



Yannick Nézet-Séguin and Kensho Watanabe discuss the score of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony. PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Opportunity of a Lifetime

CURTIS'S FIRST CONDUCTING FELLOW LEARNS FROM AN EMINENT MENTOR.

BY KENSHO WATANABE

My daily morning routine—as for many of us in the age of being “plugged in” at all times—is to catch up on e-mails that have come in overnight while still in bed, allowing the blinding glare of my phone’s LED screen to awaken me from my slumber. Such was the case on a Sunday morning last fall. In the preceding three days I had conducted three thrilling yet exhausting performances of Viktor Ullmann’s *Emperor of Atlantis*, paired with Bach’s cantata *Ich habe genug*. It was my very first experience conducting an opera, with one performance left in the run. As I swiped away LivingSocial deals and offers from Amazon, I saw “Nézet-Séguin” in bold, and immediately bolted out of bed to read the brief message.

“Just a word to say I have been thinking of you the past few days for your opera performance! When you have a moment (last one is today, correct?), please drop me a line to let me know how it went and how you felt.”

Having mentioned the performance schedule for the Ullmann only in passing at our previous meeting, I was surprised that the music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra had not only remembered how important this weekend was for me, but also took the time to check in with me despite his hectic schedule. But as I have gotten to know Yannick over the

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Kensho Watanabe conducted Strauss's "Dance of the Seven Veils" with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in October. PHOTO: DAVID DEBALKO

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past few months, I have come to understand that thoughtfulness, sincerity, and dedication are characteristic of everything he does; these make him a true mentor conductor.

The first thing that struck me in our interactions was Yannick's willingness to include me in the artistic process. In addition to inviting me to observe Philadelphia Orchestra rehearsals, he and Associate Conductor Cristian Măcelaru have opened up their post-rehearsal discussions to me as well, frequently involving me in artistic decisions that are made behind closed doors. Being able to contribute in this way has given me confidence in my own artistic opinions.

Yannick has also set aside an hour to meet with me privately whenever he is in Philadelphia. In one such meeting, we watched a video recording of Strauss's "Dance of the Seven Veils" from *Salome*, which I had conducted with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in October. Pausing and restarting the video to underline each point, Yannick commented animatedly and extensively on the effectiveness of my gestures and facial expressions—those that were successful and those that were not so successful in prompting the sound I was looking for from the orchestra.

What I appreciated most was his encouragement to be the best version of myself, rather than merely to follow a specific doctrine. "Always think about your gestures in relation to the product of sound," he told me. "Don't worry about how a specific gesture looks."

PRELUDE TO PERFORMANCE

One of the true highlights of the year has been the opportunity to prepare the Curtis Symphony Orchestra for their reading of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony ("Leningrad") with Yannick. He graciously lent me his score for reference as I learned the piece, and met with me privately before rehearsals began. To explore the rich historical and emotional depths of this piece at such an early stage in my career was an incredible experience, and I couldn't have had better guidance through the process.

On the day of the reading, I was anxious, hoping that the work the orchestra and I had done would be to his liking, all the while feeling powerless to effect any change at that moment. I needn't have worried. As they always do, the orchestra played brilliantly, and Yannick seemed impressed. I noticed how easily he was able to communicate with the players, whether through his gestures or through eloquent yet succinct suggestions. It was an encouraging prelude to the rehearsal period that would follow in January, as he and the orchestra prepared to perform the work at Verizon Hall.

Over the last few months, I've become convinced that learning the technical aspects of conducting and learning how to make music through conducting are two equally important yet separate processes. While exploring this new mentorship with Yannick, I have begun to find my own voice in the music, worrying less about technique and focusing my efforts to communicate and interact with my colleagues in the orchestra.

This transition is certainly not an overnight process, nor one without a few bumps (and psychological bruises!) along the way. To have such a strong supporter in Yannick—just an e-mail away—is an immense luxury. From my perspective, the new conducting fellows program has been a huge success, as I have thrived under my mentor's thoughtful and attentive dedication to his role. I know that this fortuitous and unique opportunity will significantly impact my growth as a musician. I can't wait to be able to serve in a similar role for a young conductor one day. ♦

Kensho Watanabe graduated from Curtis in 2013 and became the first Rita E. Hauser Conducting Fellow last fall, working closely with mentor conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin.

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Kensho Watanabe conducts the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in Glinka and Bartók at

www.InstantEncore.com/Curtis