

I search the music that goes straight to my heart – An interview with Benjamin Haemhouts
Before graduating at the Lemmens Institute Benjamin played with the Philharmonic Orchestra of Rotterdam, at age 23 he joined the Bamberg Symphoniker as trombone soloist and today he leads CASCO Phil as artistic director and chief-conductor. It seems his career came logically, but after a talk with the artist we must say logic and evidence are not written in his dictionary. Passion and intuition are.

Was it a deliberate choice going from musician to conductor?

It was a determined yet exciting decision. Every musician will confirm that building a career at a well-known orchestra like Bamberg Symphoniker is not evident. So deciding to leave the orchestra was certainly not easy. But sometimes in life you have to stop and wonder whether or not your job provides you with enough energy and satisfaction. The passion for conducting came to me after several collaborations with great conductors like Simon Rattle, Kent Nagano, Valery Gergiev and Bernard Haitink. This passion, together with my fascination for the psychology of the orchestra as thought in the lessons of Alexander Polyanichko, gave me the urge to approach music differently.

The start of a new chapter

I wanted to move in a different direction and speed up things. This impatience sometimes took its toll. In the meanwhile I learned that certain processes cannot be pushed simply because they grow organically. To get a strong foundation, a project needs an incubation period. So even though it takes effort, you have to give it time to age, just like a good wine.

You are leading CASCO Phil artistically and musically. How do you combine this?

I look at myself more as an inspirator than a leader. I dislike people who behave authoritarian just because they have a certain function. You can fill in leadership in many different ways and everyone has their opinions about it. But when I conduct an orchestra, it is my intention to inspire, and to move the musicians in a certain direction, not only in my perspective, but from the dynamic that originates from the cooperation with equal musicians. So my job is more to facilitate a process rather than create it. Of course I know what I want and there is a direction I want to follow, but this is no more than a framework that has to be filled in at the moment. And the contribution of the musicians is vital to it. Every repetition and every concert brings a different result. Especially a concert! The dynamics of a live concert is something beyond words, it is not to be analyzed. Sometimes it takes a turn you didn't anticipate or even want, but it happens nevertheless. At these moments a conductor can do 2 things: take the power back in his hands or go with the flow. I choose the latter.

Because as a leader you don't want to steer a spontaneous group-process?

Indeed. And when you lose control, you have to let go. The urge of some conductors to control an entire orchestra has an opposite effect. Not only the music suffers but also the relationship with the musicians and the trust of the entire group. It's this trust you have to cherish and guard.

On this relation with the orchestra, Claudio Abbado said in his last interview: "I'm not an obstetrician that helps the orchestra to give birth! All that happens is their merit."

A striking comparison, but I have to add a small remark to it. Abbado evidently was one of the best in the field. The Berliner Philharmoniker is, in my opinion, the best orchestra in the

whole world. Not only for their sound and technical perfection, but also as a group. They are simply fascinating to watch. So with these fine musicians less is needed from a conductor. And I'm not Claudio Abbado (smiles). Not only with CASCO Phil but as a guest conductor as well, I'm still busy on the level: are they well prepared? What can I achieve with this group? This problem does not rise with prestigious orchestras like Berlin, where every audition roughly a thousand candidates show up and where there are daily rehearsals. With this I don't want to say we don't have the quality, but it is a completely different context. The search for the right musicians and the combination of musicians takes energy and time. It is a long and hard process. With CASCO Phil we are still in development on this.

After 10 years?

Ten years is peanuts for an orchestra. Only now – I should say: now already – we have a solid base of good musicians: loyal, motivated and open minded. This I notice in the continuity of shows. We are able to peak and rise above ourselves. And this happens more often than earlier on. On this base we can build. The ongoing professionalization of the orchestra in planning, production, communication, sales, sponsorship,... runs in tandem with this.

What are the challenges for the next 10 years?

To me there is a big part for us in the renewing of the repertoire. By combining a classical, romantic and contemporary repertoire we can put contemporary music back on the agenda. This is absolutely vital if we want to reintroduce this music after years of negligence. This subject deserves some clarification. Many will correctly state that there is a lot of attention for contemporary music. They will refer to several festivals and ensembles aimed at this music. Other than that you will notice workshops, masterclasses and competitions for young composers are booming. The stimulus is big and I applaud it. But this way there is an oversupply because there are not enough musicians to play the music, and this is very unfortunate. It's a vicious cycle. Contemporary music doesn't attract enough spectators so the ticket sales disappoint, so it is less programmed. The result is a decrease in the offer. The festivals can partly absorb this but they too have this commercial reflex. If the program is too experimental, the audience won't come and sponsors will be less generous, or even back away. So all of the players in the cultural field are tied to the economic reality. This is frustrating but also an opportunity: even though you cannot extract culture from the economic reality, with a large dose of flair and courage you can dance around it. It would be great if we all would face that challenge because if we cherish music as an artform, newly written music must have a place in the concert hall.

You have an international career. Do you notice cultural differences in the approach to the contemporary repertoire?

Nations or cultures are hard to compare. If I see a difference it is usually in the self-awareness. When I go to Mexico to conduct I notice there is a certain national pride to play music composed in Mexico. Plus, musically our weight is small compared to lands like Germany and Austria, where classical music was born. The same goes for Spain, where a lot of musical styles are born from the rich folk-music tradition. In any case it's remarkable that in these countries the local composers have a forum, something we can learn from them.

This season you have more invitations as guest-conductor. Your approach is appreciated abroad.

To me it is very inspiring, fascinating and informative to work with orchestras that I don't know. There is a different dynamic in every orchestra and at the start it is always a bit

waiting and seeing, but I feel the musicians like my approach and experience it as satisfying and refreshing. Partly because I bring a different repertoire but also my way of working that is less conventional as other composers.

Less conventional as in more modest?

Modest in the way that I present myself willing. I'm at the service of the orchestra and I want to achieve things without giving myself the main part. A lot of conductors claim the attention. This brings a spectacle, but unfortunately it distracts the attention from the music. This doesn't work in the long term, but it's also not my personality. I'm unconventional because I work very fierce and I don't follow rules, not in the relation with musicians and not when it comes to historical interpretations. I do what I feel and think. De rest doesn't bother me. In the end, the only thing that counts is *Spielfreude* (the joy of playing). That's what matters in this branch. It is fun to gather musical wisdom and its fun to do research, but for me music speaks for itself. If the realization of a music score is not fully appreciated, you'll have to work on it as a team.

And finally: What is your top 3 favorite composers?

Though question. My preferences alternate a bit depending on the project I'm working on. But in any case, Beethoven is number 1, followed by Stravinsky and Chostakovitch. Beethoven for the pure beauty, genius and the unique energy this music gives me. Stravinsky because he was very important for our musical history and because he realized the connection between music and ballet. Chostakovitch because his 15th conducted by Valery Gregiev was a milestone in my life. This was the moment I realized I wanted to approach music differently. And I became a conductor.

As for contemporary music, I think I would place Schönberg Berg Webern on first place, second the school of Vienna, but also Boulez, Xenakis, Kurtág. These last 3 unfortunately are played less and less. Also today there are numerous composers who write fascinating music and use a unique musical language. Music that can be very experimental, yet straight to the heart.