretation of these symbols and articulations is very important and it is extremely technical. You need knowledge about this. You need knowledge about how any composer used these symbols and what it meant by that time. When you play a Staccato for Mozart for example, the whole structure of the bow and the violin are different from now. The Staccato back then was different from the Staccato, which we now know and which our bow allows us to do. Sometimes we have to go back historically to that. To understand a certain symbol used by the composer and what he wanted it to be and how it could sound. Then you start working on this technically to arrive at a sound, which you feel. Now there is a detail. How do you judge if a certain sound is the right one or not? I think there is an intuition inside each one of us, which is inherited from another generation, inside our genes, which tells us, this is a good color or a good sound of a note or of a music, and this is not. You also need to use your own intuition to find out what the good and the bad in a musical color or sound is.

Age of Artists: Similar with poems. They can be interpreted too.

Lubnan Baalbaki: Exactly.

Age of Artists: What is your leadership style?

Lubnan Baalbaki: I trust musicians. I believe that each one of them has his own intuition and his own vision of music. He is a musician and he could have an honest intuition about a sound. That is why I leave them to contribute as well. Many times, I ask the orchestra “Please, play your own interpretation, your own feeling”, because I want to see what they have. It is not only me who has ideas. Sometimes I have a kind of an imagination of an idea and they make it a reality for me. This is part of leadership: trusting your group. After all, they are doing the job. If you go there with the confidence that they can do it great, let them do it! Let them try to do it great. Sometimes you just lead the way, but they do it actually. They do the thing.

Age of Artists: Then it can lead to another result than what you envisioned, at least partly, if they find their way and you think “Oh it is maybe even better than what I thought”.

Lubnan Baalbaki: Yes! Sometimes it happens!

Age of Artists: There are all these cases of conductors being dictators and the orchestra is just a tool in their hands. it doesn't seem that you work that way with the orchestra.

Lubnan Baalbaki: I think this characteristic reflects itself in the music. Last week, I took a huge lesson in my life seeing Kurt Masur doing absolutely nothing and it sounded like a heaven of music. He just trusted his musicians and he led them in some key points from time to time. But at the same time the music was full of his presence and his knowledge. So, they trusted him back. They trusted their leader. He trusted them: “you are playing so well and I

am just enjoying it, I don't need to be a dictator". I think it is the main point of good leadership: how to make yourself trustworthy and trust the people who are working for you. That is the main thing.

Age of Artists: If we talk about Improvisation, tell me what you think about it in your context?

Lubnan Baalbaki: No improvisation for me in classical music. There are some rules for classical music or Baroque, but even back then it was so controversial. There is no room for improvisation.

Age of Artists: Talk to me about the performance. What happens when you are on stage?

Lubnan Baalbaki: On stage, it is the date of birth of all the things you prepared. You prepared technically and on stage, it is the moment of trust actually. You trust your musicians and you let them play. They understood your whole idea and now they will play the whole thing. It is the most constant. There is no more talking. There is no more stopping. It just starts and it goes on. It is the moment of reality. The music starts with some combination between everyone. The audience is the main part of the concert by the way. Many times, the audience affects the way the orchestra plays. All the aspects become important part of the performance: the musicians, the conductor, the audience, the acoustic etc.

Age of Artists: What is your intention for the audience? What is your ambition?

Lubnan Baalbaki: Well, my ambition is to transcend the audience from their expectations to the reality of the music. It is to take the audience to some place they did not expect to experience.

Age of Artists: What about the feedback of the audience? How do you welcome critics, newspaper reports or what you hear in the street etc.? What does it do to you and how important is it?

Lubnan Baalbaki: Feedback is quite important for me, because I do music and I am not so selfish in this. I don't do music only for myself. I do music also for the audience. Although it is my point of view, they have also their notion of reality. Many of the places I used to conduct, I was prepared for the critics I would receive, because I also judge myself on stage as a listener. I go to concerts and I am in the audience many times. I judge myself during a concert. You cannot be separated from your audience. It is a communication with the audience actually. This is a different experience compared to my father's as a painter. There, you close the room and you stay in a closed room. You do your own art. It is your own feeling, and your own vision. Then you put it on a wall. People will like it or not, but you don't care because it is yours. You are really convinced about it. I think this is different. You cannot do this, because without audience you cannot do music. You need a feedback - always. It's a dialogue between musicians and audience. The more the audience appreciates you, and you can take the example from Jazz, because there is more communication with the audience, the more the audience gives you a positive feedback, the better you play on stage. I experienced it as I used to play violin for oriental music. In oriental music, there is this participation of the audience that sometimes shout, they applause, they sing along

with you. The more the audience is a part of it, the better you play your music.

Age of Artists: So basically, to instill emotions with the audience is a key aspect for you. It sounds like a dialogue.

Lubnan Baalbaki: Also in classical music, you feel the vibrations. You feel the vibrations and you know if they are enjoying what you are doing or not. You feel them. You cannot just not feel the energy of one hundred of people looking at you or listening to you. They are just there and they are listening. Nothing is moving and everything is connected. You feel them. It gives you more energy from the audience. It gives you more good results in the music.

Age of Artists: How do you look at the aspect of time and all iterations and experiences that you gather? Do you see already something that you don't do anymore, that you do differently, based on now doing this for a couple of years? Has already something changed for you?

Lubnan Baalbaki: Always. From a concert to the other, I change a lot. That is a very difficult job what we do and it needs a lot of experience. You cannot just have the talent of doing this. You need the talent and you need the experience. I worked with Christian Badea once and he told me "Do as much as you can, because now it is the time that you do all your mistakes". This is very true. This time is the time to do them. There are different kind of mistakes that conductors do. You gain experience and you start seeing, listening, doing, approaching. Everything becomes different with experience.

Age of Artists: Can you give me an example of what has changed?

Lubnan Baalbaki: At the beginning, I used to be very technical and now after some experiences and working with great teachers, I started to know how to be connected more to the music than to the technical aspects.

Age of Artists: So basically, as a more experienced conductor you stick less to the rulebook in a way?

Lubnan Baalbaki: Yes. That is what I actually told Masur. I know, I am talking a lot about this experience, because it was so recent [laughs]. We learned a lot with him, for instance how not to conduct, how to let the music play by itself, how to trust the musicians. I told him that we started learning the technical, how to do this, how to do that, the upbeat, the downbeat etc., and when you become an experienced conductor, you learn how not to do everything you learned. You need it there, but you use it in a different way. You don't use it anymore as technical things, you use it in service of the music.

Age of Artists: Would it be fair to say, that if you try to connect between conscious and subconscious and reach a spiritual level for your music in a performance, that your objective as a person is to reach that spiritual level, as you grow older on a more fundamental level.

Lubnan Baalbaki: Yes, of course! It has something to do with all different aspects of life. It is very true.

Age of Artists: Going back to the business world, what do you think business can learn from artists in general and especially from you as a conductor, from the way you approach your work? What tips would you have for business as a whole, but also for people like me within such structures?

Lubnan Baalbaki: There is this spiritual part which exists in music, and when dealing with music, and leadership in music. In business there may be less of this. I ask myself “Why I want to do this? How I make it? What would be the reason for the whole thing?” I ask how to reach a reality for the whole thing not how to arrive at success for the whole thing. In business, it is more about success, it is about achieving something maybe sometimes without looking to the spiritual part of it.

Age of Artists: The idea of reconnecting to basic human needs and beyond revenue seems to be very strong in the arts. But there is also an economic side because you want people to come and pay for tickets. How do you establish this balance between meaning and money?

Lubnan Baalbaki: The audience is the answer. Also in business, there is a kind of audience, but I am not sure whether it is a dialogue or a manipulation, which you use to get to your main point. I think in business egoism is maybe bigger than in arts. Not on individual level but more “how much do I get out of this”. Artists always have to do business, because we are always looking for sponsors for our projects, our concerts. The first thing that I hear from my sponsors is always “What do I get from this? What is my

benefit out of it?". They want to know why they should pay money for it. In business, it is always like that: you pay and you want to get double, triple or more. You need to get something. In art, sometimes, just the reason of what you are doing is more than satisfying for you.

Age of Artists: One artist from Slovenia, Peter Tomaž Dobrila, told me something similar and went on to make a proposal when he said: "the way that business judges about art, about what it brings and what are the results etc., should be also turned around against business so that business has to justify artistically what they do".

Lubnan Baalbaki: This should be a law someday! All business should justify their benefit artistically! Some of the big business companies started using arts but they still use it in their favor, sometimes just to improve their image. It is a tool. It is not spiritual. I think it has to become a part of the whole thing instead of using it just as a tool.

Age of Artists: Is there anything else that you would like to share with me today?

Lubnan Baalbaki: It was a nice talk. Always when I talk to someone and I have these clever questions, I discover that I am always learning by talking and discussing with people. It is a basic school. I learn lot of things during these discussions. So thank you!

Age of Artists: Thank you for all your time!