

An Interview with Mariss Jansons

Winner of the 2013 Ernst von Siemens Music Prize

by Christian Merlin (musicologist and music critic of *Figaro*, Paris, France)

How do you see the world now at the age of 70?

We are living in terrible times. Not only because of our hectic lifestyle and the constant pressure we are exposed to. It is also an immoral age. I realise that there has never been an ideal world. But history should have to do with development and progress. It is true that technology has never been more advanced, but we do not owe human progress to technology, but rather to the human spirit. And it is catastrophic to neglect our spiritual side. Today, I think the balance between spirit and technology has become lost, and I find that highly disconcerting.

How can we avert this danger?

I think there are two things we can offer: religion and art. Religion is subjective and should remain a private matter, but there is no way we can do without it. Art is public and remains the best way of developing our spiritual side: art, and especially music, is food for the soul and for the heart. I find it regrettable that the relationship between the two has deteriorated so badly. An astrologer I know – I am very interested in astrology – tells me to be less pessimistic, since history is a constant oscillation between day and night, up and down. But if you see war, lies, corruption, and all these things wherever you look, how can you not be pessimistic?

But hasn't that always been the case, the difference being that we have never been as well-informed as we are today?

So what? That doesn't make it any easier. Assuming you are right, that wouldn't be any consolation at all! And it strengthens my conviction that religion and art should be better taken care of, and that this should be done by way of education.

Are you religious?

Very! My mother showed me the way to religion. Not as something dogmatic. She was Jewish, she had me baptised a Lutheran as if it was the natural thing to do, but the way she brought me up was neither Jewish nor Christian. Her religious feeling was universal and consisted mainly of a sense of responsibility, ethical values, conscientiousness. We talked a lot about what is good and what is bad; that made an impression on me as a child. I absorbed it all. My parents loved me madly, maybe because it was a kind of miracle that they even had me under those conditions.

Were you aware of the fact that your mother gave birth to you secretly in the Jewish ghetto and that her father and her brothers were murdered by the Nazis at an early age?

No, not at all. For a long time my mother didn't tell me anything. She probably wanted to protect me, especially since anti-Semitism was a threat in the Stalinist dictatorship. My sister was deported to Siberia by the KGB. I myself hardly noticed these tragedies. I was too young and my parents wanted to shield me from them.

How did your childhood influence your musical career?

Decisively. My parents didn't want to entrust me to a babysitter, so they simply took me along to the theatre where my father rehearsed with the orchestra while my mother learned her opera roles. Even as a child, conducting and the world of the orchestra was like a second home to me. I could watch and ask how it all worked, I took a close look at everything and drank it all in. Even as a boy I knew what the orchestral manager's or the orchestra librarian's jobs were. Not to mention the ballet and operatic repertoire, which I soon knew by heart. This early insight into the workings of the whole business was particularly important, because it wasn't until much later that I stood in front of a real orchestra for the first time.

You even had your own orchestra!

Yes, a toy orchestra I made myself with buttons and needles. Instead of playing with tin soldiers I wanted to conduct my own orchestra. I used a pencil as a baton and turned the pages in the score without being able to read it. As soon as I was sick and confined to bed I wanted to conduct my orchestra. I was principal conductor, intendant und dramaturge. I was responsible for everything, even for the programme. I planned the season in advance, placing great importance on the programming. Today, I find it increasingly difficult to think up original concert programmes, probably because I started so early! I have lots of doubts. Unity or contrast? Thematic or chronological?

Nevertheless, in Lucerne I saw you conduct a daring programme: Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms, Schoenberg's A Survivor from Warsaw, Barber's Adagio and Varèse's Amériques.

Yes, these were four works connected with America, whether they were composed there, or inspired by America, and they deal with the modern world, comforting or horrifying us. The spiritual background is very strong.

You are one of the few conductors to place an orchestral song cycle in the middle of a programme instead of an instrumental concerto.

I love the human voice, and one of the things that frustrates me most is that I conduct opera so rarely. I am mainly an orchestral conductor, that's just the way it turned out, but it pains me that I haven't been more active in the theatre. My mother was an opera singer, after all! Orchestral songs are a way of satisfying my passionate love for song. That goes for choral works as well. I started out as a choir conductor. My first qualification was in choral conducting.

Compared with your happy childhood in Riga, studying in Leningrad seems to have been quite a difficult time.

In the beginning it was very difficult. I was 13 years old when my family moved to Leningrad because my father had taken up a position with the Leningrad Philharmonic alongside Mravinsky. I spoke very poor Russian, so my parents engaged a home teacher who spoke only Russian to me. At the conservatorium in Leningrad the demands were very high. The fact that my father was a well-known conductor and belonged to the elite made things difficult. I had to make my own name and went to lengths to avoid any impression of nepotism or favouritism. I strove for excellence, putting myself under constant pressure. Back then I learnt to work with the utmost discipline.

Is it true that you have never abandoned these high standards?

For sure. Since then I have always been under pressure and I have never ceased working hard. This may be why I don't sleep very well. I make high demands on myself, quality is a moral duty. I expect the same from my colleagues, who are also responsible for the musical happening. Stress is undoubtedly part of this uncompromising attitude.

And stress can have serious effects on your health ...

Yes, in 1996 I suffered two heart attacks. The first was while conducting a performance of La Bohème. I could feel that something was wrong, but I kept on conducting anyway. When I collapsed, unconscious, my right hand was still beating, so the musicians told me! Since then I have been more careful, particularly as far as food is concerned. I have never drunk and never smoked.

Your musicians worry about you nevertheless. They are particularly impressed by your commitment, not only at performances, but also in rehearsals.

Music is my life, I live for music. It has to be a one hundred per cent commitment. That is why it is impossible to reduce my time plan. I am responsible for my orchestra. As I said, I have had a special sense of responsibility since my childhood. That is why I insist on going on tour with my orchestra to Asia or America even though I don't cope with jetlag as well as I used to. I could go without guest conductorships, but when I receive invitations from the Berlin Philharmonic or from the Vienna Philharmonic, who I have known for decades – how can I say no? But when I am conducting, concentration and adrenalin are so strong that I forget all pain and signs of wear and tear. Last summer I suffered from shingles. Although it was extremely painful, I didn't cancel the tour. I suffered terribly before each concert, but as soon as I was standing on the podium again, as soon as I raised the baton, I didn't feel anything anymore.

And in any case, you are not one of those artists who cancel often.

My father once said to me: "You shouldn't cancel if you aren't really sick. Otherwise you will really get sick."

You once said of your teacher Yevgeny Mravinsky: "Everything he did, he did for music and not for himself." Is the same true of you?

I hope so. In any case he was a role model in this regard.

What did your father teach you?

An enormous amount. He was so warm-hearted. I am nowhere near as warm-hearted as my father. I am very emotional and I can suddenly explode, which I always regret. He gave me so much wonderful advice that I have never forgotten. On the temptation of collecting too many jobs, to which one is sometimes exposed at the beginning of a career, he said: "One good concert less is better than one more bad one". He justified his unsentimental performance of Tchaikovsky's symphonies by saying: "You can't add any sugar to honey."

You have alluded to the traumatic years you spent in Leningrad, but your home is still in Saint Petersburg, your wife Irina is Russian, your daughter is répétiteur at the Mariinsky Theatre, where your grand-daughter is assistant director. And you have never said anything clearly negative about the Soviet regime.

It was only the first period in Leningrad that I found depressing. I soon discovered that my fellow students were very friendly, and that the Russians were generally warm-hearted and obliging. I received a wonderful education. As far as the regime is concerned, a dictatorship can never meet with our approval, but if we are honest we must admit that it also had its advantages: the system had its good points and its bad points. The standard of education was extremely high, and art was cultivated at the highest level of achievement: with its athletes and musicians the regime wanted to show the world what Russia was capable of. We were not wealthy, but friendship and solidarity played an important role. It makes me a little sad to see that modern Russia is all about individualism and making money.

When you talk about people who played an important role in your life, you mention one word again and again: "warm-hearted". Isn't that a contradiction to the authority expected of a conductor?

Do you think if somebody is warm-hearted then he has no authority? Authority has nothing to do with despotism! One of my principles, which I owe to my father and which goes for all conductors, is: be yourself with the orchestra. You shouldn't try and change your personality. If you pretend to have authority, the orchestra will notice that it is artificial straight away, and that is even worse. Orchestral musicians notice straight away when a conductor is an egomaniac. And when a conductor thinks "now I have to show my authority", then it's all over. I work with people: the musicians are my colleagues not my subordinates. They are very sensitive, they have their egos, and they are artists who mustn't be offended. In the end it is they who play, not me. I do not produce any sound. The conductor's authority comes mainly from his technical competence: good preparation, technical ability, knowledge of the score and musicality are more important than dominance. And anyway, I hate conflict.

But it is the conductor who decides?

Yes, that is very important. When I appear in front of the orchestra, I have already thoroughly studied the score for many hours at home. The musicians expect the conductor to know just what he wants.

Isn't there sometimes a discrepancy between what you have prepared alone at your desk and the result with the orchestra?

When I am finished with interpretation, conception, sound modelling, I appear in front of the orchestra, where I compare and correct. One of the conductor's main tasks is to correct. If something goes wrong I am responsible and I make a fool of myself. I have to pass on my intentions to the musicians. That is a psychological process that has to do with inner energy. But knowing what you want doesn't just mean being stubborn. Sometimes an orchestral soloist or a group of instruments plays a phrase differently to the way I had imagined it. And if I like it, I keep it. And the next time I do it the same way.

Did you have this natural authority, which instils respect in the musicians, from the very beginning?

No, I had to work on it. The most important thing is that the orchestra must be able to sense in advance what I want. But how far in advance? That is a big question. That is a technical question. A mystical question.

Technical or mystic?

A technical mysticism. That comes with time. Are you a conductor or a leader? Every conductor is confronted with questions like this. The way the orchestra plays has a lot to do with self-regulation. If the conductor rushes, drags or makes a mistake you notice it straight away: the orchestra regulates itself. That is the most significant lesson Karajan taught me when I was his assistant: "The conductor must learn not to disturb the orchestra", he told me. That's why a conductor has to be able to forgo controlling everything, showing the orchestra everything. That doesn't help the musicians, it disturbs them. Orchestral musicians are not children! As a young conductor you are burning, you are impatient and you want to take control of everything yourself. In principle that is a good way to start. But as time goes on you become more thrifty. If you have too much enthusiasm and expressivity, you can regulate it; if you don't have enough, it becomes difficult. My father said in relation to this: "It is easier to shorten a pair of trousers that is too long than to lengthen a pair that is too short." It is important to maintain your vitality during this maturing process.

Do you regret starting so early?

No. I once confessed to the great conductor Kurt Sanderling, to whom I owe very much: "There are three works I am afraid of: Beethoven's sixth, Beethoven's ninth and Tchaikovsky's sixth". He answered: "I can understand that, those are perhaps the most difficult works. It was just the same for me, but one thing is for sure: the earlier you start, the earlier you will master them."

You still seem eager to learn.

Oh yes. There is always something new to learn. That's why I go to my colleagues' rehearsals as often as possible. It is so interesting and enriching to watch Haitink, Harnoncourt, Rattle, Muti, Barenboim, and many others, at work! It is very important to question not only tradition but also your own convictions.

I noticed this particularly in your rendering of Beethoven's nine symphonies that I experienced within the space of a week in Tokyo. I would have expected a decidedly more traditional, more romantic Beethoven from a conductor of the old school such as yourself. Your Beethoven, however, was fresh and lively, as if you had taken on board some elements of the new baroque school.

And how! It is true that I grew up in the old tradition of Furtwängler and Klemperer, but that was another era. Then came Harnoncourt and Brüggem, who had a great influence. You really have to keep an open mind, and historical performance practice has undoubtedly set new standards. As far as Beethoven goes, maybe I am offering a kind of synthesis? And one day something different will come along. It is a constant, living process. I once had a chat to Otto Klemperer's daughter: She told me that her father had struggled with Beethoven his whole life long! I also remember hearing a conversation between my teacher Rabinovich and George Szell: They had so many questions! You're never finished with Beethoven. And I can't say of what I do today: This is Beethoven!

How far in advance do you prepare for a such a cycle?

In the last two years I almost went crazy immersing myself in this music. I read a lot about the historical context and biography. When I read the *Heiligenstadt Testament* I am moved to tears. And afterwards I conduct differently. I have compared and studied all the various editions. It is a never-ending task: Jonathan Del Mar's critical edition is fantastic, but for every bar there are two or three question marks! On my desk there are five scores and seven volumes with footnotes. That is all very interesting, but eventually you have to stop and decide for yourself. And when accentuating details there is always the danger of losing sight of the whole, of the overarching structure.

That seems to be a pretty slight risk, given the special sense for architecture which is a characteristic of your conducting.

When the composer expresses feelings, he uses form to do so, otherwise everything will fall apart. That is enormously important. But this form has to remain lively.

Principal conductor of the Concertgebouw Orchestra and of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra at the same time – isn't that a lot?

I am used to looking after two orchestras: This was already the case when I was principal conductor in Oslo and Pittsburgh. And I have limited my guest appearances to just two further orchestras, the Berlin Philharmonic and the Vienna Philharmonic.

You are in such demand that you could have been content to be guest conductor wherever you liked, but you always preferred to be principal conductor. Can you explain that?

The guest conductor comes, conducts his concert, and disappears again. The principal conductor has to build up something lasting, not only artistically but also on a human level, he has to keep the collective in mind. The most wonderful experience was in Oslo, where I started from scratch and established a modern world-class orchestra.

Isn't that a thankless task?

What do you mean?

You are held responsible for the quality of the orchestra. Seiji Ozawa once told me that he felt under constant pressure in Boston because of this.

Yes, the pressure is enormous, but, as I said, I have been used to pressure since my childhood, and I have a great sense of responsibility. It is true that the principal conductor sometimes has to be remorseless, while a guest conductor will try to be well-liked so he will be invited back. But as principal conductor you develop an intimate relationship with the orchestra. And that is the only way I can put into practice what I did with my toys when I was a child. Selecting the programme, tours, recordings, engaging guest conductors and soloists, auditions for hiring new members of the orchestra. I even feel responsible for the librarian and the orchestral manager. This involves unpleasant situations, too, of course, for example having to tell a musician that he is a bit out of his depth. Moral issues like that have to be resolved in as human a way as possible. That can be very difficult.

You have two orchestras. Isn't that tricky? You might tend to prefer or favour one of the two.

That would be a grave error. I am like a father of two children. He loves each one in exactly the same way. It is impossible for parents to have a favourite. And also, my two orchestras have two specific personalities.

As far as the sound is concerned, or the people?

Both. The Concertgebouw has a soft and transparent sound, the Bavarian Radio has more power and weight. If the Concertgebouw plays with an edge, then it is because I have expressly asked it to. And it's the same when the BR Orchestra plays delicately. Their behaviour is also different. In Amsterdam they are polite and calm; In Munich lively and heated, and I don't try to alter this identity. Some may say that the musicians of the Bavarian Radio chat too much or are undisciplined, but that isn't the case: they are simply lively, they are on fire. Each orchestra might sound different in the same work, we concentrate only on music and quality. In the end the orchestra expects the conductor to give something. The musicians have to sense that I do it for pleasure.

Could you give us an example of sharing responsibility in European orchestras?

In America the conductor can choose the musicians he wants to play in a particular concert, which can be quite hurtful to those who are not chosen. In Munich and in Amsterdam the musicians themselves look after the staff roster, without my involvement: If I have two principal oboists, then I am not allowed to decide who I want in the *Eroica* and who in the *Pastoral*. That's the way it should be, for if the musicians had the impression that some are more favoured than others, then that would have catastrophic consequences for the relationship between orchestra and conductor. In the end it is about interpersonal relationships. It is the conductor's duty to make sure that each and every musician feels important.

What would be the greatest virtue in a conductor?

Honesty.

That is a human virtue, not a musical one.

Honesty is necessary both for humanity and for music.

Mariss Jansons was interviewed by Christian Merlin, musicologist and music critic of "Figaro", in November 2012 during the Japan tour of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra.

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