

Waving, not drowning

Can it be that difficult, waving a stick in the air? Well, yes. And orchestras have to make up for conductors' mistakes all too often. But help is at hand. **Andrew Stewart** reports on an establishment that explores the mystical relationship between conductor, score and orchestra

Heard from the back desk of the second fiddles, podium talk of Wagnerian Melos and music making's mystery carries on the air like a chorus of frogs in a swamp. It irritates. It might even soothe. But it's no substitute for a clear upbeat before a tempo change or a helpful cue midway through an operatic recitative. The budding conductor, having consulted a mountain of enigmatic guidebooks by good, bad and ugly members of the stick-waver's union, may reach the rehearsal room with all the patter and little of the gestural technique required to communicate without words. Where can they polish, or even acquire, a sound technique?

Not so long back, conductors would make the pilgrimage to St Petersburg to study the mechanics of their craft with Ilya Musin. The legendary guru, whose alumni list includes the likes of Barshai, Temirkanov, Gergiev, Bychkov, Brabbins, Mariss Jansons and Sian Edwards, developed a non-verbal conducting method that worked, could be taught and, above all, was intelligible to orchestral musicians. Musin's death in 1999 did not define the end of the Musin technique. Although the pedagogue's books have yet to be translated from Russian, his methods are being traded openly on the international student market at the majestically named Peter the Great Music Academy.

The academy was founded in 1997 by Mats Liljefors to disseminate Musin's conducting brand and his wider message about the communicative interaction between conductors and players. The PGMA's 12th gathering, less snappily billed as the International Orchestral Conducting Masterclass based on Ilya Musin Technique, takes place in St Petersburg from 8 to 13 April under the direction of Musin's one-time assistant Ennio Nicotra. Fellow Musin pupil, Alexander Polyanichko, takes charge from 16 to 21 April for a weeklong look at opera conducting. The PGMA's tenth anniversary year also includes sessions in August with Nicotra and a week under the care of Vassily Sinaisky in September. Courses are open to applicants of all ages.

Ennio Nicotra recognises that many great conductors of the past, notably headed by Wilhelm Furtwängler, ranked discussions of conducting technique alongside discussions of personal wealth, dismissing both as vulgar corruptions of virtue. Furtwängler particularly stressed the mystical nature of the relationship between conductor, score and orchestra. According to Nicotra, Musin encouraged his pupils to explore the

ineffable from a base built of secure technical skills. 'This question of mystery and technique is most interesting and complex,' observes the Italian conductor, who first studied with Musin in St Petersburg in 1989. 'It deserves a full answer.'

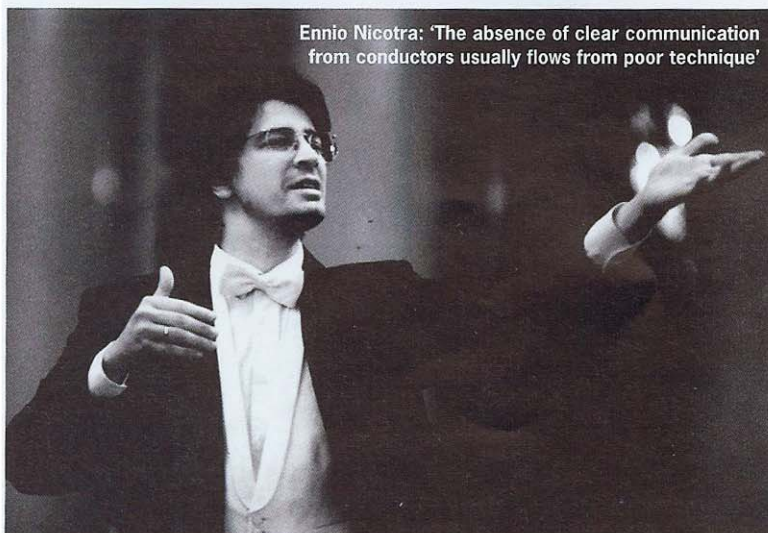
Nicotra illustrates his point with an all too familiar story. 'A few years back, I watched a television transmission of the rehearsals of a very famous conductor. He was rehearsing a piece by Richard Strauss and, at some point, made a wrong gesture. The horns were unable to follow what he was trying to communicate. He stopped the orchestra, said something about expression to the violins and started again from the same place. When he reached the problem passage, he repeated the wrong gesture with the same results. This happened three times in a row. The fourth time, the horns decided to ignore the conductor and managed to play in time with the orchestra. This sort of thing happens every day – just ask anyone who plays in an orchestra.'

The daily business of orchestras correcting conductors' mistakes is so common that it comes as no surprise to see massed ranks of players looking in every direction but the podium. Ennio Nicotra argues that the absence of clear communication from conductors usually flows from poor technique. 'So the conductor, if he wants to have control during rehearsal or performance, must not disturb the orchestra, which is producing the sound,' he suggests. 'He has to be of help giving the information these guys need, so they can always find an element of guidance and will find it interesting to look at him. This is the technique of communicating with the orchestra. After Musin, this technique or language is no longer a secret. He codified it in books and passed it on to his pupils. A perfect technique is useless and empty unless you have something to communicate to the orchestra. This brings us back to the mystical side, stressed by Furtwängler, which I would rather call emotional. We're talking here about the conductor's charisma. Either you have it or you don't.'

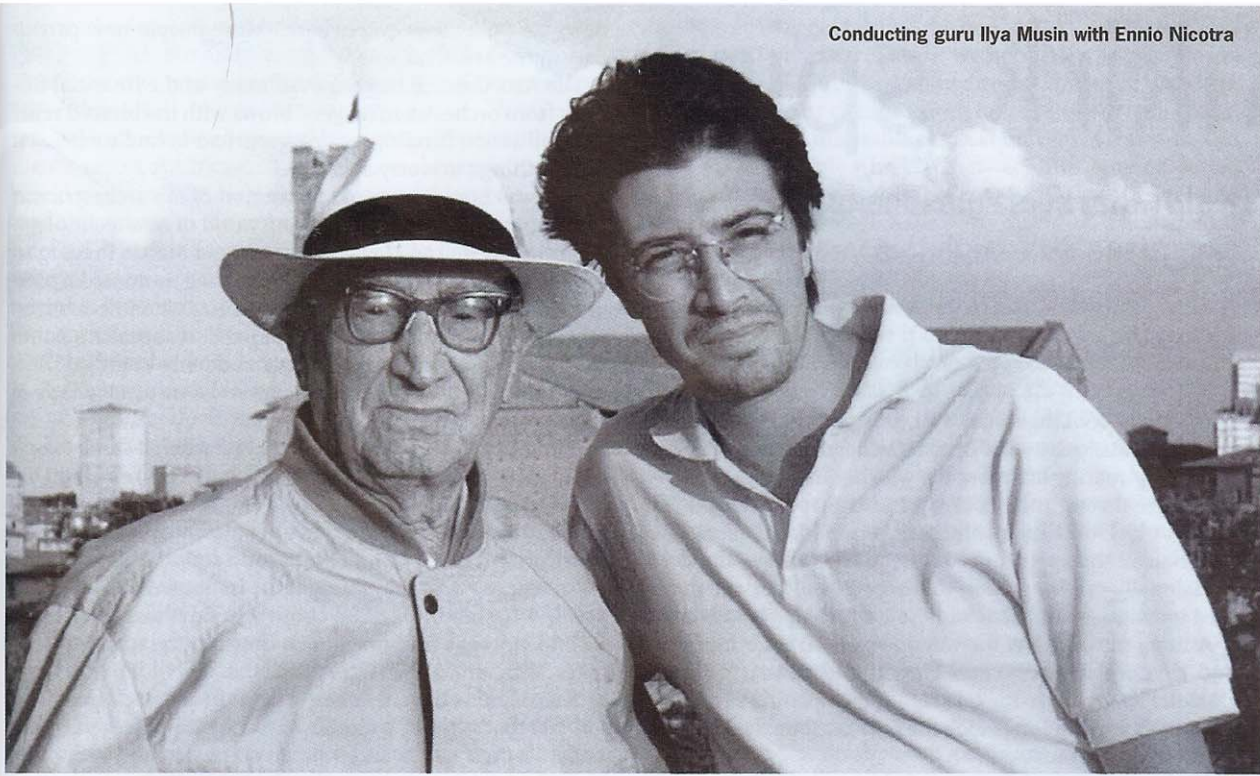
Nicotra laughs at the suggestion that many young conductors leave music college carrying the delusion that they have some kind of power over fellow musicians. It may be practically impossible to teach charisma, he says, but it is possible to overcome communicative deficiencies caused by unclear technique. 'Charisma is innate. If it was there, Musin could develop it; if not, there's nothing you can do.' The Peter the Great Music Academy offers masterclass participants the chance to adopt objective technical strategies in company with a professional piano duet or the St Petersburg State Academic Symphony Orchestra.

Former PGMA student and British-based conductor Johan Michael Katz became honorary vice-president of the academy last July. A graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Katz recalls personal experiences of disappointing conducting masterclasses before praising the value of Ennio Nicotra's courses in St Petersburg and Perugia. The St Petersburg academy, he says, is unusually comfortable and productive. 'It's an environment where people come to learn, not to show off! This is a place to experiment and become a better musician in company with a first-rate orchestra. You could not afford to do that with a comparable orchestra in London. It would be like having the LPO at your disposal for four days!'

The cultural attractions of St Petersburg clearly add to the PGMA's marketability. The academy's general manager, Elena Kostyuchenko, says that her biggest challenge is that of



Ennio Nicotra: 'The absence of clear communication from conductors usually flows from poor technique'



balancing the masterclass books: 'Money is my regular headache. Life is not as it was ten years ago in Russia, and St Petersburg is in a special situation as we go too fast into the market economy. We have to take account of this and make our programmes affordable for our participants. My task is to make a balance, so they can work with the best musicians in St Petersburg, take part in a very professional faculty and experience beautiful venues, and yet make it affordable.'

Kostyuchenko's determined management has delivered several sponsorship deals to provide a limited number of PGMA student bursaries, although she concedes that raising additional private income is tricky without a tradition of corporate support for arts and education projects. To date, she has been able to count on the St Petersburg State Orchestra to serve as the academy's house band. 'Of course, we have to pay people and, just as anywhere in the world, this is never easy. We offer not just masterclasses, but also a complete cultural programme. Many people dream about coming to St Petersburg and we try to give them as much as possible, including trips to the Hermitage and the Mariinsky and to hear the Kirov Opera. Our workshops are like improvement courses, not classes for beginners. We try to select people with experience, but we're very flexible to the needs of individuals who want to take part. The idea is to make a programme that suits each participant.'

Looking ahead, Kostyuchenko says that she hopes to engage other conductors to lead masterclasses. The PGMA will also expand its reach by greater use of video and digital technologies. 'We want to broaden our repertoire options, to make it more attractive for international participants,' she adds. 'Our basic accent has always been expressed in Russian repertoire, but that will shift in future and become more varied.'

Ennio Nicotra says that he will continue to develop Musin's pedagogical approach to match the PGMA's short-course format. In brief, he has already distilled the Musin technique so that its essence can be shown during an intense series of masterclasses. Nicotra has also made a DVD, ready for release in April, and gives further insight into the Musin technique with video clips on the Musin Society website. He wants, above all, to make conductors and players see how different gestures and movement patterns can affect the clarity of communication and directly influence the sound produced.

'I have created a synthesis of Musin's teaching,' he says. 'I did this by considering my difficulties as a student and predicting the problems that students are most likely to experience when they come to the course. The level of orchestras today is much

higher than it used to be, and there are fewer rehearsals. This means the conductor has to demonstrate his charisma and technical command immediately. An orchestra will kill him if that is not there at once.' The PGMA sessions have a practical focus, says Nicotra. They exist to confront the frustration caused by bad conducting technique and develop the confidence that goes with achieving good results quickly in rehearsal.

'When a conductor has his own orchestra, then you can see a magical affinity developing. I remember how the Kirov Theatre orchestra was when Gergiev became its music director. It's impossible to believe now that this is the same orchestra that I knew 14 years ago. It's one of the world's best today. Not everyone, though, has the luck to lead his own orchestra. Learning Musin's technique helps conductors who have to do the job in the best way in the short time available.'

Ennio Nicotra suggests that today's orchestras frequently overlook the circumstances of young conductors and the learning opportunities available to them. The era of working through the ranks from opera house repetiteur and assistant conductor to become Kapellmeister and music director, if not entirely past, is heading towards its final chapter. 'I think orchestral musicians need to recognise this and understand their part in developing communicative relationships with different conductors. The orchestra is based on communication and, therefore, interaction.'

What can Peter the Great Music Academy students expect for their money? In addition to knowledge of the Musin technique, says Nicotra, they will also lean more about the theatrical and psychological aspects of conducting. 'It's an unbelievable experience,' adds Johan Michael Katz. 'Ennio doesn't beat you over the head. He's very *simpatico* and allows you to hear what is there right away when you follow his technical advice. It can be about starting at zero, as it were, and building a technique with which you can communicate or it can be about refining what is there already. In Perugia, which is very intense, you can end up with an hour or an hour and a half with the pianos. I went through every single bar of *L'après midi d'une faune* and, in April, will get the chance to try it again with the orchestra. The beauty is that this is done without pressure; rather, it exists for the learning experience. Look, conductors stay to watch their colleagues in action. That doesn't happen unless they're really hooked!'

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