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The Andris Nelsons-BSO Ethic: 'We Have To Dig Deep While We Can'

September 28, 2016 By [Keith Powers](#) 



His baton raised above this international amalgam of musicians, Andris Nelsons represents what the Boston Symphony Orchestra has become.

He and his wife, soprano Kristine Opolais, travel incessantly, and still make Europe their home. Beginning next year, he will [take over](#) the famed Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, adding that conductorship to his BSO duties. It's a historic joint appointment, spearheading an effort to bring Gewandhaus and the BSO closer together.

But Nelsons lives in a world where the most high profile conductors all keep multiple positions, in addition to guest conducting around the world. For the energetic Nelsons, having just two appointments seems like settling down.



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“For me it means concentration on Boston, and, from 2018 on, concentration on Leipzig as well,” Nelsons says. We sat together at Tanglewood, where he was interrupted in the sun-splashed press porch in between practicing trumpet scales (before the baton, the trumpet was his instrument).

It was a glorious carefree week, leading up to Nelsons conducting the BSO in its traditional [Tanglewood closer](#), Beethoven's Ninth. Although much work gets

done at the BSO's summer encampment, it's also a time for practicing trumpet scales, driving the golf carts around the campus (Nelsons doesn't drive a car, but cruises about the Tanglewood grounds with enthusiasm), and taking stock of commitments, both onstage and in life.

"It means digging deeper, and collaborating," he says of his concentration on two orchestras. "I'm hugely reducing my guest conducting, down to one week in Berlin and one week in Vienna. And occasionally an opera.

"It's good to conduct different orchestras, of course. I had Riga, and Herford, and Birmingham," he says, speaking of his previous music directorships. "It's not like I'm calming down, but before you can reach a deeper understanding about the music, you need to build a relationship with your orchestra. You need to invest longterm to build something.

"I'll be almost 40 when I start with both orchestras," he says. Nelsons turns 38 this November. "It's young for a conductor, I know, and maybe I can do both until I'm 60 or so. But after that, you can't do two. Then I'll concentrate on my grandchildren.

"No matter what, I think it's important to dig deep. If we knew we would live 80 or 90 years, I would know more by then. But what if my mental health goes away at 60? If we want to share the message of the composers, to give good things back to humanity, we have to dig deep while we can."

Serious thoughts from someone who lives in the moment, and conducts with unending enthusiasm — an enthusiasm that is not limited to the concert performances.

In another rarity for the classical music world, Nelsons has engineered a series of recording contracts — the [complete Shostakovich orchestral music](#) with the BSO (last year's debut was awarded a Grammy), the complete Bruckner symphonies with Gewandhaus, and the complete Beethoven symphonies with the Vienna

Philharmonic — all on Deutsche Grammophon.

The first Shostakovich disc, including Symphony No. 10 and the passacaglia from “Lady MacBeth of the Mtsensk District,” was reviewed favorably everywhere ([including in this space](#)), and not only won a Grammy, but had a sound so precise that those familiar with Symphony Hall’s acoustics could actually hear the room.

“When the oldest surviving record company goes all in on a conductor, everyone notices. The forest of microphones set up in Symphony Hall these days — there were at least 25 hanging down on opening night — is a sign of the commitment to quality. That commitment shows up in [the recordings](#).”

The Shostakovich recordings originally were to include only the music written during Stalin’s reign. That commitment was quickly expanded to include all the symphonic music, along with the opera “Lady MacBeth of the Mtsensk District” — perhaps in part from the reception given the first disc.



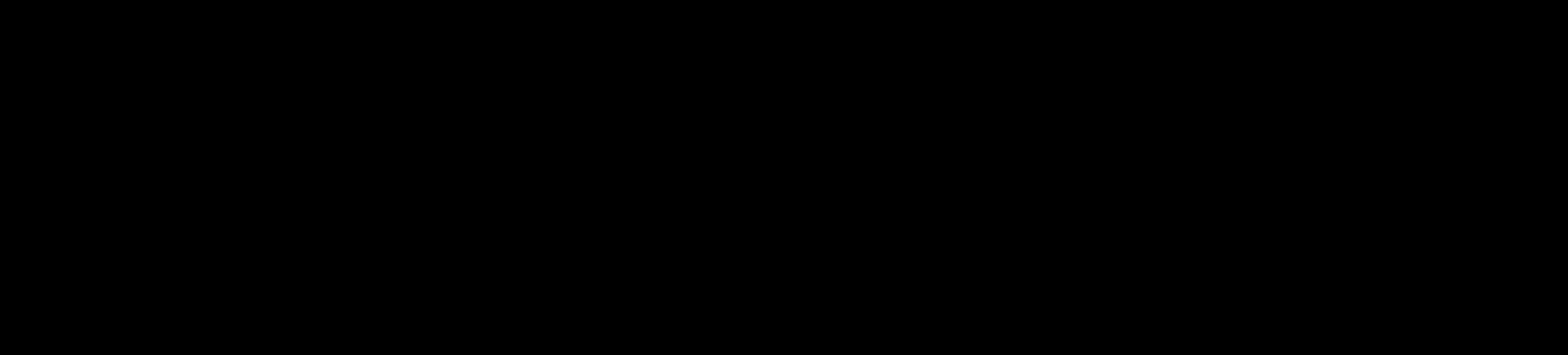
"When such a big label takes a serious interest — and not just in the most popular symphonies — these are courageous recordings," he says. "Doing the full cycle makes it a complete journey. Shostakovich's music is still important to us. Beethoven is perhaps more obvious. Bruckner's life was so interesting and complicated, and I want to share the feelings that he wanted to share.

"We want to look at that music again, respect the tradition but say subjectively what we want to with the music to today's audience. A hundred years from now there will be more recordings, and no matter what the future looks like with its ways of communicating, it's important for us to leave something."

The Shostakovich cycle will continue during this upcoming BSO season, with concerts featuring the Sixth and Seventh ("the biggest and most powerful of them all," Nelsons says) symphonies planned for live performance recordings. As well as the robust and uncomplicated "Festive Overture," which was part of opening night's [gala concert this past Saturday](#). Pianist Lang Lang joined the orchestra for the one-night performance, which filled Symphony Hall with black-tie supporters ready to show some love for their boyish conductor.

That performance proved just how much Nelsons fits in with the musical glitterati. If anyone has copyrighted music flamboyance for this generation, it's Lang Lang. He can play with the best of them, but that virtuosity sometimes gets lost in the grand body language, the distant Romantic gazes, the constant mugging.





Nelsons — swooping and bending onstage, prodding his players into constant explorations of the highs and lows of each musical phrase — is just as much the celebrity performer as Lang Lang. Having a charismatic soloist is a big plus for an opening night gala, but Nelsons’ magnetism alone is engaging enough for any Symphony Hall audience.

For this season, a red-carpet-style performance with Lang Lang was just the beginning. “We have a lot of amazing pianists this season,” Nelsons says, listing Hélène Grimaud (here for a cycle of Brahms’s orchestral works), Yefim Bronfman, Radu Lupu, Emanuel Ax, Kirill Gerstein and Mitsuko Uchida. “The recordings, the Brahms cycle, so many premieres — I’m looking forward to all of it.”



A performance of Bach's Mass in B minor in December strikes a particular chord. "I'm afraid to conduct Bach," he says, a startling admission. "I've played the trumpet in the B minor, I even sang in the B minor. But I've never conducted it.

"The music of Bach is so timeless, so fulfilling. You don't feel like you have to be in front of it. The music has everything, and you are there to find the balance when you conduct. You don't have to give too much of your individuality. It's Bach, so it's dangerous to get in the way.

"There have been so many great conductors for Bach — Stokowski for the Romantic period, and Gardner and Harnoncourt, the masters of period instruments. Every way is interesting, because you immediately find your own connection.

"All the ways are valid, but the only valid reason for conducting Bach is to express something in our feelings — our doubts, our anger about the human condition, our faith. It doesn't matter if it's Romantic or Baroque or modern. It's a connection to the human heart.

"He's such a genius — a mathematical genius almost like Einstein. I want to express this music, to perform it in the amazing acoustic of Symphony Hall. I feel like I'm being brave in a certain way, expressing it in the way that we see the world today."

It's been five years since Nelsons filled in for the ailing James Levine, conducting the BSO at Carnegie Hall in a concert that would pave the way to his taking over the orchestra. That heady sequence of events energizes Nelsons, and he speaks with deep respect for his predecessor.

“Jimmy Levine is a wonderful genius,” he says. “I’m thankful for what he’s done with this orchestra. His health created all the problems.”

Levine’s tenure with the BSO was star-crossed. He is officially listed as music director from 2004 to 2011, but in fact had only a couple of complete seasons, having suffered from a rotator cuff injury, kidney cancer and back issues, besides the lingering symptoms of what would later be revealed as Parkinson’s disease. Nelsons, with a young daughter (Adriana, now four) and a globe-trotting wife, seems determined not to let his schedule undermine his health or his personal life.


“For a conductor, the most important thing is what you do onstage,” he says. “But you can’t touch people if you don’t lead a life, if you stay in your room and study all the time. When I was young it was all music. I don’t think so now.

“The health, and the family and those values, they come first. This orchestra is my community and my family too. You must take care of your family, respect the music and work intensely. Health and family come first, and then you can make much better music.”

***Correction:** An earlier version of this post stated it was the second BSO-Shostakovich disc that won a Grammy. It was the first. We regret the error.*

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