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Gabriella De Esteban

What a woman wants...

Madrid's or the Basque country's high society laying at her feet, Gabriella de Esteban could have made a career in law thanks to an impeccable education that had already paved the way for her. Proof that humans are capable of unchaining themselves, the first woman ever to become a conductor chose to take control of her future.

At first sight, finding one's way in the somewhat elitist world of classical music can be quite discouraging. But that was exactly the road taken by Gabriella de Esteban. Her noble Spanish Basque family would certainly have preferred to see their only girl in a lawyer's robe or in the medical profession. But she decided otherwise! Music, together with horseback riding, skiing, painting or ballet are all part of the education a young girl of good social standing normally gets. Suspicious, even disapproving, her entourage refrains from stopping her – she would have asserted her independence anyway – after she drops her law studies to attend the conservatory. After being admitted, the 18 year old pianist refuses to pursue a teaching career as this would have confined her in a much too conformist life: an unbearable idea for her! As fate willed, the Basque government grants her a scholarship to continue her studies abroad after leaving the conservatory. A few days later, this young lady arrives in Paris, all by herself, without speaking a word of French, but with one goal on her mind: to refine her piano playing skills. Very soon, she realizes that the excellent level she had reached in Spain would not be enough to become a virtuoso in Paris where some of the best schools (French, Italian, Russian ...) are represented. But what would be a major disappointment, even a failure for a prodigal young person does not, in any way, change Gabriella de Esteban's mind. Far from being scared, she always seems to find the right incentive to work hard when complicated situations arise. Her mother had impressed on her the need for discipline and perseverance, two values that were to become close allies on her way to the top.

Symphonic immersion

In Paris, Gabriella de Esteban discovers a wonderful world by the best teachers' side (Eliane Richepin, Roger Muraro, Magda Tagliaferro, Alberto Neumann) whom she sees simultaneously without their knowledge. Upon reaching the top level, this insatiable stakhanovist still feels a growing desire to refine her approach to music. In line with her origins, Gabriella de Esteban loves having the "little grey cells" work and, like the great detective, she literally uproots the musical domain "to go beyond mere technique" and obtains a Master of Music.

At the same time, she already imagines her beginning career as a conductor. The idea of pursuing this profession has inspired her ever since she attended a concert at the age of 14. A wish that she forgot soon after but that reappeared ever more vigorously, taking Gabriella de Esteban by surprise after a concert by the 'Orchestre de Paris' conducted by Riccardo Mutti. The young lady, enthralled by this experience, convinces Gérard Devos as to her very singular motivation. A few days later, she is invited to conduct an orchestra at the 'Ecole Normale de Musique' and prepares herself feverishly before tackling this rather unusual task. Immersed in a myriad of sounds, Gabriella de Esteban resurfaces only upon leaving the concert hall – rewarded with a scholarship.

"Liberté chérie"

Quite naturally, her way leads the young conductor to the blue Danube. In 1991, the year celebrating the 200th anniversary of Mozart's death, her wedding in Salzburg couldn't have been more romantic. Still, she doesn't leave Paris for a minor role in Strauss' country. Austria remains a real challenge to see if she is up to the new stage in her music studies. She simply wants to excel among the best. Plácido Domingo proposes her to join the musical direction of the Vienna Opera House as an assistant. What could be more alluring to this young woman who succeeded in standing her ground in no more than four years and becoming the first female conductor at the Festival Hall in St. Pölten, Lower Austria's Baroque capital city? Gabriella de Esteban stands out due to her Prussian rigor at work and assimilates, over a period of two years, a recurring repertoire imposed on her. Performing nearly 40 times the same opera is likely to paralyze her aspiration to move on and so she decides to turn towards new horizons. As a freelance conductor, Gabriella de Esteban is finally free to choose the works she wants to conduct. At the beginning of the 21st century, she wants to promote contemporary Spanish works by Turina or Bernaola while on prestigious tours across central Europe: Vienna, Budapest and Bratislava, only to name a few. A choice one could easily attribute to her national pride. But for this staunch European, it is merely a way to claim her originality though not her origins.

Not a "classic" woman

If you happen to meet Gabriella de Esteban, beware not to ask her whether it is difficult for a woman to be accepted into the world of conducting. She would probably pretend not to know the right answer because there are not enough women conductors to provide the necessary information. However, she remembers her very first concert as a 23 year old conductor very well. Orchestra, choir and a soloist were performing that day. A rough first ride or was it just the right challenge at the right time? It certainly was not enough to bring down this young lady who always succeeds in turning a difficult situation into pleasure. Gabriella de Esteban somehow teases complexity in a very natural way and would never try to avoid it. Just like she does when she asserts her freedom of choice.

Gabriella de Esteban is a non-conformist aesthete who likes to compare conducting to sculpting. And if she were to create a sculpture, it would certainly be made from granite rather than from clay. Seen from this perspective, she also takes "the road less traveled on" when she tackles contemporary repertoires in her very own style. "Contemporary music is both grand and complex and has always haunted me. Be it at school, at home with my husband or in opera works I am charged with because they are too difficult for others. But that's not my own choice", she innocently defends herself. For Gabriella de





Esteban, contemporary music certainly represents an intellectual challenge equally significant as the intense pleasure she gets from successfully conducting exceptional scores.

In her eyes, approximation must not be associated with any repertoire, "even though the audience may not realize any imperfections". Gabriella de Esteban always strives for a perfect technique in order to better relish the works she interprets with a poetical and personal touch.

To fully explore music, a conductor must be a good communicator and urge his or her musicians to join in the adventure. If she had been born in Genova in the 15th century, Captain Esteban would certainly have discovered a new continent aboard her vessel.

Cherchez la femme?

As the Americas have already been discovered, Gabriella de Esteban avidly explores other realms within her range of skills. On her many journeys she broadens her horizon and finds new strength through material and spiritual experiences. Just like a honeybee flying towards a fragrant field of flowers, Gabriella de Esteban indulges herself in an ocean of knowledge enabling her to constantly improve her skills. She is a relentless learner and considers everything new as another potential source of enjoyment. At the Musikene, the University of Music in San Sebastian, she is the curious professor and receives as much pleasure from her courses as her students do. "Whether it is the piano repertoires, the concerts or my pedagogic activity at the Musikene, every aspect of my work contributes to the pursuit of one passion", she reveals enthusiastically. To this artist, every encounter seems to be a permit to new destinations, new knowledge, new experiences that partake in her personal development. Though music remains her preferred source of lore and culture, she admits to being more proficient in plastic arts and moves on to discover yet more domains such as literature, painting or philosophy that are but one small step towards sagesness and knowledge.

Gabriella de Esteban, a human Tower of Babel, is completely devoted to a very demanding profession and puts her heart and soul in this tantalizing experience without ever being able to lay open all its hidden pleasures. Steadfastly independent, nobody and nothing can keep her from going after her dream. An egoistic attitude? "I do what I want to do without bothering anybody but also without being stopped by anyone." is her reply as a woman and conductor. In this order! A very firm resolution she amplifies with an unusually strong will

GABRIELLA DE ESTEBAN WEARS MAURIZIO GALANTE
HAUTE COUTURE WITH JEWELRY BY IBU

MAKE UP : RAFAEL PITA AT L'ATELIER (68)
USING DR.HAUSCHKA
HAIR : THIERRY DEGRAVE
ASSISTANT PHOTOGRAPHER : BLANDINE DE PARC
SCANS & POST PRODUCTION : ANTOINE DELAGE DE LUGET
ASSISTANT STYLIST : ALINE DESCAMPS
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PHOTOGRAPH AT MAURIZIO GALANTE HAUTE COUTURE
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