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COLLECTION

# We Can't Always Play Waltzes

## CONVERSATIONS WITH BERT LUCCARELLI

by DANIEL PEREIRA

Foreword by HENRY FOGEL

Edited by NICHOLAS HOPKINS

CARL FISCHER®

*We Can't Always Play Waltzes is a pure delight! Bert Lucarelli's reflections on life and performing, his honesty, candor, insights into life, music, and the stage, along with his self-deprecating humor, all wrap into one engaging read which pleases, fascinates, and amuses as well as makes one ponder life and its twists and turns.*

—James Gandre,  
President Manhattan School of Music

*A feeling of warmth immediately washed over me as I settled into We Can't Always Play Waltzes and a smile came to my face as the Lucarelli-isms popped out in each response. These conversations inspire the reader through Maestro's amusing stories, thought provoking ideas and references all while giving you an intimate connection to a man that does not realize how much he is cherished by all who come in contact with him and his incredible music making. I am grateful that Daniel Pereira has captured and shared his spirit and generous heart through these conversations. This book reminds us of the meaning that music brings to our lives.*

—Kate Kammeyer,  
Orchestra Manager of The Philadelphia Orchestra  
Student of Bert Lucarelli,  
Hartt School of Music and Purchase College

*Bert has shared his lifetime passion for music as an artist performer and as a dedicated teacher. He now shares his "Joy of Music" journey with all who read this wonderful book. I recommend We Can't Always Play Waltzes to everyone who wishes to understand why we enter this extraordinary profession.*

—Richard Killmer,  
Professor of Oboe, Eastman School of Music

*How fitting it is that this great oboist would subtitle his book, Conversations With Bert Lucarelli. I had the joy of speaking with Bert on WQXR so many times I felt like a friend. But, in no way were these Interviews. We had Conversations and, it was from those informal and very musical talks that I learned so much about everything from classic books to breathing. Bert's right. We can't always play (or sing or dance) a waltz but we can, like Bert, make our lives swirl and, once you're whirling through Bert's book, you'll be finding new ways to make your life into the dance you want it to be.*

—June LeBell,  
WQXR Radio Host

*Anyone who has had the pleasure of listening to Bert Lucarelli play and the thrill of talking to him about music and life will instantly hear his authentic voices in this book. Anyone who had yet to do either of those things will become eager at once to do if not both then either one or the other. This book is a great read either way and no one can come away with the experience unmoved by the intelligent artistic mind that brings together both the performance and the thoughtfulness that inevitably underpin music at its most transcending.*

—Charles Middleton,  
President (ret.), Middleton University

*Daniel Pereira's conversations with Bert Lucarelli demonstrate how consciousness can be illuminated through the arts. The rituals and rhythms of this remarkable performer's life provide insights into in ways in which engaging with music, and all humanities, allows us to flourish fully as human beings.*

—Lynn Pasquerella,  
President, Mt. Holyoke College

*It's not easy to pick out the oboist in a symphony orchestra, but you certainly can hear the solos. Similarly, you can find a lot of musicians offering snapshot comments during PBS interviews, without really knowing what makes them tick, what they actually think about conductors, how they learn a new score, how they teach an old one. In his long and wonderfully productive career, Bert Lucarelli has seen, done and remembered it all, and via this fascinating set of conversations, we get to learn it all. I've shared a number of delectable broadcast hours with Bert; now it's your turn to share his sparkling wit and musical magic.*

—Robert Sherman, WQXR

*Not only is Bert Lucarelli one of America's greatest musicians but he's also a legendary raconteur. *We Can't Always Play Waltzes* is therefore as illuminating and insightful as it is tremendous fun to read. In short, it's clearly the work of that rarest of musicians: a man who talks music every bit as thrillingly as he plays it.*

—Jim Svejda, KUSC

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Photo by Michael Fiedler

## Introduction

*The Open Night* was a television show, broadcast on Spanish Public Television in the late 1990s, hosted by a controversial personage named Pedro Ruiz, whom I greatly admired. Every Thursday night, and during six seasons, the program was televised on the channel known as “The Second.” In the course of the sixty minutes of the production, Pedro Ruiz would interview a personality of interest in a rather unconventional, intimate and candid manner. On the other side of the screen, there was I, enthralled by the captivating and attractive exchange between the questioner and the interviewee.

Since then, I have been truly fascinated by this style of discussion and felt inclined to undertake a similar venture of my own. Learning and discovering what respected intellectuals, politicians, entertainers and artists have to say, have always appealed to me enormously.

Humbert Lucarelli has always been an artist and pedagogue of genuine interest to me, since I met him at the University of Hartford (Connecticut) in 2002. Years later, in the early fall of 2010, having had many engaging conversations with maestro Lucarelli, the idea of interviewing him emerged. In spite of the fact that Lucarelli reacted rather with resistance to my proposal, he agreed to get the ball rolling shortly after. It was in December of that year, that the *conversations*, as we resolved to call them, excitingly kicked off.

For the following two years, Bert (a nickname that will be used from now on) and I conducted a series of riveting talks, either in person or via the Internet. These unforgettable talks will remain amongst the most gratifying moments of my life. The spontaneity, sagacity and depth of Bert’s reflections facilitated the progress of the project and provided countless hours of enjoyment and learning.

These conversations would have not come to fruition without the immensely valuable contribution of Dr. Jan E. Holly, to whom I am deeply grateful for her witty and joyous suggestions. I must also thank Rose Ginsberg who, painstakingly and masterfully, transcribed all the audio recordings and graciously managed my inborn Spanish accent with no problem.

My sincerest gratitude goes to Henry Fogel, former president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and currently the Dean of the Chicago College of Performing Arts, Roosevelt University, who kindly wrote the generous foreword for this book.

A number of footnotes have been added, when they were considered necessary for the better comprehension of the text or simply to add some light to certain aspects of the talks.

I can only hope that these conversations will engender as much joy in the readers as they did to me. Why can’t we always play waltzes? Turn the page to find out!

—Daniel Pereira  
Fairfax, Virginia September 2014

## Chapter One: Arts in Our Life

**Daniel Pereira:** *Bert, I think the readers might be wondering, why can't we always play waltzes?*

**Humbert Lucarelli:** The title *We Can't Always Play Waltzes* comes from an impromptu conversation that a friend and I had in Chicago. Her name is Joan Bennett. She was a flutist in The Chicago Symphony Orchestra. I played with her at Grant Park in Chicago, which is a large concert series free to the public. She played principal flute and, I played principal oboe. One morning, at a rehearsal, she said to me, "I just had the most amazing experience. Coming down the elevator from my apartment, there was an older Viennese woman who got in the elevator with me. She saw the flute under my arm and said, 'Oh my, are you the flutist who I hear?'" And, embarrassed, Joan told me she said to her, "I hope you don't mind that I play scales and exercises every morning." And the woman replied, "That is fine my dear. We can't always play waltzes."

I always thought that this was a very philosophical concept about life. We can't always be happy and do what we like. Sometimes, we have to work and embrace all of those things that will make us better; that there is a flip side (maybe a dark side) to whatever we think is success.

*How do you define the role of the arts and the artists in society?*

Ah, a two-part question. My thinking is hardly original: The arts help us to go inside—to the interior—to understand our emotions, and even to explore the very concept of our feelings. We are too often afraid of our feelings, because they are often complex and difficult. We prefer to avoid talking about them. Art allows us to be a bit more objective about our own feelings. It is an experience upon which we can project our emotion, and it even helps us to become aware of emotions that we may never even knew we had.

So, as I speak, I analyze my ideas a little bit—going on a tangent in my mind. The whole notion of being moved fascinates me. First, it is about music. The listener hears a piece of music and the entire body, literally, wants to move. It's a visceral reaction. The same occurs with painting. The exquisite lines of a Picasso compel me, internally, to sway from side to side. Most challenging is literature; to move a reader with language.

Of course, you know the saying, "Art is in the eye of the beholder." Now we go into the sphere of the audience and the performer, the artist. For the artist, art is pretty much the act of communication. But communication implies both that the artist has something to say and that the listener wishes to hear or feel it. The artist's obligation is to find that connection.

*Is art selective or an activity available to only a few? Is it elitist?*

No. No, no, no, no, no. Every individual has the potential to engage with the arts. It's not elite, but the desire and willingness to take that journey into

## Chapter 2. Working under Celebrated Batons



Bert and Ascher Tempkin, Conductor after Mozart  
Concerto, 1969

**Daniel Pereira:** *I would like to ask you about a few musicians with whom you have worked during your career. Shall we start with Igor Stravinsky?*

**Humbert Lucarelli:** Oh, of course! My love for Stravinsky goes back to my high-school days, when I wrote a term paper for an English class. The paper was about the life and career of Igor Stravinsky. I never imagined that I would play in an orchestra he was conducting in Carnegie Hall.

I was very impressed with Stravinsky, especially when I was a player in an orchestra that he was conducting. But because I was working with him, developing a detailed notion of him was not at the front of my mind. He was kind, gentle, and appreciative. If he didn't like something, he would say only, "No, no, try this. Do it this way." He was never intimidating or unreceptive.

There was one particular rehearsal that will remain with me forever. We were rehearsing the *Symphony of Psalms* and in the middle of the big oboe solo, in what I believe is the opening of the second movement, Stravinsky stopped and said to me, "Mr. Oboe, it's too musical." Of course, the whole orchestra laughed, and after a moment I realized what he meant. I was phrasing it with what I jokingly call my usual "macaronic Italian-opera style," and he wanted a more angular, mechanical approach. One should not forget that Stravinsky was part of the "man-against-machine" aesthetic of the early 1900s, just coming out of the shock of trying to absorb the industrial revolution. In my opinion, this concept starts with Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and goes into Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Robert Craft, who was Stravinsky's assistant, was incredibly kind to me. He led many of the preparation rehearsals for the concerts and recordings that Stravinsky conducted in which I participated. A musician of great accomplishment, Craft had extraordinary control of the orchestra.

I will never forget being in the orchestra for Stravinsky's last performances as a conductor. Among the works we performed was *Pulcinella* with that

## Chapter 3. Performance



Seoul: During performance in 1999, Photo by Yea Jin Studio

**Daniel Pereira:** *May I ask you about concentration during performance, points of focus, the way we listen, the way we should listen, and the psychological implications of sustaining concentration?*

**Humbert Lucarelli:** Yes. Okay, maintaining concentration. One of the problems is the ease with which the mind wanders. For me, concentration is like meditation. You learn not to get upset when the mind wanders but calmly return to focus.

Onstage and in general we exist on several levels. When I perform sometimes, I find myself engaged in inner criticism, wondering, “What does the audience think of me?” “Am I walking correctly?” “How do I look?” “Am I thinking correctly?” “Am I moving correctly?” “Do they like my clothes?” “Am I sharp?” “That interval wasn’t clean.” Such pitfalls may be common to all of us. And then, on another level we think about the music. Of course, the goal is to move so far into the music that nothing else exists. I love the sensation of no longer existing outside the music. In fact, I sometimes listen detached to the sound coming out from the instrument, not so much consciously involved in the act of creating the sound, but more in observing it. That is a most wonderful moment, don’t you think? As Mike Nichols<sup>14</sup> has said, “The best thing about having total control is having none.”

I learned so much about creating the best conditions for concentration when I went on the Bach Aria Group tour as a substitute for my teacher and mentor Robert Bloom. Observing the difference of how the two female singers prepared for the performances was an inspiring lesson. Soprano, Lois Marshal spent the whole day in her hotel room on the day of a performance. She didn’t even answer the phone. Maureen Forrester was all over the place, in the lobby, in the restaurant of the hotel having lunch with

<sup>14</sup> Mike Nichols (b. 1931), German-born American filmmaker.

## Chapter 4. The Audience



Lark Quintet, ca: 1965  
on the roof of the Apthorp Apartments, at 79th and Broadway, NYC  
John Wion, Flute; Arthur Bloom, Clarinet; Jerry Warsaw, French Horn;  
Alan Brown, Bassoon; Humbert Lucarelli, Oboe

**Daniel Pereira:** *Bert, do audiences behave differently from one country to another?*

**Humbert Lucarelli:** Certainly, I would say that audience behavior does vary from country to country. Sometimes variations exist even within a country. I experienced this during a concert that I will never forget when my quintet played at a military academy. The cadets were trained not to applaud after each piece. It was their protocol. So, at the end of a piece, if they liked it, they all clapped simultaneously once. One clap, just one clap. It was peculiar.

In my experience in Japan, audiences applauded only briefly after each piece, but enthusiastically at the end of the concert. Even if they liked an individual piece or soloist very much, they applauded only to escort us off the stage. But at the end of the concert—if they enjoyed the concert, of course—we could expect a standing ovation. Because I was a soloist in the middle of the program, they brought me back to the stage to take a final bow after the end of the concert, so that the audience could show its appreciation. In retrospect, I would say that the Japanese might be reticent about making public displays of any sort or showing appreciation for one performer more than another. This speaks to another funny theory of mine that people who live on an island do not want to impose on one another.

To answer your question, I could go with the cliché and say that, in general, Italian audiences are warmer and more extroverted, whereas German audiences are more formal. I don't know. That's a tough question.

*So, are you thinking stereotypically?*

Yes, generally Italians are thought to be warm people, although they can also be critical. If they are dissatisfied, they boo, which happens rarely in America. During a concert, Italians may even shout out to express pleasure or disdain. As a young boy, my father was taken to hear Aïda at La Scala in Milan. He told me, at the point when the tenor sang “Aïda, where are you?”

## Chapter 5. The Proust Questionnaire

**Daniel Pereira:** *Bert, have you heard of the Proust Questionnaire?*

**Humbert Lucarelli:** Oh yes, I have heard of it, but can you explain it?

*The Proust Questionnaire was a list of questions popular in the late nineteenth century in England and France. It was intended as a “confessional,” to elicit insights about the respondent’s personality. The novelist and essayist Marcel Proust completed the questionnaire while still in his teens. Proust’s responses to the questionnaire were so whimsical and inventive—the manuscript of his answers was discovered in 1924, two years after his death—that the list came to be known as the Proust Questionnaire.*

*I would like to give you this Questionnaire. The questions are sometimes elemental, sometimes profound. Your answers should be no longer than one sentence, two at most. Shall we proceed?*

Sure. I am happy to try it.

*What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?*

I would say boredom.

*Where would you like to live?*

Where I am.

*What is your idea of earthly happiness?*

To be the fullest use of myself, for my friends and for my colleagues. When I say “use,” I mean that I am fulfilling the moment.

*What faults are to you the most indulgent?*

Forgive my candor, but becoming depressed is very easy for me.

*Who are your favorite heroes of fiction?*

Okay; from *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield.<sup>20</sup>

*Who are your favorite characters in history?*

Oh, perhaps because my perspective is as an American, I think first of those who have created this country. I would be fascinated to meet Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton and certainly, although not born in the United States, Albert Einstein.

*Who are your favorite real-life heroines?*

Oh, so many heroic women come to mind, some who are famous, some who are my friends, some who have accomplished so much, that they, literally, have changed the world. They continually humble me. You know, recollecting each one of them would take hours. But I look for people who

<sup>20</sup> Taken from a J. D. Salinger novel.

## Chapter 6. Learning

**Daniel Pereira:** *Tell me a little bit about your acting experiences. When did you do this, and how did it influence you?*

**Humbert Lucarelli:** I tried acting after completing my recording of Benjamin Britten's Six Metamorphoses. My interpretation on that initial recording seemed dull and uninteresting. Nothing was happening in the recording, no real dramatic expression. A critic said that I played very well at the concert before the recording, but that I was too self-effacing, that I wasn't coming to the audience enough. I had to figure out what to do, so I thought, "I'll try acting or painting or sculpture." Perhaps I could find the answer in a discipline outside of music.

Acting, and the whole idea of going into the audience, into the hall, is very important. In fact, my acting teacher taught me, as I walked onstage, to look at the far wall and sweep across the back of the theater with my eyes, to pull the theater inside my body; to pull the entire audience into me, as a way of acknowledging them. After that, I think, "Sometimes, while you're playing, you are here, sometimes you are there, sometimes you are in another place in the theater, or even outside the theater." You know what I mean? You can feel it; you're not always inside yourself.

*Correct.*

I don't know that anything is "always." I once asked my teacher Robert Bloom, "How much is here in your mind, and how much is in your heart?" He said to me, "100 percent in both places." I thought, "I only have 100 percent. Is it 50 and 50?" But I understand his meaning about 100 percent in both places. You're locked in and totally committed; nothing else exists when you perform.

*Since we are on the subject of acting—and actors, musicians and dancers practice it—can you talk about your experience with Alexander Technique?*

Yes. The idea of Alexander Technique shows me the path of letting go. It allows me to have the sensation of not controlling.

*But does Alexander Technique not sometimes make you a little too aware of your body and of yourself? It could be counterproductive, in a certain way.*

Yes, because it pulls you into your physical self. It pulls you here, it pulls you there. I love this idea, the feeling of the whole; the universal. Sometimes as I play, I take a breath. As I said, when I breathe, I inhale into my body all of the positive energy in the room. Then I put it back into the instrument. So, it is the idea of giving it back.

The Alexander Technique allows that to happen. Our bodies can be so tense for a number of understandable reasons and legitimate reasons. You know, the Alexander Technique returns you to the innocence of an

## Chapter 7. Teaching

**Daniel Pereira:** *Why is teaching important?*

**Humbert Lucarelli:** Teaching, has always struck me as a noble profession because it is fundamentally a means of passing on a tradition; it is a process of sharing between two human beings that supports the possibility of moving into a more positive future.

I have been lucky enough to have had teachers who were challenging, compassionate and stimulating, who gave me the audacity to believe that I was not trapped or frozen for life in a particular circumstance or condition; mentors who gave me the courage and support to believe that my capacity to grow and change was determined only by my own imagination.

Teaching is important to my life in music, because it embraces the act of self-discovery. Few of us can deal with the stark reality that the only meaningful answers come from within, and that when answers are harvested from the outside, the results are nothing more than a temporary solution to an issue only half understood.

*Do you teach your students according to a particular system or a method that you have followed over the years?*

I use no fixed system. I just work hard to respond to students, to what I hear them doing. Many good teachers keep a log of every lesson. Then, when a student comes back after a week, the teacher may say, “Okay, this is what we did last week, so now this is what we have to do next.”

I could never teach according to a log, because I must work with the student walking in the door. That student may be a different musician and person than they were the week before. In a week’s time, so much can occur to change a student. So, for example, I may be with a student who, ten minutes before the lesson, has been in a fight. That’s going to change the whole dynamic of the lesson. Or, the student may not have had sufficient time to practice; or, conversely, too much time. As the teacher, I must adjust to the reality of the moment. I remember a student who, two days before her lesson, helped her father, who had incurable cancer, die. That was a lesson that neither one of us will ever forget.

Teaching is difficult because both the students and I must trust my instincts. Although I don’t necessarily do this deliberately, I try to stay out of the way and let the lesson happen, just like in a performance.

I am blessed to have had such a variety of good teachers. Certainly my two principal teachers, Ray Still<sup>28</sup> and Robert Bloom, taught very differently. But lessons were profound, because they both worked within the moment.

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28 Ray Still (1920–2014), American oboist who was principal with the Chicago Symphony for forty years.

## Chapter 10. Career



Athens Greece in front of Parthenon on way to tour Australia, 1973 Photo Credit Susan Muhlhauser

**Daniel Pereira:** *You have often been praised as a true oboe virtuoso. What does the word “virtuoso” mean to you?*

**Humbert Lucarelli:** To most people, I think it means that you can play a lot of notes very fast. In order to get the review<sup>68</sup> labeling me a virtuoso, I did exactly that: playing a lot of notes very fast. If you are going to be in the game, you have to play by the rules. You go out, and you do it. So, I learned to play a couple show pieces with incredible facility and speed, even if my heart was not in it.

Playing fast notes is measurable. I know how fast your notes are. I can put a metronome on them. I know how clean they are, by carefully listening to them. These are not subjective judgments; they are factual, objective notions, like the speed of a horse race or how many home runs you hit. More important for me is whether you can move the audience and whether you go into their heart. This is a subjective judgment and it is for me more difficult to accomplish; but you must trust your instinct. Bloom said to me that he trusted his own instincts on this subject. One could teach for a lifetime on this phenomenon.

So for me, a virtuoso is a musician who can speak, who can move the listener. A virtuoso has his own personality, his own character and his own quality.

<sup>68</sup> The review praising Mr. Lucarelli as the leading American oboe recitalist appeared on the *New York Times* and was written by Allan Hughes.

## Chapter 11. Personal



Austin High School Orchestra, Maywood, Illinois, 1954



Relaxing at home 1976

**Daniel Pereira:** *Bert, could we travel all the way back to the beginning of your life in music? How did you come to play the oboe?*

**Humbert Lucarelli:** Yes, it's an unusual story. When I was young, long before I had been introduced to the oboe, I played baseball. In Little League I was a pitcher—and a pretty good one. I really enjoyed pitching, especially the psychology of the performance and its intensity. It appealed to me because pitchers are “on” the whole time they’re in the game. My pitching capabilities were similar to my later talents as an oboist. I was good at controlling location. I could place the ball pretty much at any point in the strike zone where an individual batter was weak. At fourteen, my pitching record for my age group was one of the best in the state of Illinois. So a future in professional baseball seemed real for me. A scout for the Chicago White Sox had approached my Dad about the possibility of my going to a summer baseball camp.

On the evening of October 21, at the age of fourteen, walking home from practice, there was someone in the street whose car had stalled just across the street from the house where we lived on Homan Avenue. I decided to help him push his car to the gas station, a half block away. Because it was growing dark—and the taillights were out—another vehicle did not see us and rear-ended the car that I was pushing with me caught in between. My legs were almost completely severed. My mom said she heard the screaming and knew it was me. They called her from the hospital.

I underwent a twelve-hour surgery to save my legs—to put them back together remaining in traction for three months—and was unable to walk comfortably for nearly a year and a half. My father, being concerned about