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CONDUCTOR ANDRIS POGA AND A SENSE OF SECURITY

The beginning of a conductor's path

The *Konsonanse* chamber orchestra, conducted by a certain Andris Poga born in 1980, appeared on the Latvian concert scene at the beginning of the 21st century. At the time, Poga was an unknown novice in symphony conducting. Interesting, interesting – said observers – what will this ambitious youngster show us?

It was known that Poga was studying trumpet performance and band conducting. A lesser known fact was that Poga was also studying philosophy and was particularly taken by the ideas of Descartes, Kant and Husserl. Nobody knew anything about him as a conductor.

Poga graduated from the symphony conducting class at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music in 2007. While there, he had studied under Viesturs Gailis, the former principal conductor of the Latvian National Opera, and upon graduation Poga immediately became the artistic director and principal conductor of the Professional Symphonic Band *Riga*. Under Poga's direction, the band broadened its repertoire, improved its quality of playing and in general refined its mission. These were the first attempts to change Latvian attitudes towards brass bands, proving that they are capable of more than just funeral marches and waltzes at old-time dances. Poga's first concert with the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra earned him the Latvian Great Music Award for best debut in 2007.

Victory at the Evgeny Svetlanov Conducting Competition

Poga's path to international recognition began with victory at the 2nd Evgeny Svetlanov Conducting Competition in 2010 in Montpellier. It was at that competition that he met his current agent, Marina Bower, who also organises the conducting competition and is the head of artist management at *Productions Internationales Albert Sarfati* in Paris.

Bower explains: "When I organised the Svetlanov competition for the first time, the most important thing for me was to create a jury that would assess new talent seriously and objectively. It might sound unbelievable, but this is possible. Many people have written to me after the competitions and admitted that the Svetlanov competition is like none other."

"The second year of the competition, 500 people applied to take part. Only 18 were selected, and Poga was among them. We didn't know any of the contestants, so none of them received special treatment. When Poga conducted, Anthony (Tony) Fogg, the artistic administrator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, turned to me and said, 'Look at him – he's your gem.'"

Didier de Cottignies, the artistic director of the Orchestre de Paris, remembers: "I saw Andris Poga for the first time at the Svetlanov competition, and he seemed to stand head and shoulders above the other contestants. Many of them were good, but Poga stood out for his thoroughness, his sense of security and his mastery of conducting. I therefore invited Poga to become an assistant conductor of the Orchestre de Paris under Paavo Järvi, and I was not surprised that, after hearing him, 99% of the orchestra members supported him. I was convinced of his success from the very beginning. Poga is very serious, he works extremely well, and it was a great joy for the musicians every time he conducted the orchestra."

The Sarfati agency

The Svetlanov competition differs from many other competitions in that not only do its organisers award monetary prizes, but they also concern themselves with the artistic fate of its winners. Bower says the competition is like a springboard. For Poga, the competition was the springboard



that enabled him to become an artist represented by the Paris-based *Productions Internationales Albert Sarfati*.

Cathy Sarfati, the executive director of the *Sarfati* agency says: "Andris Poga is a complete discovery for us. After his victory at the Svetlanov competition, he – like other winners of the competition – came under our wing, and we are very happy about that, because in the past four years he's developed a brilliant career for himself. He's an exceptionally intelligent, modest and fairly reserved young man who does not get drawn into the whirlwind of success; he keeps a cool mind and has an unbelievable talent and feel for music. We are very proud of him. The things he's accomplished in four years, it takes others ten or more years to achieve the same things."

When I asked Poga himself about what determined these first international successes, he answered: "I came to a certain realisation after reading a very short review in *The Boston Globe* after my debut with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. I had conducted Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, and on the next day a couple of sentences in the review connected with a review I had received in the French press a couple of years ago. Surprisingly, both reviews used almost one and the same words. In English, describing a conductor as *flashy* – as in having a dazzling, flashy manner – can be interpreted as something negative. But in this review, my approach to the orchestra and music was described as *unflashy*, that is, inwardly focussed and unpretentious. I really do always try to achieve the best sound possible and can say with certainty that I do not work in front of a mirror. I simply do not know how to make a spectacle, and so I don't try to do it."

Undoubtedly, Poga is not an outwardly flashy type of conductor or one focussed on the audience.

Cottignies explains: "But Poga nevertheless has great charisma, and he creates a great feeling of security. In that sense, he reminds me of a superb Italian conductor whom I liked very much –

Antonino Votto, the assistant of Arturo Toscanini and the teacher of Riccardo Muti. Votto and Poga have similar silhouettes and broad shoulders. Votto might not be widely known, but in the 1940s and 1950s he was one of the greatest maestros at *La Scala*, and the similarity between these two men lies in the fact that they both have always evoked in me an unbelievable sense of security. But Poga also has great and very communicative inner strength. I'm certain he has a big career ahead of him."

Working with the Orchestre de Paris

In autumn 2011, Poga began working as the assistant to the Orchestre de Paris' principal conductor, Paavo Järvi, and a year later he was hired as the assistant conductor for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. I asked him whether, having arrived at the Paris and Boston orchestras, he felt he had become a player in some bigger league:

"Of course, the feeling is completely different. The beginning of my career was not at all as I had imagined it after winning the Montpellier competition and seeing how the careers of other conductors were advancing. Quite a few French orchestras invited me to guest-conduct – some even several times – and I began thinking, yes, this is an interesting and fun life, travelling here and there, conducting this and that. But then Marina [Bower] and I began talking about how that was all well and good, but such a lifestyle didn't promote any kind of development. The idea came up about trying to talk with Paavo Järvi about possibly taking me on as an assistant conductor. In recent years Järvi's Orchestre de Paris has gotten along quite well without an assistant; the practice is associated more with American orchestras, which almost always have one or two assistant conductors. They've had that system there for at least a hundred years, and many famous conductors have begun their career as an assistant conductor. Take, for example, Leonard Bernstein or my predecessor at this job in Boston, Michael Tilson Thomas.

"There was a practice at the Orchestre de Paris in which an educational concert took place on the day after an evening concert, and this concert was conducted by the same conductor as the evening concert. Järvi said he wouldn't do it, because the workload was too great; with a new programme every week, he didn't have the time or the energy. In addition, by inviting assistants they would be giving educational opportunities to new conductors. And so it came about that I was one of the candidates. The choice of assistant was basically left to a vote in the orchestra."

As an artistic entity, the Orchestre de Paris has a strong personality – no one can deny that. What is it about the way this ensemble makes music that fascinates Poga the most?

He says: "It's the spontaneity. If they embrace an idea, they implement it to the very core. I had the opportunity to hear them play Brahms – you just sit there in the audience and realise that you've never even heard something like the Berlin Philharmonic play like that – there's such passion in it! But, just the same, if they don't like a conductor or soloist, they become completely cool and distanced!"

After the *Radio Classique* Christmas concert at the end of 2014, in which Poga conducted the Orchestre de Paris, I met first violinist Roland Daugareil, who said: "Our orchestra has always unanimously held Poga in high esteem, and we are very happy for the cooperation we enjoyed with him. This is our last concert of the year and also the Orchestre de Paris' last concert ever in the Pleyel Hall, so this concert under the direction of Poga will leave us with even more beautiful memories. He is very kind and very sensible, very professional, and we've always worked together well. In the professional sense, he really has genuine talent, and now he just has to gradually, step by step, gain experience, acquire experience. In short, he now needs to mature like a fine wine."

Extremes

On December 11 and 12, 2013, Poga replaced 34-year-old Finnish conductor Mikko Franck, who had suddenly fallen ill, conducting Shostakovich's 7th Symphony in two Orchestre de Paris concerts in the Pleyel Hall. It was a dizzying experience, jumping into another conductor's territory on short notice and practically without rehearsals conducting a major symphonic work that he had never conducted before.

Remy Louis, the popular French classical music critic on *Diapason* magazine's Internet portal, writes: "With the build of a rugby forward, captivating and crystal clear gestures and a naturally instantaneous authority [...] The beginning of the *Allegretto* is cautious, but as the famous march theme takes off, his interpretation of the symphony takes on its true character and continues to the end with a great concentration and stylistic refinement that reminds the listener of Gennady Rozhdestvensky's interpretations. [...] Without visible effort, Poga made this symphony completely his own, offering a grand interpretation of the "Leningrad Symphony" – the first in his budding career! For this, we say thank you to Poga, just as the audience at Pleyel Hall heartily expressed its appreciation. Make note of this name: Andris Poga. This will not be the last surprise we see from him."

Christian Merlin, the prominent musicologist and music critic at *Le Figaro*, writes: "Seeing as Mikko Franck had conducted all of the rehearsals, Poga could have just stepped in as coordinator of the performance, merely directing traffic and letting the orchestra play the Finnish conductor's interpretation. But he did not decline the position of interpreter and source of inspiration. Poga held the great arc of this tricky and easily tractile opus firmly in his hands and gave it unceasing energy. One could detract from Poga's merits by saying that he rode to success on the fruits of Franck's labour, but another conductor would not have been able to manage these elements as well and therefore would not have allowed the amazingly concentrated and enthusiastic Orchestre de Paris to demonstrate its full glory and fine musicianship."

Marina Bower remembers: "That was an extremely important turning point for Poga in his career. All of the critics immediately said that Poga is one of the most superb new conductors – no, not just one of the best new conductors, but overall one of the best conductors of our time. Music critics tend to criticise. But none of the most prestigious publications have yet pounced on Poga. He's also doing well in Boston. There he was given a whole concert programme not as an assistant, but as a true conductor."

Like the occasion with Franck and Shostakovich, Poga had a similar experience in September 2013, when he substituted for the then 89-year-old maestro Georges Prêtre and very successfully conducted Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony, delighting both the audience and the critics with his interpretation.

Visiting in Boston

Before Andris Nelsons became the artistic director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the orchestra's assistant conductor was Andris Poga. For a time, many music lovers confused which of the two Latvian Andris' were on the podium at which time. The fact that both had begun their musical careers as trumpet players led to no greater clarity.

Poga says: "The quality of American orchestras is still very high, and their work ethic and attitude differs greatly from the style of European orchestras. In Europe, especially in Paris, if the orchestra sees that something isn't quite going the way you had planned, the players sort of distance themselves from you and take the initiative into their own hands; they play on their own and don't pay much attention to the conductor anymore. Once something like that has happened, it's very

difficult to get the orchestra's trust back. It's different in America – even if you happen to make an incorrect gesture, the orchestra will still look at you the next time and will play what you show them to play.

I think Americans have completely different criteria for professionalism in music – in reviews and radio programmes as well. It's a completely different world, in which everything is examined and described more in terms of quality and visuality instead of content."

A story about the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra

Lorin Maazel died in the summer of 2014. Suddenly, the question arose of who would take his Munich Philharmonic Orchestra on their planned tour of Asia.

Marina Bower says: "This tour was organised by the *Kajimoto* agency, one of the world's oldest and most significant agencies, which is particularly important in Asia. You can imagine the number of people who applied for the position! And again, purely by coincidence, the woman organising the Munich Philharmonic's Asian tour happened to see Poga conducting the Shostakovich symphony. She saw him and decided to give it a try. Yes, exactly that – give it a try. I don't know how she persuaded the Munich Philharmonic, but persuade them she did. During the tour, the orchestra and Poga achieved complete harmony. And after the tour, they've kept inviting him to conduct again."

Didier de Cottignies also played a role in the process: "When the Munich Philharmonic was considering Poga for the tour, they asked me for my opinion, and I could say with certainty that Poga is a suitable substitute for Lorin Maazel. Furthermore, Poga is one of the most honest people that I know. He always clearly knows whether such and such can be achieved or not. If Poga says it's not possible, then it truly is not possible. You can believe it. I completely trust him in this sense. Many young conductors will assert that they can and will then spend the whole night studying just so they can conduct something they've always wanted to conduct. But Poga is not like that – he's honest, strict and direct."

Two of Munich's newspapers reviewed the grand harmony between the Munich Philharmonic players and Andris Poga.

On October 20, 2014, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote: "The seemingly inconspicuous Latvian conductor Andris Poga was able to entice vividly beautiful, intelligent and consistently refined interpretations from the orchestra. By the end of the tour, in Taipei, he had gained the admiration of the orchestra to such a degree that he received an ovation from them after their final rehearsal. [...] In this sense, things were not easy for the young Latvian, especially because his venerable colleagues (the recently deceased Maazel and Gergiev, for whom Poga had substituted) are considered legends. But Poga is a calm and structured young man. He trusts his cool mind. His conducting is not emotional, but it is clearly structured."

Marina Bower concludes: "The Asian tour gave new momentum to Poga's engagements, among which are assignments for which others wait for years and still fail to achieve. For example, the Gewandhaus in Leipzig – every conductor's dream. Poga has a concert planned there next season. The NDR Symphony Orchestra in Hamburg has invited him to conduct. The Bavarian Radio has proposed recording him with the Bamberg Symphony. Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, Rome's Saint Cecilia Academy Orchestra, the Luxembourg Philharmonic and London's Philharmonia Orchestra have also expressed interest in Poga. In other words, many of the top orchestras have expressed so much interest that Poga's calendar for 2015 and even 2016 is already full. Just a few days ago the Orchestre National de France asked me to reserve a date, but none were left. So, 2017 will soon be full as well."

"I've been doing this job for 30 years already. I've had the pleasure to represent Evgeny Svetlanov, Yuri Temirkanov, Valery Gergiev and many Western musicians, but I must admit that there are fewer and fewer musicians of their calibre. But Poga is going in the same direction as the great maestros I just mentioned. I congratulate Latvia for being the birthplace of such talent! Poga is intelligent and modest. For him, the music – instead of his career – is always in first place."

Andris Poga – artistic director of the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra

In late autumn of 2013, Poga became the artistic director and principal conductor of the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra (LNSO).

Poga says: "The stimulus to take on this job was, quite simply, the challenge of becoming the artistic leader of the nation's top orchestra, with all of the creative opportunities the position entails. It's one thing to be a guest conductor with good or excellent orchestras with long traditions and unique sounds that you can't influence much, but it's a completely different thing to take on the responsibility for retaining and developing an orchestra's sound in the long term. Therefore, the LNSO musicians' trust and support is very important to me, and I cannot allow myself to betray them."

"The most enjoyable thing in this job is the opportunity to plan and develop the general overview of the repertoire for an orchestra's season, choosing new works and first performances of new compositions as well as seeing to what extent my vision for the orchestra's ideal sound is realised in real life.

"The least enjoyable thing is the fact that, considering Latvia's financial situation, the musicians receive inadequately low salaries. For this reason, the artistic targets and demands are often in stark contrast with the musicians' daily lives (including the necessity to work two or three jobs).

"My work is also made more difficult by the fact that Riga does not have a concert hall that corresponds to today's acoustic needs. While everyone enjoys the good concerts and acoustics at the Cēsis and Rēzekne concert halls, more and more often at concerts in Riga's Great Guild Hall we must put up with the fact that 'we are where we are....'"

In reviewing Latvia's cultural policy, Poga says: "This seems to me quite an abstract situation. One feels a lack of finances at all levels of the orchestra's daily life, from musicians' salaries to the acquisition of musical instruments to concerts – it's very difficult to attract prominent soloists from abroad, and especially distinguished guest conductors, which is vitally important for the growth of any orchestra's musicianship."

"Currently, however, we're nevertheless able to implement most of our artistic goals, even though we often teeter on the edge of financial risk."

The conductor – the person

Andris Poga is a fairly reserved man. He does not like to boast or talk about himself. He hates being photographed and other forms of showing off. In conversation, however, it's quite easy to bring Poga to unexpected bouts of laughter or ping-pong games of ironic remarks. In small groups of people the maestro seems to enjoy conversations as a form of intellectual challenge, although he is very reserved when it comes to public speaking. Rattling off strings of beautiful words is not Poga's forte. He will rather say nothing if the words are merely beautiful but lack content; instead, he is more likely to say something short and dry, but precise.



By observing the way in which Poga plans dates and events during a season, one can see that he does have a bit of the gambler in him...except that in place of playing cards, he deals in the orchestra and works of music. His temperament shows itself in his impulsive reactions, especially when disclaiming and arguing. Poga enjoys it. Steadiness and bolts of temper alternate in his character like a strobe light. He doesn't say anything about himself, and then suddenly he recounts an episode from the past – oh, that time in Peru when we got into such and such a situation with a rented car. Or, how we did this or that in Indonesia. It seems that travel is Poga's second passion after music. It's obvious that Japan is one of his favourite destinations. And not just because of the cuisine.

"I just feel a good atmosphere in Japan," says Poga. "I'm the sort of conductor who tends to offer instead of order, and I think that fits well with the Japanese mentality. The Japanese wait to be invited to play instead of for someone to order them to play. One more positive thing – wherever there's a good orchestra [in Japan], there's a good concert hall."

Music, travel. What else feeds Poga's spiritual horizons? "I'm interested in the world as such, but I do not have a specific hobby or pastime. Yes, I like films, but mostly only on longer flights. In the past few years, the volume of music in my life has been simply insane. If people could see how my cabinet of music has grown over the past two years – it's just scores, scores and more musical scores."

And where is Poga's music cabinet located?

"At home, in Riga. I think it'll stay there, too, because I feel at my best in Riga. In that sense, I'm a patriot."