

Bernard Haitink: A maestro passes on his baton to the next generation

It's tough to make it as a conductor – so when 20 young stars were asked to perform for the great Bernard Haitink, the pressure was on.

Jessica Duchon, Saturday 23 June 2012

It's a training experience like no other. Twenty of the world's brightest young conductors have come to the Lucerne Festival, Switzerland, hoping to be chosen for a masterclass with Bernard Haitink. Of those 20, seven make the final cut. Their task: in front of the veteran Dutch maestro and a fascinated public, they must conduct the Lucerne Festival Orchestra.

There, though, any resemblance to *The Apprentice* ends. This is not a competition and it's anything but cut-throat. All 20 twentysomethings, selected from 150 applicants, listen to the course; they all have a chance to conduct, not just the final seven. It is like Hogwarts for conductors, with Haitink, a legend in his own lifetime, serving as benevolent Dumbledore to the lot.

"I supervise them, give them my ideas and see if it suits them and if it helps them," Haitink, 83, remarks with characteristic self-deprecation. "I can't work miracles. But there are so many wrong ideas about this profession that it doesn't do any harm when a conductor who has a certain amount of experience tries to share it with younger people. It takes an enormous amount of energy, but I enjoy it."

Would-be conductors are at a disadvantage compared to instrumentalists: they can't practise easily because their instrument consists of 50-80 highly trained humans. That gives this course extra value even before Haitink has said a word.

Each participant has prepared four set works: Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony, Schumann's *Manfred* Overture, the first movement of

Bruckner's Symphony No 7 and Ravel's Mother Goose Suite. The chosen seven each have half an hour per day to strut their stuff.

"Maestro Haitink works with each of us as an individual, trying to bring out the best in everyone," says Gad Kadosh, 27, a French-Israeli conductor currently working as a vocal coach at the Theater für Niedersachsen, Hildesheim. "

Haitink's techniques certainly keep the youngsters on their toes. Usually (to generalise) a conductor gives the beat with his/her right hand, using the left to aid direction and amplify expression. Having decided that Anton Torbeev is using his left hand to excess, Haitink grabs his wrist in mid flow: the Russian student must finish the piece with his right hand alone. Then, with Kadosh, Haitink does the opposite, asking him to conduct only with his left; the result sounds marvellous, apparently to Kadosh's own surprise. Another student is startled when Haitink removes the score from under his nose halfway through a piece: he must continue from memory. "I could see that you know it," Haitink explains afterwards. "Looking at the score was distracting you. Have confidence!"

In the most common traps, the practicality of Haitink's advice proves its worth. "Not so holy," he says, stopping a student after a few phrases of Bruckner. The massive Seventh Symphony's opening inspires too much reverence; if the tempi slouch, the energy will soon flag. Haitink gently encourages him to think less of the heavens and more of the mountains. He takes the baton and demonstrates: at once the sound changes, the music becoming supple and vivid. "It's a long symphony," he points out. "Don't make the brass play full out even more than they are – they will be exhausted halfway through."

Then there's a recurrent question about focusing movement. "Don't move so much," Haitink exhorts a student whose flailing limbs are not helping the orchestra: a particular flute is late every time. "Concentrate the energy."

Isn't it alarming to feel Haitink's eye upon your every move? "Not at all," declares Zoi Tsokanou from Greece, the only girl in the top seven. "His energy is all about, 'let's make lovely music'. He gives us a lot of trust and a lot of love – there's no need to be afraid." Her animation and assurance in the Schumann overture inspire the orchestra into giving her a spontaneous round of applause.

Jonathan Mann, from the UK, says the course has been "one of the most exciting experiences of my life so far". He has already started his own orchestra, the Cardiff Sinfonietta. What does he feel he's learning here?

"Maestro Haitink mentioned that sometimes the simple things are the hardest to do," he says. "Holding a pause a little longer or getting a really quiet sound from the orchestra – can make the difference between a good performance and a great one."

Another Brit, Duncan Ward, at 22 years old the youngest in the final 20, is asked to run through the Schumann one afternoon. Having studied with (among others) Ravi Shankar in California, Ward especially enjoys Haitink's anecdotes about the great conductors of the past, such as Bruno Walter and Willem Mengelberg: "The Indian tradition passes everything down aurally from guru to pupil," he points out. "This is a little similar – the sense of a contact point with those great figures is fabulous."

The summer season of the Lucerne Festival opens on 8 August including further conducting masterclasses(www.lucernefestival.ch); Bernard Haitink conducts the Vienna Philharmonic on tour this summer and will be at the Proms and in Lucerne in September.