

# Musically Speaking

## Lorin Maazel on giving voice to music

BY TODD COCHRAN

**The concert hall** has darkened. An oboist sets the intonation, a single sound, a lone beacon. Small talk dims to quiet. Woodwinds and the brass ready their embouchures while the percussionists settle, awaiting the downbeat. The bows prepare to ride across the strings and fingers to come down on the keyboard. The baton rises in the conductor's palm, the room belongs to Maestro Lorin Maazel.

Maazel is a master interpreter whose pursuit is to capture the composer's intention, and then lend the storytelling an expressive, compassionate voice. Dynamics, clarity and vivid interpretation distinguish his work. Often reflective and assertive at the same time, the music Maazel makes has everything to do with an in-the-moment present time experience. His calling is to frequent the burrows of the big ideas – the masterpieces of the classical concert tradition are his staple – and he knows the spirit very well, having established his reputation in the most demanding cities of Europe and America.

Maazel has held positions as artistic director of The Deutsche Opera Berlin (1965-1971), music director of the Cleveland Orchestra (1972-1982), general manager of the Vienna State Opera (1982-1984), music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony (1988-1996), and music director of the elite Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (through 2002).

Enter Autumn 2002, when Maestro Lorin Maazel took the stage as the new conductor and music director of the New York Philharmonic – the oldest, most prestigious and established symphonic orchestra in the world. His vision will be a continuum of great leaders, who, as equal parts high artist

and exhibitionist, represent the authentically passionate exponents of the genre. After all, Gustav Mahler, Arturo Toscanini, Leonard Bernstein, Pierre Boulez, Zubin Mehta were there. Under Maazel's direction, the band will continue to explore the gems of the standard repertoire, while embracing 21st-century post modernity with the mandate of commissioning and premiering new music.

Maazel is a man of language and sound – whether expressed in the world of music or verbal conversation. During a telephone conversation from his home in Munich, where he's tucked away composing, Maazel says: "I believe in languages and communication with people."

On the compositional front, he enthuses: "I'm currently composing an opera based on George Orwell's *1984*. Amazingly, the rights were available and I was able to obtain them! It should be finished in a couple of years' time... I've been working on the score for about a year and a half, so it's an ongoing project."

*Todd Cochran:* With a large scale symphonic piece the elements are complex: splashy sounds that grab the ears, themes that ask for exploration, movement and rhythms that encourage us to escape; the mind is invited to travel and dream. There are many strategies for emotional interpretation, what is central to the conductor portraying the core message of a work?

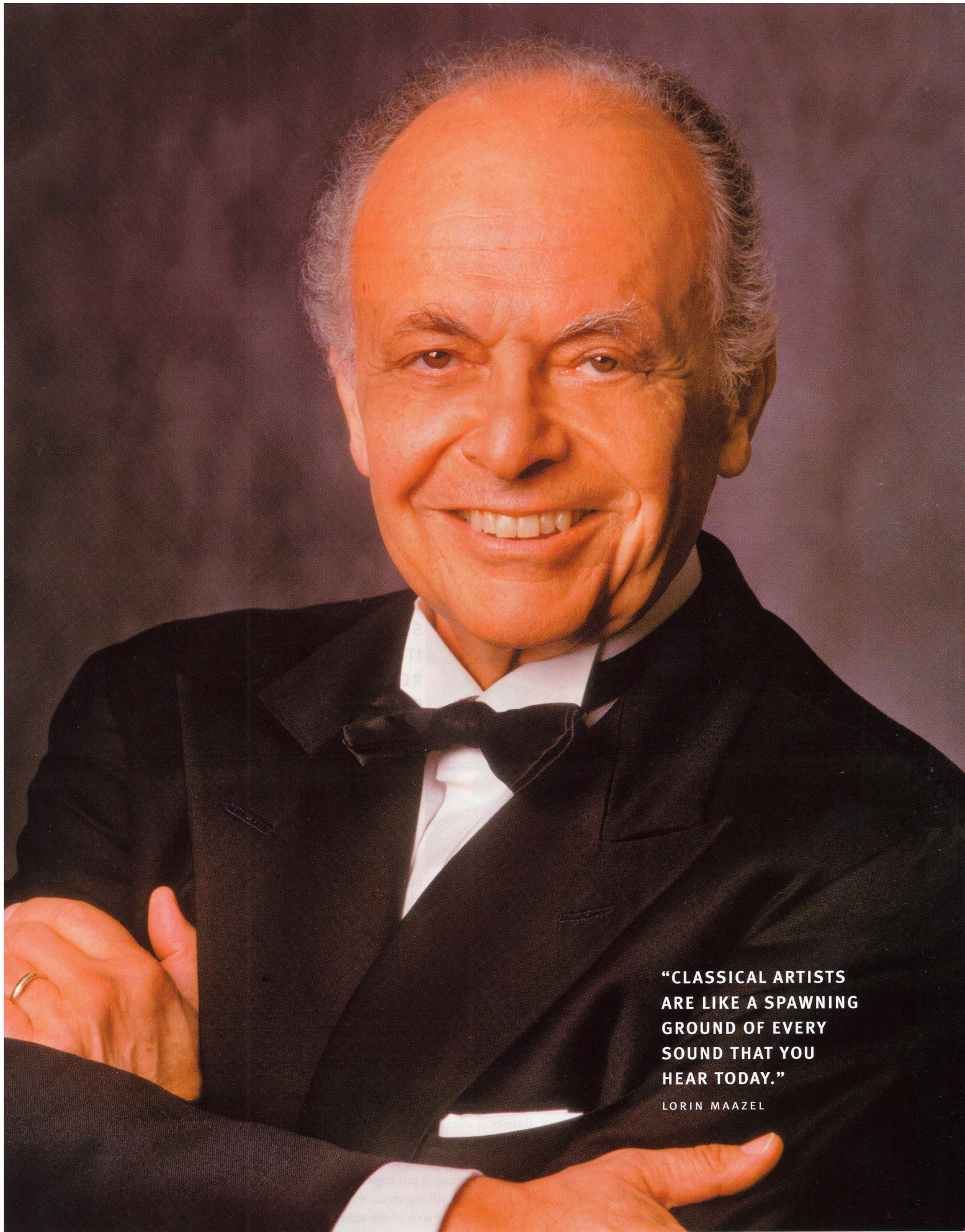
*Lorin Maazel:* In the final analysis, it's your instinct which guides you. You can analyse all you want, but it's the instinct. If you're lucky, that can move you closer to what is was the composer was thinking when they put down those notes, and not other notes. And since I compose myself, I know that you sit in

front of a page and your instinct is telling you what to write. So if you're an interpreter, you try to get closer to the same kind of instinct that moved the composer to write those notes in the first place. It sounds pretty empirical, the approach, but basically what is music in the first place but the ultimate exercise in empiricism? I mean if you're going to just write fugues, that's fine, you're just learning the nuts and bolts. But it's what you do with it, and that's where JS Bach was so fabulous. He showed that you could deal with a form and imbue it with music, and that music – of course – comes from one's instinct, from one's musical talent, and nothing else.

*TC:* I like what you said about how instinct guides and moves you closer to the meaning of the notes. There are no fixed rules in great art. Today, people throughout the world have been acculturated by the model of the symphonic orchestra, embracing and celebrating the tradition, and continuing the ritual. Art music clearly has an essential function in world society. How does a modern orchestra's tone become conversational?

*LM:* Again, it's the context in which that tone is heard. One shouldn't forget that classical music has crept into almost every activity you can imagine. I was watching an ice skating event and counted 20 classical pieces strung together. I watched the circus and counted 35 classical pieces that were played during the show. It's everywhere. If you go to the movies and listen to a good movie score, the number of pieces that are plagiarised (*laughing*) – I happen to believe in plagiarism, I think it's great! – in the last mega-film I saw I counted 43 quotes. And of course everyone knows these scores by heart. Almost all





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of the pop artists' arrangers have been classically trained. So classical artists are like a spawning ground of every sound you hear today. People should recognise our place, and I think they do. However, they're not always prepared to hear the real thing. When my kids go to see a Disney movie I say, 'How would you like to read the real thing?' So I take Rudyard Kipling down from the shelf and they say (*laughing*) 'Wow, we really like the original much better than the Disney version.' And I say well, that's really what it's all about, but you wouldn't have heard the story were it not for Disney. So they [Disney] say something for us after all!

*TC:* Born in Paris, growing up in America, performing and conducting throughout the world, you've travelled extensively. During the course of your

it'll be they who will represent music and carry the torch. And young people relate to young people, so the young performers will bring in a lot of young people to watch them.

*TC:* How has your own composing heightened your empathy for the great masterpieces?



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*LM:* Well, I've developed an amazing additional respect for some of the masters who put

career as a violinist, conductor, composer – musician, conceptionaliser, leader – you've had the opportunity to observe shifts in the responses and tastes of audiences. What insight can you share about the process of bringing new listeners to the experience?

*LM:* That's being done by the various outreach programmes, the park concerts, and there are gigantic numbers of people who buy CDs to listen to classical music. Everywhere I go, I see more and more young faces, especially in Europe and the Orient. In fact, it seems older people are less interested, and younger people are more interested. It depends on which culture you're talking about. The young artists who are coming forth from the conservatories are so stunningly good,

to paper a gigantic number of notes in their lifetime – just the sheer energy of it is remarkable. For example, Richard Strauss: how did he do it? Astonishing. It takes time to write all of those notes. Inspiration is something of another question. The quality of most of his music is amazing. I'm developing an even greater respect for these masters as I struggle to write a tenth of the number of notes they managed. I've noticed that composing also requires a great deal of technique, which escapes the untutored listener or even the 'under-skilled' performer, who may know a great deal about performing, but almost nothing about how music is put together.

*TC:* You're talking about the elements and the arch of the structure.

*LM:* It's astonishing how much good music one can write by simply relying a great deal on technique. There are quite a few performers who haven't the vaguest idea of how a fugue is really written, having had little, or no, harmonic training. This is depressing at times. I think that a good deal of your interpretation relies upon your ability to analyse music intelligently.

*TC:* How did you begin studying both violin and conducting at such an early age, five years old? Undoubtedly your parents, or someone special, had a great deal of foresight, and perhaps also their own well-formed love of music.

*LM:* My father was an actor, he'd studied some music. But basically he just had the intuition that I might have a good musical talent, and indeed I did... I was brought to a professional musician

under whose guidance I blossomed and matured.

*TC:* The level of a teacher's knowledge makes so much difference to the young student during the critical formulative period. Great teachers live with us

in permanence.

You began conducting on major concert stages as a teenager. Describe giving yourself to the ritual of performance.

*LM:* At the time, it was just something that I did and I assumed every child made music, conducted orchestras, played the violin. Later I was amazed that this was not the case. It was something that was completely natural to me ■

The New York Philharmonic with Maestro Lorin Maazel is on 28-29 Oct at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

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