

Are you busy this evening?

If not, can you conduct our orchestra? Jessica Duchon on the musical careers boosted by a star's failure to show

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It's the stuff of musicians' dreams. The great X breaks his leg and the youthful Y appears in his place, promptly to be hailed as a bright new star. And it can really happen - just ask the Bulgarian mezzo-soprano Vesselina Kasarova or Sakari Oramo, Simon Rattle's successor at the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. Kasarova, currently starring in *La Clemenza di Tito* at the Royal Opera House, made her mark by replacing Marilyn Horne at short notice in Salzburg in 1991; Oramo, then a Finnish orchestra leader, picked up the baton to cover for a sick maestro in 1993 to find himself transformed permanently from violinist to conductor.

On Saturday the Swiss-born pianist Andreas Haefliger will get his chance to raise his profile when he performs Mozart's *Concerto in A major K488* with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and conductor Riccardo Chailly at the Royal Festival Hall in London. He is replacing Maria Joao Pires, one of the most sought-after pianists on the international circuit.

Haefliger, 37, has less to prove than many of his peers. He is a serious, strong-minded musician with an established international career and has worked successfully with the Concertgebouw before. The repertoire suits him well, and he says that he had enough notice of the event to regard it as just another date in the diary.

"Chailly and the Concertgebouw were something I was hoping to fit into my schedule anyway," Haefliger says, "though the opportunity has arisen a little sooner than I thought." For all that, he could still gain much glory if he proves himself a worthy replacement for Pires.

Today's concert promoters are increasingly reluctant to take a chance on newcomers, however. The more dramatic and high-profile the cancellation, the harder their task becomes and the greater the danger of damaging the precious relationship with their audience.

A couple of years ago, Cecilia Bartoli, probably the world's best-loved mezzo-soprano, suddenly pulled out of a London Philharmonic fundraising gala concert at Glyndebourne, and the LPO's chief executive, Serge Dorny, had just 48 hours to sort out a replacement and inform 1,000 audience members. The singers Thomas Allen and Susan Graham were drafted in; meanwhile, the LPO office telephoned every single ticket holder. "People were disappointed, but they were grateful to have been personally contacted," says Dorny, "and only one person asked to exchange the ticket."

He emphasises that cancellations are usually made with good reason. "Nobody cancels a concert with pleasure - it's inconvenient for everyone."

That's something of an understatement. Last Friday the Alban Berg Quartet, one of the world's top string ensembles, had to cancel Saturday's sold-out concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall because one of the violinists had caught pneumonia. No quartet of the same calibre was available, and box-office staff were left with less than 36 hours to contact the holders of 1,000 tickets.

But there is a small number of top-notch musicians who have earned themselves reputations as notorious cancellers. The pianists Sviatoslav Richter and Arturo Benedetti Michel-angeli, both of whom died in the 90s, achieved the status of legends primarily for their artistry but also partly because of the mystique surrounding their frequent non-appearances on stage. No one who bought a ticket for their concerts could be sure that they would actually hear them play.

Pianist Martha Argerich has long-term health problems that have made her an irregular recitalist. When she did give a concert in London in March 1999, she had been absent from the stage for a year - and got rave reviews. But only the greatest musicians can cancel frequently and get away with it. "It's quite courageous of Maria [Joao Pires] to cancel," says Haefliger. "I think it's a wonderful thing that she can decide to give herself some time to replenish the batteries." According to Pires's agent, she is taking a year's break from performing.

Younger musicians setting out to increase their mystique with a few cancellations are asking for trouble, however. "In the case of Argerich, people will take the risk because she's such a brilliant pianist and everyone loves her," says Jilly Clarke, an artist manager with the musical agency Askonas Holt. "But if a younger artist who isn't well known starts messing promoters around, it can take years for them to recover from the bad reputation that results. They get dropped like hot bricks."

In 1997, a young Russian competition winner was booked for a UK tour. He refused to commit himself totally. The agents rang up British pianist Lucy Parham and asked her to be on standby for six months in case he pulled out, which he finally did, with one month's notice. Parham did the tour; the Russian hasn't been asked back.

"Up to a point you are totally dispensable," says Parham wryly. "Unless you are an Argerich or a Richter, there are innumerable pianists who can replace you. There's less work around now than 10 years ago, so people are very loath to give up a date and pass it on to a colleague, who may then do better with the orchestra and be invited back instead of you. "I have played with horrible flu," Parham continues. "Another time I'd hurt my foot and could hardly move. I went on to the platform wearing a long evening dress, one shoe and one trainer."

As for agreeing to step into another musician's shoes, the young British pianist Leon McCawley says, "It's all about decision making and risk taking." A popular figure with British audiences after coming second in the 1993 Leeds piano competition, aged only 19, McCawley has been offered opportunities that could well have put him on the fast track to stardom. "I've had some nice experiences taking over cancellations. But once I was asked to step in for Richard Goode at the Proms at one week's notice with a Mozart concerto I'd never done and I decided it was too much of a risk."

About five years ago, a television broadcast of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto in Coventry cathedral came McCawley's way at the last moment. He turned it down. A lost opportunity? Perhaps.

Clarke says she and fellow agents have to be very careful about offering young artists replacement dates. "We have a huge responsibility to put them up for things if we think they're up to it; but, if they're not ready, or a particular audience is too demanding, we shouldn't suggest them. Doing the wrong thing at the wrong time can destroy someone."

For most young musicians, last-minute dates present an impossible dilemma. Play well and you can kick-start your career; accept something too risky and you may well end up playing Russian roulette with your future.

Andreas Haefliger plays the Royal Festival Hall, London SE1 (0171-960 4242), on Saturday, with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and conductor Riccardo Chailly.