

## **Ernst von Siemens Music Prize 2013 to Mariss Jansons**

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Mariss Jansons likes to call himself a happy person. Born on 14th January 1943 as the child of a Latvian music family in Riga, Jansons' path to happiness could easily have gone wrong. Jansons' family – his father, Arvid Jansons, was a conductor, his mother, Iraida, a singer at the opera in Riga – experienced threatening times between the Scylla of Nazi occupation and the Charybdis of Stalinist terror after the reconquering of Latvia by the Soviet Union. After Stalin's death the situation improved, but the pressure of the Soviet system was a burden on Latvia's cultural life. The positive aspect of the system was the strictly disciplined musical education that Jansons has praised again and again, despite its dark side. To be sure: music, in Nietzsche's words, as the greatest "stimulant of life" was not what was called for. The rigour of the Soviet musical education was a particular burden to Mariss Jansons, for he was constantly compared with his father. More was expected of him than of other music students, and for his whole life he has always felt compelled to give his best. He himself demanded more of himself than was healthy, he internalised the norms of his cultural environment so he could hold his own against his father, keeping up with the super-ego. He has never denied his father complex. Up to this very day a sense of duty and responsibility has been the moral basis of his artistry.

Jansons virtually grew up in the opera house. His parents took him along from a very young age. He imbibed the opera with his mother's milk, as it were. Even as a child he knew most of the operatic repertoire more or less by heart. It is all the more remarkable that during his conducting career Jansons' concert performances have become more important than operatic work. – His parents' house was permeated not only with music. Musicians, poets and painters gathered together there. It was a meeting place for Riga's cultural elite, and respect for German culture was instilled in the budding musician, too, despite the atrocities that Germany had perpetrated during the second world war in Latvia!

When Mariss Jansons was barely thirteen years old, his father left Riga to become second conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic alongside Yevgeny Mravinsky. Mariss, of course, was sent to the Conservatorium in Leningrad, where he studied violin, viola, piano, and conducting – and he had to learn Russian. Up until then he had only spoken Latvian. Leningrad, which was to become Saint Petersburg again in 1991, became his second home alongside Riga. He still has his first residence there. It is only there that he really feels at home.

Jansons came to Herbert von Karajan's attention at a master class in Leningrad in 1968. And so he achieved something incredible: in 1969 he was permitted to leave the Soviet Union to study in Vienna under the epoch-making conducting teacher Hans Swarowsky – half of today's conducting elite has enjoyed his tutelage – and to assist Herbert von Karajan in Salzburg. After winning the Karajan competition 1971 in Berlin, Jansons – following in his father's footsteps –

became assistant to Yevgeny Mravinsky with the Leningrad Philharmonic. Mravinsky was to become even more significant to Jansons than Swarowsky or Karajan. He was virtually an artistic father-figure. Not only the conductor Mravinsky, his charismatic-imperial personality also had a lasting influence on Jansons. He was not least impressed by the fact that Mravinsky preserved his freedom in the Soviet state, that he was not a party member, expressing his distance from the Soviet system, for example, by unfailingly avoiding conducting his own orchestra on the anniversary of the October Revolution. Jansons' interpretations of Russian music were decisively influenced by the way Mravinsky conducted Tchaikovsky's symphonies, in particular – in his ascetic stringency he freed them of all sentimentality and pomp – and Shostakovich.

Jansons was not a precocious conductor; it wasn't until he was forty that he achieved world-fame. In 1979, in addition to his activities with the Leningrad Philharmonic, he was appointed principal conductor of a provincial orchestra: the Oslo Philharmonic. Under Jansons' direction, this orchestra, within just a few years, developed into one of the best ensembles in Europe. As was the case wherever he worked, Jansons took care not only of the musical quality of his orchestra, but he also looked after its human and social intactness. In the case of the Oslo orchestra this meant in the first instance providing its members with appropriate remuneration. Up until then the musicians had been dependent on extra income for maintaining their livelihood. At the height the Oslo Philharmonic's fame – Jansons remained faithful as principal conductor until 2001 – he was celebrated as a Norwegian national hero. His career nearly came to a sudden end in 1996 when he suffered a life-threatening heart-attack during the last pages of *La Bohème* – conducting as he fell. This is frighteningly reminiscent of his father, who collapsed during a concert with the Hallé orchestra in Manchester on 21 November 1984, and died a few days later.

Jansons was principal guest conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra from 1992-1997, and succeeded Lorin Maazel as Music Director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in 1997, where he stayed until 2004. And again he succeeded Maazel: in 2003 as the principal conductor of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Choir. And since 2004 he has the same position with the Koninklijk Concertgebouworkest Amsterdam. Jansons has since travelled to musical centres all over the world with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. Their first tour, in 2005, took them to Japan and China. In 2006 and in 2009 they performed to celebrated concerts in Carnegie Hall, and in 2007 they performed Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* in the Vatican before Benedict XVI, to name but a few of the highlights of Jansons' activities with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. Jansons has received prizes and awards; he is a member of the Royal Academy of Music in London; of the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts and of the Bavarian Maximilian Order for Science and Art. And he has received the conductors' knighthood: the Vienna Philharmonic has twice entrusted the New Year's Concert to him. But surely the highest of all honours he has received will be the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize, which will be awarded to him in the Prinzregententheater, Munich, on 4 June 2013. He joins a list of conductors including Claudio Abbado, Leonard Bernstein and Herbert von Karajan.

Amongst international cities, Jansons once confessed, Munich is his favourite – even if not as dear to his heart as his home towns Riga and Saint Petersburg. He sees Munich as a specifically musical city where music is part of the mentality, like Berlin, Amsterdam, Tokyo, Vienna and Salzburg, Dresden and – to a somewhat lesser extent – London. Audiences in Munich react with less exuberance and less curiosity than in other cities, but with their conservative sobriety they are almost always well-informed. Admittedly, the absence of a large concert hall in Munich with appropriate acoustics pains Jansons. Such a hall would finally give the Bavarian Radio Symphony

Orchestra – which currently rushes from one inadequate concert hall to the next – a home. Jansons is convinced that a large orchestral sound can only come into its own when the acoustic is perfect. His main objective for Munich is a concert hall like the Vienna Musikvereinssaal, like the Philharmonie in Berlin, or the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, where music sounds as it is produced by conductor and orchestra.

Since his time in Oslo Jansons is thought of not only as one of the most important conductors of our time, but also as a gifted orchestral educator. It is Jansons' fundamental belief that a conductor must never dominate an orchestra. Rather he has to serve the orchestra, come close to its centre of gravity, and respect its individuality. Each orchestra has its own 'sound'. For Jansons, for example, Mahler belongs to Amsterdam as Strauss does to Munich. He places great importance on early musical education, pleading passionately and untiringly for a better integration of musical education in preschool and school. Working with young musicians, for example with the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra, the Academy of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and other youth orchestras, is of great importance to him. In spite of his tight schedule and in spite of setbacks due to poor health, he has always taken time for them. This is part of what he calls his main virtue: a sense of responsibility.

Experience of the Soviet music education system's Draconian stringency gave him insight into its virtues and its dark sides; and it helped him to find a happy medium: this means exercising objective authority without appearing in front of the orchestra as a despot; it means expecting discipline and subordination from the musicians under an overarching concept, under the conductor's guidance, while at the same time never fencing them in; it means giving them room to unfold, space to breathe and to phrase the music. Jansons insists on work-intensive and extensive rehearsals, but the moment the work is performed all this must be forgotten, and the music must seem to be spontaneous.

This is how Jansons became the favourite of the leading orchestras: they treasure and admire his irreproachable professional aplomb, his precise beat, the certainty of his musical directions, which are free of arrogance and given in a friendly tone – according to the conductor's human ethos, which the experience of totalitarianism and dictatorship has rendered deeply suspicious of any kind of despotic behaviour in art. Its humanistic aspect is of central importance to him on all artistic levels, in interpreting art and also in interpersonal relationships.

The way he treats the orchestra, which is determined by the ideal of bound freedom, is in accordance with his conducting style: complete control of the music, whilst still letting himself be carried away by his temperament. In essence he is convinced that conducting is a matter of talent, a blessing which cannot be learned. Perfect knowledge of the score and technical proficiency cannot replace the spontaneous 'transmission capacity' of the conductor's movements. These movements cannot be thought out; they must emerge spontaneously from the music. The efforts of those lacking intuition will be in vain.

Although Jansons has no time for sorcery on the podium – he stresses the Kapellmeister's handcraft, the secret of which is that it has no secret – he sees the transfer of energy to the orchestra as the be-all and end-all of conducting. On the podium he often seems to be existentially driven, 'a madman', as musicians lovingly and respectfully say of him, when it 'comes over him'. This is when the Freudian id asserts itself in the face of the super-ego, whose pattern of norms has dictated Jansons' life to such a degree. Music is – as he never tires of repeating – "the language of our soul", an expression of the "heart". Not the dissection of the score is dear to his heart, but rather the emotionality of the music – what friends and admirers call a Russian "warmth of soul".

For Jansons, music is not just music; notes are not just notes. His aim is to bring to light the meaning behind the score's symbols, the intellectual content behind the sounds. He sees the score as the transcript of spiritual processes. The score serves to communicate spiritual contexts. And so what is most important to him is to convey to the orchestra an inner image of the work to be performed, to let its visionary power unfold. It is telling that a high level of learning and intellectuality is typical for conductors like Swarowsky and Mravinsky, to whom Jansons owes so much. Mravinsky, according to Jansons, could sit for hours thinking about music, penetrating its depths. For Jansons music is not only the language of the human heart, but also of the heart of things; it has a metaphysical dimension. Religion and art are intimately connected. Jansons is a religious person who openly confesses that he believes in God.

As broad as his repertoire is, there can be no mistake that the bulk of his repertoire belongs to the late romantic and early modernists. Brahms and Bruckner, Strauss and Mahler are his favourites here – and of course the Russians: Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, above all Shostakovich, undoubtedly his favourite composer, whom he met in person. In 2005 he completed a cycle of the complete Shostakovich symphonies, recorded with various orchestras. The final recording was made with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. Jansons is the most important heir to the great Shostakovich tradition, with which one associates the names of Mravinsky and Kondrashin. Even though he is a musician who emphasises emotions, he also has a fine appreciation for the chilling frigid zones, for the bizarre moments in Shostakovich, for the sharp accents, the often harsh contrasts that make life seem grotesque behind the façade of the Stalin era. Shostakovich's symphonies are not 'representative' works of the Soviet system, but rather secret 'pièces de resistance'. And with Mahler, too, it is the grotesque, bizarre and shrill elements, the distortion of the familiar, which Jansons sees as central.

As far as his repertoire is concerned, Jansons is more a romantic than a classicist. And yet in recent times he has turned more and more to the works of Viennese classicism, in particular Joseph Haydn and Beethoven. But it is telling that he lets Haydn's classicism simmer beneath the surface – in a different way to Leonard Bernstein, but with a related intensity. The result is red-hot classicism. And conversely he takes care not to let the enthusiastic or orgiastic moments of the romantic musical tradition burst their banks, but rather he banishes them into clear forms. A romantic in classical form, a Dionysian in Apollonian costume.

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