

Interview with Brett Deubner

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Musicólogo

We are doing this interview with the magnificent viola, Brett Deubner, right after the premiere of the Viola Concerto, composed by its artistic director and composer, Maestro Robert Butts on January 13th, 2019 in Madison, NJ.

Fernando Torner. I actually see you as a very “complete musician.” What I mean by that is that: I have heard you perform in a chamber music setting. I have heard you play as an orchestral leader. And certainly you have performed world-wide in a solo viola role. Have I left something out?

Brett Deubner. I am also professor of viola at the Aaron Copland School of Music in New York. I believe as a violist I have been blessed with the opportunity to express myself in many different formats. For me, my most favorite mode of expression on the viola is as a soloist. This is the world I inhabit most naturally. My experience in orchestras and in chamber music has taught me wonderful lessons in how to communicate amongst colleagues in order to achieve a unified musical product for the audience.



Brett Deubner. Personal file

Torner. You're performing the world premiere of the Viola Concerto, composed by its artistic director and composer, Maestro Robert Butts. How did this come about?

Deubner. I've known Bob for a few years and have performed as soloist with his wonderful chamber orchestra a few times in the past. When Bob told me that he was composing an opera about a year ago I suggested that he consider writing a viola concerto for me. 6 months later he appeared at my house with handwritten sketches. That was a fun afternoon where we both experimented with string techniques and tried different versions of his thematic sketches. It was his first time writing for viola as a solo instrument so it was a great learning experience for him to see and understand all that is possible on the viola. Because of the range of this great instrument one can play deep and resonant like a cello but also quite high and virtuosic like a violin. As a composer, Bob found this very illuminating and exciting because the viola has such a broad range of expression. Two months later I received the full score of the viola concerto and we performed it with orchestra a month later to a very positive and warm audience.



Brett Deubner. Personal file

Torner. Please tell us a little about more exciting news project you have been involved with.

Deubner. Well, it seems like I am always working on numerous exciting projects. This spring I perform the Hindemith viola concerto "der Schwanendreher" with the Peninsula Symphony in Los Angeles. In between rehearsal on Wednesday and the performance on Sunday I will fly to Seattle to

give viola master classes at Seattle University. Directly after my performance in L. A., I fly to Auckland, New Zealand to give some recitals and masterclasses there before heading to Melbourne, Australia for two weeks where I will perform a different recital program on the radio, give master classes at the university there as well as give the world premiere of Houston Dunleavy's viola concerto "Moon Burn" with the Southern Cross Philharmonia. We will also record this exciting new concerto. I then fly back to the U.S. and two days later travel to Philadelphia where I will record another CD project with the Camerata Philadelphia of the viola concerto by Stanley Grill. This concerto and the Dunleavy were composed for me. Then in June I tour Ecuador and Colombia with a chamber orchestra as soloist in a new concerto composed for me by Brazilian composer Liduino Pitombeira. Later in the summer I will spend two weeks in Texas at the Round Top Festival teaching and performing chamber music with as well as give concerts in Lviv and Kiev, Ukraine where I will premiere 5 works written for me. Directly after those concerts I fly to China for a 4 week 20 city recital tour with my pianist. So it's a pretty busy spring and summer with lots of performing, recording, teaching and travelling on four continents!

Torner. You are certainly a busy man – with a huge diversity of projects. Do you feel all these projects helps you stay fresh?

Deubner. Yes! I love being a part of the creative process. I know that my curiosity and love of trying new things has enriched my life in countless ways. It's made me a more compassionate teacher, more complete performer and, most importantly, given me a greater appreciation for our collective humanity. This means that as I travel the world performing my viola I get to witness firsthand how amazing people are. Our political systems or economic situations may differ greatly, but in the end we are all the same...

Torner. Do you find that your life in music is too busy with travel, rehearsals, performances, and more travel? Or have you been able to develop a formula to bring balance to your life?

Deubner. Finding balance is a constant when you must find time to prepare programs, travel (I am on the road from 6-7 months a year) and try to maintain a healthy lifestyle with exercise and sleep. Luckily I learn music very quickly, (probably due to the fact that I was a violinist as a child) and am also able to focus and accomplish a lot in a short time. Yes it is busy. Too busy? So far I'm handling it!

Torner. There surely are performance sites and cities where you are in high demand: New York City, Paris, countries like Italy, German, China... Are there places where you love to play for perhaps personal reasons?

Deubner. I absolutely love performing in Latin America, especially countries like Ecuador and Brazil. I have many friends in these regions from soloing with orchestras over the years. I love the food, the dancing, and the weather!



Brett Deubner. Personal file

Torner. What or where is the most unusual place or venue you've performed?

Deubner. So many amazing memories come to mind... I have vivid memories of performing chamber music (Mozart E flat Divertimento) at a festival in Alaska. We were performing on a boat off the coast near Juneau and as we were performing you could actually see humpback whales leaping through the air during feeding time! When I was in Denmark I performed with a wonderful youth orchestra at a local Ikea! That was an experience! I've always heard how tall and statuesque the Vikings of yesteryear were. As I walked around the Ikea I literally felt like a 5 year old as every employee seemed like they were 8 feet tall. They enjoyed the performance!

Torner. Throughout your career you have tackled some of the most challenging works in the entire repertoire. Would you single out certain works that were especially important to you in your development as performing artist?

Deubner. I think every piece I prepare, whether it is a world premiere or Mozart, helps to shape us as artists. Certainly one of the most significant breakthroughs in my solo career was when I gave the world premiere of the great Lalo Schifrin's concerto with the Grammy-award winning New Jersey Symphony. That was 9 years ago and since then I've had over 40 viola concerti composed for me. I remember speaking on the phone to Schifrin and he told me that he had checked every note of the solo viola part with a friend from L.A. who

was a violist and he reassured me that it was all “playable.” I found this an odd thing to say, but I took it as a challenge that I could not decline. After the premiere’s success and subsequent performances with the Knoxville Symphony, I heard a story told to me by a musician friend from L.A. She was doing a studio recording session conducted by Schifrin and he very excitedly shared with the orchestra how his new concerto had just been performed and the violist did a marvelous job. He also let the studio orchestra in on the joke that he had shown the viola part to a violist first. But then he laughed out loud and admitted that he actually had not shown it to anyone! I’m glad! I passed the test.

Torner. Your extensive discography includes some of the most demanding works ever written for viola, how do you approach studio recording as opposed to performing in public?

Deubner. I actually treat both performing in public and making recordings the same. For me, it’s about the music. My job is to tell a story and I think because of that I tend to leave my ego and fear of failure “at the door”. I don’t get nervous. For me, I’m thrilled to be able to tell that story to so many people. Of course there are some differences. Recordings have the advantage of getting many times to try a passage and in live performance it’s just one time. But I don’t feel any different. You have to “perform” and give it your whole heart whether its live for 3,000 people or for a recording studio and an engineer.

Torner. You have played all the great works of the repertoire, finding new details in them. Is this what distinguishes a great piece of music, to always find something new?

Deubner. I think that’s a great question. Being an artist, a dancer, singer, sculptor. Is all about being human. This means we are fragile, vulnerable. And in that way I think we are perfect. You can learn a piece of music by Mozart when you are 13 and then 20 years later the music has changed because you have changed. Music is like the many layers of life, it gets richer and more complex and more fragile, always interesting. As an artist it’s my job to reach that vulnerable state and cherish it.

Torner.What's your view on the value of music today? In what way does the abundance of music change our perception of it?

Deubner. Depending on where you live, I think art and culture in general is constantly being threatened. At the same time, the external challenge is what helps to make us “more creative” not only in the way we approach music but also in the innovative ways we advertise, market and develop our audiences and educate our young generation. Social networking is a great way to spread the love of music in all its forms. I think we live in a very exciting time for the arts.

Torner. And finally, tell us, what’s next Brett Deubner?

Deubner. Well, next season I will continue to perform and guide young professionals on their journey. I will be making concerto appearances with numerous American orchestras such as the Fort Wayne, Arkansas Philharmonics, the Reading Symphony as well as orchestras in New Jersey, Mississippi and Washington State. In the works are two world premiere concertos I will perform and Internationally I will be busy as well soloing with orchestras and giving recitals and collaborating in chamber music as festivals. Basically I'm going to keep doing what I love to do. It's all about staying "humble and hungry!"

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Recensiones
