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# DIFFERENT TAKE

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# ORCHESTRAL MANEUVERS

MUSIC DIRECTOR OF THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE, LONDON

ANTONIO PAPPANO TALKS TO BRUNSWICK'S JAMES OLLEY

*“What I love about the word conductor is that it implies a certain electricity passing through. Music is basically air. It is given life somehow, whether it’s the pull of a bow or it’s a wind player blowing. Then I, in the center, take all this energy, all this air, and try to influence it, coax it – to produce something that is dramatic.”*

*“The more I conduct, the more I have the feeling that just how I stand there, move my eyes, the expression on my face, my whole attitude has somehow become 10 times more important than how I wave my arms.”*

*“The conductor is the most important person in an opera performance. Not for ego reasons, but because he’s the person who can bring all the strands together, and yes, I’m taking the audience on a journey, because that’s what they’re there for. God knows what they’ve experienced during the day before they come to the theater in the evening.”*

*“The baton is a tool. Some conductors are brilliant at doing everything with the stick, and there are many ways to beat ... from march band to the most exotic, fluid ways of making music; from neat and tidy to very dramatic. I tend to be a little bit more pugilistic in my approach. It’s just my body type. I’m kind of squat, and I get involved.”*

*“My job is not to steer a piece of music like a NASCAR driver, but to guide it.”*

*“Musicians . . . have their own heart, their own expression, their own poetry. To have an attitude of love, of wonder – a state of wonder about the music; I think that’s important because I think we’re in a business where we’re very privileged.”*

*“Conducting is so easy, really. Anybody can get up in front of an orchestra and, somehow, they’ll play. So, as a conductor, you have to be very good at what you do, because if anybody can do it, then what you produce has to be something that brings them to another level of understanding.”*

*“When you start a piece of music, you set something into motion. Whether it be the Force of Destiny, which is bang, bang, bang, like a tremendous knocking on the door of fate... or the beginning of Aida – a gossamer, chromatic melody which is perfumed and from a far-away land. You set something in motion that will have a life of its own as it develops.”*

*“I have a name: ‘Maestro.’ In Italian it means teacher. I think conductors do have to focus on educating an audience.”*

*“Some composers are very explicit about what they want. But once the performance starts, you have to also be big enough to let it take shape itself.”*

*“I don’t think a conductor should come out and talk every time before a performance. Well actually, secretly, I do. Even if it’s Beethoven’s Fifth, if you could just say a couple of words about it, I would be kind of happy. I don’t dare to at the moment. But I think it would make the concert-going experience so much more human and less ritualistic. I think just a little help, a mini-lesson right before. Five minutes is good.”*

*“We have to package our message more succinctly, more clearly. We have to help the audiences understand the references of what they’re going to see. What with computers, television, movies – all the distractions of today – we don’t read as much. We’re not as well read. I’m not talking about everybody, but in general. So, a Russian audience going to see a Russian opera, they will have read Pushkin, they will have read Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky. That’s a given. At the turn of the century, of the 20th century, everyone would have been well read. So, if a composer makes a reference, that would resonate very, very strongly.”*

*“I am as passionate about the words as I am about the music.”*

**Q: What is the first piece of music that really spoke to you? There is a long pause as Pappano gives a concentrated look into the distance. Then he starts to sing the theme tune from Match of the Day, the long-running BBC television show for soccer-mad Brits.**

*“Performing is an exchange with the audience. I don’t think it’s true that musicians would rather be in a quiet room and perform chamber music. I think chamber musicians need to perform for an audience. There’s an electricity when you play chamber music also, that they need to express. Something else comes out of musicians when they have to do it in front of people, and that exchange is so hugely important.”*

*“Music is not alive unless it is played, and I believe that somebody needs to hear it on top of that.”*

*“The more you conduct, the more you get a sense of – and the more your back gets a sense of – the atmosphere, and certainly, you get a sense of the mood of the room. I think audiences are as much a part of the performance as they choose to be, in a way. Some of them are more placid, some sit on their hands, some are not into it. Some are completely corporate and maybe not real music lovers, but they’re there because they somehow have to be. But that’s our challenge.”*

*“Donors don’t come to every rehearsal. It’s usually when the orchestra and the singers are together with no staging – just a pure music rehearsal. I’m very engaged there. I’m working. It’s not just a play-through. They hear what I say and see how a performance is shaped from early on. When you’re giving money to something it’s good to know how that money is used to shape the performance.”*

**Q: Who is the greatest communicator in music?** *“Tony Bennett. I saw him for the first time this summer at the Royal Albert Hall in London. He took the place apart. He had an old-fashioned sense of razzmatazz. He had heart.”*

*“Another thing that’s very important for conductors, is how you interact with the people who are giving money to your organization. It’s been such a great pleasure to meet so many people who love, and who are loyal to, the [Royal Opera] House. And to be able to talk to them one-on-one and have them come to rehearsals. At Covent Garden now, we’re letting more people into the inner workings of the House to see the process of how something is built. The level of fascination that has been expressed is really quite something.”*

*“I think people need theatricality in their lives. Too many lives are ho-hum.”*

**Antonio Pappano** is Music Director of both the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in London and the Orchestra dell’Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome. Born in London, he studied piano, composition and conducting in the US, making his debut as an opera conductor at Den Norske Opera in Oslo in 1987. His recorded work is released by EMI Classics and has earned him numerous awards. In December 2008 he was made a Commendatore of the Republic of Italy. [www.roh.org.uk](http://www.roh.org.uk)

**James Olley** is a Director at Brunswick, London, and an amateur conductor.

