

From Brahms to the Velvet Underground....

Eliran Avni and Avner Dorman talk about collaborating on their new CD, hummus and schnitzel, and the future of classical music

Interview by Anita Mercier – May 16, 2006

AM: When did you two first meet?

AD: It was 1994, when we were both serving in the Israeli army. We were in a unit that allows exceptionally talented musicians to continue their art during their service and every Sunday we had a meeting of all the soldiers in this unit. I walked in and at the other side of this big hall someone was sitting there playing the hell out of *Petrouchka*. I went over to see who it was because I'd never seen him before and he was playing it so fabulously. Then he stopped and he started complaining about how he can't play, which is no different today [laughs]: 11 years, nothing has changed.

AM: You're both Israeli, you're the same age, you have similar backgrounds. How does that affect the way you work together?

EA: I think that sharing the same language was very important. I think there are things that we can communicate to each other only in Hebrew. Also, in French or Italian or German music, there is a certain style that is derivative of the language. In Avner's case there is a very fundamental Hebrew essence to the music in the way the melodic line is constructed and the rhythms. Sharing the same culture has really helped us.

AM: What was your first collaboration and how did that lead to the CD?

EA: First I commissioned a Violin Sonata from Avner for a concert at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall with violinist Lauren Basney. That was in February, 2004. Then, in the winter of 2005 I was creating a program for a recital coming up that May. It occurred to me to do a whole program of Avner's music. I had the violin sonata and I had already learned the *Moments Musicaux*, and I had a suspicion that if instead of asking him to write new pieces I went and checked the earlier pieces, I would be surprised. I knew that there was a second piano sonata, which Avner played for me, and it was beautiful. Then it was a matter of seeing if there was anything else that could make it into the concert program. We went to Avner's house and he started pulling out all of these pieces of paper and mini files on the computer saying, what do you think of this? The first thing he put on was the first sonata. I think my jaw dropped when I heard it. The compositional craft is incredible.

AM: Avner, the music on the CD traverses a pretty broad span in your life. There is music written when you were a teenager and very recently completed works. Talk about that, about some of the challenges involved in integrating younger work with more mature work.

AD: If you look at the order of the CD, you'll see that older pieces are mixed in with newer pieces. At the beginning we thought we would keep it chronological but I didn't

want someone who is listening to the CD to hear only older compositions for the first 30 minutes. I want people to understand that this is a lot of years of composition, and crucial years. But you can hear that they're all done by the same composer. Some composers focus on a narrow vocabulary their entire career (which can lead to great results). I feel closer to someone like Stravinsky, who always experimented. I am inclusive. I love watching TV and going to the theater, and music of many different kinds. I think that's part of being human. I can relate to Arabic music and Indian music, and Western classical music, as much as I relate to pop music. Personally, of course, I chose a specific path, which is that of western art music.

AM: So you don't make a distinction between art music, popular music, and other music?

AD: I think that you can make a distinction, because the focus of most art composers is different than that of most pop composers. But I think that some of the most interesting things happen at the fringes of both worlds. I think Stravinsky is so interesting because he was inclusive and was open to all these melodies from the villages in the mountains that nobody was considering as art music, and then he put them in the Rite of Spring and they became the pillars of art music in the twentieth century.

EA: I have a different question. Do you feel that the emotional intensity of folk music or pop music, it's basically just something very simple, very immediate, so their power is something stronger than art music? Take a complicated Bartok fugue vs. the folk songs or the *Improvisations*. The force of the folk song is very direct compared to the fugue.

AD: Right, I think something is lost when you make a fugue out of it, of course something is lost. And something is also gained. When you listen to a country singer accompanying himself playing the guitar, there is something he can do in the way he plucks the strings of the guitar. With one pluck, he can say "love" with his finger on the string. That's what makes him Bob Dylan. When he says "love" and he plucks the strings the way only he knows how to pluck a string, you know, that makes you want to cry.

AM: Where do you place this music? What do you call music that incorporates so many different languages, from Arabic *Maqam* and Azerbaijani folk melodies to Israeli pop and jazz?

AD: It is what you would call contemporary art music. I think art music has always had the capacity of including. I think Mozart was inclusive. If you listen to music before Mozart, how many composers wrote a 'Rondo alla Turca'? I think that most of the great composers, most, not all, in their time were inclusive. I think the Velvet Underground was very inclusive too. They used a viola in a rock LP back in the 60s. I think inclusiveness is usually a sign of someone being interested and curious. I just don't know why someone would block off something that is not exactly what they were trained to do. Why is that a value?

AM: What's the distinction between your inclusivism and eclecticism?

AD: I feel that if you listen to music, grow up with certain music, and you really love it, it comes out naturally as part of your own thing. I study *Maqam* because I grew up hearing that music. I don't use Bossa Nova as much in my music. Don't get me wrong, I like it, but I don't feel as close to it, I've never heard it played on the streets by amateurs. On the other hand, I remember hearing the morning prayers of the *Muezzin* early in the morning when I was a teenager and pop music in Israel is also very much influenced by Arabic Music. And by some Bossa Nova too.

EA: At some point it hit me that this music is about being an Israeli. We grew up having to incorporate the idea of Diaspora in a country. So there are Yemeni Jews and Iraqi Jews and German Jews and French Jews, and we're all Jews and we live in Israel. And besides the Jews there are of course the Christians and the Muslims and the Druze.... And we are all sharing the same space, so you can buy falafel and on the other side of the street you can buy rugalach....

AD: In Israel one of the favorite fast foods is pita with hummus and schnitzel. People think it's funny here, but you go to any fast food place in Israel for pita and schnitzel. It's like asking for a hamburger and fries here. Now how bizarre is that? For us, that's natural.

AM: Eliran, what draws you to Avner's music?

EA: The first thing is the craft. When I first heard Avner's music, the craft, the compositional technique just stood out to me. There are very few people today writing counterpoint like Avner does, there are very few people who would give it the time of day. And for me as a pianist, a good counterpoint is a gift from God. Because that's what we do. We don't just play one line and an accompaniment, but we play with a juxtaposition of lines. The better the counterpoint, the better I can come out, as a pianist and performer, because the more thought I need to put into how I'm balancing these lines. And in Avner's case there is the orchestral background which also echoes in me very much. The scope of colors and scope of lines that are intermingled with one another is huge. The second thing is the Israeli thing. When people ask me if I compose, I say no because I don't feel I have anything new to say. Hearing his music, I realize that I did want to say something, and that he was already saying it. So I didn't have to work hard, I just had to play his music. As a performer today, I'm saying this seriously, do we really need another recording of all Chopin? Do we really need another recording of all Brahms? As much as I love these composers, and they are the people I go back to, it seems to me artificial to our reality. To find somebody whose music I appreciate, with a context I feel is relevant, and we're saying something new and with such phenomenal craft, I mean, that was it.

AM: Avner, what do you appreciate most about Eliran's playing?

AD: First of all, let me say it one sentence, and then I will try to elaborate. Eliran plays the way I would like to be able to play. I wish, I wish. His technique is perfect. I know that there is nothing I can write that he will not be able to play. Most of the music I write for the piano is very virtuosic. I think it's important, too, that I always think of the pianist acting the piece. So like in the *Dance Suite*, when he gets to the highest and lowest notes on the piano, I was imagining the pianist acting it out, and Eliran certainly found a very interesting way of doing it, with the side of his hand instead of using his fingers. That's what I'm looking for. I'm not looking for a pianist who will sit there not moving at all. Any good musician has to understand that this music is dramatic.

AM: So theater is important to your whole sense of structure?

AD: Very important, very important. How else can you build a ten minute piece if there is no drama? How long can a pretty melody carry a piece?

AM: Where do you look for your dramatic inspirations?

AD: I do have the Screenwriters 101 book from UCLA...I just watch a lot of movies just for the dramatic structure. In a movie more than any other art, they're dealing with the same problem I'm dealing with. Unlike other arts, I have you captive for say 30 minutes, and I decide what you're going to hear every second. A book, you can decide how quickly to read. Even in a play, people put it on differently. In music, recorded music is absolutely accurate, even concert music; most performers follow instructions and tempo markings. So in the movie, you have the same difficulty. The director, or editor or whatever, they have you captive. So for me, that's a very good analogy. They have more tools than us. They have visuals, sound, story, words, they have a lot more things than in piano music I have. But still, I think that's a very close approximation.

EA: I would argue with the idea that you don't have those things.

AD: I don't have words, I don't have visuals.

EA: Yeah, but in a way you do. The language of music is so rich in associations and connotations, that no matter what you do, your audience is going to imagine some sort of a dramatic conflict. And that's another thing about this collaboration. I think you were after someone who would realize what that dramatic scenario was.

AD: It is for me a basic, basic thing. Any good musician, instrumentalist, has to understand that music is basically dramatic. Unless you are playing a song, and then the drama is in the words, not necessarily in the music, especially a pop song; or you're playing ritual music. Those are the two places where you might not have drama. Most music tells a story. It's very simple. Yet if you were not someone who is interested in the drama of music, of course you would be a lousy pianist.

EA: But as you know, we instrumentalists sit behind the instrument and look at the score and we don't always realize the dramatic conflict that you put inside the piece. That's

where, unfortunately I believe that in current times we have lost touch with what music is all about because we are scared of making a commitment to an interpretation, and we are scared to assume that you as a composer meant to be saying something in the music. I was very lucky with you, because you are alive and we're still talking [laughs]. So I could say, Avner, did you mean x here, is that the dramatic conflict? And you said: "what else would it be? How could you imagine something different?" I'm not saying that we always agreed. But in most cases we did.

AM: Is there any piece on the CD that you feel particularly strongly about?

EA: I love them all. They are like people to me, some are nicer and accessible and some of them are pretty difficult to stomach, and I think they challenge the listener on various levels. So you will see Avner's nice side, funny and charming and cool, and you will see a very dark and very violent Avner, the music goes very deep, you have to really reach deeper to really understand it and do it justice.

AM: Who do you see as your target audience for this CD?

AD: People who listen to all sorts of different soundtracks, people looking for music that is good and professional and interesting and new outside of the contemporary art music scene.

EA: Today, you're sitting there with your iPod and you put it on shuffle and you might get a Miles Davis contrasted with a Mozart aria contrasted with Coldplay or whatever. The juxtaposition of these things doesn't seem unnatural to us any more. What we are listening to is something that makes us enjoy. We go for sushi, then the day after we order pizza. Do we get all upset about mixing Italian food and Japanese food? No. We like the food, we eat it.

AD: There is a restaurant on 49th Street that sells Italian sushi. It's one of my favorite restaurants in the world

AM: So you're saying that the content of your music reflects not only your experience as an Israeli growing up in a mosaic culture, but also the wider world culture and how it is being changed by technology. What people are listening to and how they are listening to music.

EA: I would say another thing about attention span. The difficulty for me in Avner's music is that, unlike in Mozart's or Brahms' work, where the progression of events would be paced at a much slower tempo, with Avner, it's like roadrunner, it's high speed, everything is happening simultaneously on different levels, compacted into five minutes. Avner's music is very much rooted in this culture, in the speed of this culture and the issues of this culture.

AD: I'm not aware of this, but I'm aware that people feel that about that music. I never feel that myself. But it does seem that there is something about the pace that is more relevant, not to people who grew up only on classical music, but to people who come from other art music backgrounds. I think there are other art music backgrounds. I think that may be the biggest thing I have to say. It's a mistake to think that the only art music is the one produced by composers who finished conservatories. That is wrong, it has been wrong forever. Look at the Velvet Underground. They are considered a classic today by anyone who listens to alternative music, and I love their music. They did things in the 60s that were at least as new and interesting as any concert composers. And they've stayed as a classic. I'm sure their CDs have sold at least as much as Stockhausen or Steve Reich. I'm sure. This music has a very artistic basis. It's not pop. It was not done by conservatory graduates. Prince has some CDs that I consider fantastic art music.

EA: I think we share the feeling that something must change in the way we, as musicians, approach our audiences. The penguin suit is dead.

AD: Even more than that. You know the Brahms story about someone coming to him and asking him to sign "The Blue Danube"? Someone came to Brahms in a coffee shop in Vienna with the score of The Blue Danube and asked him to sign it. He signed, "Wish it was mine, Johannes Brahms." There was a time, prior to 1950, when music that was popular was not necessarily considered bad.

AM: Talk about the recording the CD. What was the process like?

AD: Ozawa Hall is the best place to record the piano. The piano that Eliran chose from the Boston Symphony is a fantastic piano. And Tim Martin, the sound engineer, has state of the art sound equipment. David Frost has several Grammys, and it's not just luck that he has them. He has so much experience, there's no other way we could have gotten such a fantastic recording.

EA: We were constantly pushing each other to go beyond what we thought was possible. What Avner thought was possible in terms of piano playing, what I thought was possible in terms of piano composition, what we both thought was possible in terms of creating a recording. Every time we pushed the envelope, it stayed. Nothing fell apart.
