Private Passions

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Private Passions

Michael Berkeley interviews Isaiah Berlin

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MICHAEL BERKELEY Isaiah Berlin, Mario Vargas Llosa the novelist wrote of you that you were one of the last humanists in the Renaissance sense, but I suppose one could also say that you just enjoyed yourself enormously.

ISAIAH BERLIN There is no doubt of that. I've had a very happy life. I can't complain.

MB And is that because you've been able to indulge your passions?

IB Not so much that, no. I'm not a man of many passions, simply because I've done one thing after another without much effort to shape my life in any particular fashion. I'm not ambitious by nature; if anything I'm under-ambitious. I take things as they come, and if I can enjoy them I do, but they don't produce obstacles to some preconceived plan which I want to actualise.

MB Have you ever wondered what would have happened if you had never come to this country – because you were born in Riga, weren't you?

IB I was. I should have been dead at a fairly early age, because I was taken from Riga to Petrograd, as it was called then, and I saw the Revolution at the age of eight. I remember both Revolutions, the first liberal one, and the later Soviet one, which I remember vividly and could describe to you at length. If I'd stayed on I suppose I might have been found a job, but in the end I would certainly have been eliminated in some kind of bourgeois deviation.

MB As somebody whose life has revolved around thinking, and indeed been an intellectual life, I suppose it's not surprising that you should begin with perhaps the most perfectly crafted music of all, in one sense, the most extraordinary combination of the heart and the mind, and that is Bach.

IB I admire and love Bach, as everyone does who likes music at all. To love music and not love Bach is a very exceptional state of mind. I don't really want to praise him, he doesn't need our praise – he's like daily bread, one doesn't tire of it.

MB One thing that comes out of this list is that the performers are very important in these choices.

IB Very. That's what remains in my memory. A particular performance is something which doesn't leave me. It's made a difference to my life.

MB In this case it's that wonderful pianist Alfred Cortot, with Jacques Thibaud and Roger Cortet playing the flute.

IB I chose this movement because it's a most exceptional piece of really inspired virtuosity, particularly the cadenza – that's what I chose it for. It's a most extraordinary performance.

MB Wonderfully exhilarating.

IB The rhythm, the colour and the accent are something I'd never heard before in this particular work.

MB That was the first movement, the Allegro, of the Brandenburg Concerto No 5 in D by Bach, with Alfred Cortot – Jacques Thibaud playing the violin and Roger Cortet the flute, the École Normale de Paris Chamber Orchestra. You mentioned, just before we heard that, the Russian Revolution, and what you said

was so tantalising that I'm going to ask you to go on a bit about it, because I'm so fascinated to just to talk to somebody who saw it.

IB The thing I remember most vividly was my father waking me one morning and making me go out on to a balcony of the flat in which we were living, and there was a kind of piazza in front of us, and he said, 'You might take an interest in what's going on there.' There were men there with banners, a large crowd; the banners said 'Land and Liberty', 'Down with the War', 'Down with the Tsar', 'All Power to the Duma', which is the parliament: these were the four big banners. And the people milled about, and shouted, and then suddenly a thin line of soldiers appeared on the edge. And my father said, 'It's appalling, it's going to be a blood-bath, they're going to be shot down, better not look, you'd better come away, oh it'll be dreadful.' Instead of which the troops mingled with the crowd and fraternised. My father said: 'That's it. The Revolution has occurred.' And it had.

MB That's it in a nutshell! Much later, in the 1970s, you were on the Board of the Royal Opera House. I know from my own experience that that is a rather wonderful thing to do, because of course it is, again, as a lot of your life has been, an education. Had you a consuming interest in opera up until then?

IB Oh yes, I did. My operatic interest begins with listening to records. I was a very amateurish reviewer of records for an Oxford periodical. On my desk suddenly came this record of 'Casta Diva' sung by Rosa Ponselle. I thought I'd never heard such a beautiful aria in all my life. Ponselle sang it with a sweet lyrical intensity and charm, an exquisite lyrical feeling. From that day on I became an addict of the Italian opera. That's what began it.

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MB That was Rosa Ponselle with 'Casta Diva' from Bellini's *Norma*, the Metropolitan Orchestra and Chorus conducted by Giulio Setti. It is a much more delicate instrument than Callas, or somebody like Sutherland.

IB Certainly, yes, sweeter, more lyrical and more inward, somehow.

MB You turned away from philosophy, didn't you, to look more towards political thought in history? Why did you do that?

IB You might well ask. Philosophy can be done only by very clever people, just like mathematics. To be a second-rate mathematician is no good. I didn't think that I'd ever be good enough. I thought I was a perfectly competent tutor, I could teach philosophy perfectly well. I could talk about philosophy to my more gifted contemporaries perfectly well, but in the end I thought it wasn't for me, because I didn't lie awake in bed at night thinking of solutions to agonising philosophical problems. Whereas when I read Russian nineteenth-century radical thought before the Revolution, I was completely bowled over by it. I was seized by it, and I thought: This is my thing.

MB Did you lie in bed, then, thinking of Karl Marx before you wrote your great book on him?

IB No, certainly not – far from it. Do you wish to know how that happened? I can tell you. There was a series called the Home University Library. They needed a book on Karl Marx, they thought. They offered it to Laski, who turned it down. They then offered it to Frank Longford, who turned it down. They then must have offered it to four or five others, all of whom turned it down. In despair they turned to me, because I was a lecturer at New College, and said: Would you like to write a little book on Karl Marx? I'd never read a line of Karl Marx at that time. I thought: Well, if I don't write about it, I shall never read it, and I shall never know what it is – because when I tried to read *Das Kapital*, I got bogged in about the fourth sentence. Then I wrote this book. It was twice its size originally; I had the painful task of squeezing each chapter to half its length – it was a very, very agonising process. Still in print, to my total astonishment. It's not a first-class book; it's a perfectly competent book about Marx, but it's not a masterpiece by any means.

MB Well, you do not have the ego of a Stravinsky.

IB Evidently not.

MB Again, it is a performer who, I think, informed your next choice to a certain extent.

IB For me there are two kinds of pianists. There are virtuosi. Their technique may be brilliant, their playing may be of superb quality; that's like Horowitz, let's say, it's like – well, up to a point, Rubinstein. But somehow, to me, the inner essence is missing, and that is because these people – this may be unfair, but it is my view – think rather more about the way they perform than about the music they're performing. Then there is the other kind of pianist, whom I can only call people who have a sense of the inwardness of the music which they are playing. They have an inner vision themselves which they convey in some way by total absorption in the music and not in their own playing. Schnabel, for example, made an enormous difference to me. My friend the late Stephen Spender and I used to go to every Schnabel performance. His performance of the Beethoven sonatas, and Schubert too, opened our ears for ever.

MB And the contemporary counterpart?

IB I think Brendel is probably the leading player of that type. When I hear him play Beethoven I'm transported. It's an experience, it's not just hearing music and liking it very much; an experience is something unique, and this is what he conveys.

MB But it's Schubert that you've decided on.

IB Because it's a most beautiful work, because I think it's a deeply beautiful, deeply tragic, deeply melancholy work with a painful inner vision, which I would like to have played at my funeral.

MB I'm sure that if Alfred outlasts you he would be only too happy to do that, since he's a great friend, isn't he?

IB He is a great friend – I don't know, I wouldn't put it on him, I wouldn't make him do it, no no, no no; I'd rather not die.

♫

MB The remarkable Andantino from the Schubert Sonata in A, D 959, played by Brendel.

IB I think it's the most moving piece of music that I know; the unearthly beauty and the extraordinary visionary quality, and the fact that Alfred Brendel gives it a unity of content in which all the parts reflect each other, in a certain sense. That seems to me done by nobody else who plays it, although some people play it very well.

MB I was slightly surprised, in your list, which has all the great Viennese masters, not nevertheless to see somebody whom you knew, and that is Stravinsky.

IB But why – you think I ought to have put something in by him? Of course I admired him very, very much, but I don't think that there's a single work by Stravinsky which I regard as better than Bach, better than Beethoven, better than Mozart, better than Schubert.

MB He had quite an inflated idea of himself – rightly, as it turned out – and he had a rather wicked sense of humour where other composers were involved.

IB Certainly. I once asked him naughtily, because I knew that the answer would not be very favourable: 'What do you think of Benjamin Britten?' He said: 'Oh, you ask me about Benjamin Britten. Wonderful accompani-ist. Have you heard him? Wonderful accompani-ist.' Full stop.

MB Well, Stravinsky's paid the penalty of being in the company of Beethoven, and it is Beethoven that we move on to. Interestingly enough, again, I suspect, Adolf Busch is very important in this choice.

IB Oh, very. Let me go back: what I said about Brendel and the others, and Schnabel, applies to Busch – exactly so. The point is, the first time I heard Busch was on a record, playing the Bach Chaconne. I'd never heard anything played like that, and I suddenly realised that he was what I was meaning: a dedicated musician with an inner vision totally divorced from even the slightest form of showmanship or self-advancement – this was also so in the Quartet, and afterwards in the Busch Ensemble. This totally transformed one's view of the Beethoven quartets, particularly of the one which is coming. The Cavatina, of course, is a very, very beautiful movement in the posthumous quartets, which are one of the greatest works of human musical genius that have ever occurred. The word 'deep' could have been invented to describe what Beethoven was doing in these quartets.

MB Or 'profound', even better.

IB But that is the same word in Latin.

MB Dangerous to take you on on word play …

IB You remember, his contemporaries, and then later people, thought it was just confused music in the mind of an elderly, rather distraught composer, so deaf he could no longer know what he was composing, and yet this is a work of superb, supreme human genius, and very disturbing in a way, upsetting.

MB Adagio molto espressivo.

IB It certainly is.

MB That was the Cavatina from Beethoven's Quartet No 13 in B Flat, Opus 130, played by the Busch Quartet.

IB The best quartet for me is the Alban Berg Quartet: but even they don't play it quite with that degree of inward imaginativeness.

MB Toscanini was very keen on that quartet.

IB Toscanini was my hero. I thought he was the best conductor I had ever heard, better than Furtwängler, although one is not allowed to say so these days. He was asked once what was the piece of music he thought best. He said 'The Cavatina'. I was surprised.

MB He heard the Busch Quartet play it, did he?

IB He called on them, and they said to him, 'What shall we play?', and he said 'The Cavatina'; they said 'No, no: we're not going to play it by itself. The whole quartet or nothing.' They played the whole quartet. He was very favourable to them, he liked them, and they liked him.

MB What other conductors of that period did you admire?

IB Bruno Walter doing Mozart was wonderful. Franz Schalk, whom nobody remembers – he was a pupil of Bruckner, and edited him – also played Mozart very beautifully. Klemperer was an incomparable conductor in some works. Kleiber I thought very good, both the father and – today I think we all agree that Kleiber *fils* is the best conductor living.

MB In fact the last piece that we are going to hear is conducted by Solti. Is he a conductor that speaks to you?

IB Oh yes. Solti is a very good conductor, no question of that, highly gifted, and knows exactly what he is doing, and dominates the orchestra, and shapes music as he wants. Why I have chosen this particular piece is that Mozart is, I suppose, the greatest artist since the Renaissance, in any medium. Everything by him is beautiful. *Figaro* is the best opera ever written. Everything in it is of supreme and exquisite beauty, and unforgettable at every point, but what is marvellous in Mozart are the ensembles; and he knew that. He said that he liked the ensemble – this one we are about to hear – better than anything else he had written.

MB And what is happening in the one that we are joining?

IB Everyone is talking to everyone. Let me see. Almaviva is trying to smoke out Figaro, whom he suspects of all kinds of tricks and goings-on, and Figaro of course knows that the Count is after Susanna, and he manages to stand up to it; the Countess and Susanna help him, the Count goes on and on trying to press him, trying to bully him, and in the middle of all this the gardener comes in and says that he has found a piece of paper on the ground left there by the page, Cherubino. Then after this suddenly enter on to the stage Bartolo and Marcellina, and then the ensemble grows, it becomes absolutely wonderful, and lifts one, as well as being tremendously comical, amusing, and full of unbelievable vitality.

MB Music from the last part of Act 2 of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. That was the Solti recording with the LPO, which had Samuel Ramey as Figaro, Thomas Allen as the Count, Kiri Te Kanawa as the Countess, and Lucia Popp as Susanna. Isaiah Berlin, if you could take any figure from the past in music to dinner at your club, at the Garrick, who would you choose? Who do you think would be the most interesting conversationalist, who would you like to prise open?

IB The most interesting conversationalist, without doubt, would be Rossini. He chattered along quite merrily. I don't think Mozart was terribly good. Beethoven, I think, would be too much to take on: anything might happen. He might leave furiously in the middle. Wagner I would make a wide berth for. I think Rossini was the most amusing.

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