

"A Need To Talk, Musically Speaking!" Maestro Lorin Maazel

by Todd Cochran

The concert hall has darkened. An oboist sets the intonation, a single sound, a lone beacon. Small talk dims to quiet. Veiled perfumes and colognes waif through the air. Anticipation heightens. 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 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. Maazel's 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.

Enter Autumn 2002, when Lorin Maazel takes the stage as the new conductor and music director of the New York Philharmonic – which is 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. *Attuned to the future, under Maazel's direction the band will continue to imaginatively explore the gems of the standard repertoire while embracing 21st century post modernity with the mandate of commissioning and premiering new music.*

Maestro Maazel is a man of language – sound – whether expressed in the world of music or verbal conversation. In the highly communicative representations of organized thought, he is well spoken, note his refined empathy for the genres of the symphonic and the operatic.

During our late summer telephone conversation from his home in Munich, Germany where he's tucked away composing, said Maazel "I believe in languages and communication with people. In fact my children [who are not yet teenagers] are to begin studying Mandarin next year. I feel [that when they are adults] they will regret it greatly if they haven't learned a major language such as Mandarin Chinese." On the compositional front Lorin enthuses, "The piece I'm currently composing is 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."

Taken that he was musically immersed in such a topical contemporary literary theme, my thoughts were: It's a gift when you can attach yourself to something that is compelling, where, as you work, you are drawn more deeply inside of the idea that motivated you initially. And usually brilliant things emerge on the other side.

Maestro 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).

The voice has everything to do with the messages we gather from words. Conversations are also about language, and language, for many is inseparable from sound. Maazel speaks in the measured cadences you would expect from someone of his *citizen of the world* pedigree, yet, his fascination with *looking deeply* is balanced by playfulness and an appealing dry wit.

Todd Cochran: The human poetry of passion, situation, and circumstance is revealed in the *language of sound*. With a large scale work, a symphonic piece – and clearly this fits the description of anything the New York Philharmonic would perform – the elements are complex: Splashy sounds that grab the ears, themes that ask for exploration,

movement and rhythms that encourage us to escape; all while the mind is invited to travel and dream.

All art needs *context*, and of the shadings and moods created in performance, most important are the representations of *place and time*. Technical ability alone is never enough to convey this sense of *place and time*; a great orchestra, or soloist, gives the listener so much more. The ways in which music becomes organic and shares its secrets is a balance of the composer's intention and an interpretive musical understanding. Realizing that there are many strategies for emotional interpretation, what is central to the conductor in portraying the core message of a work?

Lorin Maazel: In the final analysis, it's your instinct which guides you. You can analyze all you want, but it's the instinct, (PAUSING) well if your lucky, that can move you closer to what is was that the composer was thinking when he/she 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, what the approach is, 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 J.S. 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 ones instinct, from ones musical talent, and from nothing else.

Todd Cochran: I like what you said about how instinct guides and moves you closer to the meaning of the notes. It's similar, for instance, to how as a pianist, we can begin to learn a piece of music, and as we look deeper, can understand the *shapings of the hands* – the shape of the *composer-as-pianist, pianist-as-composer's* hands – in a way that gives us insight into those instinctual musical elements. This said, we know that musical questions are never fully answered, and without exception, are best explained by the music itself!!!

Those who look to an artistic experience are expressing a desire to engage in a dialog of ideas, but more so, I believe, they are responding to the very basic human need to

communicate and be understood. In today's climate, where we have so many overlapping global concerns and difficult cross-cultural issues, a lot of people out there are rethinking their lives.

There are no fixed rules in great art and the paradigm of the artistic voice remains constant; unquestionably, creative expression will always exist in one form or another. Nowadays we have a situation where 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?

Lorin Maazel: Again, it's the context in which that tone is heard. One really shouldn't forget that classical music has crept into almost any activity that you can imagine. I was watching an ice skating event and counted twenty classical pieces that were strung together. I watched the circus with the kids and couldn't believe it, I counted thirty-five classical pieces that were played somehow or another during the circus show. It's everywhere. If you go to the movies and listen to a good movie score, the number of pieces that are plagiarized (LAUGHING)—I happen to believe in plagiarism, I think it's great! — in the last mega-film I saw I counted forty-three quotes. And of course everyone knows these scores by heart. It's like Picasso. A lot of people who say they don't like Picasso have a set of potteries, the design of which is derived from some Picasso drawing. Almost all of the pop artists' arrangers have been classically trained. So we [classical artists] are like a spawning ground of every sound that you hear today. People should recognize our place, and I think that 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!

Todd Cochran: It's generally becoming more and more difficult to hold people's attention and attract them to high concept settings because they are being bombarded by things that they have an easier access to. Born in Paris, growing up in America,

performing and conducting throughout the world; you've traveled extensively. During the course of your career as a violinist, conductor, composer – musician, conceptualizer, leader – you've had the opportunity to observe shifts in the responses and tastes of audiences. And classical music has an extraordinary canon. It's tough to challenge, educate and make people feel good all at the same time.

Knowing how taste and temperament affect our perceptions, and mindful of the ongoing need for audience cultivation, what insight can you share about the process of bringing new listeners to the experience?

Lorin Maazel: That's being done by the various outreach programs, 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, it seems that the older people, in fact, are less interested and the younger people are more interested. It depends on what culture you're talking about. The young artists who are coming forth from the conservatories are so stunningly good, it'll be they who will represent music and carry the torch. And young people relate to young people, so the young will bring in a lot of young people to watch the young people perform.

Todd Cochran: I'm convinced that the quintessence of a person's musical pursuit is to capture a stream of thought and express it imaginatively. Intuitive/creative artists consider the flow of fusing musical sounds into an emotional tapestry – composing — to be a way to tap into the self-conscious and come to an understanding of self. Share a few of your observations about the composing process, and the ways in which your own composing has heightened your empathy for the great masterpieces.

Lorin Maazel: Well, I've firstly developed an amazing additional respect for some of the masters who have put to paper a gigantic number of notes in their lifetime and just the sheer energy of it is remarkable. For example Richard Strauss: How did he do it? Astonishing. It just 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 down even a tenth of the number of notes they've managed [to commit to score]. And then on the other hand I've noticed

that composing also requires a great deal of technique which escapes the untutored listener or even the ‘underskilled’ performer who may know a great deal about performing but almost nothing about how music is put together.

Todd Cochran: Yes, it’s the elements and the arch of the structure that you’re talking about.

Lorin Maazel: It’s astonishing how much good music one could write by simply relying a great deal on technique. There’re quite a few performers who haven’t the vaguest idea of how a fugue is really written, having had little or no harmonic training. (PAUSE) And this is depressing at times. I think that a good deal of your interpretation relies upon your ability to analyze music intelligently.

Todd Cochran: How did it occur that you began studying both violin and conducting at such an early age, five years old. Undoubtedly your parents, or someone very special to you, had a great deal of foresight, and perhaps also their own well-formed love of music.

Lorin Maazel: My father was an actor, he’d studied some music. But basically he was an actor who just sort of 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.

Todd Cochran: It makes so much difference for the young student, and I’m referring to the level of a teacher’s knowledge during the critical first steps formulative period. Conventional wisdom is sometimes misleading inasmuch that many people tend to hold off in seeking the best teacher available, because ‘Well the child is only so many years old, this, that and the other.’ But in respect of the open and impressionable young mind, the orientation that comes from the instructor who can impart the greatest insight can become a lifelong gift. Great teachers live with us in permanence.

You began conducting on major concert stages as a teenager. Describe the experience of giving yourself to the ritual of performance and any images of your rite of passage.

Lorin Maazel: 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.

Todd Cochran: There's a singular sense of texture and clarity to the music created under your direction. The role of the conductor has everything to do with high art – and is very similar in many ways to dance, which is figurative and abstract. The idea of gestures pointing to an unseen (invisible) subtext is almost mystical. What is this mystery?

Lorin Maazel: I suppose it's because the arts – for better or worse – are a form of language to which human beings have felt obliged to have recourse because of the inability to express in words or verbalize some of the most important feelings they have. They used body language which turned into dance, they used growls and grunts which turned into song, they started banging sticks and that became their percussion instruments out of which pitch was developed, reeds were hollowed out, and bit by bit these languages formed and people felt the imperative to develop them because they felt freer and freer to express what it is that they felt within them that they simply couldn't find the words to express, or if they did, found the words actually very limiting – curiously enough – because of their precision. There's something multifaceted about a string of notes, or a string of colors, or a string of movements. The very *imprecision* of the implications of these notes or movements or colors allow us a free range of certain emotions that are not hamstrung, if you will, by the over precision of a word.

Todd Cochran: Language in itself is often very closely associated with sound. And to continue the theme you've touched upon, I'd like to share something I find particularly fascinating. A few years ago I became aware of research that had been conducted by Harvard University in which they were analyzing the use of pitch, specifically in Asian dialects. The study focused on the area of the North Vietnamese and what they found was that not only did the language utilize very specific sounds, but that each of the speaking 'tones' was invariably reproduced at the identical pitch!

Lorin Maazel: That's amazing, wow.

Todd Cochran: This really opened my mind up. For me, coming across this information was one of those moments where you hear or see something that completely changes your perspective on music. And to follow the road of unveiling a bit further, we can go into the dimension of beauty where all our educated understanding of all of the nuances of art are not that important. For instance, with music there's an abundance, we might even say there's an *over abundance*, of discussions about form, structure, methodology, ethos – what have you – while there is relatively little commentary about beauty. People who see and then hear the sound of temple bells made during the early Chinese dynasties, which are thousands and thousands of years old, really do not have any true grasp or perspective of the social-geopolitical climate of the times. Yet, we can easily be swept away by the beauty of the physical design and of course the deep penetrating sound the sacred bells produce. Why do you suppose there is so little commentary about beauty? Of course there is plenty of invective about the treatment of this passage, dynamics, tempo...

Lorin Maazel: Because a lot of people make the mistake of thinking that if they read music they can hear it. That's where it all falls apart, they're reading and so they begin to believe what they see on the page is the sum of it. I explain to people who, when they say 'What do you guys do up there as interpreters, it's printed, all you have to do is play it the way it's written?' my reaction to that is, purely in physical terms, [what would occur] if you were to turn on the pathfinder in your car? There the roads are laid out very neatly, the instructions 'turn right after 200 yards at the corner.' Imagine driving your car looking at the pathfinder. You'd run over 14 kids, and maim 17 grandmothers... You know, there's something called real life out there, and you're reacting [to it.] That a point of departure, your map, is fine as far as it goes, but it can't tell you or give you more than five percent of what's really important. There are people out there and there's something called rain, and sleet and ice, dogs chasing balls. That's what a performance is all about, you're dealing with people playing instruments, and that's just the physical thing, I mean driving from A to B doesn't require a spiritual relationship!!! ...and then there are those [who are] doing hours and hours of analysis on whether or not that mordent goes up or down, (PAUSE) and how far; (PAUSE) it's so ridiculous, it's a wonder that people haven't split their sides laughing these folks right off the block. But

you know people don't seem to have much humor when it comes to the mis-or-lack-of application of logic.

Some day when I retire I'm going to write a little book, a little monogram on the inability of the human being to apply logic to his/her affairs. It's absolutely amazing. You look around and you see nothing but illogic, and when you bring this to the attention of people who think they're thinking logically, they are very offended.

Todd Cochran: That's apropos on several levels. And as an extension of that idea, individuals may master creating in a musical context, they can play Beethoven, they can play Shoenberg, what have you, and quite effectively, but they have an inability to apply that same creative process and understanding to the *creating* of their lives. I find this to be similar to what you've said in the context of transferring things that are entirely logical to other dimensions of our existence.

Maestro, you are known for taking the podium and conducting virtually every performance without a score. You give an audience a lot. The dimension of theatre is captivating and exciting.

However, equally intriguing is the reality that the act of recalling what has been committed to memory also involves *re-membering*, and the powerful subconscious process of accessing multiple associations. It's these overlapping associations that dramatically open the expressive range of interpretation. The art of reciting, I find, is fascinating in the ways it enables access to various collective memories: Cultural memory, Artistic memory, Emotional memory, Tactile memory, and so on.

In this sense, *remembering* engages both your cognitions and personal journey and then avails your entire artistry to the spirit of the moment. For this reason many of the great humanitarian messages have been delivered through music.

It's possible then, for one piece – beautifully rendered – to tell multiple stories. Can you talk a bit about multiple memories and how, with a given piece, the impressions can vary from concert to concert?

Lorin Maazel: Committing music to memory or text to memory is not vital to a great performance of the work at hand. But it does free one during the act of recreation – which is performance – to be aware and to be more open to dimensions that might have escaped you were you using the visual. By shutting off the visual, you open up all kinds of other ducts, other pores, other avenues, viaducts, whatever, to dimensions that are out there. The entire spectrum has only partially been revealed, there are lots of areas we do not know anything about, but we can feel them. This is the implied existence of a particle that's never actually been measured or identified; they know it's there by deduction, by application. We do feel that there are dimensions there – especially in music and during performance – that escape rational analysis, and thank God they do. And you can respond to them even very directly, not quite knowing what you're doing. I try to do that and very often if I'm really in an amazing state of grace, and have totally identified with the material, I have seen things and heard things that really defy description. I would be very embarrassed to try to verbalize it.

Todd Cochran: The reality that geographically distant people are unified by common interests and sentiment is very exciting. With this mindset, intuitively we embrace the dreams of those we may never have the opportunity to directly encounter, yet still we have a relationship and are connected.

It's refreshing to think of a given culture as only one of many. In light of this, as part of a seek and discover cycle as you will, it's inspiring to get outside of the norms of our expectancies and become immersed in something else. What are some of the other musical styles that you listen to or enjoy outside of the European tradition? Other art forms that you follow? Interests outside of music?

Lorin Maazel: I'm very fond of East Indian classical music. I like much of the folk music traditions such as the Portuguese Fado. Also I'm very fond of Gypsy music. I find it very straight from the shoulder, that's the way they feel, and no messing about! At one time I thought I'd become a writer. At university I studied the literature and creative writing, languages and so forth, so I'm quite a reader. I'm born under the astrological sign of Pisces, therefore I'm water oriented. I love water sports, water skiing. The only land based sport that really interests me is tennis, which I can still play more or less.

“A Need To Talk, Musically Speaking” Maestro Lorin Maazel by Todd Cochran

Although I'm beginning to miss those drop shots! I'm afraid I can't quite get there! It happens to everyone, I suppose, eventually. I'm a very hard worker, and I enjoy just hanging out, just doing nothing. ///

© *Cochran Music*