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# Lunch with Ben Northey: A conductor for all seasons

Jason Steger

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The worst feeling for a conductor is when you make a mistake and lead the orchestra up the wrong way, Ben Northey says. It's awful because it's your fault. He's been there, done that.

Northey, associate conductor with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, was wielding the baton in Perth during a particularly complicated piece by Australian composer Ross Edwards. A big first-violin cue looming and "I accidentally turned two pages of the score at once ... then I turned back and opened up the page and had no idea where I was. Can you imagine?"



Conductor Ben Northey at Tiamo in Lygon Street. Photo: Wayne Taylor

Not really. Perhaps it would be like the steering wheel coming away in your hands as you're driving. So what happens when the conductor, the man who is supposed to be navigating for the orchestra, is lost?

"You go small, you don't start laying down big beats, you just become very kind of out of the way, not really showing anything," he confides.



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Tiamo's wiener schnitzel. Photo: Jason Steger

He was working with "one of the all-time great concertmasters" and it was he who came to the rescue. "I basically stopped conducting and he looked at me and gave a big gesture for their entry and they all played and I knew where we were. Then you go backstage and apologise – the orchestra always knows when you've made a mistake."

Last time I saw Northey in action, he was on the podium at the Melbourne Town Hall conducting Beethoven's Fifth. Cutting quite the dashing figure in his black tails in that grand old building, there was no question of getting lost in that core piece of the canon. Nevertheless, that sort of risk appeals to him: "That's live performance and that's what makes it good when it's good – because it's fraught with danger."

Today, though, we are in more modest surroundings – Tiamo in Lygon Street, the classic and popular Italian restaurant. It's been a particular haunt of his since he moved from Ballarat into a student share house in Carlton in 1990.

Northey is torn between two favourites in Tiamo's repertoire, chicken parmigiana or wiener schnitzel. He plumps for the classic Austrian dish while I opt for rigatoni with a lamb ragout. Mozart and Verdi anyone? We limit ourselves to a glass each of San Givese. He has to study a score in the afternoon and also needs to pick up some nappies for his young son.



Rigatoni with lamb ragout at Tiamo. Photo: Jason Steger

"My wife's of Italian parentage and they moved out probably at the time this place opened up. My children are now half Italian and I'm really proud of that immigrant history that part of the family brings."

Northey was something of a precocious child. At the age of two he was obsessed by his parents' substantial record collection. He would lie on

his back and listen to side after side. "They thought this was very concerning – or quite interesting."

Rather than booking him in at the local child psychiatrist, he was enrolled at a Yamaha early-learning class when he was three. It helped that his mother was a fine pianist whose family wanted her to get a "real job" rather than go to the conservatorium.

When he went to school, he switched to violin. A couple of years later, it was the trumpet. "I just wanted to do new things all the time, so I played trumpet for four years because I wanted to make a louder noise, I think."

Then he switched to the flute and encountered the first of several teachers who have played a significant role in his musical career. "He said 'Ben, it's all about the sound. That's what our tool is. It's sound, so you have to remember to make sure you're making a good sound.' Now in this conducting business, that's what I do. I listen to sound and try and sculpt it the way I want it to be."

But what is that makes you shift from producing the sound on whatever instrument to "sculpting" it?

He moved to Melbourne for uni, by which time he'd turned to the saxophone and started playing jazz and with a James Brown cover band. He had toured internationally with the Melbourne Youth Symphonic Band and that led to playing sax with the Australian Wind Orchestra.

It has always been the cooperative nature of large-scale music-making that appeals to him. "It's one of the few examples of a large number of human beings cooperating in real time to achieve a very very difficult end product," he says. "As a metaphor for what human beings can achieve, there's nothing like an orchestra."

And for an audience it's special too. "It's a shared experience and that energy cannot be replicated by listening to a recording. There's something about human beings being in a large group and having an emotional response."

He was studying soprano saxophone – "fairly niche, but the thing that degree gave me was a much more holistic understanding of the traditional canon of musical history" – and when he did an elective in conducting in his fourth year he encountered John Hopkins, "one of the most significant Australian figures in orchestral music". Hopkins was the one who identified in Northey the skills for conducting and invited him to be the first student in a new post-graduate course.

"I always get a lot of people asking about conducting as if it's this ultimate expression of power. It has very little to do with power; it has a lot to do with responsibility and having to make choices on behalf of a bigger group. It really is a cycle of communication. not so



Lunch invoice. Ben Northey. Photo: Supplied

...much the dictatorial art form it looks like."

After only a year studying with Hopkins, Northey surprised everyone by winning the 2001 Sydney Young Conductor of the Year competition in front of another great teacher, Finland's Jorma Panula. The prize was \$20,000, which allowed him to follow his girlfriend Joanne to Salzburg where she was studying the French horn. It was there he asked her to marry him: "I was really nervous about that; it would put any classical concert to shame that feeling."

Two years later Northey auditioned for the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki. Panula had left and it was under the control of Northey's next big influence, "a very eccentric Scandinavian genius called Leif Segerstam, who weighed about 185 kilos with a beard like Santa Claus and a personality to match".

He nailed the audition by getting a perfect score when asked to listen to a piece of music a few times and write it down. He puts it down to all the transcribing and arranging he had done.

"If you haven't got the ability to listen, there's no point you being a conductor because that's actually your job. That's the main part – listening," he says. "The art of conducting is replacing the spoken word with gesture. So it's a body-language art form and different gestures get different sounds and they may vary from person to person as well."

Northey does about 10 weeks a year with the MSO and the rest of time he is freelance, which means eight weeks with the Christchurch Orchestra, usually an opera for Australian Opera and one or two concerts in Asia.

When he came back from Europe people said he'd never find enough work in this part of the world, "but that's not been my experience at all, but it's required a very broad approach to music and being able to jump between styles".

His passion is for modernism. "I'm a child of the 20th century," he says. "I grew up listening to the music of Aaron Copeland, even Leonard Bernstein, of Stravinsky, Bartok, Debussy. I find the first part of the century so rich and I feel that we haven't quite bridged the gap (in mainstream repertoire) between the great Romantic works that everyone knows and loves and some of the more modernist works of the 20th century."

The year is already shaping up to be a busy one. Plenty of collaborations and film scores in the Town Hall, Hamer Hall and the Plenary. The MSO, like many others around the world, is trying to switch people onto orchestral music.

The point, he says, with concerts of the film music of the late 20th century is that if people loved that music they would love so much of the orchestral repertoire as well. John Williams' *Star Wars* music referenced "huge slabs" of Gustav Holst's *The Planets*, and the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* score is "so rich in its borrowings from the great masters of the 20th century – Bartok, Stravinsky, Prokofiev".

Ben Northey conducts the MSO in the Sidney Myer Free Concerts on February 8 & 11. [mso.com.au](http://mso.com.au)

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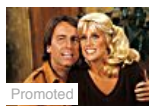
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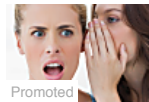
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