

# Staging an Orchestra Concert

by Marshall Burlingame

Tonight's concert began unconventionally, with 23 of the orchestra's woodwind and brass players arranged around the podium as a large chamber ensemble. They have just played Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, and their solemn, clear sonorities still linger in the ear through the buzz of latecomers taking their seats. The big concert grand is being moved to the center of the stage and approximately half the orchestra's string players are assuming their normal positions where the winds were. In the middle of the stage behind the strings are selected winds and timpani, forming a "classical" orchestra. After intermission the stage will adopt yet another configuration as the full orchestra, assisted by extra musicians, convenes for *Ein Heldenleben*.

Now the house lights dim again in the beautiful old hall, bringing the stage into relief. The audience's conversational murmur dwindles to expectant silence; the stage door opens. Greeted by warm applause, the celebrated pianist and the famous conductor walk on stage to perform Mozart's *Concerto in C, K. 503*.

Bringing the concert to this moment of fruition required long-range planning and the co-ordinated effort of many individuals. Two years ago the orchestra's Artistic Administrator began a series of meetings with the Music Director to fashion the programs for the present season. Maestro X, our guest conductor, was already reserved for this date, since the schedules of eminent conductors are often completely booked for years in advance. X had submitted a list of preferred repertoire from which the Music Director eliminated those pieces he wished to perform himself with his orchestra. Correspondence, cables and telexes between the two went something like this:

MD: "Would you like to do *Heldenleben* as the program's second half, preceded perhaps by a brief Stravinsky work (since it will be his centennial year) and a classical piano concerto?"

X: "*Heldenleben* would be fine. What would you say to *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* plus the concerto?"

The Music Director selected an acclaimed Mozart pianist from a list of artists he had chosen as possibilities for the next few seasons.

MD: "*Symphonies of Winds* and *Heldenleben* excellent. How about pianist Y with *K. 503*?"

X: "Would be happy to conduct that program."

To the Artistic Administrator's inquiry, Y's

artist agency replied: "Y would be pleased to do *K. 503* with Maestro X and your orchestra."

MD: "Pianist Y engaged. This will confirm your program as discussed."

X: "Terrific! Looking forward to being with your wonderful orchestra."

The Artistic Administrator then drew up and forwarded contracts to the artists' representatives.

Program building is not always such a graceful minuet. One or all concerned may haggle over repertoire, dates, fees, or all of the above, precipitating an extended juggling act. When singers are involved, as for example in Beethoven's *Ninth*, the juggling can be extremely complex. Compatible voices must be found, then busy schedules adapted so all can be in one place for the necessary time span. It is not uncommon for repertoire to be summarily changed when a singer cancels and no suitable replacement can be found.

With tonight's program set, the members of the orchestra's production staff could begin their preparations. A questionnaire was submitted to Maestro X. The Orchestra Librarian needed to know the Maestro's preferences in music editions. Stravinsky wrote his *Symphonies* in 1920 and revised it in 1947. Both editions are available on hire from Boosey & Hawkes. Maestro X indicated the revised edition, as do most conductors. The Librarian reserved a set of parts with Boosey, specifying concert dates. The materials would arrive 30 days before the first rehearsal, to be returned within a few days of the final performance. The orchestra owned Breitkopf and Haertel parts for the Mozart concerto. *K. 503*, however, is now available in the new Baerenreiter edition of the complete works. Baerenreiter is preferred by most conductors, including Maestro X, so the Librarian purchased a new set of materials. The only edition of *Ein Heldenleben* was published in Leipzig in 1898 by the firm of F.E.C. Leuckart. Under European copyright law, exclusive rights to the edition are still held by Leuckart, now located in Munich. Under the terms of the previous U.S. copyright law, the maximum period of protection for the edition expired in 1954. It is therefore in the Public Domain in this country and available as a reprint from several sources. Use of the re-printed edition by an American orchestra on tour in Europe, however, would be an infringement of European copyright. Since no European performances of *Heldenleben* were planned, the Librarian purchased a new set of string parts to replace the old ones, which were

tattered and messy from decades of bowing and editing changes. Wind parts receive much less abuse, so the Librarian could still use the originals that were so comfortably familiar to the solo wind players.

Once the music was acquired, the Librarian needed to know about any editing Maestro X might wish to have entered in the parts prior to rehearsal. Unless supplied by the Maestro, bowings would be prepared by the orchestra's principal string players and marked in all the parts by the library staff. For this reason, it was necessary to know the number of string players to be used in the Mozart. Guest conductors will typically say: "Let's start with 6, 5, 4, 3, 2 and I'll probably reduce it when I hear how it sounds in the hall with the soloist." (The sequence refers to stands of 1st and 2nd violins, violas, cellos and basses.)

The number of Mozart players was also important information for the Personnel Manager, who is responsible for the musicians' comings and goings during all rehearsals and performances. The Librarian had supplied him with an instrumentation card on each work for the entire season. Well in advance of each concert the Personnel Manager posted a "casting sheet" listing the specific players for each piece. The casting was based on the Music Director's policies with regard to how much principal players and their assistants should play on each program. From this point of departure, the principles worked with the Personnel Manager to provide an equitable distribution of responsibility and time off for the members of each section over the course of the season.

From his instrumentation cards the Personnel Manager also determined when in the season he needed to hire extra musicians. *Ein Heldenleben*, for example, required an additional four

horns, trumpet, tenor tuba and harp. He reserved the players he wanted for this concert before they accepted conflicting engagements.

The Personnel Manager asked Maestro X to indicate what pieces he wished to rehearse at each of his four 2½-hour rehearsals. Maestro X responded with the following rehearsal order, subject to daily revision depending on how things progressed:

Tuesday	10:30 - 1:00	Strauss
Wednesday	10:30-11:45	Strauss
	Break	
	12:00 - 1:00	Stravinsky
	2:00 - 2:20	Mozart (orchestra alone)
	2:20 - 3:20	Mozart (with soloist)
	Break	
	3:35 - 4:30	Stravinsky
Thursday	10:30-10:55	Stravinsky
(Dress rehearsal)	10:55-11:40	Mozart
	Break	
	11:55 - 1:00	Strauss
	8:00	First Performance

The week's scenario was now tentatively established: the extra *Heldenleben* players need not be hired for Wednesday P.M.; the string players would finish early on Wednesday's rehearsals and begin late on Thursday's—those who played only Strauss would have Wednesday P.M. off; except for Wednesday A.M., the winds would never be taxed to play Strauss and Stravinsky back-to-back.

The Production Co-ordinator was concerned both with the orchestra's rehearsals and with the peripheral schedule that accompanied them. He needed to know when the soloist wished to practice at the hall and when soloist and conductor would meet before rehearsing with the orchestra. He arranged transportation for each artist. He planned the piano tuner's visits for the week so that the concert grand was always tuned for rehearsals and performances and the studio pianos were ready for individual use.

Included in the questionnaire sent to Maestro X was a diagram from the Production Co-ordinator showing the way the full orchestra is normally seated. This would be the set-up for *Heldenleben* and, on a smaller scale, the Mozart concerto. What was needed from the Maestro was a diagram for the way he wanted the Stravinsky players arranged. When the Production Co-ordinator received the Maestro's information, he conferred with the Stage Manager at the weekly meeting of stage personnel. During the concerts it would be the job of the Stage Manager and his crew quickly and smoothly to change from the Stravinsky set-up to the Mozart, with its solo piano and reduced number



Arthur Nikisch (1855-1922) rehearsing

of strings. The large *Heldenleben* wind section, occupying the rear half of the stage, could be mostly pre-set before the concert. They would have all of the intermission to strike the concert grand and arrange the front half of the stage for the full string complement.

Each concert is a sequence of events which, once set in motion, steadily runs its course, involving the members of the production staff with their individual but interdependent duties. The Stravinsky provides an example: the Stage Manager positioned chairs and stands in the prescribed manner; the Librarian provided an automatic double-check when he placed the part on the stands and the score on the podium; the Personnel Manager also checked the set-up before he called the wind players to the stage. Throughout the evening the Stage Manager is aware of where each chair or stand is and where it will go as the pattern of the stage shifts for each piece. Working with the Stage Manager, the Librarian pre-sets the music in a way that provides for the least amount of change. He also keeps track of the conductor's scores and times each performance. The Personnel Manager calls the players to the stage at the appropriate times. After checking that everyone is accounted for he gives the O.K. to the Production Co-ordinator, who directs the lighting changes. The Production Co-ordinator also sees that conductor and soloist are given

warning calls and are escorted to the stage at the proper times.

There are many more aspects to the daily routine of each member of the orchestra's production staff. And the production staff is only one of the organization's many components directly involved in producing concerts: management, publicity, program office, broadcast personnel, box office, ushers, house crew. All of this activity is directed toward setting the stage for the principal characters: the musicians, who bring their artistry; the conductor, who brings a lifetime of study and insight; the members of the audience, who bring their emotions and awareness. The composer has created a work of art that depends on all three for its life. Every performance of his work is a fresh gathering of those involved in the concert experience. Tonight, as Mozart's majestic C-major introduction resounds in the hall, all present are participants in an event that is unique to this time and place.

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