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MUSIC

Sound and fury

An inside look at Madison conductors Sandy Rucker-Tabachnick on Friday 01/04/2008

Credit: Jen Fridy



So what are conductors like, these lone figures who direct the music that can move us to ecstasy or tears? Public interest is heating up as more articles about them appear in the news and web chatter gets louder. There are rumblings that young conductors from Venezuela are going to electrify audiences as never before. One of them, 26-year old Gustavo Dudamel, the product of a youth orchestra system for underprivileged kids, is poised to take over when Esa-Pekka Salonen steps down from the L.A. Philharmonic.

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But the public's notion of a conductor hasn't changed much since Toscanini's heyday in the 1920s. Some of our local conductors agreed to shed light on what it's like to wield the baton in the 21st century.

At John and Barbara DeMain's home, Barbara leads me into their living room to a framed sheet of staff paper that hangs on the wall by the piano. It is the final page of Leonard Bernstein's opera A Quiet Place, whose premiere John conducted in 1983. The inscription from Bernstein's pencil scribbled over the staves reads, "Giovanni, you nailed it!"

"He loved to call John 'Giovanni,' the Italian for 'John,'" Barbara says.

"Bernstein and I disagreed on the tempo for the ending," says John, 63. "He thought that it couldn't be slow enough and I thought it should be faster."

John DeMain, music director and conductor of the Madison Symphony Orchestra, studied with Bernstein at Tanglewood in 1971 and landed the conducting job for the opera partly because he had the temperament to deal with a fussy composer. Composers tend to hold their work close, like a newborn baby, and conductors have to take it away gently. So they quibbled over the ending, but DeMain persuaded Bernstein, gently, that it should go faster, and the composer liked it.

"There are eight words in the conducting profession," says DeMain. "Louder, softer, faster, slower, higher, lower, longer, shorter. No joke. That's what we spend our time doing."

Besides balancing sound, American conductors have to balance their orchestra's budgets and figure out ways to keep them in the black. As the MSO's music director and artistic director of Opera Pacific and the Madison Opera, DeMain fund-raises, makes management decisions and scouts out new talent.

"This summer I went to Santa Fe to see what was going on in the world of scenery and who the

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next generation of singers might be. I have to build up relationships with performers before they become superstars so that when they get to that level, they will come and sing with us because they know us. With all this, I have to multitask and take my relaxation in fits and starts. My computer goes with me everywhere."

But all is not frantic. Studying the musical score is the quiet, meditative side to conducting. "By studying a score, you almost become the composer, and you come to the conclusion that this note in this measure is the only note that the composer could have chosen — inevitability," says DeMain.

For DeMain, the rewards of conducting are worth every swing of the baton. "When you have a Marc Fink [principal oboe], or a John Aley [principal trumpet], or a Suzanne Beia [co-concertmaster], or a Karl Lavine [principal cello], or any of these sophisticated musicians, they know what I'm after in the music by my face, my tempo choices and my arm motions, and the orchestra can go to a level that neither side individually had imagined."

When John runs to answer the phone, I think I've missed my chance to say goodbye and thank you. But as I back out of the driveway, I see him waving at me from his garden. His arm moves side-to-side like the pendulum of a metronome, always keeping a steady beat.

Beverly Taylor, assistant conductor of the Madison Symphony Orchestra, says that being an assistant is a bit like being the vice president.

"You're supposed to be able to cover the conductor if there are any emergencies during the course of the evening, so I have to prepare the works enough to step in. To learn the music, I start from scratch and try to hear it in my head as I take it apart and mark the score for cues and interesting things. If I don't have a lot of time, I'll listen to a recording, but usually I don't do that because I don't want someone else's impressions to limit my choices."

If you attend an MSO rehearsal, you might see Taylor sitting in the audience giving feedback to the conductor about the sound that's coming to the audience.

"The conductor is trained to hear what's happening on stage, but even with a wonderful hall, what you hear on stage is not exactly the same as what goes out," she says. "I sit in the averagely best seat in the hall and listen."

For many, Taylor's name is synonymous with singing. She is director of the Madison Symphony Chorus and professor of choral conducting at UW-Madison. A great choral tradition and a chance to conduct both choir and orchestra drew Taylor to Madison from Harvard, where she was associate director of choral activities for 17 years.

Conductors and martial artists usually aren't put in the same sentence, but when it comes to conducting 1,000 musicians or more, the difference between the two is only one of attire.

"With very large groups, the conductor's gestures have to be large and powerful, so the downbeats are like karate chops," says Taylor. This is why most conductors change their sweat-drenched clothes after conducting the first movement of Mahler's "Eighth Symphony."

"Some of the hardest conducting is fast, precise choral/orchestral," says Taylor. "It's like getting all the Rockettes to kick at the same time."

Taylor came into the conducting profession at 22, which she says is late.

"I did a little conducting in high school for school musicals, but at the time there were no female conductors, and conducting just didn't occur to me as an option. I went to the University of Delaware and took a double major in English and voice. In the choral program you had to study conducting, and I took to it very well. I was fearful at first, but then I said, 'I can do that. I can do that as well as he can. I can do that better than he can.'"

Women conductors are making waves in the U.S., and women who want to be conductors have more role models. The daring Sarah Caldwell, the late founder of the Opera Company of Boston, and the refreshing Marin Alsop, who conducts the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, have added chic to the baton.

Andrew Sewell, music director and conductor of the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, is a persuasive negotiator.

"Being a conductor is a public-relations exercise," says Sewell, 44. "You have to convince a group of musicians, who feel as strongly about the music as you do, that your interpretation is good. Not only that, you have to convince them that you believe in your interpretation."

Sewell, a native of New Zealand, came to the U.S. for his conducting education. Since higher education in New Zealand didn't offer conducting degrees at the time, Sewell made his way to the University of Michigan.



"Teaching conducting is very specific, and it's universal," says Sewell. "The right hand always keeps the beat, while the left hand is for expression. Conductors show music through their bodies, not through words."

Some conductors take dance lessons to learn how to propel an orchestra forward and then stop it on a dime.

In our phone interview, Sewell and I did a little score study, an activity that conductors spend much of their lives on. We compared notes on the score to Mozart's "Symphony No. 39 in E-flat Major," which he would conduct in the WCO's opening concert for the 2007-08 season. Sewell got his hands on a good edition that was worked over by scholars who studied Mozart's original autograph, compared it to a first copy and then to a second engraving. Through this process, the idea is that the symphony, as Mozart intended it in 1788, will emerge like an island out of the mist.

Sewell is also conductor of the Wichita Symphony Orchestra. He falls in line with most conductors today, who oversee more than one orchestra and travel across state and international lines to do their jobs.

"Having more than one orchestra isn't always planned," says Sewell. "Sometimes, it's just how the cards fall, but it adds variety to the job. I have a symphony orchestra and a chamber orchestra, and both have separate and unique repertoire."

As a child, Sewell wanted to play all the instruments in the orchestra, but he settled on the violin as his major orchestral instrument and the piano as his main instrument through high school. It was during the piano exams in elementary school that he was smitten with conducting.

"During the aural, theory and sight-reading exams, I found that I enjoyed beating time while the examiner played music."

There were other perks to his profession. Sewell met his wife, Mary, an accomplished violinist, while they were playing in an orchestra together. Their children, Anna, Lydia and Alistair, are all musicians, but none have been bitten by the conducting bug — yet.

Marvin Rabin, founding conductor of the Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestras, knows about the unique insights that children bring to great music.

"It's wonderful to hear the New York Philharmonic play Beethoven's 'Ninth Symphony,' but they've probably played it a thousand times," says Rabin. "When a youth orchestra plays it, what they have to say about it is special."

A nurturing attitude is the essential ingredient for youth orchestra conductors.

"They have to love the kids, believe in their potential, know where they are musically and not expect the impossible, and structure their sights six months out," says Rabin.

This is a hefty list of requirements, and not all conductors are up for it. "I sat in on a youth orchestra rehearsal in Boston years ago, and when one of the flutists made a mistake, the conductor stopped the orchestra, spat on the floor and rubbed his shoe in it and said, 'That's what I think of you.' I wanted to kill him."

At 91, Rabin is soft-spoken and often closes his eyes to think before answering questions about his life in music.

"I went to Transylvania College in Kentucky," he says. "It didn't have a music program then, but they wanted a viola player for their ensembles. I always played the viola because my mother appreciated great music."

With a history/political science degree and a pilot's license, music wasn't an obvious career choice for Rabin, but he backed into it and is awfully glad he did.

"In the late 1930s, I couldn't get a job as a history teacher in small towns because I was Jewish. I couldn't get a job as a history teacher in big towns because I didn't have enough experience. In World War II, I trained pilots in Alabama, but after the war I couldn't get a job as a commercial pilot because the airline unions wouldn't allow companies to hire Jews. It was Roosevelt who helped me out in 1941 when he called up the National Guard and Kentucky was left with hardly any music teachers. I had gathered enough music credits at the University of Kentucky to have a minor in music, and in those days you could teach your minor. I was asked to teach in Louisville, so off I went. I started playing with the Louisville Symphony, and I played in quartets in Alabama." One thing led to another.

Although he would do graduate work in music at Eastman School of Music and the University of Illinois, Rabin started conducting without conducting classes and says he has about 150 tapes of various conductors that he has watched over the years. He modeled his gestures after

his favorites.

As founding conductor of the Boston Youth Symphony Orchestras, Rabin was recently honored in its 50th year anniversary celebration. A former student wrote, "No words can describe what it was like to be a member of BYSO with Dr. Rabin as your conductor. It was like being zapped by a baton which threw out electric shocks, such was the power of his conducting."

Rabin stepped down as conductor of WYSO in 1972. He says his successor, James Smith, is one of the finest conductors he's ever known.

Since his retirement as professor of music at UW-Madison, Rabin has worked to bring the art of string playing to inner-city kids in Milwaukee and keeps up with students who once came under the spell of his electrifying baton.

These are some of our conductors, the hardy musicians whom orchestras can lean on. Besides symphony orchestras, they all have a venue that speaks to their unique abilities. For John DeMain it's the visual splendor of opera, and for Beverly Taylor it's the organic sound of choirs. For Andrew Sewell it's the charm of chamber music, and for Marvin Rabin it's the refreshing perspective of youth.

But their goals are the same: to brandish the baton that brings the composer's message that brings the notes to life that open the treasures of music.

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