



May/June 2009



Interviewer Nancy Shear (left) at Steinway Hall in New York with Lorin Maazel; his wife, Dietlinde Turban-Maazel (far right); and Music For All Seasons Artistic Director Rena Fruchter (Photo: Ken Browar)

Interview with Lorin Maazel

MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

On the verge of his final days at the New York Philharmonic, and with a new summer festival up his sleeve, **Lorin Maazel** chats with **Nancy Shear** at Steinway Hall.

Lorin Maazel first waved a stick in front of the New York Philharmonic in 1942, at the jaw-dropping age of twelve. His preternatural talent for leading musicians had been noticed and mentored in two of the cities where he lived as a boy, Los Angeles and Pittsburgh, and the dramatic result was his appearance at Manhattan's Lewisohn Stadium, then the Philharmonic's summer venue. By the time Maazel took over the orchestra's podium 60 years later, in September 2002, he had already conducted the Philharmonic in performance more than 100 times. He came to New York after holding two other high-profile American music directorships—at The Cleveland Orchestra (1972-1982) and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (1988-96)—as well as top conducting posts at the Vienna Staatsoper and Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. Maazel has now logged more than 5,000 concert and opera performances, conducting upwards of 150 orchestras. This spring he steps down from the Philharmonic after seven seasons as music director, a tenure that caps one of the most remarkable conducting careers in American history. As he says farewell to the Philharmonic Maazel is looking ahead to a new venture: He and his wife, Dietlinde Turban-Maazel, are launching what they intend to be a two-week annual festival of opera, concert music, and educational activities at Castleton Farms, their 550-acre estate in Rappahannock County, Virginia; the inaugural Castleton Festival is scheduled for July 4-19, 2009.

At the start of his penultimate season with the Philharmonic, in October 2007, Maazel sat down with veteran music publicist and broadcaster Nancy Shear at New York's Steinway Hall. She interviewed the conductor before a live audience under the auspices of Music For All Seasons, a nonprofit organization that brings live music to non-traditional audiences. In the course of their wide-ranging conversation, excerpted here, Maazel spoke of his feelings for orchestral musicians; the conductor's historical shift from "maestro" to colleague; his own experience as a composer, most recently of the opera *1984*, which the Royal Opera premiered at Covent Garden in 2006; and the urgent need to build appreciation for classical music among young people in the United States to a level found in many other parts of the world.

—*Chester Lane*

NANCY SHEAR: How has your experience with the New York Philharmonic changed you as a musician, as a person?

LORIN MAAZEL: I suppose it's really a question of genes. I come from the same world that these musicians come from. I was educated in this country and I've had a lot of interaction with foreigners who've come to this country, taught us, and guided us. And I did spend quite a few years abroad, which is a separate chapter. But roots are roots. We're cut from the same cloth, so to speak.

I've been music director of other American orchestras, Cleveland and Pittsburgh—in fact, I spent some years of my youth in Pittsburgh, and so I knew something about that city and its mentality. But both my parents were born and raised in New York, and I suppose from the day I stood in front of the New York Philharmonic and they were looking for a music director and I looked at these people out there—clever, street-wise, smart, quick, highly intelligent, focused—I said to myself, “My God, I love them already!” [laughter]

I recently had two rehearsals with the orchestra for our Tchaikovsky cycle, and we had built in some overtime because there were two programs to prepare in one week. The first rehearsal was supposed to be two and a half hours, and I sent them home after an hour and ten minutes. The second was supposed to be three hours, and I sent them home after an hour and 25 minutes. They're the fastest guns in the West! I'm a very tough-minded professional: I don't leave anybody in doubt, I don't leave an orchestra and its repertoire until I feel that it's ready to face the music the next day on stage in performance. And they know that. And because they know that, they're so keen and so focused and so well prepared. It's an amazing orchestra.

And if I've made some contribution to them, it's on two levels. One, there were some players getting on in years, and I'm an older person myself and therefore empathize with the problems that older people have in negotiating an instrument well. But for the benefit of the orchestra, and in the interest of individual players who were not quite able to deal with the challenges the repertoire would give them, I felt that I would help them realize that the time had come to hang up their gloves. So I've engaged about fifteen very powerful young players, and they have given a virtuosic thrust to the underpinning of the orchestra that fleshes out its inherent technical brilliance.

The second thing—and I think this is much more important—is that they felt I loved them, and had confidence in them, and would put them at their ease technically. The sound became warmer and more self-confident. And when they realized that I loved them and respected them and honored their ability to phrase, they became more and more emboldened to express themselves as individuals.

I will be leaving them not without regret, because I love this orchestra and I love making music with them. But I'm one of those people who believes in numbers. I will have been with the Philharmonic for seven years, just as Arturo Toscanini was. Seven is a wonderful number. And I also believe in hanging up your gloves when you're still ahead.

SHEAR: You speak about self-esteem and imbuing your orchestra with confidence, and you also use the word “love.” Years ago, conductors like Toscanini and Stokowski and Reiner got their results by beating their orchestra players down, terrorizing them.

MAAZEL: I've never believed in that, simply because my generation was the next generation. We didn't believe in browbeating people. We believed in working with them and interacting. I really felt sorry for someone like Fritz Reiner. When he was music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony I used to hear him conduct every Sunday in the Syria Mosque outside of the city. Fritz was a product of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which had its own rhythm and its own ethic and its own approach to human relations, quite far from those that we are accustomed to in this country. Conductors like Fritz Reiner and George Szell really had no choice but to follow the precepts of their education: That here was the leader with a whip, and the orchestra was his subject.

I can't understand how music was made under those circumstances, and I'm wondering whether it had the warmth and the breadth that one can achieve today by working with great musicians and interacting with them. If the conductor is the first among equals, that's only because there must be leaders and there must be followers. Somebody has to take the final responsibility, and a conductor who is overly democratic will miss the boat. He doesn't get the message, because we all crave intelligent and informed leadership. We need leadership in areas where we are not expert.

So, it's a matter of great interest to me to understand just how these great musicians in the past achieved what they did. Toscanini was not a tyrant, he was highly intelligent—something that we can't possibly know, because he had such trouble with the English language. And he was highly educated; he knew [Giacomo] Leopardi, who was the Shakespeare of Italian literature, and he could recite chunks of Dante's *Inferno*. His mother was very literate and very keen that her son be equally literate.

Toscanini was an introvert. One of his letters is so revealing. He tells of going to the post office to post a letter, and then realizing that he would be recognized there. As he stood in line he almost disintegrated, because he was shocked that folks were looking at him and might ask for his autograph. By the time he got to the window he was a sputtering mess and barely managed to post his letter. Then he turned around and ran all the way home in sheer shame. Imagine this introvert, this unbelievable musical genius, standing in front of 100 people embarrassed to be seen, then conducting a concert in front of 2,000 people, driven to do so by his genius and by his calling.

This is something that members of the New York Philharmonic understood. He would rail at them and throw invective and imprecations in their direction: “You know nothing about music! You are pigs!” and so forth. Everyone’s totally insulted and destroyed. But they just sort of sat there and said, “Maestro, just what is it you would like? Would you like us to play louder, softer, faster?” And he was totally nonplussed. He said, “Faster.” “Thank you, Maestro, thank you.” And he sort of got on with it.

So they understood that these were psychological problems, that he wasn’t insulting anybody. He loved them. In fact, after finishing a tour with the New York Philharmonic in Europe he wrote a letter saying, “These expressions of love that I receive from the orchestra I shall never forget. I adore them.”

Fritz was not so sweet—Fritz Reiner. And neither was George Szell, or a few of the other folks out there. And the results they got were in fact mixed, because one cannot do one’s best in a state of fear. If you didn’t please the boss, you could be fired on the spot. That was certainly a downer, and gave rise to all the quirks that we have to deal with today. The union contracts are perfectly understandable: If you had been subjected to this kind of abuse, obviously you would band together with your colleagues and try to work out something that would protect you from the outrageous excesses of some of those maniacs. The film producer Cecil B. de Mille was also considered a tyrant. He’d say, “I’m the easiest man in the world to satisfy—all I want is perfection!” [laughter] And in a sense, some of those conductors were just like that.

Nowadays, of course, we have conductors who just want to please the second oboe and the fourth-string critic and so forth. These people are never going to get any results, because that’s not what music-making is all about. You have to make some tough decisions that will displease folks.

SHEAR: Give us an example of a really tough decision.

MAAZEL: I remember a 72-year-old violist playing first chair in the Cleveland Orchestra. He played as well as I’ve ever heard a violist play at the age of 72. This was when there was mandatory retirement at age 65. I kept him on, and would have kept him on forever, because he was a great player. I didn’t have to. But I did, because I respected his ability and kept him in the first chair. Now you no longer have mandatory retirement. You have folks out there who are lovable—you love them, their colleagues love them—but a musician may have been around for 40 years, and he or she is falling apart. Everybody knows it, and yet the conductor at a certain point has to say, “In the interests of everyone, including the interest of the player himself, it’s time to go.” You have to make that decision, and everybody knows that you do. And they also know that they have the freedom to dislike you intensely for it temporarily.

SHEAR: But you have their respect, I’m sure, if you make decisions that are in the best interest of the art.

MAAZEL: In the long run, yes. But it’s a very lonely position. The leader has to assume that he’ll always be a loner and lonely, because you are on this little podium and you’re all by yourself, basically, and you always will be. In all important moments of our life—severe pain, birth, death—we’re alone. But we can be very grateful for not being alone the rest of the time. So this loneliness thing doesn’t worry me very much. It’s just part of the job.

SHEAR: You are a composer as well as a conductor. When you commission a work, how much input do you have? If you’re part of the commissioning process, do you meet with the composer? Do you set guidelines? Do you have restrictions?

MAAZEL: I don’t commission a composer unless I have some confidence in his music, but I also may have stumbled on a few of his foibles along the way. I’ll say, “Look, George, I know you’re very fond of the basset horn, but maybe in this particular work, you could do without it.” I get along with these folks, because they know I’m on their side. I’m not their mortal enemy, except in the case of one composer who came along in the last three years. It was written in his contract that he had a right to hear a play-through of his music. I didn’t know this was the case, and I really didn’t like this guy at all. I called him into my office and said, “May I ask you why you’re having this reading rehearsal?” He said, “I wanna hear my piece.” I said, “Didn’t you hear it in your head before you wrote it?” He hasn’t talked to me since. But it’s okay.

SHEAR: What was it like writing your opera *1984*, based on George Orwell’s tragically dystopian novel? The opera is a multi-layered, multi-colored, very complex work. Was it a pleasure? Was it agony?

MAAZEL: I have no trouble getting going; I just sit down and start writing. But the subject matter all but traumatized me. I had to finish the second act, and I was way behind, so I locked myself up in a hut in Sardinia for seven weeks—twelve hours a day with the shutters closed and writing this music, two torture scenes and a hallucination scene. By the time I finished I was ready for the—you know, I’d gone bonkers. It was so bad that when I finished it I put it in a suitcase, got in a rented car, drove to the airport. And when I

got there, I said, "Where does the next plane go?" Fortunately for me, it was something called Paris. So I went to Paris, and for three days I walked around like a man let out of a penitentiary.

This is all by way of saying that it was a traumatic experience. Because 1984 is today—all around you there are signs of it. The state inches its way stone by stone and day by day and event by event into our lives, so that we are, in fact, without any present freedom. This is a terrible problem we're facing, and my hope is that when people walk out of that opera house, they're going to say, "What can we do about it tomorrow morning to see to it that this does not happen?" Writing music to such themes is quite terrifying. I'm not a pessimistic person by nature, I'm a happy-go-lucky, life-loving person. The next piece I'm going to write will be all bubbles, sheer nonsense. I would very much like to write a work without any substance, without any value, something that will make people laugh.

SHEAR: You've earned the right to do that.

MAAZEL: Yeah, and if I can bring that off, I'll really be a happy person.

SHEAR: But the question is, will you conduct it?

MAAZEL: No, no. Conducting is not all that much fun. I want to sit in the seventeenth row and have the pleasure of hearing people laugh at my bad jokes.

SHEAR: And you will write this under your own name, not a pseudonym?

MAAZEL: I might.

SHEAR: You have to give that some thought. Here's a final question: Do you feel that your role as a conductor has been to bring younger people to classical music?

MAAZEL: I'm very embarrassed to say this as an American, but we're a backwater. Young people don't have to be "brought into the fold" in England or France or Spain or Germany or Japan or Malaysia or Taipei. I travel a lot, and it's astonishing the number of young people who go to concerts outside of our country who are passionately devoted to classical music, and the number of young people who want to become musicians and play classical music! I've just come back from conducting the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra in Venezuela, the members of which have been culled from an association of 135 provincial orchestras established by José Antonio Abreu, who ought to get the Nobel Peace Prize. Before they were brought into the orchestras some of these people were pushing drugs, part of street gangs, had nothing to eat and nothing to lose, and were growing up in slums beyond description.

This system has brought more than 130,000 young people into classical music, and I conducted the best of the lot. It just blew my mind. These were kids between 14 and 23, playing Tchaikovsky's *Romeo & Juliet*, the Grieg Piano Concerto with Gabriela Montero, Kodály's *Dances of Galanta*, and the Second Suite from Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*. And their playing was to die for—the enthusiasm and the power and the dedication they threw into this music! We're talking about Caracas, Venezuela. In our own country we have not only classical music, but infant mortality and illiteracy and all the other problems—if you look at the statistics, it's pitiful for a leading country to be in such shape. What we need to do is shape up and realize that there are folks out there who are overtaking us. And there's no reason why we should allow this. Young people care about classical music outside of the boundaries of our country, and they could care here if it were properly promoted and properly disseminated. The potential is there, it just needs to be tapped.