

Interview with Magyar Narancs, published in February 2025

„They Should Communicate with me”

Vera Blum, Founder of Veracity Artists.

After many years working as an assistant to conductors, she gained enough experience that she decided to found her own artist agency a year ago. We spoke with her about the use of telephones and chairs.

MN: Your grandfather was the well-known Tamás Blum, but you never got to meet him. Did your grandmother speak Hungarian with you from the start in Switzerland?

VB: Yes, and in the summers, she took me to Lake Balaton so I could practice Hungarian. At home, I spoke Swiss German with my mother, and Hungarian with my father when we were alone. But I never really learned to read and write Hungarian properly. In 2013, I came to Hungary to learn to read Hungarian with my uncle Iván Bächer, but unfortunately, he passed away a few months later.

MN: I find it remarkable that you never saw being an assistant as a secondary profession or felt like a failed musician.

VB: Being an assistant is an important role—everything comes together there! And I think I’ve found my own path so well that I feel I complement the musicians rather than needing to be one myself. I don’t mind that I didn’t become a musician. As a child, I played the flute and piano. A good organizer is much more needed than a mediocre musician.

MN: Can you briefly summarize what your work as an assistant entailed? I assume you did more than just the minimum.

VB: That completely depends on the person I was assisting. It’s a bit like playing in an orchestra—whether you’re a flutist, percussionist, or violinist is technically very different, but there are commonalities. With Ádám Fischer, I started small and was essentially on standby during rehearsals for any situation that might arise. With Rubén Dubrovsky, I was mainly responsible for the logistics of his orchestra. With Iván Fischer, I did absolutely everything. And with Roland Kluttig, I was also involved in program selection, which I really enjoyed.

MN: This career somehow started with Pussy Riot.

VB: The arrest of Pussy Riot in 2012 caused a huge stir in Switzerland. The Zurich Schauspielhaus organized panel discussions on the topic of art and freedom. Ádám was one of the speakers, and that’s how we met. We sat down together, and he asked me about my favorite opera—I said *Cenerentola*. „And did you see the performance here?”

„Yes.“ „Who conducted?“ „No idea.“ Of course, it was him. „And what did you see in Budapest?“ „*Bluebeard's Castle*.“ „And who conducted there?“ „No idea.“ Again, it was him. I liked that he wasn't vain or offended but instead invited me to be his assistant—I was 16 at the time. I was still in school, so I could only start working with him properly when I turned 18. Until then, we prepared for the Wagner Days, wrote emails in Hungarian, and he kept correcting me. To this day, I still struggle with object and subject conjugation.

I learned the craft from four conductors and saw the work from four different perspectives. One thing I often noticed was the strange relationship between guest conductors and orchestras. After a concert, the conductor often sits alone in a restaurant or hotel—in those moments, it's good if they can talk or work with their assistant. The profession of a conductor can be very lonely.

MN: You've made some tough decisions—for example, when you were offered a job at the Salzburg Festival at 24 but ultimately chose a different path.

VB: The interview in Salzburg went well, I got the job, and I had a week to decide. At the time, I was an intern at La Scala in Milan when Iván Fischer called me and said he needed a personal assistant immediately. By the way, La Scala was a terrible experience: I wasn't given a chair, a computer, or any tasks—I just stood around in the intern office.

I practically fled to Berlin, spent two or three days there with Iván and his assistant at the time. Then I called Salzburg to decline the offer—and they already knew! This world is small, and information spreads in seconds. In my two years at the Budapest Festival Orchestra, I learned more than in the six years before that. The pandemic made everything even more complicated, but it was an incredible learning experience. It's very important to me to talk to musicians because they know exactly what they need—many organizers don't do that. Musicians are the experts on their own instruments, and the organizer's job is to skillfully combine information rather than knowing everything about every instrument or situation. It's also a matter of trust: if I feel a musician is trying to trick me, the collaboration won't work.

In Graz, I learned a lot about instruments—where to buy harp strings or the wooden piece that holds a cello's endpin. I dealt with too much draft in the orchestra pit, lack of space, ordering specific reeds, the seating arrangement for the horns, and so on. Back then, there was no dedicated orchestra office in Graz. These are mundane matters, but they're essential for musicians to be able to do their job well.

The chair, for example, is a major topic in many orchestras, which is incredibly fascinating. In Graz, I let the musicians vote democratically, but later it turned out that the selected model wasn't produced in the required sizes. So, in the end, we had to order the other model.

Many of these issues only come up in private conversations because many musicians either don't dare or don't want to come to the office. If they don't come to me, then I go to them. Sometimes I get criticized for getting along „too well” with musicians. But just because we have a trusting relationship or even a friendship doesn't mean that I can't set boundaries and treat everyone equally. As an organizer, I need information—and if a musician doesn't have the courage or the inclination to communicate with me, then of course, nothing happens.

MN: You've now started an agency. Does it only represent artists, or does it also organize concerts?

VB: Only representation—concert organization would be too much. My focus is on career management. Some artists already have well-established marketing and PR, while others still need support, for example, with high-quality videos. I'm interested in how to build a career, not just in simple bookings. I represent eleven artists—which is a lot. But not every artist has the same access to the market. A brass quintet like *In Medias Brass* has nowhere near as many performance opportunities as a pianist—that's something I really want to change. Of course, in return, there are far more pianists. Five of the artists I represent are from Hungary: trumpeter Tamás Pálfalvi, conductor Róbert Farkas, the aforementioned brass quintet, the Budapest Sound Collective under Gergely Dubóczy, and cimbalom player Jenő Lisztes. Many advised me against taking on a cimbalom player, but I see a demand for this instrument in the market. One of my tasks is to make the cimbalom more well-known in Western Europe.

My agency is registered in Switzerland, where there are very few serious agencies for instrumentalists. I get the impression that presenters are pleased that another Swiss agency has emerged—they're curious about it. In Switzerland, you can already plan the 2027/28 season in detail, whereas in Hungary, it sometimes happens that neither the current year's budget, nor the program, nor even the concert itself is certain. That's a major cultural challenge for me—I have to navigate between these two countries like doing the splits.

I love Swiss bureaucracy because it's simple: people want things to work. I don't have an accountant, and setting up the company was very straightforward—except for a single document that I needed from Austria, which took me three months to get.

MN: I see that you haven't taken on any singers. Why?

VB: Out of five applications I receive, four are from singers—it's an even more ruthless world than that of pianists. Working with Ádám, I saw how much you need to understand about the voice because it's very easy to damage a singer's voice. I love opera, but I don't know enough about the voice. Maybe one day I'll bring in a vocal specialist. That would also make financial sense because the market for last-minute

stand-ins is much bigger for singers—someone is always canceling, so you can generate income more quickly than with concerts that are planned years in advance.

MN: Agencies are often criticized, especially the big ones, which take the approach that artists should feel lucky to be on their roster—but they don't necessarily do much for them. How do you plan to do things differently?

VB: A key aspect is how information is handled. I give my artists access to all emails and notes that concern them. Some look at them and appreciate it, others aren't interested—but the option is there, and we work with full transparency. Recently, a China tour didn't happen because the artist was of Asian descent, and China didn't want to book an Asian musician. I share such information with my artists. They also need to be aware that different instruments have different market opportunities.

MN: What criteria did you use to select these eleven artists—besides quality?

VB: They are outstanding classical musicians, but they also think outside the box. I like when my artists engage with folk music, jazz, or pop, or when they teach. They should be creative, develop their own programs, and not just focus on the big concert stages.

MN: How do you structure your commission?

VB: If my artist teaches or has a CD they recorded five years ago, I see no reason to take a commission on that. This is clearly defined in the contract. I've heard that other agencies ruthlessly take a cut of every single source of income their artists have. I had to find a compromise. When artists join my agency, they submit a contact list. This benefits me, but they put in the work to build those contacts. If a booking happens through one of those contacts, the artist decides whether I handle the organization—if I do, I take 10%. If the artist organizes it themselves, I take 0%. If the request comes from outside their contact list, I handle everything and take 20%. I think this is fair and transparent.

MN: What do you promise your artists—what's in your contracts?

VB: My commitment is to secure high-quality concert engagements, handle marketing, and keep the calendar up to date—in other words, career management. The artist, in turn, is responsible for being in top form and on time for rehearsals, bringing a well-maintained instrument if necessary, and communicating with me. What I can personally guarantee—and what many other agencies don't—is that I'm accessible. Every few months, I hold one-on-one sessions with each artist to go over everything. This helps me see the bigger picture and ensures that everyone feels personally taken care of. This approach is especially appreciated by artists who have been with other agencies before. Of course, some artists will leave when their careers take off and they move to a bigger agency—that's something I have to prepare myself for emotionally.

MN: You mentioned that communication is a big issue.

VB: Yes, because phone calls dominate communication, which is understandable—but it really disrupts my work. Emails are my second brain. Whatever is written there stays in memory. I've created a communication guideline that specifies which types of information should be shared with me via which channels. When I send an email, I expect the artist to respond by a certain deadline—otherwise, I can't do my job properly. I work very collaboratively with my artists, but they need to support me in communication because that's the area where I get overwhelmed the fastest. I expect an artist to be able to read, understand, and respond to an email in a timely manner.

MN: You're used to constantly being on the move. Will that change?

VB: I don't like being tied to one place, but at the moment, I „only“ commute between Zurich and Budapest. Traveling is important to me—I want to attend my artists' concerts rather than be tied to a representative office, which, by the way, is currently in my childhood bedroom in Zurich. Right now, I'm fully focused on my agency, but I have many plans and ideas for the future. Shows like *The Queen's Gambit* have inspired many people to take up chess—I believe that if there were a high-quality series about musicians, their struggles and joys, orchestras, and opera houses, it could bring many people closer to classical music. And it could be both a popular series and one that maintains high musical standards.