

With A Season Behind Him, How Did Andris Nelsons Do?



Christian Tetzlaff with Andris Nelsons and the BSO. (Liza Voll)

Keith Powers April 21, 2015



The first official season of the Andris Nelsons' era at the Boston Symphony Orchestra has concluded. The whirlwind — in a conductor's world, at least — that has carried him from his initial, fill-in performance with the orchestra at Carnegie Hall in 2011, all the way to becoming the 15th music director of the BSO, and the youngest in 100 years, might be ready to subside.

To cap off his debut season as music director, the BSO traveled to New York last week, performing Nelsons' three most recent subscription programs at Carnegie Hall. The enthusiastic audience response gave the lie to the notion of phlegmatic New Yorkers, and seemed to cement Nelsons' growing bond with his stage-mates.

The repertory for the Carnegie concerts broke no new ground. In that regard, Nelsons's vision for a new music direction — a point of pride with Serge Koussevitzky's mid-century BSO — remains unfocused. (The fact that Carnegie lacks an organ, and so [Michael Gandolfi's new organ concerto "Ascending Light"](#) could not be performed as it was in Symphony Hall, was unfortunate.)

But terse, unblinkingly secure readings of Richard Strauss's "Ein Heldenleben," and Mahler's Sixth

Symphony, aided by a highly personal approach from soloist Christian Tetzlaff to Beethoven's violin concerto, drew clamorous responses from the audiences that packed Carnegie Hall for all three concerts.

The BSO has not yet concluded its season; two more programs at Symphony Hall under Bernard Haitink's direction remain. And no small set of onstage successes could give any certain idea of Nelsons' orchestral captaincy.

But much about his style can be divined.



The young conductor, Andris Nelsons. (Michael Blanchard)

Nelsons loves his job. His passion for music runs deep, and it's not just intellectual — he's emotional. His off-the-scale podium gestures will be a source for commentary and amusement for as long as his tenure lasts.

If Nelsons were an actor, he'd be Jim Carrey. If he were a comedian, Robin Williams. He's a genius, but he works hard for it. He's graceful and fluid, but he does not make it look easy. He's a big man, and he uses every bit of his floor — and airspace to shape the music.

His genius comes in finding and nurturing musical phrases. In maintaining tension throughout the orchestra. He does this by investing emotionally, not treating even one set of measures as simply “this is an extended part of the development,” or “this little bit gets us through to the coda.” He feels it all.

As with any performer, Nelsons’ greatest strengths can be his greatest weakness. He can over-conduct.

A superb ensemble like the BSO can make great music with minimal intervention from a conductor. The austere podium commands from a Masur, or von Dohnányi — which invariably end up in electrifying performances — provide proof enough.

Those conductors make their mark in rehearsal, or simply by reputation. No wild gesticulations necessary. You know the score, they seem to say, let’s make music. And the orchestra is capable of doing just that, without exhortations, simply with an occasional downbeat, a cue here and there for a precise entrance, some counting when the rhythms cross over each other.

Nelsons will never be like that. He’s only 36, and he may tone down his physical flamboyance as he gets older. Probably not. He conducts grandly, molding figures with both arms far apart. Scooping deep down with one arm or another — the [New Yorker’s Alex Ross](#) calls this move the “Across-the-Table Ice-Cream Scoop” — to sweep a phrase along. Reaching high, trilling with his fingers to signal the horns or harp. Even air drumming from the podium for the timpani.

He wears his heart on his sleeve, but his feelings are genuine. His conducting — however unorthodox — is organic, and his results have been unmistakably successful. For three long evenings of music at Carnegie Hall, not a single lapse in his orchestra’s attention span was discernible.

Those lapses might come. These are professionals, who work year round. It cannot remain “first season, rapt attention” forever. Nelsons’ exhortations will eventually receive a tepid response, in one appearance or another, somewhere down the road.

Various appraisals of Nelsons’ conducting have been offered. [Anthony Tommasini of the New York Times](#) wrote a summary review of the three Carnegie concerts, praising the music and hoping that Nelsons clarifies his intentions toward contemporary composition. [Jeremy Eichler of the Globe](#), whose initial enthusiasm for Nelsons’ conducting likely had much to do with his appointment, has consistently supported his work.

[David Mermelstein of the Wall Street Journal](#), in a well-conceived summary, criticized some of the

repertory from Nelsons' programs at Symphony Hall last fall, but generally supported his selection, sounding optimistic about the orchestra's future. Last December, Ross wrote a compelling (and humorous) dissection of Nelsons' podium style. David Allen of the Times, writing in this spring before the Carnegie appearances, gave many informed insights into Nelsons' programs to that point. But also quoted Nelsons as saying he "didn't want to change anything" — which Allen and others have concluded as implying Nelsons has an unclear concept for the BSO's future.

We know a little about Nelsons' proclivities: a love for Bruckner, Wagner, Shostakovich. A talent for the music of Strauss and Mahler, and in general, the musical language just before and after 1900. His precise vision for a direction on contemporary music may not be complete. Given the BSO's steady financial commitment to new works, Nelsons will get every chance to make his mark.

And given his background — a Latvian, born when it was still in Soviet Russia, with ties to central European, Scandinavian and Germanic traditions — it seems likely that the musical cosmos inhabited by Shostakovich, Wagner, Pärt, Gubaidulina, Sibelius, Gorecki, Henze, Strauss and Bruckner will get explored. A recently announced recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon for a set of Shostakovich symphonies guarantees that, in part. (If one needs any more certain sign of the belief in Nelsons' future, wouldn't a five-recording contract be just that?)

Pot shots get taken at the BSO from time to time — many fewer since the end of the Ozawa era — but it remains one of the world's great ensembles. The history, the magnificent hall, the rigid auditioning process and the money — the glorious three-headed economic machine that the BSO, Pops and Tanglewood comprise definitely fits into the equation — all this ensures the future of the orchestra. And neither the desultory final seasons under Ozawa, nor the maddening lack of fulfillment in James Levine's tenure, could possibly derail that.

There have been implications that Nelsons needs more seasoning before daring to lead the austere professionals of the BSO. I agree to some extent — but I also think that means Nelsons is exactly what



Andris Nelsons rehearses with the BSO. (Marco Borggreve)

the BSO needs.



Andris Nelsons directs a Boston Symphony Orchestra rehearsal at Tanglewood in July. (Courtesy Marco Borggreve/BSO)

This art form needs an infusion of energy. A sense of risk. No matter how much new music gets programmed, no matter how many “half off for singles” or “under 30” promotions are launched, classical music consists largely of compositions written long ago, performed by seasoned professionals — for audiences that eschew multi-tasking for a couple hours, to enjoy thoughtful entertainment.

This does not make it boring. Watch anyone who is hearing, for the first time, Beethoven’s “Eroica,” or “Rite of Spring,” or “Miraculous Mandarin,” live at Symphony Hall, and you see, or remember, what the thrill is.

Recapturing that thrill will be what Nelsons does for the BSO. At these Carnegie Hall concerts, hearing “Heldenleben,” hearing Mahler Six — it was just like hearing it for the first time. When Nelsons conducts, the audience knows for certain that at least one person in the room is intensely, physically invested in the music. He transfers that passion to his orchestra, and to his audiences. This is why we trust Nelsons with the future of the BSO.

Keith Powers, former music critic at the Boston Herald, now freelances for a number of newspapers and

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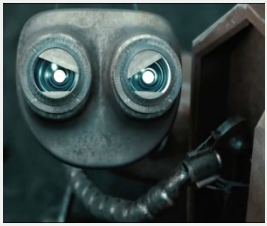
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