

Interview in NRC Handelsblad (Dutch newspaper), 15 March 2002:

DREAM OF AN ORCHESTRA REPETITEUR

Interview by Mischa Spel.

Hans Leenders (1971) is assistant-conductor to the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra. The programmes of chef-conductor Valery Gergjev are rehearsed by him.

Very occasionally, world politics even impact classical music. Two days after '9/11', Valery Gergjev, chef-conductor of the RphO, was stranded at the airport of Los Angeles. The Rotterdam Philharmonic Gergjev Festival had to start without its name-giver, with the assistant-conductor at the podium. Suddenly all eyes were on Hans Leenders (30), the orchestra repetiteur whose preparatory work normally remains behind the scenes. "They were not the most unequalled concerts I ever conducted" he laughs, "but it was of course an excellent opportunity. I had as yet never conducted a whole programme, and now I had the opportunity. The orchestra was happy with the way things went and so was I, but one could imagine more ideal circumstances. I had exactly one rehearsal to bring my own vision across to the orchestra."

The assistant-conductorship has a long history. In the 80-ies and early 90-ies, this phenomenon did not exist in the Netherlands, resulting in a visible lack of conductors of the generation between Edo de Waart (60) and Lawrence Renes (31).

Previously, de Waart, Hans Vonk and Ed Spanjaard received their professional education as assistants to Bernard Haitink at the Concertgebouw Orchestra. De Waart transmitted his know-how to Lawrence Renes and Alexander Liebreich at the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, Micha Hamel assisted at the Radio Symphony Orchestra. In 1995, it was decided in Rotterdam that, after sixteen years of not having one, it was high time to reinstitute the assistant-conductorship. After Jurjen Hempel and Ernst van Thiel, Hans Leenders - percussionist of the orchestra - was in 1998 selected from 21 candidates. The year after, he resigned from his job in the orchestra and started fully focusing on conducting. Leenders: "I always had hoped to be able to continue in conducting. But a dream first has to come true, and it was a weird situation to apply with my own orchestra. Fortunately that only worked to my advantage. No doubt there will be players in the orchestra who think I am no good as a conductor, but I never really experienced any problems. On the contrary, the musicians are helpful and help me prevent beginner-mistakes with their advice: "Hans, don't stop the orchestra that often. Hans, speak up!" Those are simple but crucial tips. In addition, this open communication gives me the feeling that it is OK if I make a few mistakes.

All orchestras should see it as their task to institute an assistant-conductor" suggests Leenders. "It is advantageous for the orchestra to have such an assistant around. And in addition it is the only way young Dutch conductors can get groomed for the future. It is so very different to lead one hundred professional musicians as opposed to practicing dry in front of a piano – one can only learn that in practice.

The role of assistant-conductor offers Leenders a training-on-the-job which requires him to be accommodating and may not very glamorous. "Being an assistant-conductor is a really tough and servile job", he acknowledges. "I prepare all orchestral programmes in the shadow of the chef-conductor or guest conductors, just in case the

conductor falls ill or they need a stand-in for a rehearsal. That is extremely intensive, and as a consequence one can only reach a certain level in musicality. But the other side of this crazy work pressure is the unique experience I acquire. Regional orchestras like the Brabants Orchestra or the Gelders Orchestra will never invite a beginning conductor to conduct Mahler's second symphony. But as an assistant, I get the opportunity to come across that kind of repertoire on the conductor's podium.

Can not be missed

The concept of assistantship in Rotterdam is unique in The Netherlands. The assistant-conductor is not an "extra" employee, as is the case at the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, but a genuine indispensable member of the artistic team. Chef-conductor Valery Gergjev combines his role in Rotterdam with contracts with the Mariinski Theater in St Petersburg, the Metropolitan Opera in New York and a multitude of incidental guest-conductorships. As a consequence, he seldom conducts the full series of rehearsals in Rotterdam. "For programmes conducted by Gergjev, I nearly always have had to stand in at a rehearsal" acknowledges Leenders. "Usually that would concern the familiarisation rehearsals, in which one lets the orchestra play through the programme. The ground work. And that is how it should be. In the end it is Valery Gergjev who will conduct the concert, and I can never predict in full detail how he will do that. Thus it does not make sense to have the orchestra adopt certain musical details which they may have to forget about later. It is more my role to help the orchestra build up a feeling for the piece. Something which could be done by just playing through, but that would be boring. So during the rehearsal process, I do try to work on some musical aspects, whilst trying to stay as close as I can to Gergjev's spirit. I know him more closely from when I was a percussionist, so in broad lines I can sense which direction his interpretation may take.

Opinions are divided about the Rotterdam division of work, with Gergjev as chef-conductor and Leenders as "preparing" assistant. Isn't an orchestra exhausting its tone culture by choosing a chef-conductor who usually flies in for one or two rehearsals before the concert, and afterwards sometimes immediately takes off for the next engagement? "Every orchestra needs to consider what they wish to get out of a chief conductor", Leenders states. "For a regional orchestra which may need to improve some fundamental aspects, it is a good choice to have a chef-conductor around frequently. For a top orchestra like the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra that might be paralysing. Conductors like Valery Gergjev and Simon Rattle can achieve a refinement in one week which might take a less good conductor half a year. And then still he would not achieve the same result. What does guaranteeing of a result mean? Is that the striving to reach the one real peak, that unforgettable concert under a top conductor? Or is it engaging a trustworthy but less inspiring chief? The Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra has in the era of Gergjev developed itself into an alert, flexible and organic ensemble. Quality counts, not quantity."

Honest

A good conductor is someone who behaves like he is, who is honest, Leenders says. "I prepare the programmes and thereafter I can see how the 'real' conductors give the finishing touch. By seeing different conductors at work one is taught how to conduct.

Every conductor has a different personality, every personality a different vision on the repertoire. That is what makes the world of music so interesting and varied.

“The contact that I as an assistant have with the other conductors varies considerably. With Valery Gergjev, discussing music is always two-way, whether trivial or abstract. He often only views the score at the last moment, and then absorbs like a sponge everything I tell or ask him. I hardly get any rapport with a conductor like Simon Rattle, but a person like Hans Vonk is the ultimate mentor and advisor. He supports and advises in a learning process he has gone through himself, and understands the difficulties one encounters. How do you deal with rebellious musicians? How do you communicate with an orchestra which is not motivated? There are some tricks, I am learning, but I am not going to disclose those!”

“Of course I have learnt most from Valery Gergjev. For him, conducting is a permanent search, a ‘work in progress’. Sometimes he can not find the twist, sometimes something absolutely ingenious. Take his performances of Tjaikowski’s symphonic oeuvre. They may bypass the musical indications in the score, but in fact get more to the core than all other performances I know. Gergjev’s secret is the openness of his approach. He plays the orchestra like a piano, almost improvising. With his mime he directs them and forces the musicians to stay alert, as he partially defines his vision at the last moment. Then you can feel the energy flowing two-way.”

“The orchestra members feel and say that I have adopted some technical tricks of the trade from Gergjev, and I am absolutely not embarrassed by it. These are my years of learning; wouldn’t it be a waste if I would dismiss technical solutions for musical problems? But subsequently one has to fit such a gesture into one’s own physique, and that takes time. Take Gergjev’s famous urging left hand. With it, he, like nobody else, can conduct the lengths of all tones, and that is how he maintains the sonority. Through that, he creates moments of unique tone intensity, but that is something which is not easily learned! As a starting conductor, I need quite some time at the rehearsals to achieve what he accomplishes with the orchestra by one gesture.”

Next week, Hans Leenders will four times conduct his first own official programme with the orchestra. “After the interval we’ll play the Symphonic Dances of Rachmaninow, he beams. “I was allowed to choose myself. This music already attracted me strongly the first time I heard it, because of the combination of the strong rhythmic pulse with space for melodic beauty. As an ex-percussionist I could also have chosen *Le sacre du printemps* of Strawinsky, but that music has less space for broad melodies, for digging into the sound.”

Ricardo Chailly once said: “It does not make sense to wait with playing Mahler until you’re fifty.” In essence he is right: being ready for a certain work has not got to do with age, but with personality. I sense that with some works I prefer to wait. My heart is now with the Russian and French repertoire. The heavier, German repertoire, operas – they will follow later. I think I am careful. It does not have to be all at once. The essence for me is to penetrate to the core of music by my own devise.”

This coming season will be Leenders’ last as assistant-conductor. In between reduced activities in Rotterdam and after 2003, he can be heard as guest-conductor at the Gelders Orchestra, the Radio Symphony Orchestra, the North Netherlands Orchestra, The Orchestra van het Oosten and the Residentie Orchestra. “There will be work enough, I am not really worried about that. It is more a matter of not wanting to do too much all at once, keeping time free for studying. I am not a businessman at all, that may be my biggest limitation. All I want to do is be busy with notes, and that as best as I can.”

Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra led by Hans Leenders with music by R. Strauss and S. Rachmaninov: 20, 21, 22 March (2003), 8.15 pm; 24 March 2.15 pm, De Doelen Rotterdam. Reservations (010) 2171717.