

Ernst von Siemens Music Prize 2013 to Mariss Jansons

by Richard Morrison (chief music critic of *The Times*, London, Great Britain)

Great conductors aren't always revered by the musicians in front of them. Toscanini, Klemperer, Karajan, Solti, Szell – these were dictatorial figures who inspired respect, awe and sometimes terror, but rarely love. As he turns 70, Mariss Jansons is surely worthy to be ranked as a conductor in the same premier league as those legendary names from the past. But there is an extra reason to celebrate his life and his achievement. He has become a great conductor without sacrificing his humanity, humour, courtesy or warmth. He is revered, and he is loved.

He is also a magician. That is the word you most often hear at the end of a Jansons performance, and at first it sounds a little insulting - as though he is some kind of vaudeville conjurer, producing rabbits out of a hat. But I have attended dozens of Jansons concerts over the past 35 years, and at the end of them all I inevitably had the same question in my head. How on earth did he achieve that? This is what people mean when they describe him as a magician. How on earth did he make you hear familiar pieces – even pieces as frequently played as a Mahler symphony or a Strauss tone-poem – as if for the first time? It is shocking, almost surreal: like seeing the sun rise in the west.

Sometimes, astonished at what my ears have just heard, I have rushed to a library and examined the score that Jansons has just conducted. Invariably, I discover the details that I had never heard before, perhaps buried deep in the string texture. Jansons didn't invent them; they had been put there by the composer. But nobody had made them audible before.

That is one aspect of his magic. But there is a balancing side as well. He never lets this endless quest for hidden details and sophisticated articulation and instrumental blends get in the way of what truly matters – which is the sweep of the music, the entirety of the composer's idea, and what Jansons would call the "cosmic meaning" of the music. He has the sort of brain that is rare in any sort of profession, not just music: someone who can simultaneously nurture both the tiniest details and the grand sweep; the individual blades of grass, and the entire landscape.

How does he do that? There are many valid answers. Steeped in the nuts and bolts of orchestral musicmaking since he was a small child, he knows how to run a superbly efficient rehearsal. He concentrates on where he needs to make a difference. He galvanises top-class instrumentalists, but also gives them the space to express something of themselves. He is no megalomaniac, nor a tyrant demanding absolute power. But because he gives everything of himself – physically, mentally, spiritually – he expects the same from his colleagues. Throughout his life he has gravitated towards orchestras where the musicians have this integrity.

Then there is his physical technique. A conductor's body language – the way he uses not just his baton but his whole body and particularly his eyes – can communicate far more to an orchestra,

and far more quickly, than a long monologue in rehearsal about what is required. Of course Jansons speaks as well. But few present-day conductors have developed so eloquent a language of gesture – or made it seem so natural, unforced and seemingly spontaneous.

All this explains a lot about his magic. But ask Jansons himself to explain it, and he will often reach for a metaphor that resonates right back to his earliest childhood. “I have the brain of a Latvian,” he says, “but the heart of a Russian.” By that he doesn’t mean that he feels more passionate about Russia than about his native Latvia (though his home, in the few weeks a year when he is not in hotels, is St Petersburg). Rather, he is pinpointing the duality in his character that gives his performances such mesmerising power. It’s the ability to respond to the music both intellectually and analytically (the “Latvian” way), but also passionately and instinctively (the “Russian” approach).

That may seem simplistic, and probably is. Jansons wouldn’t be the first master conductor to be hesitant about disclosing too much about what goes on inside his head. But it fits with his extraordinary biography. He was indeed born in Latvia, and in extraordinary circumstances. His mother, an opera singer who was Jewish, gave birth to him in 1943 while hiding in Riga – her father and brother having been killed in the ghetto. But just after the war, when Mariss was three, his father, Arvid, attracted enough favourable attention in a conducting competition to be chosen by Yevgeny Mravinsky as second conductor at the Leningrad Philharmonic.

So it was in Leningrad, at the famous Conservatory, that the teenage Mariss studied piano and conducting. It was a destiny that had seemed inevitable since he was a small boy, when he memorised the names and instruments of all the members of the Leningrad Philharmonic, and “conducted” orchestras made out of paperclips, buttons and bits of woods. “It was the only orchestra that never argued with me,” he later joked.

Just as his father had caught Mravinsky’s eye, so the young Mariss, allowed out of the Soviet Union to study in Vienna and Salzburg, caught the eye of another hugely influential conductor. Herbert von Karajan invited him to be an assistant conductor with the Berlin Philharmonic, a gilt-edged opportunity for a 26-year-old. Unfortunately, the Soviet authorities ensured that the offer was never communicated to Jansons. His career path might have been very different, and very much easier, if he had become Karajan’s protégé.

Instead he went back to Leningrad and became the associate conductor of the Leningrad (now St Petersburg) Philharmonic. He wasn’t entirely absent from Western Europe; one important engagement was to conduct all the Tchaikovsky symphonies in a series of televised concerts with the BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra – a series that first alerted British musiclovers to his potential and magnificently passionate interpretations. But it wasn’t until he became music director of the Oslo Philharmonic that he really had the opportunity to work intensely with an orchestra that he could call his own.

That relationship, which lasted 21 years, was immensely formative for both sides. It brought the Norwegians international acclaim, tours and recordings. And for Jansons it was a chance to begin building in reality the idealised, super-refined orchestral sound that he nurtured in his head. “There is only one rule in conducting,” he says. “Inside the imagination must be some model of how you want the music to sound, and your job in rehearsal is to make what you are hearing from the orchestra correspond to what is in your head. The most important way of doing that is to give the players your energy – an energy that is cosmic as well as physical.

Unfortunately, that is the one thing that cannot be taught. It must come from deep inside a conductor's soul."

Jansons's next career move was to Pittsburgh, where he did much the same job: taking a reasonable regional orchestra and giving it a world-class outlook and polish. But a long-term move to the United States was never likely. Jansons is too European in outlook and cultural tastes. He admits that he finds aspects of American life "soulless" - and he also suffers from severe jet-lag. Even if he didn't believe in the importance of conductors have long relationships with orchestras, the life of a globe-trotting guest conductor is not for him.

Happily, his return to Europe brought him to two orchestras where the ambitions and integrity of the musicians match his own. When some observers heard that Jansons was going to be music director, simultaneously, of the Bavarian State Radio Orchestra in Munich and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam, there was understandable concern. Two superb, long-established and proud ensembles in adjacent countries, competing on the same international stage - how could one conductor, no matter how dazzling, be at the helm of both?

Jansons's answer was typically witty and forthright. "I shall divide my energies absolutely equally," he announced. "100 per cent to Munich, and another 100 per cent to Amsterdam." And, once again, this master magician has pulled off a dazzling conjuring-trick. A couple of years ago the highly respected Gramophone magazine conducted a poll of music critics to produce a league-table of the top 20 orchestras in the world. The Concertgebouw and the Bavarians were both in the top six, and Jansons was the only conductor to have two orchestras in the list. A superficial exercise, perhaps - but an indication of the huge esteem that he commands among those who are paid to listen critically to live performances and recordings.

There is one other vital aspect to his musicmaking - and that is courage. Not just the intellectual courage to interpret masterpieces in new, unfamiliar ways, but physical courage as well. Conducting, often for six hours a day, every day for weeks, is a physically demanding occupation. It usually requires the constitution of an ox and the stamina of a marathon runner. Jansons inherited many wonderful gifts from his revered father, but one unfortunate genetic "gift" was also a heart condition. Arvid Jansons died a few days after suffering a heart attack while conducting the Halle Orchestra in Manchester in 1984. Just 12 years later, when Mariss was 53, he too was struck down by a massive heart attack, also in a performance - while making a rare excursion into opera and conducting *La boheme* in Oslo. Typically, he was still attempting to beat time as he collapsed onto the floor of the orchestra pit. Taken to hospital, he clung to life like a thread. Five weeks later he had a second heart attack. He spent most of a year recuperating, and was warned by his doctors that, if he wished to live a long life, he should observe a strict diet and also avoid violent physical exercise.

Well, he is slightly more careful these days about what he eats: a severe strain on a man with a strong addiction to sweet food. But as for avoiding strenuous gestures? That was forgotten the moment he returned to the podium. He is constitutionally incapable of standing in front of an orchestra and not leading even a first rehearsal with volcanic impetus. "When I started conducting after the heart attacks, I went back to the BBC Welsh Orchestra," he says. "They are such wonderful, friendly people that I knew there would be no pressure. For the first 20 minutes of the first rehearsal I was very careful, very calm, very moderate. But in the interval I said to my wife: 'It's so boring! If I have to do it like this, it's better that I don't conduct at all.' So I threw my arms around as normal, and felt fine."

He has been “throwing his arms around as normal” to stunning effect ever since. But since his return from illness there has been something new in his performances – a serenity and depth usually only granted to conductors in their eighties. “It’s an interesting psychological moment when you feel your body deciding whether you go to life or death,” he says. “Something happens deep within you. It’s definitely a positive experience.”

It’s typical of Jansons to call a near-fatal heart attack a positive experience. But he believes it has made a big difference. “I like slow, quiet music enormously now,” he says. “But there is something else. I am striving for a higher level. I am not content with playing the notes. I want to find the spiritual meaning behind them. I tell the orchestra to play each concert as if it is their last.”

If musicians need a motto, that would be an excellent one. But it takes a conductor of exceptional mental and spiritual energy to imbue every concert with the transcendental intensity of a farewell. If Jansons has a secret, it is probably that he is always questing, always striving for something indefinable – a sound that may never be achieved in this world, or this life.

“Perhaps that is the Latvian temperament in me,” he says. “I feel that life should be like climbing a mountain but never reaching the top. Perhaps the mountain shouldn’t even have a top.”

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