

DAVID GARRETT – Evolution of an Icon, Metamorphosis of an Artist

Written by Dorothy Wu



Twilight fans, beware! Rob Pattinson doesn't hold a candle to this golden newcomer, who should have been cast to play the contemporary romantic Edward Cullen on the big screen.

And anyway, didn't author Stephenie Meyer intend for Edward to be a blindingly handsome, blond, violin-brandishing, music-prodigy fashion model with impossibly beautiful thick-fringed eyes, rock n' roll style and an angelic smile?

Last Saturday, Notes on the Road wandered through the Sierra Nevada mountains into cavernous neon-lit Silver Legacy Casino & Resort, in Reno, to find violinist David Garrett on tour with his crossover band and program that includes arrangements of tunes by Michael Jackson, J.S. Bach, Jimi Hendrix, Georges Bizet's opera Carmen, Metallica, Johannes Brahms, and theme songs from major motion picture films like Pirates of the Caribbean.

Garrett could have easily had a mainstream classical career, but instead chose to reinvent himself as both a classical and a crossover performer, trailblazing a unique career path as a rare multi-genre artist who reaches out equally to politely murmuring black-tie classical audiences in gilded concert halls, and to the hundreds of thousands of boot-stompin', hand-clappin' masses of all ages that pour into venues across the country to hear him play Smooth Criminal and the Habanera from Carmen.

Videos, fan sites and other media of Garrett abound on the internet, but what you won't see in cyberspace is the atmosphere of relaxed enthusiasm that spreads throughout his audiences, or the scores of children that leave his concerts holding Garrett's CDs in hand, wearing his official tour t-shirt, and begging their parents for a violin.

From the conversation we had with Garrett after his show:

Notes: How do you stay true to yourself – Where do you find the courage to do what you do, and the strength to sustain the realization of your artistic vision?

Oh – there are a lot of answers to that question. How do I stay true to myself as an artist? I would say that in the end, I'm just an interpreter of great music, and that should always be humbling. It should never make more out of who you are. I always try to serve the composer. In the end you really have to make sure that you deal with the music and the composer in a serious way... so you can't be full of yourself. Especially when you work the big classical sonatas, concerti, chamber music – you know your place. In the end, those composers were the geniuses, not me. And I am merely trying to bring this music out for a lot of other people. So that kind of keeps me on the ground, artistically.

It's about the dedication to really deliver and present great music on the highest level. Not even necessarily for the audience, but for the composer's sake. That should always be the main concern as an artist, to really deliver the guy that wrote this stuff.

In my personal life, there are probably other things which keep me on the ground- friends that I enjoy hanging out with, and family - all those things play a big role in my life.

Notes: When did you start doing your own arrangements?

Well, I always did a little here and there but I kind of seriously started during college, when I was attending Juilliard School. As far as I remember, Juilliard was the first time I was connected with people my age....people who had the same interests, people that had different interests, it's all the same idea of going out there and doing something with your life on stage. Whether it's dancing or acting or music, it's all the same. I always felt a kind of reservation with classical music which I never understood, and I was always interested in how I could "break the ice." Juilliard gave me a very good idea about what young people of my generation like to listen to.

And funny enough – it's not the music itself which is the issue with classical music. It's the environment in which it's presented, the way it is presented, and it's also the mixture of music. You've got to give people a little bit of something that they know, something that they feel comfortable with, and then they are going to feel comfortable with classical pieces like Bach, Brahms, etc. That's my experience, and out of that essence, I started doing my programs.

Notes: It was great to see the audience tonight and feel the audience tonight – the enthusiasm. It goes the other way around too! Hearing you play that Metallica ballad and Jimi Hendrix – it made me want to go and check out all their other albums.

--Exactly! It goes both ways.

Notes: Thank you so much for being a bridge for people, for being out there. So few classical musicians have actually put themselves out there and done what you do all the time these days. It takes guts!

Well I don't know, I think people can do it, but they just might be missing the big picture. Being an artist in classical music also means that you also have the responsibility to promote classical music.

Every other genre promotes their music like crazy – R&B artists go out there and promote their genre. Sometimes classical musicians are so snobby they think “Oh the music is so great, I don't have to do promotion for it.” Which I think is a shame because in the end, in order for something to survive in the long term, it's not only the greatness that a few people know about – you really gotta make sure that every year and every day and every week, you work for the exposure. And that's as important for classical music as it is for rock n'roll.

Notes: Have you ever received pressure associated with artistic integrity while going commercial and mainstream with your career?

Oh yeah, of course.

Notes: How do you respond to criticism from a sometimes unforgiving and even bitter purist classical crowd?

Very frankly put – I don't give a *[expletive]*. Seriously, you can quote me on that.

Because in the end what is the integrity of an artist? The greatest artists are not those who judge themselves by what other people tell them what they are, but those who judge themselves. Period. That's the hardest thing to do – to be objective with what you do. Having this objectivity means also that if there's something somebody writes that you don't agree with, this also gives you protection. And that's very very important.

Of course if you do something commercial, there's always going to be a few hardcore classical people who are not gonna like that. But in the end, if you really know music, and if you really can judge yourself objectively, that should be more important than anything else. More than the public, than critics, even more than friends...Well, with friends sometimes of course you gotta listen [smiles], but- let's say public and critics. They should never be like a guideline. Even if you have great success during one night, and you go offstage and get a standing ovation, you should always be critical, always know if you were 100%, 99%, 95%, no matter what the success.

For instance, I go offstage and even if it's a success, if I know that I didn't do 100%, I am not happy. I'd rather go offstage and feel that I did great, and get a [*expletive*] review the next day.

Notes: Going back to your first performance that ventured into crossover realms – when was it, and what did it feel like to be doing this kind of program and putting yourself out there for the first time?

I think it was 2002 or 2003 – it was a crossover event, but I was the “classical” artist, in Antwerp. I played Beethoven and Saint-Saens, classical pieces in a non-classical event, for people in the audience who don't typically listen to classical music. The enthusiasm that night was truly an eye-opener. Basically saying that classical music really does connect with everybody but it's just a matter of bringing it to the people.

Notes: What goes through your mind when you think back onto your first performance when you were age 5?

I really can't remember that time. I swear to god! Sometimes I feel like I'm a computer, like I have to erase stuff in the past in order to be able to move in the present. I don't really remember that time. It was such a long time ago, and there are so many memories in between. I'd kind of rather hold on to memories in the last recent years than something that's an eternity away.

Notes: You have quite an exhausting tour schedule~

Yeah, I do. But you know you always get the energy when you walk out there.

Notes: Seems like you were born to be on stage, able to be so natural ~

Well, I always wanted to refuse that comment; I don't think it's something you're "born to do"... but I do think that as an artist you've got to be vulnerable in certain situations.

Notes: You had the entire audience in the palm of your hands, before you played Gershwin's Summertime, just talking about your search for an apartment in New York City years ago, and the hot summertime, practicing in front of the fridge~

I love talking to an audience! Because in the end it connects, it really connects. These days, in classical concerts god forbid if somebody coughs - they get looked over like they should be embarrassed for coughing... I don't like that. So basically in the end, I think that classical music was always meant to be fun – especially in the 18th and 19th century. People had such a great time going to the opera.. it was a society event, people went to have a good time, people clapped between the pieces.

In Beethoven's time during symphony concerts – the audience clapped. These days when you go to a concert to hear a symphony, god forbid if you clap after the first movement....it's BULL-*[expletive]*. They did it 200, 150 years ago. Who are we to say that we are better now?

That's just bull. I don't like that. I really don't. And it's with this understanding, I try to give to people an experience that music was originally intended for – a way of getting away from your troubles, a way of getting away from your everyday life problems, and having a good time. Somehow in the early 20th century classical music unfortunately started to become an elite thing...but the composers never felt that, so why should interpreters make a big fuss out of it?

Notes: Well, thanks for bringing classical music back to the greater public. It was really heartwarming to see how

people of all ages – children, grandparents, teenagers, adults – were all enjoying themselves so much~

That is really also something that I genuinely enjoy.

Notes: They should just hire you to do outreach programs at places like Carnegie Hall!

[smiles] It's very very sweet of you to say that. Things develop as they develop – if Carnegie Hall asked me, I would certainly not say no! But I'm sure something like this also has to grow.. especially in prestigious places like Carnegie Hall, I'm sure that they have their traditions..

Notes: You'll be the grassroots movement instead, that's sweeping the country by storm!

[Laughs]..Let's see. Let's see what happens.

Notes: What are you excited about working on next?

Ohhhh, there's a lot of things. I just finished up a tour with Jean-Yves Thibaudet and Gaultier Capucon, and we're going back on tour in Asia with Brahms, Haydn and Mendelssohn. We have a really good time together. Next up: we're taking this show to Switzerland for 10 concerts, then going back and doing the other leg of the tour on the East coast (there's another 16 performances there), and then I'm going to Germany and doing a recital tour with the French pianist Julien Quentin... Brahms 3rd, Ravel Tzigane, 2nd Partita and Beethoven Spring...the second half is going to be quite long!

End of April / May we're going to start recording another classical album in New York, and to be quite honest, I don't remember after that. I always like to mix it up – for instance in January I just toured with a crossover program for 10 shows, and then I toured with a classical program – the pieces on an album I just recorded which includes a couple of short romantic pieces I got to rearrange, and the Mendelssohn concerto with Andrew Litton conducting.... Around 60 – 70 percent of my shows are core classical. This year I performed 220 shows - it's a lot of work, but when I'm not sick (like I am today) it's a lot of fun.

Notes: Tell us about what you're wearing!

Jacket - S. Oliver, Shirt- G-Star, Pants -S. Oliver. Some Japanese boots. Rings and necklace: Thomas Sabo – a German accessories designer I like to do testimonials for. Hat-
-I stole it from somebody!