



# The S.B. Questionnaire: Nir Kabaretti

Talking Music and Cufflinks with the Director  
of the Santa Barbara Symphony

By **Indy Staff**

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*Nir Kabaretti, Music and Artistic Director of the Santa Barbara  
Symphony, at the Granada Theatre*

*Paul Wellman*

There's a distinctive congeniality about Maestro Nir Kabaretti, the music and artistic director of the Santa Barbara Symphony, which is celebrating its 65th season.

The internationally acclaimed conductor is down-to-earth, enjoys a hearty laugh, and is the proprietor of a charming accent that reflects his worldliness. He immediately puts you at ease, and makes you feel like you've been friends forever.

"Three years ago, we moved to Santa Barbara full-time," shares Nir, who was selected to lead the symphony in 2006 after 300 applicants were interviewed. "The center of my family life is here. On top of the beauty, it's an incredible community."

Still, from every October through June, he's on the road: 12 weeks in Israel, conducting the Israel Sinfonietta Beersheba; then 12 weeks in Florida, as music director of the Southwest Florida Symphony; and then one month in Rome, among other stops. "That's the nature of my work," he says. "Conducting is a part-time job. Working with new people, the adrenaline is high. You get inspired by other type of musicians and audiences. It makes you better."

Nir was born in Israel. "My father was a semi-professional musician," he says. "We had instruments all over the house. " He began piano lessons at six, and realized at 13 that he wanted to be more serious, in part inspired by the movie *Fame*.

He went to the Telma Yellin School, the only high school with a music degree. As he approached 18 years old, he was getting quite strong on the piano, and started attending concerts to hear other pianists. Everything changed when he noticed the conductor.

"I wanted to live the music," he recalls. "I was amazed what the conductor could do, how they brought the music alive. I was fascinated about how I could become a conductor."

He started studying piano and conducting at the Rubin Academy of Music at Tel Aviv University. He had to pause his studies to complete his military service, where he joined their band. "The very first thing I conducted," he explains, "was the American anthem for the arrival of Secretary of State James Baker."

In 1995, he earned a Master's degree from the prestigious University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna, where he studied both conducting and composition. "I wanted to

learn German,” he explains of going to Austria. “I felt a German-speaking country was essential. I wanted to be able to read the letters of Beethoven. I wanted to get closer to his soul. I wanted to go to the music center of the world.”

Upon his graduation, Nir began working as coach and chorus master at the Vienna State Opera and the Salzburg Festival. “I got into the opera house as a piano player and then I made my way into conducting,” he says.

He advanced to positions as assistant to the music director at the Teatro Real in Madrid and personal assistant to Maestro Zubin Mehta at Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino in Florence, Italy. He was appointed principal conductor of the Raanana Symphonette Orchestra in Israel in 2002 and served as its music director until 2008.

Maestro Kabaretti is extremely happy with his work at the Santa Barbara Symphony. “We worked hard on our ensemble,” he says. “We’ve selected wonderful musicians. We have a severe audition process. The best musicians come to Santa Barbara.” Altogether, he feels that he’s help build our very own “musical DNA.”

But it’s more than music. “We collaborate with other organizations in town to do things that haven’t been otherwise possible,” he explains. “How to use the symphony to do unique things in a town that has so many musical offerings? We’ve improved our musicians and created partnerships.”

As they enter their 65th year, Nir is constantly focused on making the symphony attractive to people who didn’t grow up with classical music. “How can we serve a wider

audience?” he asks. “How can we be more relevant?” One of their solutions is an expansive educational program.

As we part, I ask the maestro if he has a favorite piece to conduct. “I love Gustav Mahler,” he answers, his eyes lighting up. “One of the most rewarding experiences was conducting Mahler’s ‘Second’ here in Santa Barbara.”

Maestro Nir Kabaretti answers the Proust Questionnaire.

**Where would you most like to live?**

I have lived in five countries, and have been lucky enough to call Vienna, Florence, Madrid, and now Santa Barbara my home. Each town had so many great things to offer, but the community we found in Santa Barbara is the most special one.

**What is your most marked characteristic?**

Probably my foreign accent. Although people tell me that I always laugh, and that I speak from the heart, which I’ll happily be known for.

**What do you consider your greatest achievement?**

Personally, I followed my childhood passion, and followed a long path to become a musician. Professionally, I am very proud to be part of the leadership that made such a difference in our Santa Barbara Symphony over the last decade.

**What do you like most about your job?**

Making music with exceptional musicians is truly a gift that I cherish. My work also takes me to beautiful places all over the world, where I meet wonderful people, and

experience inspiring cities and cultures.

**What is your idea of perfect happiness?**

Doing something meaningful and feeling grateful for what I have. Small things or gestures can easily make me happy.

**What is your greatest fear?**

I like to think of myself as a fearless person, but still there is always a little fear from unexpected things or disasters. Looking at the future, I am uncomfortable when I hear about artificial intelligence and the impact it may have on our human and cultural achievements.

**Who do you most admire?**

I admire so many people, and for so many different reasons. Some for their courage, some for their talents, and others for their lifelong dedication and care for others, from geniuses to philanthropists. I admire them all.

**What is your greatest extravagance?**

A day off!

**What is your current state of mind?**

Excited and hopeful.

**What is the quality you most like in people?**

Being positive. For me, this is a virtue that represents respect, tolerance, kindness, compassion, and so much more.

**What is the quality you most dislike in people?**

Dishonesty and manipulation. In two words: negative attitude.

**What do you most value in friends?**

Unconditional love and care, accepting you and help you be the best of yourself.

**Which words or phrases do you most overuse?**

“Fantastic” and “wonderful” are probably words that I use a lot, but I can’t help it when I hear great music, or witness something spectacular. “It’s bedtime, guys” is unfortunately another phrase I repeat to my children every night!

**Which talent would you most like to have?**

I wish I could paint. Luckily, on my wife’s side of the family, we have four generations of English and Italian sculptors and painters.

**If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?**

Be more sensitive to others.

**What is your most trusted possession?**

A few sets of cufflinks from people I love, and a jacket that my mother made for me when I went to study in Europe.

**Who makes you laugh the most?**

My family. We treasure a good sense of humor, and especially enjoy laughing about ourselves.

**What is your motto?**

Follow your dreams.

**Which historical figure do you most identify with?**

Shimon Peres, Israel's ninth president, two-time prime minister, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who aimed to unite the nation, and always strived for peace.

**On what occasion do you lie?**

I guess I lie whenever I say I don't lie. Occasionally, I will change my name for ordering at Starbucks, and telling my kids I don't know where the iPad is before bedtime!

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<https://www.independent.com/2018/10/08/s-b-questionnaire-nir-kabaretti/>



**Roger Durling**