

The Secret of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

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[J U D I T H V A N D E R W E L]

In the concert hall of the Sydney Opera House, the audience grows silent. The musicians of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra concentrate. Everyone in the hall looks expectantly at the door where chief conductor Mariss Jansons is about to appear. Silence. For a few very long minutes, the door remains closed. A murmuring goes through the hall. Why doesn't he come? The audience starts to talk louder. Then, finally, the door opens and Jansons appears. His face is ashen. Bent and unsteadily, he makes his way between the orchestra members. Concertmaster Vesko Eschkenazy gives him a hand and helps him onto the podium. The musicians exchange worried looks. They know that Jansons suffers from serious heart problems and that once, years ago in Oslo, he even collapsed on the podium. The story goes that despite lying unconscious on the floor, he kept beating time with his baton. Jansons survived, but his own father had died on stage, just like the former chief conductor of the Concertgebouw orchestra, Eduard van Beinum. Why is Jansons here? He can hardly stand up.

The concertmaster moves to the edge of his chair and turns towards the orchestra so everyone can see him well. The other orchestra members move closer together. With Jansons's first gesture, the double bass and cello players emit their first growling sounds. The musicians look at their conductor, but even more than on other occasions they follow each other's directions. Anxiously, they manage to bring Stravinsky's *Firebird* to a proper conclusion. While an assistant conductor takes over for the second half of the concert, Jansons is immediately transported to hospital. He leaves the Sydney Opera House, which, in honour of the orchestra's 125th anniversary, is bathed in an orange glow. The year is 2013.

It's not for every conductor that an audience will hold its communal breath. And the Sydney Opera House does not light up in a special colour for every orchestra that has an anniversary. But the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra isn't just any orchestra. In 2008, it was voted the best orchestra in the world by the British magazine *Gramophone*. Who the best conductor was had not been asked, but according to many newspapers it was Mariss Jansons. He was the only principal conductor with two orchestras in the top six: München's Bayerische Rundfunk and Amsterdam's Concertgebouw Orchestra. In 2015, in a new poll, the international critics of the classical music site bachtrack.com named



the Concertgebouw Orchestra the second best orchestra in the world. The Berliner Philharmoniker came in first. This time, conductors were also rated. Mariss Jansons was number three on the list of best conductors; number one was Riccardo Chailly, who had been chief conductor of the Concertgebouw Orchestra from 1988 to 2004.

Although such lists are somewhat arbitrary and are disliked by many musicians 'because music is not a competition', they do show that the Royal Concertgebouw is one of the top orchestras in the world. But what accounts for the excellence of this Amsterdam orchestra? How do these 120 musicians with diverse backgrounds and characters unite their sound into one orchestra? Do they owe their success to Jansons or can they do without him? What is their secret?

A fine from the conductor

When the Concertgebouw Orchestra was founded in 1888, no one would have guessed that this symphony orchestra would become so successful. Most members had been plucked from provincial orchestras and ensembles, where the music sounded pretty good but never great. Yet its first chief conductor immediately set the bar high. Willem Kes was an experienced musician who had studied in Leipzig, Brussels and Berlin and had seen and listened to fa-

Concertgebouw Orchestra
in Amsterdam.
Photo by Anne Dokter

mous orchestras and conductors. He approached the music with a precision the members of the orchestra were not accustomed to. They were shocked when the conductor called the players who had not been up to par during rehearsal to his office to go through the composition note by note. They were just as indignant when he started handing out fines to musicians who were late or missed a rehearsal. Kes was no more accommodating to his listeners. They could no longer walk around, drink tea or chat during a concert. The conductor demanded absolute silence in the hall. In this way, Kes taught the orchestra an important lesson: a good orchestra needs discipline and attention to detail to make the music sound as beautiful as possible.

Today this speaks for itself. In 2013, I travelled for a year with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra on its world tour in celebration of its 125th anniversary and wrote a book about it, *Stemmen* (Voices, Querido/Van Halewyck, 2015). During the tour, I saw how the whole rhythm of the orchestra members was directed at giving good concerts. The musicians took a nap before each concert, restrained from drinking too much alcohol and went to the gym to stay fit. Every day, I heard musicians playing in their hotel rooms to improve their performance even more. Some of them even practised in the departure hall of the airport. Not because they had to, but because, as a violist said to me, 'It hurts when the music doesn't get its due'. A faultless concert was to them not necessarily a satisfying concert. As first solo oboist, Alexei Ogrintchouk said, 'I want to share my vision of the music as completely as possible with the audience, not missing the tiniest detail.'

Not everyone has the passion, imagination and technique to express the richness of a composition. The musicians of the Concertgebouw Orchestra have all passed rigorous auditions. For someone to be accepted is like a dream come true. The velvet sound of the string players is known all over the world, just like the refined solos of the wind section and the ingenious rhythms of the percussionists. The acoustics of the Concertgebouw add to the uniqueness of



Strings. Photo by Anne Dokter



Bernard Haitink
conducts Mahler.
Photo by Ronald Knapp

this sound. 'When you are in the Concertgebouw you start playing differently', says cellist Daniël Esser. 'You can't escape it. The acoustics of the Concertgebouw are like a Madonna on a Raphael painting holding the orchestra in her arms.' Those acoustics unite the musicians and serve also as a benchmark, for every week the orchestra has another guest conductor leading it with a new programme. Even when the orchestra goes on tour, the musicians remember how the music sounded in the Main Hall. This very resonance also has its challenges, as the musicians can sometimes hardly hear each other on stage. But that is exactly why they have become even better listeners to each other's specific sound.

The love with which musicians talk about the Concertgebouw Orchestra is not a given in the orchestra world. When first solo trombonist Jörgen van Rijen played in a French orchestra, he noticed that its members were not very motivated. This was due to the orchestra's organization model. In France, the Minister of Culture or the mayor chooses the conductor. In the Concertgebouw Orchestra, the orchestra members also vote when a chief conductor or a new colleague is chosen. On top of that, they have a say in the choice of music and the work provisions for the orchestra. According to Van Rijen this makes an enormous difference. 'When orchestra members feel that their opinion doesn't make any difference, they think: as long as I play my notes I will get my salary.' So participation is essential for a good orchestra. It's no coincidence that the three best orchestras in the world, the Berliner and Wiener Philharmoniker and the Concertgebouw Orchestra all have a good system of participation.

Principals and tutti

In spite of this participation, in every orchestra there is tension between the individual and the collective. To get accepted in the Concertgebouw Orchestra a musician has to be almost as good as a soloist. But in an orchestra there is



Mariss Jansons.
Photo by Anne Dokter

less room for that. All 120 members of the Concertgebouw Orchestra have, after all, their own musical ideas, but if they were to sound all at the same time it would be a cacophony.

That's why there is a strict hierarchy in an orchestra. It does not only have a conductor, but each instrumental section also has a principal. The principal of the cellists, for example, shows the other cellists, the *tuttis*, with his gestures when he starts playing faster and louder. At the same time, he has eye contact with the principals of the other sections to coordinate his timing. A principal will also play solos regularly. At such a moment, he may give his own interpretation. But the rest of the time he does his best to blend his own timbre with that of the orchestra.

The principal of the first violins has a special position: he is the concertmaster. He can mediate between the orchestra and the conductor. When an ill Mariss Jansons stood on the podium in Sydney, concertmaster Vesko Eschkenazy partly took over his duties. He shifted to face the orchestra more directly to let them know: if the maestro is unclear or becomes unwell, I'm here. At the same time, the other principals kept an even closer eye on each other. That way an orchestra still functions quite well without a conductor.

The conductor's baton

But the conductor isn't there for nothing, of course. It is up to him to blend the sound of all those different personalities in the orchestra into one. He has studied the score, listened to earlier renditions and arrived at his own vision of the music. His fingers dictate the tempo and volume, single out musical lines and phrases and guard the tension arc of the composition as a whole.

The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra has had very few, but very good chief conductors. After 128 years of existence, the orchestra has only just come to its seventh chief conductor. It's the Italian Daniele Gatti who will be leading the orchestra from September 2016 on. Shortly after the concert in Sydney, Mariss Jansons decided that he would have to step down because of his health. By then he had been chief conductor for eleven years. If Gatti follows in his and in his predecessors' footsteps, he is at the beginning of a long career with the Concertgebouw Orchestra. Willem Mengelberg even made it to fifty years as chief conductor.

Unfortunately, the relationship between an orchestra and its conductor is not always a bed of roses. Kes, as I mentioned earlier, was feared because of his strict, pedantic approach. Mengelberg, who was indeed a very great musician, nevertheless brought his own 'chocolate club' into existence by passing advantages ('chocolates') to his protégés in exchange for their howls of derision when tearing down another musician. His successor, Eduard van Beinum, on the other hand, was so meek, that he appeared one day at the door of the then still very young Bernard Haitink and sobbed: 'They say that I'm no good at tuning up.'

Recently, Haitink himself got into conflict with the management of the Concertgebouw Orchestra. In March 2014 in an interview with the Dutch newspaper *Het Parool*, he said that he never wanted to conduct the Concertgebouw Orchestra again, as he had felt 'totally neglected' during the 125th anniversary celebrations. Still, Haitink *had* conducted a Bruckner symphony that year, but apparently that had not been enough. The management of the Concertgebouw Orchestra was 'perplexed'. Executive director Jan Raes indicated that, over the years, in order to make Haitink's appearances possible, they had stretched the flexibility of other leading conductors 'to the limits of what was acceptable'. He also said that he respected Haitink greatly and that there would always be an extended hand. It now appears that Haitink has accepted this hand. After the management of the Concertgebouw Orchestra apologized once more for 'unnecessarily hurting his feelings', he promised that he would conduct the Concertgebouw Orchestra again. A great relief to all. Haitink is one of the greatest still living Dutch conductors and was chief conductor of the Concertgebouw Orchestra for no less than twenty-seven years. It's not for nothing that he is also its honorary conductor.

Haitink's magic

Bernard Haitink was only thirty-two when he landed on the podium of the Concertgebouw. His predecessor, Eduard van Beinum, had unexpectedly died of a heart attack during a rehearsal. After his death, the management appointed two conductors: the seasoned old hand, Eugen Jochum, and the emerging talent, Bernard Haitink. After two years, Haitink was promoted to chief conductor.

But a lot of repertory was still new to him and the orchestra wasn't making it easy for him either. 'Mr. Haitink', a cellist once derisively said when he made a remark: 'you could have been my son.' Later Haitink would say that he aged twice as fast during those years.

In the late 1960s, early 1970s, Haitink began to grow. He started performing the big cycles of, among others, Bruckner and Mahler and recorded them for Philips, with whom he had meanwhile signed a recording contract. Those recordings struck a chord. The Christmas matinees in the 1980s, where he performed Mahler symphonies, also added to his popularity in Europe.

In 1978, the orchestra appointed a permanent conductor alongside Haitink: the Russian conductor Kirill Kondrashin. Haitink had to take a deep breath, especially when he saw that the orchestra appreciated Kondrashin's meticulous approach. But Haitink had his own strength. 'He gave the musicians space', cellist Daniël Esser says. 'Out of that freedom something could arise and the orchestra would then surpass itself. Haitink was a master in atmosphere, which especially enhanced French music.'

The idea that Haitink would never again lead the Concertgebouw Orchestra was therefore painful for the musicians. Especially when Mariss Jansons – as meticulous as Kondrashin – was its conductor, some orchestra members missed Haitink's free approach. But Haitink would also have missed the orchestra. After all, not many orchestras have such a special sound or rise as singularly to the occasion when a conductor gives it the freedom. Moreover, Haitink had built up a history and connection with the musicians. Fortunately, he was magnanimous enough to accept the extended hand.

Breathing together

This story also reveals one of the Concertgebouw Orchestra's secrets, for the Concertgebouw Orchestra has many secrets. The acoustics of the Concertgebouw have already been mentioned as have the rigorous auditions for new orchestra members. The orchestra has always had exceptional chief conduc-

Cellists in
New York.
Photo by
Anne Dokter.





Trumpeter Wim van Hasselt
practising in Durban,
South Africa.
Photo by Anne Dokter



Timpanist
Marinus Komst
in New York.
Photo by Anne Dokter

tors and, from an early age, participatory bodies, which increase musicians' feeling of belonging and motivate them even more to outshine themselves. The variation in guest conductors, programmes and tours also kept the orchestra sharp and inspired.

But the biggest secret of the orchestra is revealed during hardship. When the orchestra has to help Mariss Jansons to the finish line of *The Firebird*. When an orchestra member fears his playing level is slipping and asks a colleague for advice. When musicians sharing a music stand do not get along, but still cooperate. Or when management and Haitink genuflect to each other to restore their relationship. In each case people let go of their ego because of the orchestra. Of course, that is not easy, but most of the time their love of the music and bond with the orchestra turn out to be triumphant.

'In a good orchestra all personalities blend because they all have the same goal', top violinist Leonidas Kavakos said when he was a soloist with the Concertgebouw Orchestra. 'An orchestra member can't just play what he wants, however good he may be. Musicians have to listen to each other, look at each other, they have to breathe and play together. That happens in the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and that's exactly what the world of today needs.' ■

Translated by Pleuke Boyce