



From The Podium (Transcript)

ESO Offstage - Episode 7

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[MUSIC - 00:00]

Max Cardilli (00:03): Welcome to ESO Offstage, I'm your host and ESO Double Bassist Max Cardilli. My earliest memory of music is being brought to an early childhood music program. When I was handed a triangle and a stick to tap it with, I passed the triangle to my mother but kept the stick declaring that I wanted to be the conductor. Of course at that time I thought that being a conductor meant getting to work on a train. This episode I finally find out what being a conductor really means by speaking to four conductors who talk about their work on-and-off the podium. But first, how did we get here? Here's DT Baker, who writes the program notes for the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, and presents online courses and lectures about music.

[MUSIC - 00:54]

D.T. Baker (00:57): There was once a time, many an orchestral musician will tell you, when there were no conductors, and the world was an eden where musicians roamed free.

And there was once a time, conductors will tell you, when there were no conductors, and the world was a dystopian hellscape where musicians roamed free.

The truth is, like nearly everything connected with the orchestral music we know and love, the art of the conductor evolved over a long period of time. But it stands to reason that, when the number of musicians gathered to make music together reaches a certain quantity, some sense of direction is a pretty good idea. It's the nature of that direction, and how it has changed, that is the heart of our story.

We have to keep in mind that, until the Romantic era created the self-sustaining artist who made their living on the basis of the acceptance of their work by the public and by patrons of art, musicians now revered as immortal, such as Bach and Mozart, were regarded as part of the working class, a guild of artisans, really – and were happy to be thought of as such. So those who kept time, or helped ensure that the entrances were done correctly, were assistants to these professionals. Even as late as Schumann, who referred to conducting as a “necessary evil,” and Verdi, who felt that conductors did not merit their own bows after a performance, conductors were nowhere near the messianic figures they would become.

And yet, there always seems to have been a need for it. Going back to our friends, the ancient Greeks, the rhythm both of choral and of instrumental music was marked by stamping on the ground with the right foot, to which was attached a piece of iron. Some like to think this may be the origin of the later practice of raising the hand for a weak



beat and lowering it for a strong one. The Bohemian Venceslaus Philomathes (1512), who criticized extravagance in music, felt that those who lead the performance should do so by example, rather than by overly extravagant gestures, and among his criticisms, observed that some cantors conduct from a fighting stance with their hands held up, as if threatening injury towards his colleagues. In 1549, Spanish friar and composer Juan Bermudo mentioned with disapproval those who hit the music book with a staff, so that it can be heard all over the church.

In 1665, Christopher Simpson wrote that in order to keep musical time, “we use a constant Motion of the Hand. Or, if the hand be otherwise employed, we use the Foot. If that be also engaged, the Imagination (to which these are but assistant) is able of itself to perform that Office.”

“Stroke” was a term used by Elizabethan music scholar and composer Thomas Morley (1597), defined as “a successive motion of the hand, directing the quantity of every note & rest in the song, with equal measure.” So that is starting to sound a lot like actual conducting.

For a long time, of course, “conducting” was largely a matter of cuing, and it was done from within the orchestra. Generally, if there was a keyboard involved, cues would be given from there. As well, the job could be done from the first violinist’s desk. But as performances became grander, the musical forces grew. Operas and ballets would often involve multiple ensembles, and multiple “conductors” would be needed. The first violinist would lead the musicians, while another conductor would cue dancers or singers. And in the days before electricity, large performance spaces could make it hard to see someone’s hand waving in a dimly lit space, so other devices were used – from rolls of paper to violin bows, to the stamping of a staff on the floor.

In fact, the famous legend tells of French master musician Jean-Baptiste Lully, long the favourite of Louis XIV, who accidentally struck himself on the foot with his staff, wounding himself so significantly that the wound became infected, ultimately becoming the cause of Lully’s death. That the first recorded death of a conductor came from his own hands and not from a member of his orchestra is worth noting.

Time goes on, the size of the orchestra continues to grow. To the standard Baroque complement of strings are added woodwinds and brass, to the point where they become permanent members of the orchestra – Beethoven’s Fifth symphony gives us the first symphonic performances by piccolo and trombone. The larger the orchestra gets, the more difficult it becomes to lead it from a desk within it. Still, the normal way of doing things in the Classical era and the early Romantic is for the composer of music to lead the orchestra in the performance of it. In fact, illustrations of Mozart conducting were used on pamphlets advertising the first production of his opera *The Magic Flute* in 1791.



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The full flower of the Romantic era in the early 19th century changed everything. The artist as a profession puts them in control, for better or worse. They now dictate thematic content, and the interpretation of music becomes a very personal thing.

Still, most of the time, the composer led the orchestra. But with Felix Mendelssohn, and others in the early decades of the 19th century, concerts began to scour the treasures of the past more and more, rather than relying on the latest new thing all the time. In fact, Mendelssohn is credited with reviving interest in the music of Bach, which had been relegated to the musical back benches following the great composer's death in 1750.

The era of the conductor as interpreter has now arrived, and let's face it, if it's not your music, it takes a pretty confident person to stand in front of a few score professional musicians and assert your artistic will on someone else's music. And two of the most important figures in establishing the conductor as the final word did not lack for confidence. And interestingly, I think a large part of the reason that Hector Berlioz and Richard Wagner would advance the "art," if you like, of conducting is that neither Berlioz nor Wagner played a musical instrument. They could get by on a piano, but for them, the orchestra itself was their instrument, and so mastery of it became crucial to their art.

Nowadays, we take the almost complete separation of composer, conductor, soloist, and orchestral musician as a matter of course. But there is a very direct line, for example, from Wagner to the great German conducting tradition. From Wagner to von Bülow to Furtwangler to Karajan is a remarkably straight line, and the notion of conductor as orchestral pop star became a thing. Orchestras became famous largely due to the eras during which a particular conductor was their Music Director and for many classical music fans, naming a conductor instantly calls to mind an orchestra – and vice versa.

But even school kid Peter Parker knew that with great power came great responsibility, and there are books filled with the over-reach of many a conductor with many an orchestra. George Szell's directorship of the Cleveland Orchestra was so total, one of his musicians joked that, if he could, Szell would be in the box office selling tickets. Arturo Toscanini was equally infamous. His tantrums at rehearsals were the stuff of legend - snapping batons and dyspeptic tirades, and once declaring the orchestra's playing was an insult to both him and Beethoven (putting both on equal footing).

Recent decades have seen a more cooperative relationship develop between a Music Director and their orchestra, and the age of the despot seems largely to be behind us.



[MUSIC-10:44]

Max Cardilli (10:47): So, if the age of the despot is behind us, what is taking its place? I had the chance to speak with Daniel Bartholomew Poyser, who is an artist in residence and Community Ambassador for Symphony Nova Scotia as well as being the Barret Principal Education Conductor and Community Ambassador for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. It's people like Daniel and my other guests who are redefining what it means to be a conductor in today's orchestras.

Max Cardilli (11:13): What drew you into becoming a conductor?

Daniel Bartholomew Poyser (11:15): You know, when I was in Grade Two, my teacher Mrs Pauls in Marion Carson school in Varsity, which may or may not be even - Oh, this is an Edmonton podcast, so why am I giving all these Calgary locations? [laughs] I shouldn't even mention it actually. [laughs] I certainly won't mention that I'm a Flames fan because that would get me in trouble.

Max Cardilli (11:35): Yeah, okay, no more questions.

Daniel Bartholomew Poyser (11:38): Yeah, that's right, the interview is done. We are finished. [laughs] Thank you Daniel and next! Okay, even though I'm from Calgary, I super love Edmonton all jokes aside. Except for the Oilers, that vendetta remains but everything else is good. We started just doing those patterns in grade two actually and I think I always just kind of had it, you know, in my um. I would just conduct along to stuff for fun. I was very fortunate to be in Alberta and to have the music education systems that we have in Alberta that are set up so that when I said I want to play tuba I was handed a tuba and my single parent family was able to afford the rental of that tuba. Go music education in Alberta! I always wanted to be a professional conductor. How did I know that I would love conducting and I wanted to be a conductor before I had ever conducted? I guess you kind of imagine what it'd be like to be up there in front of musicians. It's this non-verbal conversation, communication between musicians of the orchestra and the conductor. The negotiation of how things will go is incredibly intimate especially in performance. You can feel it, you can literally feel it underneath your hands how people are responding and it's not like one person's making a decision, it's this group-mind. It's really fascinating. Like, that's kind of the thrill of conducting. That's what gets you back. How did I know that I would love that when I, you know, had only just started those lessons? I don't know, I don't know. But I think I made the right choice so far, so.

Max Cardilli (12:57): Is conducting what you thought it was going to be?



Daniel Bartholomew Poyser (12:59): [laughs] No no no no no no no. It's both more and less than what I thought it would be. It's more challenging in different ways. I guess the breadth of it is quite challenging. What do I mean by that? There's a book called "From the Ground Up" and it's a pilot training manual. The very first sentence of this pilot training manual is "among other things, one of the things the pilot has to learn how to do is fly an airplane. But apart from that..." and then it goes on for another 10 pages, right. [laughs] You think of all the stuff - of policies, like, you know - they're a scientist, and they're a weather person, and they're a physicist, and they're a mechanic, and they're all these different things. It is really the same with the conductor. In order to be a good conductor you also have to be a good administrator, a good speaker, a good people person, a good emailer. [laughs] You have to be a good programmer, a really good programmer. So, it's challenging in that there are many things you have to do in order to do that job and it's also in a sense, it's a lot about the music but the actual interaction with music, and I don't just mean concerts and rehearsals but also just plain old working with music and studying music, those are the pinnacle times. The actual work of being a conductor sometimes feels like a vacation compared to all the work you have to do to continue being a conductor. That by the time you get on stage - that's the fun part. I didn't actually imagine if it was going to be as much fun actually conducting as it is, because people look at me, they're like: "oh you look like you're having so much fun, it looks like it's such a great thing" and I'm like actually what it looks like, it's ten times better than that. Conducting a professional orchestra is incredible.

Max Cardilli (14:33): CBC produced a documentary that follows Daniel around on the job. [Daniels tag] I highly recommend checking it out to see how Daniel is breaking down barriers and disrupting the norm in his field.

Daniel Bartholomew Poyser (14:50): Looking back on the work that kind of naturally outflowed over the first six years of my conducting career, and not just as a result of me as a result of people like Chris Wilkinson, CEO of um Symphony Nova Scotia, Edwin Outwater who was the music director of Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony, Olga Mychajluk who was the Artistic Administrator in Kitchener, and also now Toronto Symphony Orchestra.

You know, I get a lot of acclaim for the work that we did for kids on on the spectrum, for concerts that included music of black people for concerts, for people like my queer family - LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit community, on concerts for them with Thorgy Thor, for prison concerts - right. There were always teams of people that were working on this, and I see that that's been some of the most valuable work that I've done. I want to continue it. I want to do more innovative things. I'd like to make it so that by the time my career is done in 40 years neurodiverse concerts like Toyota Corollas and Honda Civics - they're just everywhere, you know - they're everywhere. Of course you're doing neurodiverse concerts. Of course we have a prison program. Of course! How couldn't we? It's about making room at the table.



I think it was Abbado that said that “one of the main jobs of the conductor is to give the musicians confidence” and then when they have confidence then they're able to play their best. When they're playing their best your job becomes really simple, because there's this organic sort of collaboration that's happening in the moment. It's really, really beautiful.

So, lately I've been thinking more about that. What do I need - not just beat patterns and stuff - but how do I need to be in order to give the musicians confidence that this performance is going to be great, that we're doing as a value, and they know exactly when to start. They know exactly how the transitions go, they know the boundaries of the *decrescendo*, they know the boundaries of the *rallentando* and the *accelerando*, so they know what to expect. When people know what to expect then they can really perform the best.

That's what I'm, that's what I'm learning and thinking about right now. It's very, very practical. It's almost medical. People can work better when their fight or flight responses are not activated. I think we know that now - reading some of the biographies of some of these conductors who were tyrants. Those same conductors were tyrants because they were afraid and - this is not justifying abuse of a player at all - but they were at times afraid of being shown up or being made to look foolish. So, you know, strike first and just undercut the players. I don't want to do that. Ultimately music is for people, people aren't for music.

Max Cardilli (17:16): I asked Daniel more about his approach in connecting with the orchestra and the audience.

Daniel Bartholomew Poyser (17:25): I guess one of the things that helps is that I worked with Junior high school students for a long time. I spent 10 years teaching junior high school music in Calgary. People go “wow, you work with them. That's crazy. Like, they're the worst age group”. They're the best actually. The best age group to work with. You can't hide anything. You can't hide anything from them because they can read you really, really easily - and it's the same with an orchestra. You can't hide anything from an orchestra.

So, it's like the conductor gets up and in the first minute everybody knows. It's like yes or no. Yes or no. You see, you can't hide. And, it basically comes down to every performance - that process of vulnerability. That's one of the exhausting things about the art. If you are an actor and you're playing, you know, some Shakespearean tragedy in which you're a character - a main character who dies at the end of the play - and you're doing that four times a week, you can't take a night off emotionally or psychologically.



You have to go there every single time. You can have the right baton technique, and you can say the right things - but to be willing to be emotionally vulnerable with an orchestra...You know, especially the types of shows that I started off doing. That I do.

You know, doing an education show where you're doing eight shows of the same thing - twice, maybe three times in one day - and every single time it's 100% commitment. No excuses.

And when we're doing these outreach concerts, and education concerts, and community engagement concerts that applies threefold - tenfold - because for everybody in the audience, right, all those people in the audience. It's somebody's first, last, or only concert. You might have a person in the audience who it's the first time they're ever hearing an orchestra, and you can take their life in a totally different direction. The conductor is given two really important sticks - one is the baton for the musicians, and the other one is the microphone, for the audience.

So, everything matters. Everything has to be done to the same absolute standard. And that's what makes the work so intense. That's what makes it so continually intense - and the process of vulnerability, I think it's a matter of will. It's like "will I or won't I go there for these people today?"

You know, maybe I'm feeling a conflict, or I'm feeling tired, or whatever - but it's like for the orchestra members. Am I willing to go there? Because if I'm not, if I'm not, what can I expect of them?

Max Cardilli (19:54): Daniel teamed up with Thorgy Thor, an American Drag Queen and musician who was featured on the hit TV show Ru Paul's Drag Race. "Thorgy and the Thorchestra" was the first orchestra drag show in Canada. If it sounds familiar it's because that same show came here to the Edmonton Symphony in 2019.

Daniel Bartholomew Poyser (20:15): We approached Thorgy and at first they weren't really sure. She was like "how can this work? Like, how can we do this?"

So basically what we decided was that I would kind of handle you know some of the education and human rights-portion side of it. Like, speaking about the Brunswick Four - those four, it was kind of a spark for the LGBT2S+ community in Toronto in 1974. I would bring that sort of information and Thorgy would bring just all the fun of a New York drag show and all of her talent, you know, playing cello and violin because Thorgy plays violin, and cello, and viola. The idea was that people come for a drag show. they're coming for Thorgy. By the time they leave they've gotten Thorgy, they've gotten a game show, they've gotten LGBTQ education, they've gotten a little bit of Canadian history, they've got all this stuff.



So, you get more than you bargained for - and that's why the show has been a success! And that's why we toured it, you know, over the States and all over the place. It's been really, really great. I think the part that had the most personal significance was just having all those people - that community in the room, and having it be a place that was, like, overly okay. That was really...that was very, very important to me. So to have a concert hall where the Two-Spirit LGBTQIA+ experience is enshrined, respected, celebrated is kind of groundbreaking.

It was not so long ago that in Toronto police were raiding establishments where they thought that there were gay people were liaising, and and tracking people's mail, and doing all sorts of heinous things. You can just - seem like "oh my gosh, is this from a novel in, like, you know 1800's?" No, no, no - this is Canada 1980s. It's not that long ago - so to have it be more safe - especially to have young people who are 12, and 13, and 14, and 15 come to a concert hall and have that be normal. That is their starting point. Their starting point is a concert with a Drag Queen and an Orchestra providing you know hilarious drag hits and modern hits from the gay clubs right alongside Glinka and Mozart and Beethoven! That I feel good about. If that can be normalized. It was not normalized for me, though. I had a painful experience of being in the closet. I mean like we say, like , "oh, in the closet". People don't really think about what that feels like for people who are in the closet - who still are. Some are even listening to this now. It's a painful place. So, providing opportunities and spaces where people can be overtly themselves or in introverted ways themselves - that's powerful, and that's meaningful to me.

[MUSIC - 22:48]

Cosette Justo Valdés (22:53): My name is Cosette Justo Valdés and I am the Assistant Conductor and Community Ambassador of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra.

My role here is basically to assist the conductors - our Chief Conductor Alex Prior - and also any guest conductor that we received to cover for them, to be present in all their rehearsals and be on-call in case I need to jump in and conduct. As well as I get my own concerts - mainly educational concerts, Symphony for Kids - and as well as I work as a part of the Artistic Leadership of the YONA program.

Max Cardilli (23:28): Have you ever had to actually jump in at the last minute to cover?

Cosette Justo Valdés (23:32): Yes, I remember covering for one rehearsal. But yeah, every time - I'm ready every time. I'm learning the scores as if I'm conducting.

Max Cardilli (23:39): Like when you're preparing are you nervous that that's going to happen? Or are you excited that that's going to happen?



Cosette Justo Valdés (23:44): Both. [laughs] I'm very excited, because as even Alex Prior was telling me - once he heard about the story of one of his mentors. He had given some laxative to his Chief Conductor so he would get the chance to conduct. [laughs] And it's very funny when I every time - every time I offer Alex a coffee he's like, "is it good? Could I take it?" because yeah, sometimes we are so eager to conduct, right. And I'm lucky that I get so many chances to conduct. Under normal circumstances I was conducting a lot and this year was going to be amazing for me where I was going to conduct so many concerts.

[MUSIC - 24:21]

Cosette Justo Valdés (24:27): It's a great experience to see how people approach me after concerts because of being a woman. Actually last night somebody messaged me and she sent me a picture that her daughter draw of her daughter playing violin - she's learning violin - and also of a female conductor. And she wrote me "see what my daughter just draw? It's easy to see that is a woman because she is wearing a dress, and if you ever thought you don't make a change, you don't provoke the difference - you are. You're making a difference."

So, that brought tears to my eyes - because I've seen so many girls approach me after a concert. Mainly for Symphony for Kids I wear my long, long skirt on purpose for them so that from far away they can see I'm a girl too! And they just come in - well they used to come and hopefully they will come again in huge groups - where I have to talk to each one of them , because they have so many questions.

Max Cardilli (25:26): What sort of questions do they ask?

Cosette Justo Valdés (25:29): Oh, well one of their main questions has been how much do you earn? [laughs] They are very, very honest, right? They want to know and they want to know what do I like the most? What do I hate the most? And they have asked me if I play all the instruments? So many, many different questions.

Max Cardilli (25:45): Can I get you to answer those questions?

Cosette Justo Valdés (25:48): Okay, okay. Good. So how much do I earn - I'm not gonna tell you. [laughter] Second, when they say what do you love the most? I normally say the connection - the human connection with the orchestra, with the musicians. Which is so powerful every time and the adrenaline - that is, every time - it's a feast for me. Is special. I'm nervous, I'm excited - so many emotions.

What I hate the most is this role-playing of conductor versus orchestra. I love my musicians, whoever I work with - and I love to get to know them. And now I think more and more it is seen as a collaboration-type of role, and respect in both ways - other



than just look at the conductor, and respect the conductor and musicians don't matter. That is not the case at all anymore.

Another question, if I play all the instruments. No - I play piano, I love to sing and I love to sing in a choir.

Max Cardilli (26:49): Do you find it's different to come to an orchestra that you've never worked with before versus one that you know very well?

Cosette Justo Valdés (26:56): Yes, it's different. Both cases are difficult in their own way. It's like a first date and a marriage, right? When you come for the first time there is a lot of mystery, there is a lot of freshness. And when you know the orchestra already - well you know some things that can create a foundation for that experience and I feel that when you have a good relationship with that orchestra, everything is already so much easier.

Max Cardilli (27:30): What made you want to become a conductor?

Cosette Justo Valdés (27:32): Well I have a stuttering situation when I speak. Mainly in Spanish - in English you can feel it a little bit - and I had struggled my whole life for speaking in Spanish. I would stutter at every word I would speak. So, I remember I started studying piano and I didn't pass the exam at some point because I was going through a very difficult time. So, I was good in all the theory classes - so they decided "well, we can put you in to study theory of music, for for becoming a musicologist or a teacher. The only problem is that you can barely speak, so we, you, have to work on that."

Then I did work on that. And I remember I was playing piano for the violin class - the only professor of violin - he was trained in the Russian school. Very, very good professor. And I was playing for his class, for his students, and I remember one day I was talking to some friends in a break and he was there and I was saying "oh, you what - I don't want to to suffer this anymore. This struggle of speaking. I want to make music! How can I get to make music so I don't have to talk too much about music?" He said well "you could be a conductor. You could be a good conductor. You are musical. You have character. I don't think you have to speak too much if you're a conductor - you would be making music." And I said "what? You think?" So we called the University of Havana - the only place where you could study conducting, and he found out everything.

I prepared. It's a long story for that but then in the process of preparing I went to the next city where they had an orchestra and I saw for the first time a live concert - Beethoven Fifth and contemporary music, contemporary opera with living composers being there from Europe.



It was amazing and I was in love right away. I knew okay, this - yes. This is, this is me. Of course, I didn't know that I would have to speak once I was a conductor - and I am learning with the opportunity that this orchestra and this city has given me. And my happy language, which is English, where I can bloom and I can express myself, which is already manifesting in my Spanish language and I love it.

So conducting has basically saved my life, because I can express myself.

Max Cardilli (30:03): You have this title of Community Ambassador - what does that mean?

Cosette Justo Valdés (30:07): First of all that means that our orchestra has a mission of connecting and serving our community - and my role includes that aspect. I feel I am a messenger - I'm somebody who can reach out to our community, who can work with our musicians and our staff to get them also to know what our community wants and needs.

We have a beautiful program here within our organization called YONA program - the Youth Orchestra of Northern Alberta. A systema inspired in El Sistema - from Venezuela - and it's a mix of musical program with social programs.

So we really can get to know different areas of our city, and connect with different groups. And I think that has brought us together in a more deep way, because children are so honest and they are so real, and to work with them is always so special. It's beautiful, it's very satisfying when I see the kids - how they change from the first day in front of the music - where they are overwhelmed, when they are a bit scared. After, I start seeing them practicing more and more and getting more excited. I'm very careful on the pieces I choose so that they like it, but it's also a challenge. When I see their enjoyment while playing and after the concert is so beautiful.

[MUSIC - 31:43]

Janna Sailor (32:04): Okay, and with any luck my cats won't crash the interview. They very much resent being left out of anything.

My name is Janna Sailor, and I'm the Conductor and Artistic Director of the Allegra chamber Orchestra, which is an all-female orchestra dedicated to social action through music.

[MUSIC - 32:28]



Janna Sailor (32:32): I grew up in a musical home - my mom was a pianist and a piano teacher, so it wasn't a matter of if you study music, it's just like what are you going to study?

Probably my musical training began in utero - but my first, kind of, conscious musical experience was my mom taking me to the Toronto Symphony and she took me to see *Carnival of the Animals*. I was three years old at the time and she said "okay, have a look at the instruments and see which one you like best". I pointed at the violins - I didn't know what they were but I think they were the only instrument I could actually see from where I was.

The path didn't always run smooth, either. In fact, my mom ran into my first violin teacher years later and she said "oh, you're Janna Sailor's mom. Janna Sailor was the last three-year-old I ever taught". I guess I was a bit of a nightmare. [laughs]

[MUSIC - 33:30]

Janna Sailor (33:33): I've never set out or intended to be a conductor. At the time I was playing in the Vancouver Opera Orchestra and I was also holding down an additional position with the Vancouver Youth Orchestra.

I was kind of the everything-girl as the Assistant Manager. Of course I'd taken required conducting classes throughout grad school and things - but it wasn't something that I used on a regular basis or even considered to be a possibility of a career.

One of our conductors had to leave her position on a few days notice, and they called an emergency meeting and they were like, "okay, would you mind just stepping in for this Saturday until we find an actual conductor that can take over?"

And so. anyways, I stepped into the role for what I thought was one week - and it became two weeks. And then it became the rest of the season, and by the end of the season I had two other job offers as a conductor. You know, I'd been happy in the back of the violin section, and this was really an uncomfortable transition for me to be up in front of everyone calling the shots, making the decisions - making those maybe unpopular decisions at times, to be honest, there was - I started taking conducting lessons because I couldn't figure out what was going on on the podium, a lot of the time. You know, it was a mystery to me, and I found myself often in leadership positions, principal positions. I was, like, I need to figure this out, to try and decode the mysteries of the podium. And actually, learning how to conduct made it more confusing. [laughs]

Max Cardilli (35:29): How did the Allegra Chamber Orchestra come to be?



Janna Sailor (35:30): A number of years ago, a dear friend of mine had founded Music Heals, and that is a really fantastic organization that's Vancouver based, that goes into communities and institutions and works with them to found a Music Therapy Program. And they needed money, so I thought I'd put out a call to my fellow musicians and see who would be up for doing some benefit concerts and giving the money to Music Heals.

And so, I put out the call to my colleagues - and only female musicians responded. At first I thought "oh that's kind of funny" but then I kept getting expressions of interest and so the ensemble kept getting bigger and bigger - well beyond a chamber group that I'd originally anticipated.

I thought "well, if we just grabbed a trumpet player or two, and a timpanist we could do Beethoven - we actually have an orchestra here". It became really apparent from our first rehearsal that this was something really special, that it was a really kind of critical time. In the Vancouver musical landscape there were a number of issues specifically regarding gender and harassment in our musical community- and these female musicians wanted, and needed, a safe place to create and just be musicians. And that was also the height of the Me Too Movement - so we realized we had something kind of crazy on our hands in the fact that we were an all-female orchestra. And in answer to why an all-female orchestra - why not? There's been all-male orchestras for decades. I think the fact that we are an all-female orchestra that in itself makes a statement.

And so, we had our first concert and raised enough seed funds to found a Music Therapy Program for the Wish drop-in center on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside - and that is a continued community partnership that we continue to support. And that was always kind of the goal - was that it would be an orchestra that would contribute to the community - but not only that but create a quality artistic product that would be thought-provoking and profound.

We're going onto five years now and we've raised tens of thousands of dollars that we've given away to charity as a fully professional orchestra. All of our self-produced concerts have a social action mandate, and we wanted to make sure that we were always featuring those voices that weren't necessarily being featured or heard on the main stage. So, we have just launched our composer mentorship program for female-identifying and minority composers - and as of a few days ago our selection committee just came up with our six mentees that will be working with established female and minority Canadian composers over the next three months.

So, that's really exciting. They will be taken through a series of professional development workshops as well as one-on-one mentoring - and at the end of that three-month period Allegra will get together we'll workshop those particular works and then record and livestream those as part of our festival that will be taking place in June of 2021.



Max Cardilli (38:55): So, what's the deal with the baton?

Janna Sailor (38:57): The traditional answer to that question is, you know, it's an extension of your arm, and it clarifies the beat point, and you know when something feels more intimate or- I'm trying to draw kind of more humanity out of the music and of the players, you know, I'll bring the baton closer to my face so that we kind of feel like we have more of a connection. That way it's a person-to-person communication. It's not just something that's removed from me

But at the same time, when I'm conducting just strings, and it's very intimate - or some new music that is more experimental and not necessarily based on beat patterns - I will use just my hands, because I feel like the baton in that instance kind of gets in my way.

One of my first conducting mentors always said that "the musicians should respond to you, but not know why". They shouldn't have to decode what you're doing, and be like "okay, so that..." [laughs] You know, they shouldn't have to think. They should just be able to be in the moment, creating music - and you just kind of nudge them along and kind of guide them, or inspire them.

My experience as a violinist really has benefited my conducting. When I'm kind of getting tied up in my conductor brain I'll go back and be like "okay, how would I do that on my instrument? you know How would that feel? What do I want the players to feel like? How do I feel this phrase in my body as a musician?"

So, I take my violin and play through my scores - even like parts that aren't violin parts - and just see how that feels in my body so that I'm always kind of staying connected with, actually, the player's experience and what it feels like. My biggest challenge is to be really self-aware. I'm not a trumpet player I'm not an oboist - and I've always found musicians to be incredibly generous when I go and ask like - explain to me how this works.

Explain to me how that feels in your body. Explain to me the challenges that you're having right now. Tell me what you want me to know as a conductor. That's been really exceedingly important to me especially as a learning conductor, because I came to it a bit unconventionally. You know I didn't go through the 10 years of conducting school in the traditional way. It was very much experimental, and learning on the job, and learning from having these conversations, and learning from others.

You know, I've worked really hard in in my own ensembles - the Allegra Ensemble, with Vancouver Intercultural Orchestra- to try and kind of change that perception of what it means to be a conductor, and for the the musicians to see me as more of a collaborator and someone to come alongside and facilitate the music making, rather than being this



kind of dictatorial position that it has been and has had the reputation of being in the decades previously.

And I think there's no longer any place for that in our modern society, and in our creative society.

[MUSIC - 41:47]

Alex Prior (41:52): One of the greatest strengths of an artist is vulnerability and honesty, and actually for me that's the definition of good music - is it honest and vulnerable? Do you know, like, even if it's a style I dislike but - did that composer speak honestly?

Max Cardilli (42:02): My last guest is an exciting conductor and composer and is someone whose voice you might recognize...

Alex Prior (42:09): I'm Alex Prior, I'm the Chief Conductor of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra - I have the great privilege and joy of holding that title. I've been a conductor kind of professionally since I was about 13. I've wanted to be a conductor since I was four because I remember distinctly being in nursery, in kindergarten and the first day a teacher asked me what I wanted to do and I said I wanted to be a conductor. I can't remember if I really understood what that was. Somehow that's what I said - although my previous dream was to be a ballet dancer. That was absolutely my dream but I did not have the body type for that.

I was very lucky to grow up in London in the sense that there's, you know - it's like every night at least five things you definitely want to go to. So, I was definitely exposed to music but my parents had zero ambitions of me being a position. In fact, I can quite clearly say they would early-on have preferred I didn't - because as you and I know music is by no means a financial guarantee. It's by no means an easy path. Shostakovich always said about composing if you can not compose, don't compose. It really has to be a calling - which it is for both of us.

My first actual experience conducting was quite interesting. I had the opportunity to have my first, basically - piano concerto recorded in Russia. The conductor turned up, how do I put this - tipsy. More than tipsy, and so I conducted it. I mean I had no idea. I was just kind of, you know, going off imagination. I'm sure I was absolutely terrible, but the musicians were good sports, you know. I was 12 or something and it was really fun.

My very first lesson with my, sort of, main conducting professor in the Saint Petersburg Conservatory, I mean he demolished me. And, I was not prepared for that. Of course, he loved me very much - you know, we were very close. He would destroy me in a



lesson and then you know walk me to the bus-stop to make sure I got onto the bus safely. You know, that's very russian-style education - and then he said "call me when you get home so I know you're home safe". You know, like, very sweet, very caring - but in the lesson he used to call me the fried chicken. You know, like, my arms were too tight and up here - and it's like you look like a chicken wing. Fried chicken.

You know, the technique, for the first two years of the Conservatory education, was basically just conducting slow movements of Beethoven *sonatas*. Not interpreting - just getting a smooth technique - weighted hands, a clear beat pattern - all those things, a sense of where the beat comes. That now, hopefully, is internalized and instinctual. So that's what happened! The surprises were many. The first surprise is that it's really difficult. [laughs] It seems almost more like "Ah! I love music, I have musicality! I'm naturally musical! I'm educated about music history, a little bit - so of course I can do this". Well, you know, surprise. Everything that's worth anything in life requires technique and practice. Anything, right. Not just music.

The next big surprise was, is, was just how much psychology goes into the job. You know, that's not what I went into it for, but there's so much psychology involved between rehearsal technique. How to bring people with you and not push them, but how to pull them along with you, ideally - and also empower them to put their own musical freedom and ideas within the confines of a certain interpretive direction. After all, in front of me are 60, 70, 80, 100 very highly qualified people and it can't be all my ideas. It can't be all. I mean, of course. Now you need to be sure, right? Like, I'm really sure of my interpretation. I'm not saying I'm not open to changing it, but like I don't come to an orchestra saying "well, I think this is kind of a good way to do it" because my feeling is if I'm not convinced that this is a convincing, important, or at least desirable way to do a certain piece - then why should anyone else feel that way? Why should they follow me? Why should they try and enable it?

My conducting professor said "Alex, remember - the conducting baton makes no sound." Right? [laughs] I wish it did - we'd know who's really great or...but it doesn't. [laughs] The occasional swoosh and swish, but really not anything substantial. [laughs]

Max Cardilli (46:06): How do you go about introducing people to new music?

Alex Prior (46:11): I mean the first thing to remind people of is that all music was new music at some point, right? So, you know, Mozart's Magic Flute was brand spanking new at some point. And, some new music shocked people and some new music didn't shock people - and much of the new music that did shock people (one thinks of you know one thing so for example Beethoven's Third Symphony) today is considered completely mainstream - if not easy listening, then certainly not challenging listening. Masterpiece that it is - as this is one example - there's so many, right. So, I think reminding people about that is a good little starting point.



And then, it's a few things, I think it's a balance of not over-feeding, right? You need to make a balance, because it's not fair if people have really come and they really just want to hear a nice Dvořák Symphony, and they're the kind of person who just - they've worked a long hard day and this is what they know they like, and they've come for a relaxation, right. People come to concerts for lots of different reasons, you know, you have to give them the catharsis they came for - but I think that new music can actually give them that as a surprise. But you just don't want to over do it. [laughs]

So, that's why you have some concerts really geared at people who are looking for some exploration and then other times you put it in in a way that's organic with the rest of the program. So that's one thing, and then you talk. I think it's the way you introduce the music. Of course, in Europe this isn't a thing. Conductors don't talk from the stage. I do it if it's, for example, a languard symphony - who's not a particularly modern composer, but it's not a composer people are familiar with. So I talk about his life, and the piece and so I think if you give people little things to cling on to, do you know? Like two minutes into the piece you'll hear the sound, and that's resemblant of the mountain bagpipes of this composer's native Bulgaria, so for them - for this composer - this was a moment of nostalgia. We all have this, right? Where we suddenly have a flashback to our childhood, things that we all universally have as a species, right? Probably all species, but certainly as humans. And then, you relate that to their life. That relevance, I think, is what makes people open their emotional gates up to it - and then you do a bloody good performance. Do you know? [laughs]

I mean I always say that. I always say, like, how do we fill halls? How do we get people? Well, the first thing is a fantastic concert, you know? With not just great quality playing - that's a given - but all our spirit, and our telling the story through the musicality, through the phrasing, especially. Through the color, the timbres that we find - but, it's getting enough people to give it a try. And that giving it a try part, I think, is the hardest. And that's not technically my department. That's not technically my, you know, my job description. But, of course, it is. It's definitely my responsibility to work as hard as I can on that.

I'm doing a new Music Appreciation course, together with our Associate Principal Horn Megan Evans. The goal is to talk about the storytelling of the music. I mean all great art is in some way storytelling - even abstract ballet is a story. It's just not a story about who, when, where - but it's a story about emotions and feelings. It's still a story, So you talk about the story. You talk about the composer's life and what prompted them to write the way they did, right? You know, like, it's a bit like a good museum guide, right? Where you look at the painting you're like, "well, that's a nice painting" and then someone says "but how about this , and why did this happen?" and something. Oh! Right? Like many more layers open up - without being lecturing is always my goal because not everyone needs to be a professional musician. And, I always say about new music - you should be able to enjoy it without reading the CD cover. That's a



bonus! Great. Interesting to find out, and that's what I'm hoping to do. But, of course good music does speak for itself and we should keep that humility.

Max Cardilli (49:54): I want to give you the opportunity - are there any common myths that you would like to debunk or dispel?

Alex Prior (50:00): I think our personalities are sometimes put into a stereotype. I don't like what I call the "mystical maestro mask". Do you know? Which especially - it was a thing, I think, of a previous era more. Let's say 50s to 80s - 90s was like the peak of it. Where the conductor was this sort of semi-mythical, semi-deity figure and that's such nonsense. Do you know? It's just such nonsense. We're musicians, and we're artists, and we're colleagues, and I think that the world is - the conducting world is - very, very much changing that way. So, that's a good thing. I think a common misconception amongst some people I've spoken to is that musicians need us to play the notes or the rhythm.

You know, like we're not really there to show people what to do. Most of the time. Of course, it's more complicated than that, because sometimes we are. But, basically with an orchestra the level of the ESO, I think a lot of concerts could be done conductor-less on, in some way. You know, these are very gifted, very skillful musicians. What we're there for is to unify a musical idea. To inspire, I think, but to unify - stylistically and interpretively, to facilitate people to be their best and to do their best, and definitely to communicate with the audience in various ways. And, to serve the composer best - I would say maybe, first of all, the highest of all - do the composer justice.

I do think a really good analogy of what a conductor does is the coach in hockey or any sport, really. I mean like American football - you see the coaches on the side they're doing something during the game, but as far as I can tell it's what they do not during the game that really matters. Or both, but certainly the pre-game is also very important - the training, the rehearsals as you might say.

I will say it's quite a lonely job. Sometimes very, very lonely - too lonely. And, in some ways it has to be, and in some ways I wish it didn't have to be. I will sum it up by a piece of advice I got from an older conductor friend of mine - retired now, a very fine conductor. I was working in an Opera House in Europe and he said "Alex, just make sure in the break you don't sit with the musicians. Make sure you sit at your own table. If people come to sit with you, that's great - but they need an opportunity [laughs] to say how much they didn't like your tempo, or how and how annoying your accent is. Or whatever, you know - like you sound pretentious. Whatever, whatever they want to say."

You know, and maybe it's nice things too - who knows. You know, stranger things have happened. But [laughs] you know, there's a real truth to that. I think he was maybe a



little bit exaggerating. - but nonetheless, there is some degree of, sort of, historically-maintained kind of almost instinctual sense that the conductor is a little bit separate. And I don't like that. I certainly try not to reinforce that, but it's somehow there. I mean, definitely there's been times where you know in a canteen and I do sit down with the musicians and suddenly they were all laughing and suddenly they're not.

You know, just like "oh, weather's nice", you know. [laughs] So, that's a part of the job that people don't see. And, you know, like you travel around a lot and, you know, if you have a good concert - people standing, ovation, people applauding - and if you're really lucky what really is the orchestra applauds to you. That's like, it's a really good sign, right. - and then you leave the stage door in the dark and quiet. And you go back to the hotel in the city you don't know anyone in. And then, you go to the next city where you don't know anyone in. And, you know, rinse and repeat.

But, it's still such a privilege to be a conductor. I mean that - it's just such a privilege, and I think we should never forget it because sometimes it's hard work, right. It's incredibly hard, psychological work. It's sometimes hard, physical work. The travel is fun, but tiring. On the other hand, the reward is phenomenal. So, it's such a privilege to be a conductor, and I think it's a very bizarre profession, it's a unique profession. You're always a wanderer and a sort of-kind of a guest everywhere, to some degree - which has its negatives, which I think are fairly obvious.

But also the positives - which is that you get to grow from various cultures and ways of life. I mean, I would not have expected before I came to Edmonton that I would be a daily country music listener. I mean, who would have guessed?

Max Cardilli (54:18): In this episode, you heard excerpts from Vivaldi's Four Seasons, with Concertmaster Robert Uchida as soloist and leader joined by musicians of the Edmonton Symphony.

In the Show Notes you can find links where you can learn more about our guests - including their websites and social media. We've also included the link to the Disruptor Conductor documentary, which I'd encourage you all to watch! As well, you can find the links to register for our Music Appreciation courses that are taught live online - including The Music of Latin America taught by Cossette Justo Valdés starting April 6th and Innovation and Inspiration: Music of the last Century with Alex Prior and Megan Evans starting April 26th.

Thank you to our wonderful guests Alex Prior, Cosette Justo Valdés,



From The Podium (Transcript)

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ESO Offstage - Episode 7

Janna Sailor, D.T Baker, and Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser who shared their time and voices for this episode.

This episode was produced in *amiskwaciy-wâskahikan* also known as Edmonton on the traditional lands referred to as Treaty 6 Territory - a place that has been a meeting ground, travelling route and home for many Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial including the Cree, Métis, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, and Blackfoot whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence and enrich our vibrant community.

This episode was produced by me, ESO double bassist Max Cardilli. If you want to connect with me about the podcast you can write to eso.offstage@winspearcentre.com. If you like our show, please consider leaving us a rating and review on Apple Podcasts.