

## **The young and the restless**

**A new generation of conductors is taking Europe by storm.**

**Jessica Duchen outlines the trials and triumphs that lie ahead in the pressure cooker of the pit**

**Published: 08 November 2004**

The idea of a conductor wielding a fierce baton over a cowering symphony orchestra evokes a somewhat senior presence, with a shock of white hair, or at least a substantial bald patch, to lend authority. But recently a remarkable number of the plum conducting posts in the UK, indeed in the world, have been taken over by fresh-faced maestri under the age of 30. Now the Donatella Flick Conducting Competition, held in London every two years, is getting ready to discover the latest potential addition to this extraordinary roster at its Barbican final on 17 November. The lucky winner will benefit from an unusual prize: two years as assistant conductor to the London Symphony Orchestra.

At the moment, the worldwide picture of successful young conductors is singularly impressive. A few weeks ago Daniel Harding, 29, a protégé of Sir Simon Rattle and already a highly respected figure, was appointed principal guest conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra. Vladimir Jurowski was appointed music director at Glyndebourne while still in his twenties; now 32 and principal guest conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, he is being hailed as "the next Gergiev". Philippe Jordan, 29, is principal conductor of the Graz Philharmonic and has conducted opera at the Salzburg Festival and Covent Garden to impressive reviews. Ilan Volkov, 28, has been installed as chief conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra for two years; and Mikko Franck is music director of the Finnish National Opera at only 25.

It's a welcome regeneration for a profession that is often seen as stultifyingly mired in venerability. But is there now an inordinate focus on youthfulness for its own sake that could be doing some young conductors more harm than good? In August, the 26-year-old Tugan Sokhiev crashed abruptly out of his post as principal conductor of Welsh National Opera, amid complaints from the chorus about his lack of experience. It was a sign of exactly how much can go wrong, and how quickly. To stand an under-experienced conductor in front of a high-profile orchestra or opera company means playing for very high stakes - and one critic called Sokhiev's appointment "a gamble that did not pay off".

It's catch-22: conductors cannot conduct without experience, but they cannot gain that experience without conducting. That is of course nothing new in this peculiar profession; but the pressure to make it to the top very young is certainly

increasing in a society generally fixated on youth. Hugh Macdonald, director of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, comments: "There is always a race to find the next prodigy conductor, and that can be damaging if they are thrown into the limelight before they can handle it. For every young conductor who makes it, there are several more who have been pushed too early."

The Russian conductor Semyon Bychkov is well placed to cast perspective on these challenges, having successfully navigated many of them himself. Now 52, he is principal conductor of the Westdeutscher Rundfunk Orchester; when he first left the Soviet Union for New York, he enrolled at the Mannes College of Music, where a powerful agent soon spotted him at the helm of a student ensemble. "He wanted to send me to the Philadelphia Orchestra," Bychkov remembers. "But I was 26. What was the point of my going to such a famous orchestra to conduct a Mahler symphony for the first time? I wouldn't know the problems in the piece, but the orchestra would already know the solutions! What would I say to them? So I refused. You have to earn the right to stand in front of your colleagues and direct them."

However, while young conductors often do face inappropriate demands too early, they can also have to deal with an equally damaging prejudice against their youth. "There's a real stigma attached to being a young conductor," Volkov exclaims. "People who are not in music are always saying to me, 'You're so young to conduct.' They think you have to be 50 to stand on the podium!" Bychkov agrees that the pressure to pace oneself can go too far: "When I was studying at the Leningrad Conservatory, one professor said: 'You must not touch Mozart's Symphony No 40 until you are 50 years old.' I put up my hand and said: 'What if I don't live to be 50?'"

In light of all this, the post of "assistant conductor" is perhaps the most important stepping-stone in the business. It is one of the best ways in which a budding maestro can learn the trade, without being over-exposed to the astronomical expectations of famous orchestras and hard-to-please critics. Effectively it is an apprenticeship: working with an established conductor, absorbing rehearsal techniques and asking as many questions as possible - and taking over at short notice if the maestro goes off sick. Assistantships have stood Harding and Volkov in good stead: Harding was assistant to Rattle at the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Claudio Abbado at the Berlin Philharmonic, and Volkov to Seiji Ozawa at the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

The young French conductor Christophe Mangou scooped the Donatella Flick prize aged 26 in 2002 and has in consequence been assistant conductor to the LSO for the past two years. He has found the experience priceless. "I've learnt an incredible amount," he enthuses. "The other day I was able to ask Pierre Boulez all sorts of questions about Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and it was absolutely phenomenal. Also I've learned that it's important in rehearsals to make people laugh occasionally, especially if the orchestra is tired or stressed. When Boulez was rehearsing the LSO in an extremely difficult piece of his own, he sometimes told funny stories - that made a real difference to the orchestra's energy."

Volkov in Scotland has been through a learning process too; as Hugh Macdonald puts it, "We've learnt together how to let him do major projects

without pushing too hard." Volkov's mature attitude is telling in itself: "As in any job, the results can't be the best every time," he says. "But even if one week goes badly, the next will be different. When a concert starts, if you know how to lead you can carry the performance, and the musicians, even if they did not like the rehearsals, will appreciate that."

When it comes to the crunch, even the most hardened orchestras respond not to a conductor's age or lack of it, but to an elusive quality, be it natural leadership, charisma or absolute musical conviction, that simply cannot be taught. Patrick Harrild, chairman and tuba of the London Symphony Orchestra, is on the jury of the Donatella Flick Competition. He agrees that to a considerable extent conductors are born and not made. "We're looking at the candidates' potential," he explains. "They must know the music thoroughly and they must have the ability to convey their ideas through body language. But to lift the notes off the page and energise the orchestra requires a special inborn combination of musicianship and personality. That quality is very intangible.

"I think one can easily become muddled by the obsession with age, at both ends of the spectrum. What we need is real talent. Daniel Harding may be young, but he's not too young to be our principal guest conductor because he's talented and has taken the orchestra by storm. Such talent has to be found and nurtured. We need good conductors - let them come forward!"

*The Donatella Flick Conducting Competition is at the Royal Academy of Music, London NW1 and the Barbican, London EC2, 15-17 November*