

## ENCOUNTERS

### **Manfred Honeck: 'Routine is the worst thing in a musician's life'**

Manfred Honeck (Nenzing, Austria, 1958) has been the Music Director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra since 2007, and has recently seen his contract extended until 2020. This will make him the conductor that has been with the orchestra for the longest period of time after William Steinberg. The orchestra has been able to maintain the loyalty of its sponsors, including legendary names such as Heinz, Carnegie or Mellon. So much so that this year it is breaking its own record in terms of securing private support – public support doesn't exceed 1.5%. At the same time, the orchestra serves the community through educational programmes, family concerts and performances on various stages. Honeck, who has been the Music Director of the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, the MDR Symphony Orchestra Leipzig and the Staatsoper Stuttgart, speaks to SCHERZO as Bruckner's *Fourth Symphony*, his new album with the Pittsburgh Symphony, comes out this month under the Recording References label.

### **You began your music career as a violinist and violist. Why did you decide to become a conductor?**

I would say that a conductor is someone who has a specific passion, a sort of fire in their heart urging them to be one. You either have it or you don't. But let's start by the beginning. When I was 15 years old I went to the New Year's Concert that Willi Boskovsky was conducting. My family wasn't particularly wealthy – in fact it was rather poor I would say. There were seven siblings and my parents didn't have much money to spare. So if we wanted to go to that concert, we had to stand at the very back of the Musikverein. Everyone was taller than me, so I couldn't really see much. But someone – an older man I recall – helped me to the front of the crowd, and what I saw impressed me so much that I thought to myself that I would become an orchestra musician and perhaps even a conductor. That old man never knew what his gesture meant to me. He never knew, doesn't know and will never know that he is part of my career, of my life. Had it not been for him, I could have become a frustrated person. I liked, and like, playing the violin, but I saw its limitations, I missed the colours of the woodwind instruments, the cellos, the percussion... All the excitement around the plenitude of making music, of seeing the canvases that lie within it, was very deeply rooted inside me.

### **But taking that step didn't come without risks...**

The conductor's profession is a dangerous one. If you want to become an orchestra conductor to be a chief, a dictator, an alpha male, if that is your motivation, then you are making a mistake. When I decided to audition for the Vienna Philharmonic in 1983, I swapped the violin for the viola in the space of five months, and I was lucky enough to be admitted. This was very important for me, as it is essential for a conductor to master an instrument. You then understand the attitude, the way of thinking and the quality of a professional musician. When I joined the orchestra I immediately realised that I was in the best possible school for a conductor. I got to know everyone, the good ones and the bad ones. In the eight years I was with the Vienna Philharmonic, I was able to learn all I needed. And learning from the baton of Carlos Kleiber, Bernstein, Karajan, Muti or Maazel was fascinating, as was learning about the mentality of an orchestra. Before then, I had played as the second violin of a string quartet, and my ear was trained to play chamber music. And then, when you join an orchestra, you realise that you know how to listen, what to do and how to do it. In the end, when you decide to become a conductor, that makes for a solid foundation. Conducting techniques, harmony, counterpoint and formal analysis are all very important but, in reality, my training is the sum of all those different approaches conductors I worked with have to making music, and the deep experience I gained through it.

### **Even so, you studied conducting.**

With Hans Swarowski and Karl Österreicher in Vienna.

### **An orthodox school, so to speak.**

They had a very clear vision of the technique and how to learn it. You can attain great technical perfection, and in that respect Maazel has been the best, but you must connect that technique to musicality, and for that Carlos Kleiber has been the greatest. You can't just dictate a certain pace, one two, one two, one two... To really make music you have to feel the phrase, its beginning and its end. And you have to feel it before it actually begins. Everything that your hand illustrates must be immediately present musically. Would you like me to give an example?

### **Go ahead.**

There is a tradition in Viennese waltz, in the Viennese way of thinking, called the rubato. Around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it was everywhere. Playing with rubato was the most important thing, and in order to do that you had to be very firm with the tempo. A Viennese waltz with no rubato is inconceivable. Therefore, your conducting technique must allow you to breathe at the same time. I learned that through my mentors, but I then had to develop my own conducting style in order for musicians to be able to play in what I thought was the right style, the right pace and, from there, understand rubato musically. And that is tremendously difficult, so much so that it has been one of the greatest challenges I have come up against in my conducting career. You see, overall conducting is easy, it is not that complicated. It is about good understanding and good delivery. That's it. Focusing on having everyone play together and understand one another is one of the simplest things in the world. But if you want to make music in a very special way all the time and not only during rehearsals, then the matter becomes very, very difficult. That is what I love about my profession.

### **You have taken it easy.**

The career of a conductor is a very special one. Some begin when they are only 20 years old and move at a tremendous speed. There are also those who take it easy and yet others who need time to get there. One example of the latter is Günter Wand, who had a late career and now, 13 years after his death, is one of the most admired conductors. I was so happy for him; it was fantastic that this happened even if it took him a while to succeed. I began my career when I was 33, and it has been in constant crescendo, for which I am very pleased. I had my anxieties and my goals as a conductor, but I am grateful that everything has progressed step by step, with each of those steps being more solid than the previous one. We know conductors tend to live long lives. I am now 56 and I love the idea of having good things to look forward to. I would rather have that than instant success. I aspire to standing in front of an orchestra and with a certain wisdom, knowledge and confidence about what I want to do with it.

### **Have you got a taste of this already in any of your recent experiences?**

I had an extraordinary experience when I made my debut with the Berlin Philharmonic two years ago. We performed Lutosławski's Concerto for Orchestra, which I really wanted to conduct. In 2016 I will be back with them. Had this happened ten years earlier, perhaps it would not have worked out. Those secrets that you must uncover, those conductor secrets, are very important. Routine is the worst thing in a musician's life: the day I fall into it I will quit. You must always remain up to date and engage the orchestra, bearing in mind that they are not your slaves, that you must display a natural authority and they must support you. Dictatorships à la Toscanini, Celibidache or the early Karajan make no sense nowadays. An orchestra conductor cannot be democratic in its craft, but they must bring the best out of every musician and at the same time

provide them with new challenges. If you get that, you have succeeded. People can get tired while rehearsing, but if the end result is good everyone will be happy. And achieving something special is not possible without good rehearsals.

### **Should you leave something for the concert too?**

Of course, but the foundation and the ideas are all built during rehearsals. It is through rehearsals that you will be able to deliver an entirely new musical experience on stage. I have a lot of respect for Kleiber and Celibidache for not wanting microphones in the hall as they made them nervous. Although it shouldn't really matter, it is understandable at certain points in time.

### **When and how did you get the offer from the Pittsburgh Symphony?**

When I left Stockholm, I had an offer from the Czech Philharmonic to become its Chief Conductor, replacing Zdeněk Mácal. My agent already had a contract on their desk, but it was in Czech. It was June and the contract needed to be translated: summer, holidays, slowness... the previous month I had made my debut with the Pittsburgh Philharmonic and after the concert, the people in charge asked me about my future plans. I said, half-jokingly, that my plans were to keep conducting, but they pushed me further and asked about 'my real plans'. I didn't really understand what they were talking about until they asked whether I had been in touch with any orchestra and I said I had but could not talk about it yet as I hadn't signed the contract. A few days later I got a phone call, we had a meeting and they offered me to become the Music Director of the Pittsburgh Symphony. I said I felt really honoured but there was a problem as there was already a contract on the table that only lacked my signature. They insisted, which troubled me as I loved and love the Czech Philharmonic. I said to them I would not sign the contract with the Czech Philharmonic quite yet, but before making a decision I would go back to Pittsburgh once more, as the first time can be great fun, but it is the second time that counts. I only had a free week two months later, and went back then. We got on really well and I said to my manager 'I have a feeling that I have to be in Pittsburgh, that this is a wonderful project; so let's propose to the Czech Philharmonic that I become its Principal Guest Conductor. I would understand it if they got upset, but this is how things are. And they did get upset as they had already announced I was coming even though the contract hadn't been signed yet. That made everything more problematic, but in the end they said they understood and accepted the situation. They offered me three weeks as Principal Guest Conductor, but I suggested five, and they were very happy about it.

### **And they ended up hiring Eliahu Inbal as principal conductor.**

Exactly.

### **What did you have to learn to lead an orchestra like the Pittsburgh Symphony?**

A US orchestra is very different from a European one, purely because the system itself is different: fundraising, financial challenges... I had to learn to take care of the orchestra in this respect too. But all has gone really well. I started in 2008 and in 2009 they asked me to extend my contract. I found that impressive, as I had only been there for a year. I accepted because I love the orchestra and the city, and I signed up to 2016. A year later, they offered yet another extension, and I have now signed until 2020. A long time perhaps... It is wonderful to appear as a guest conductor in orchestras around the world, but so is staying connected to an orchestra, and my relationship with this particular orchestra is very special.

### **It is also an orchestra that releases recordings. In a crisis period like this, it is quite something.**

It is important for the world to know what we are doing here, and how wonderful these musicians are. The time when recordings made money is long gone, and the big record companies have died as technology has progressed. At the same time, smaller labels can

do an excellent job. This orchestra had a great and world-renowned conductor, Fritz Reiner, and another one who was less known in Europe but very famous here, William Steinberg. But barely any of their recordings were with the Pittsburgh Philharmonic. That made me wonder: 'where are our Mahler, Dvořák or Beethoven?'. They were nowhere to be seen. By 1963 or 1965, every great orchestra except Pittsburgh had its own Beethoven cycle. Things changed progressively in the US. Contracts became more affordable and musicians realised they were not recording, so it was a good moment to propose it. We started with Mahler, then Strauss, Tchaikovsky – whom I would have rather recorded *ad hoc* than through a live recording. Our album with music from Dvořák and Janáček received a Grammy nomination. With Mahler's *Fourth* we won an ICMA... And now Bruckner's *Fourth* is being released. As an Austrian, it is not hard for anyone to imagine how much I like Mahler and Bruckner.

**Don't you think that, given the conductors that have led it – Klemperer, De Sabata, Reiner, Steinberg – the Pittsburgh Symphony has a certain European character?**

I think so, yes, we are more European in certain aspects thanks to these great conductors we have had, and this is why the orchestra's approach to music is very similar to that of European orchestras. When you listen to the St. Petersburg Philharmonic, the Czech Philharmonic, the Orchestre de Paris or the London Symphony, you are listening to very different orchestras. And what is worth exploring is how each of them reaches their own, specific sound within the broader general context. That is where we are too.

**Tell me about your Mahler.**

The orchestra and I often talk about tradition and style. My most important job with Mahler was ensuring that the orchestra was not playing exactly what was written in the score. I had to convince them that the second movement was a waltz that was played in Vienna in a very specific way at the time it was composed. Mahler included this kind of music in his symphony, and at the time this was considered trivial music. How could anyone include a polka or a march in a symphony? I think it is a shame to have forgotten this style and approach to music only a hundred years after it was composed. For example, in the second movement of the *First*, one can easily find the form and the spirit of Josef Strauss's waltzes, which Mahler clearly references. This is why it has to be played with rubato, just like the waltz it comes from, and in this respect, Mengelberg was absolutely right. But if you emphasise the theme too much, it goes against Mahler's identity. Mahler said that the most important thing in his music is what is not written. These are things I must tell every orchestra when I work with them. When I conducted the Vienna Symphony, we did Mahler's *First* and I had to explain that to them too. They understood it right away. And we have recorded an album with waltzes from Strauss.

**You like that quintessentially Viennese music...**

That is one of the reasons I started conducting concerts on Thanksgiving, one of the most important celebrations in the US. It has become a tradition for us to play music by the Strauss family, Nicolai, Brahms. The first years it was hard, but by the third year everyone knew exactly what to do.

**Before you were hired, a triumvirate led the orchestra: Andrew Davis, Yan-Pascal Tortelier and Marek Janowski. What do you think about this formula?**

Let me tell you that this is what happened to me with the MDR Leipzig. There were Marcello Viotti, Fabio Luisi and I. Here in Pittsburgh my three colleagues did an excellent job, but I don't like that formula. One of the most beautiful things about being a conductor is building a specific sound, an image and an identity, to the point where, when others listen, they can say that what they are hearing is the Pittsburgh Symphony and Manfred Honeck. If you only have three weeks to work with an orchestra, and right after that comes another conductor who has different ideas, followed by yet a third

person, it leads to great confusion. There has to be one artistic voice, a sound and an identity. People here need an icon, a leader. There is only one president, not three.

**The job of a conductor in the US implies liaising with sponsors and playing a role in the marketing of the orchestra. Do you enjoy that?**

Sometimes it is hard to understand. This happened with Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony. My contract says that the orchestra administration cannot oblige me to work on fundraising, and that I have freedom of choice in that respect. Very well. But the US orchestras rely on private sponsors and, if someone who gives ten million dollars requests having dinner with the musical director, you can't say no. There is therefore a certain logical and reasonable obligation, and sometimes I love doing it as that helps me stay in touch with people who work with and for the orchestra. In Europe, it is basically state funds that support orchestras. Here, 62.5% of our budget comes from donations and fundraising, 36% comes from ticket sales and 1.5% comes from public administrations. You can see the passion and affection from people who donate, and how they really want for music to stay in the city, how that gives meaning to their lives. I like that kind of passion, and it is good to share it. In Europe, things are changing. What is it like in Spain?

**The exact opposite to what you are describing, just like in the rest of Europe.**

By the way, I conducted the Galicia Symphony in Spain more than ten years ago. I thought it was a magnificent orchestra.

**It is. Tell me about your Beethoven and Janáček arrangements... Are these stepping stones towards a career as a composer?**

I would like to compose at some point, but that would take so much of my time. Perhaps in ten years... I have it in mind. Regarding the arrangements I have made with Thomas Ille, I would say they are about casting a new light on the great music. There is already an established tradition in this respect. Immediately after Haydn composed *The Creation*, hundreds of different versions of it appeared. The same is true of the arrangements of Mozart's operas, and those of Wagner. The reason is that there were no albums, and if you wanted to listen to music at home you needed a more reduced score, either for piano or for a small ensemble. Some of these arrangements make for wonderful music. The opposite is also the case. I listen to many string quartets and suddenly, with Op.18 No.4, I said to myself: 'this movement sounds like that of a symphony'. And indeed it is like a full symphony that the Adagio from Bruckner's *String Quartet* sounds, of which we have also produced an arrangement for strings. The same goes for Janáček's *Jenufa*, fantastic music that is connected to Dvořák - this is why it appears alongside its *Eighth* in our album -, and connected to traditional Czech music too. It has a Czech soul. We have just done a suite from *Elektra*, which I will conduct in Prague and Cologne. Suites already existed for *The Knight of the Rose* and *The Woman without a Shadow*, but not for *Elektra*, which is ironically probably the most interesting of Richard Strauss's operas from a musical point of view.

**Your repertoire also encompasses contemporary music.**

Oh yes. I am interested in contemporary music as music is not meant to be just a museum, but also needs to be connected to people, to life, to history and to the present moment. Style is a different question. I am very open, but the music must be good, as otherwise I do have a problem with it. Modern expression leads to thinking about something atonal or very experimental. No. Modern music is any music written nowadays with any type of resource, even when it is done through old techniques. If it is new, it is modern. We haven't succeeded in building a good relationship with the audience through modern music, and composers realise this and argue that they haven't been given the right to write from the heart. Remember the story of Darmstadt and the rows with those who didn't compose in a certain way, with Henze for example. Nowadays in the US, modern music is sometimes sort of romantic, and this is a trend we

are seeing pretty much everywhere and towards which people are very open. John Adams, Patrick Burke, Steven Stuck, Reza Valli... There is much good music being composed, and this is the case for Europe as well. It makes me very happy to see someone like Jörg Widmann, with such a personal language, being such a great composer yet writing things that are so fundamentally different to, for example, John Adams. I like his style and his profound way of thinking about music.

### **Why have you become an advocate for the music of Walter Braunfels?**

Braunfels is one of the most important opera composers of the 1920s. He was number one after Strauss, Furtwängler conducted his music... Until the Nazis arrived and, as he was half Jew, his music was abandoned, it was over. From 1933 he was banned from composing and playing. He was exiled and when he came back after the war he thought his music would begin to be played again. But at that point it was perceived as too traditional and old, so it wasn't played. It is a very sad and unfair story, because his music is fantastic, with a truly personal instrumentation and language. It is a great piece of the tradition that follows Bruckner's *Ninth*, just like Franz Schmidt. His *Great Mass* is extraordinary. We must look after those masterworks.

*Luis Suñén*

**Scherzo  
February 2015**