

A melange of interesting notes and the promise of things to come

"I find little in the works of Beethoven, Berlioz, Wagner and others when they are led by a conductor who functions like a windmill." - *Franz Liszt*



Caricature of Hector Berlioz conducting a choir in Paris in 1850, by Gustave Doré.

The conductor's stand...

is not a continent of power, but rather an island of solitude, according to Italian conductor Riccardo Muti. The return of our Conductor Emeritus, Peter Brock is sufficient reason to have a look at the role of conductors in this issue. Peter retired 14 years ago as our Musical Director after 18 years in that capacity.

Peter's impressive resumé includes the award of an honorary degree of Master of Arts by the University and the Medal of the Order of Australia for service to choral music. You can look forward to reading more in the program, but we are honoured to have him as our Conductor Emeritus.

I can't swear to the accuracy of this story, but somewhere I heard about the conductor of an orchestra who wasn't happy with the performance of one of the percussionists. Repeated attempts to get the drummer to improve failed. Finally, in front of the orchestra, the conductor said in frustration, "When a musician just can't handle his instrument, they take it away, give him two sticks and make him a drummer!"

A stage whisper was heard from the percussion section: "And if he can't handle that, they take away one of his sticks and make him a conductor."

I don't believe that it was a musician who told that story. The conductor makes all the difference to a performance, and our choir has been fortunate to have benefited from the services of some of the best, and perhaps they don't get the credit they deserve.

It can be quite a dangerous profession. In 1687 Jean-Baptiste Lully was conducting a performance of a *Te Deum* to celebrate the recovery of Louis XIV from a serious illness. As was the practice then, before the use of the baton became popular, he conducted by banging a long staff on the ground. He accidentally stabbed his foot with the staff, his foot became gangrenous and the poor man died.

We expect no such sacrifices from our conductors!

I have a video of Leonard Bernstein conducting Kiri Te Kanawa and José Carreras in *West Side Story*, and what a wonderful experience this is - to see the composer conducting such musicians in a performance of his own work.

Ravel's *Bolero* is number 20 on the ABC's list of classics, but I find that people either love it or hate it. I think it's entirely dependent on the conductor.

In 1980, in the movie *10*, Bo Derek bounced attractively up a beach to enquire of the waiting Dudley Moore if he had ever done it to *Bolero*, and later in the movie the piece accompanied a love scene. It took four minutes.

Ravel would have been devastated. He said, and I agree, that a performance of *Bolero* should take at least 14 minutes. In 1930, when Toscanini conducted the New York Philharmonic in Ravel's presence, Ravel told him that the tempo was too fast. Toscanini replied that in his opinion, "It's the only way to save the work".

Bolero demands constraint from the performers, it is dependent on the amazing transition from one

instrument to another, it's one long crescendo, it's time dependent.

To its everlasting shame, on the album *The Best Classical Album in the World - Ever*, the London Symphony manages to get through it in 5 minutes 10 seconds. André Rieux, master of the Readers Digest condensed versions of the classics, lectures his audience on the need for restraint and the resulting tension to which I have referred, and then finishes in 7 minutes.

In 1973, an Academy Award winning film was made of Zubin Mehta conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic in their performance of *Bolero*. In the first half of the film, Mehta and his musicians speak of the difficulties and nuances of the music, the second half features the performance. It's a wonderful introduction to the music, the orchestra and the function of the conductor. From the gentle opening solo of the flute to the final crashing climax takes 14 minutes, and I am swept up in the excitement of the piece every time I watch it. *Bolero* is much more than a tune.

Bolero was first recorded on January 8, 1930 in Paris. The very next day Ravel himself conducted the Orchestra de l'Association des Concerts Lamoureux in a recording for Polydor. Under his leadership the performance took 15 minutes and 41 seconds, and I find it a bit flat. I think Toscanini was right.

It can be even more difficult for the conductor if he also has to conduct a relatively untrained

audience - have a look at www.youtube.com/watch?v=wh1p5tEd2UE.

He was best known as a composer, but Ralph Vaughan Williams assumed leadership of the Bach Singers after Hugh Allen, who was something of a martinet, which Ralph certainly wasn't. The singers were highly experienced amateurs, which initially led to some nervousness. But as one choir member recalled, Ralph's outsized flat feet, capacious boots and shambling appearance soon endeared him to them, writing that 'as soon as we saw his boots, we knew it would be alright!'

Herbert von Karajan knew how to handle a choir. "I give them as much freedom as they like to do exactly what I want," he said.

Rudolf Bing observed that "It is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain the services of first-class conductors. They are sick and tired of dealing with singers, as I am."

The choir is fortunate to have prepared for this concert with our Musical Director, Chris Allen. He will be one of the soloists, after having worked with the choir throughout the rehearsal period. Our thanks to him for his ongoing dedication to the choir, and his determination to ensure that everything will be right on the night.

Zubin Mehta conducting *The Bolero* is available on DVD from First Run Features. *The Making of West Side Story - Leonard Bernstein* is a Deutsche Gramophon DVD. *Ravel Conducts Bolero* is a Dutton CD (CDBP 9789). All are available on-line.



Portion of a painting by Hans Memling c.1480 of an orchestra of angels playing, from left to right, a psalter, tromba marina, lute and folded trumpet.

We'll have some interesting news about lutes and lute players in our next issue.

St John Passion

Johann Sebastian Bach

The Great Hall
Newcastle University
Sunday April 1 2012 at 2pm

with

Paul Bevan (Evangelist)
Christopher Allan (Christ)
Bernadette Lannen (Soprano)
Jo Burton (Alto)
Richard Butler (Tenor)
Christopher Richardson (Bass)
Christ Church Camerata

Adults \$30 Concession \$25 Students \$15
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through our website or phone 4954 8781

Cacophony is edited by Peter McCloy on behalf of the Newcastle University Choir, who do not necessarily share the views of the editor. To contribute or to communicate, email us at newsletter@newcastleuniversitychoir.com

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