

„Warum Klassik?“

Interview Leonard Eröd and Marin Alsop

Hi everybody. My name is Marin Alsop and I'm the chief conductor of the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, and it's my great privilege to get up every day and open a piece of music and study an incredible score, and then get to work with these great musicians. It's really a joy when you do what you love as a profession.

The podcast is called "Warum Klassik?". So, what is your personal answer to this?

Well, I think, um, classical music is, it's like, wonderful wine. You know, when you're young, you like, you don't really care: you want a cheap wine that gives you a fast buzz, but as you get older, your taste develops and you start to want to have a wine that is special and has different kind of qualities and properties. It's the same with music. Classical music is about an experience, and when you go to a classical music concert, it's different because you are there. And you're part of the experience, even if you're a listener, it's very empowering to know that you're participating in a once in a moment experience. Some young people really love classical music, and the younger they're exposed to it, the more it sticks and the more interested they become. But I do think that worrying about the age of the audience is a waste of time, because classical music has always worried about the age of the audience because it tends to be more mature people who have more time and more... I think it's really patience because I'm trying to think about it. It's, it's not an easy listen. Classical music is very, it demands a lot of you intellectually, emotionally. It's almost as though you're going into a museum and the curator says to you, okay, I have this fantastic painting and I'm gonna show you one inch at a time. And then I'm gonna fold it up so you can't see the whole picture ever. That's what listening to classical music is like. You have to track it all and create an entity from what you've heard, so this is also, I think why classical music is such an incredible contributor to brain development in children, to healing in a lot of diseases. I think when we try to say, oh, let's make classical music for everyone, we have to understand that it's a big responsibility to listen to a symphony.

Is it important to know, to learn stuff about music, about the composers, maybe their lives, about the musical history to understand it, or is it something you can just learn by listening, I mean to develop this sense of what it means....

It's a little bit like, um, watching a film about... maybe the Second World War and never understanding who's fighting and why. You know, there's no context for what you're listening to. For me personally, everything in life is deeper when I understand the context. So when I know, why Beethoven wrote his third symphony and you know, the fact that he originally dedicated it to Napoleon, who for Beethoven was a hero. And then when he finds out, oh, Napoleon's, he's just a megalomaniac and, he's completely self-absorbed, and he, um, tears up the dedication page. I mean, this to me gives the piece a real relevance in our existing world as well as at in Beethoven's time. Think about Bach: I just imagine him every Saturday night with all of his kids, you know: "Daddy, daddy!" And he said, look, I gotta finish this canata for tomorrow morning, you know, every Sunday he had to write it. It was a piece for purpose.

Going to a live concert as opposed to put on a record of a, of a symphony. What's the difference or why, why not just listen to all this stuff on Spotify or something?

When you go into a concert hall, there's a certain ritual about it. There's a, a sense of occasion, you're joined by other human beings and it's all about the collective energy of being in the same space with the artists and having this shared experience. I think community is, is really what it's all about, and I think community, especially coming out of Covid, is really critical. We see that we can do a lot of things online and we can do a lot of things alone. But we're not really healthy emotionally after that kind of separation, we need to be with each other and we need to have shared communal experiences. The great thing about music is that it's not partisan. It doesn't prescribe what you should think or what you should feel. You and I can sit in a concert and listen to a piece and have a completely different reaction, and both reactions are valid. So that's what I love about music that it's about imagination and you can access it from wherever you are personally.

So this ritual, I mean, maybe that's just me, but I think sometimes it really seems strange, this, uh, kind of zoo, people come and, and look at us and listen, then we have this, this fixed ritual of: orchestra coming to stage, the conductor. Would the same experience be imaginable with another ritual to you?

Well, the ritual has changed over the decades for sure. I mean, I don't think it's necessarily that you dress up and you are not allowed to clap, and there are a lot of rules. I don't think that's what is interesting about the experience. I think it's about coming together. And for me, listening is not a passive experience. It's a much more active, engaged experience. And I always think about the audience, and I think as musicians, we all feel the energy that the listeners bring to the space. But you know, I'm a great believer in mixing up the rules and the presentation, but I think the ritual of coming together to experience live music, is one that is age old and important to us as human beings.

Do you like to go to concerts? Do you enjoy going to concerts as, as listener?

Oh, I love concerts. You know, especially when I'm in a city like Vienna or, um, London, I think probably is, is the place I go to the most concerts because every night there's something different, and you can hear, you can hear a new orchestra, a new conductor, new soloist in the same concert hall, you know, the same acoustic, and hear the differences. And so I do enjoy it. Um, I, I don't often have a lot of time to indulge, but I love going to concerts.

And can you really immerse on an emotional level or would you say that, that you tend also to listen technically, to watch what your colleagues conductors do and how they do it? Is it possible to put away the, the professional hearing, or is it necessary?

I don't think any of us can, you know, when you, when you arrive at a certain level in a field, you know, you've specialized so much, it's very hard to then put yourself back in the position of just being, a naive listener, um, innocent, maybe listener. So I think it's hard and, and sometimes it does feel like work, you know, when I'm at a concert that I'm thinking about the balance and maybe the setup that the conductor chose and why this and that. But at the same time, I still am in awe of the art form and of the artists on stage always. You know, even if I don't agree with the interpretation, I can be moved by the experience.

What was the beginning of your musical story? Did you have some kind of „awakening experience“ or...

You know, my history is not really typical because both of my parents were professional musicians, so, you know, they were busy trying to figure out which instrument I should play before I was even born. And so I came into the world, with parents who had aspirations, for me to be a concert pianist. And so that was the instrument that they directed me toward, and I hated it. I really did not like the piano at all. And it was great because I retired from piano when I was six years old. And then I went to a camp and my mom said, oh, you, you might have to play the violin at the camp. Of course it was, like, wow, you know, the most rigorous violin camp in the world, but it was interesting because I fell in love with the violin and that was the instrument more suited to me. And so that's given me a real insight into kids, young people, that there's an instrument for every single person. And sometimes it takes kids longer to find that instrument and sometimes they see the instrument and they immediately know it's like a, a, a lost cousin or something. So, violin really stuck with me.

Do you still play?

No, I don't play anymore. Occasionally I, I play a bit, but you know, when you don't have time to practice, it's really not fun anymore. And then I was playing in the orchestra, which I loved, at Julliard pre-college, shortly after that. And I, uh, I fell in love with the orchestra as an instrument. I, I should confess a little bit that I was already getting into trouble. Um, I'm a bit of a, you know, troublemaker and, or, I was, I'm not anymore, and I was getting yelled at because I was smiling and I was moving and, you know, all these things that classical musicians aren't supposed to do. And then I went with my dad to this concert and the conductor was jumping around like a crazy person and I thought, I need to be the conductor because he's having a great time and nobody's yelling at him. So that was my motivation. And the conductor was Leonard Bernstein, he became my teacher eventually.

Did it turn out to be true? That the conductor is having the most fun and can do what he wants... or she?

I think yes, I think more so certainly than... I mean, it surely beats being told what to do by a conductor. I think that's the frustration of being a symphonic musician or orchestra player because you know, often you have to follow directions from people that you know, don't really have the same insight even as you do. So, I have to say that I never changed my mind. It was really interesting, I was nine years old and I just, I was so drawn to it and I've loved it every single day and every single minute and, uh, so it was a good decision.

How is it to be a conductor without playing the piano? I mean, usually you hear the conductors all study their scores on the piano.

Well, I think that, uh, that idea that every conductor should be a pianist is really changing. Because the reality is that most pianists don't play in the orchestra. So you have no experience of what you're actually about to work with. From my perspective, I, I think being a string player is the way to go because you can relate to the majority of the orchestra very quickly. But I mean, I can play the piano enough to get through some scores. So, you know, I think that is an important skill to have.

So, you became a fan of Bernstein and then, when did you meet him?

Well, I met him a few times in my teenage years because my parents, again, worked with him and, uh, and I was able to go to rehearsals and things like this, but I didn't begin studying with him until, 1987. And, that was great. And then I, I spent lots and lots of time with him and traveled a lot with him, and he was fantastic. I mean, scary too. But he was, uh, you know, he, he was so much about the music and the responsibility of conductors is that we have to be the messenger for the composer and you have to put the composer always first. You know, Bernstein believed that music could really, I think, change the world. And he tried to use music as a vehicle to react politically or to react emotionally. you know, when the Berlin Wall came down, he was there playing Beethoven nine, when, when there was controversy, he always tried to use music as a healing force. And I, I love that.

I read his books about music for young people, and he's also my big role model in, in terms of how to talk about music. Because I think also when I saw these old videos of these young people's concerts. I, I always think that's, that's exactly the way you have to talk about music in order to...

...get people excited. I think that, um, I think the great thing about Bernstein is that he never talks down to young people or, or people who aren't perhaps trained musically. He, he's really telling us exactly what's going on in the music and giving us insight into the composer and he approaches every piece and every situation, um, anew and with fresh eyes. And I think, you know, some of those young people's concerts where he's talking about Mahler and he's really telling them about Mahler, and the kids, you know, kids... this is the thing: kids are all born geniuses and they can assimilate and understand so much. But often we lower our expectations instead of raising them. I see with all the kids I've worked with in Baltimore, you know, the Orchkids, um, that these kids are, you know, they come to hear a concert now at the age of 10 years old, and they're more engaged than the older audience, you know, because they really understand what's happening.

You have a, a big experience and a long experience. How, in your opinion, did making music, did how orchestras work and how orchestras sound change in the last, I don't know, let's say 50 years?

Well, I think that Classical Music always is a microcosm of the broader society and the broader world and as we've gone to more globalization and more universality, the orchestras have also, they've become certainly better technically, um, much higher level, uh, and they become more similar than dissimilar. Now that's not to say that orchestras today don't have personality, but I think they're more capable of playing all kinds of different styles. I remember early in my career, you know, trying to do some Bernstein with a couple of European orchestras. It was rough, you know, 'cause they didn't have a feel for the swing! Today, it's completely different.

But back then they played Brahms in a way they don't play it anymore. Especially I think the European orchestras.

I, I agree. I mean, I wish they, that every orchestra could hang onto some of the tradition in that way, and some do, of course. But the reality is that an orchestra needs to be a flexible entity so that the ideal orchestra for me is the orchestra that you hear and you say, oh my God, that's a great Brahms orchestra. And then they play a Mozart symphony, you say, oh, it's a fantastic Mozart orchestra, but the sound worlds are completely different. So to me, a truly great orchestra is one that is serving the composer in that moment.

And do you think there are still differences between orchestras in Europe and the US or America? Also between different countries in Europe, I don't know what, what...

But every, you know, there, there are differences even, within Europe of course, because culturally there's so many different traditions, and wherever I go, you know, I can immediately have a feel for the city that I'm in, from the orchestra, how they play, what their attitude is. You know, even in Vienna, I think you'll, of the three main orchestras, the top orchestras, you'll have a very different attitude from each of them and that has to do with so much, you know, and it's just fascinating to go to different countries. You know, when I work in Japan, it's a completely different culture. But you would expect that too, right? And, and it's really a reflection of their society. You know, they're very disciplined, they're very quiet, they're very, but working, say in Italy or France, you know, they're not quiet because they're chatty people. And so it, it's fun because it, it is about who they are.

And... The RSO? What's special about our orchestra?

Well, our orchestra is really special and, and I'm not saying that just because we're here. Um, I think that the RSO is, it's an orchestra of enthusiasm and quickness and flexibility and tolerance. Also, there's an openness about new music. When you play a lot of new music, you have to, you can't come to it with a judgment each time. You have to come with an open approach. Um, I think that it's a hard working orchestra, um, and it's an orchestra that defies expectation because we're here in a city that's very, very conservative, but the orchestra is filled with diversity that we see, and it's an orchestra of flexibility, not of stagnation. So I think the RSO is a very special orchestra. I, I love being here, and working with the orchestra and you know, my only hope is that everyone will discover this best kept secret of Vienna.

Speaking of Vienna, what are your favorite places in Vienna? Do you have any?

Oh, gosh. I, I, you know, when I have free time, I mean, it's a little embarrassing to say that, I go, I go to the halls that we play in and listen to the visiting orchestras, but I really love doing that, it's so so much fun to me. And I've done all the museums many, many times and, uh, love them. And of course I often have people visiting and that's a great joy because then you have another excuse to go to a museum and and revisit it. I mean, I think Vienna is in, in so many ways an ideal city to live in, because it's user friendly you can walk almost everywhere. That's great.

Could you imagine, I mean, you told me that you couldn't, but what other profession would be possible for you, if not conductor?

Maybe the CEO of a company or, um, President of the United States, something like that. You know, something small like that.

Um, it's still time.

It's still time . Really, we, we might be out of politicians by now.

I won't ask for which party.

I know, really... No, of course you must know already. But, um, yeah, politics are, are rough. You would agree that it's such a privilege to be a musician. I mean, how many people get to take their passion and turn it into a job.

But I mean, it's something else, when you say that you really would have a, a leading..., I mean, that's what I hear is, that you...

Yeah, i, I would lead, I would lead something no matter what. I mean, even when I was in the lower school, I wasn't a very talented athlete, but I was always the captain of the team, you know, because that's what I like to do, is to bring people together and, and galvanize them. And that's really what the conductor does.

That's interesting because maybe music is also, that's like, like you say, it's a microcosm that, that, uh, there is place for every kind of human character also. Because there are a lot of musicians who love, who love to play, but they don't want to be in the, in the front seat or in the first, in the, in the "Rampenlicht".

Yeah. Yeah. It's true, isn't it? It's interesting.

Something about your early years is this funny, uh, swing string orchestra. I don't remember how it was called.

I had a, um, a swing band for about 20 years called String Fever, and it was all string players, all friends of mine from Julliard and other walks of life. Yeah, that was great.

So this kind of crossover idea was always something close to you, because also that's something that maybe, uh, connects you to Bernstein.

I think that my love of, um, American Jazz, it comes from my father. He, he was, uh, the concert master of the New York City Ballet Orchestra, but he also played saxophone and clarinet and flute in a big band, a touring big band. Also, he was a great whistler. Uh, so, um, he was always listening to jazz and always playing along with records. And my mother and I were very snobbish about it, always: "Oh God." So, and then as it turned out, I kind of fell in love with, uh, jazz and, and swing music in particular. But that was a great group and a great experience and, you know, the idea of organizing it and I, I managed the whole thing, so I really started to understand what goes into creating a successful ensemble, and that's been very helpful.

There's again the leader role...

Yeah. Exactly. Can't get away from it.