



# What I learned (and relearned)

By H. Robert Reynolds

*Editor's Note: Whether you teach band, orchestra, or choir, and regardless of the level, there is much to learn from H. Robert Reynolds's experience observing some of the great conductors of our time.*

I just observed one of the best rehearsals of my life! The conductor was Andris Nelsons, the new music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He was rehearsing *Symphonic Dances* by Rachmaninoff with the BSO in the Shed at the Tanglewood Music Center. I'm so lucky to be at Tanglewood for two weeks each summer. It affords me the great privilege of hearing many rehearsals and performances of the BSO with a variety of conductors.

When watching and listening to Nelsons rehearse, I am struck that he *really* knows the score in all its detail. He not only grasps the big picture but also communicates the smallest gems of musical insight—all with gestures in lieu of words. His gestures always come from the heart and describe his *feeling* of the music. At once bold and grand, then suddenly delicate and sensitive, he seems to have absorbed the music into his DNA. Out comes a purely natural gesture—unplanned and spontaneous and often

unusual, perfectly describing his inner feeling of the music and communicating this glorious music to his orchestra.

The BSO, filled with many older well-seasoned members who must have played the *Symphonic Dances* many times, light up in a way I have rarely witnessed with orchestra pros. It's not that Nelsons avoids rehearsing like a middle school band director. At times I witnessed him rehearsing only the trumpet section, then the flute section to achieve the smallest detail of what he wanted. However, this was all done with the greatest joy, striving for the ideal of his inner concept of the details of the Rachmaninoff. Then with an enthusiastic shout and big smile, out comes, "That's it exactly!"

I asked several members of the BSO about their experiences with their new director. Rachel Childers, Second Horn in the BSO, offered this about Nelsons:

*He's incredibly imaginative and creative. He uses metaphors to capture the feeling and emotion he'd like us to create, and I think the humor and out-of-the-box scenarios are extremely effective at pulling us toward his vision. I also like that he is self-effacing and down to earth—it seems like he sees himself as one of us. It also feels like the*



# at Tanglewood

*orchestra is fully engaged and responsive when he is here. He also has asked us to correct several things—like intonation and sloppiness—that the orchestra usually gets away with. My experience here so far has been sans music director, so I'm looking forward to the accountability that comes with having a regular boss! I'm also looking forward to hearing how he'd like to shape the sound of the orchestra, especially in Symphony Hall. I think these next few years will be a great time to be in the BSO!*

Over my lifetime, I have witnessed *many* rehearsals of major ensembles and outstanding conductors, including Simon Rattle, James Levine, Valery Gergiev, Eugene Ormandy, Manfred Honeck, Zubin Mehta, Kurt Masur, Leonard Slatkin, Giancarlo Guerrero, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Gustavo Dudamel, and now Andris Nelsons. I guess I'm a rehearsal junkie or maybe just a *music junkie*. Early on, I used to focus on their stick technique, rehearsal hints and tricks, and what they said. *I completely missed the point.* When I stopped looking for tricks that click and began absorbing the atmosphere and the way they rehearsed, several ingredients seemed to be common to all. While I witnessed these characteristics when observing top-tier professional conductors,

they clearly can apply to any director of any ensemble:

- Complete knowledge of the score in all its details
- Knowing from the beginning of the very first rehearsal what they want when it is performance ready
- A strong intuitive musical sense
- Ability to hear what is being played and how it differs from their idealized concept
- Persistence in the pursuit of their ideal rehearsal and performance
- A rehearsal balance between objective details and the feeling of the music
- Pacing of each rehearsal and pacing of all rehearsals toward a performance
- Sensitizing the ensemble to their musical priorities

The other ingredient I picked up at these rehearsals, and now especially at Tanglewood, is the sound of *really* good playing. It is much more than playing in tune, together, with the right

The one last ingredient possessed by all great conductors is a deep passion for music and the need to express that passion. The players can feel it, and the audience can feel it. It's a love affair that burns deep inside all who truly love music.



style, in balance, and with good tone. It is something that one must experience, hear, and sense, not something that can be explained or discussed. We must hear it and make it a part of our aural concepts. I am so glad that I began attending rehearsals of fantastic conductors early in my development. I am a better musician and conductor for it. I have also noticed that members of the BSO play better for the conductors they respect the most—not just the most famous, but those with the deepest musicianship, aural perception, and sensitivity, along with intimate knowledge of the structure of the music.

I first came across Andris Nelsons a number of years ago when I was checking the archives of the Berlin Philharmonic online in the Berlin Philharmonic Digital Concert Hall. The Berlin folks were performing *Suite from Der Rosenkavalier*, a composition I just love. I had never heard of the conductor (Nelsons), but the Berlin Phil has played the Strauss many times, so I thought no matter the quality of the conductor, the performance would be excellent. Lo and behold, this “unknown conductor” was good—no, really good—

no, someone *very special*. So when Nelsons was named music director of the BSO, I was thrilled because I would be able to witness his music-making firsthand at Tanglewood. I have certainly not been disappointed.

His joy of music-making is clear, and his nonverbal description of each line of music comes from the feeling he has for the music, not from technique or the correct beat pattern. Yet, when he needs to be clear, clarity suddenly appears. He seems to know intuitively what his players need and don't need. Perhaps it is talent; if so, then I want more.


There is one thing, however, that I really don't like about Andris Nelsons—he is just 35 years old. *How can anyone that young be that good?*

To offer more insider insight, Robert Sheena, English Horn in the BSO, shared the following:

*Andris Nelsons has the ability to communicate what he wants an orchestra to do with the entire range of gestures. That is to say baton, arms, hands, facial expressions, and verbal instructions in rehearsal—all can have an impact, all can have meaning.*

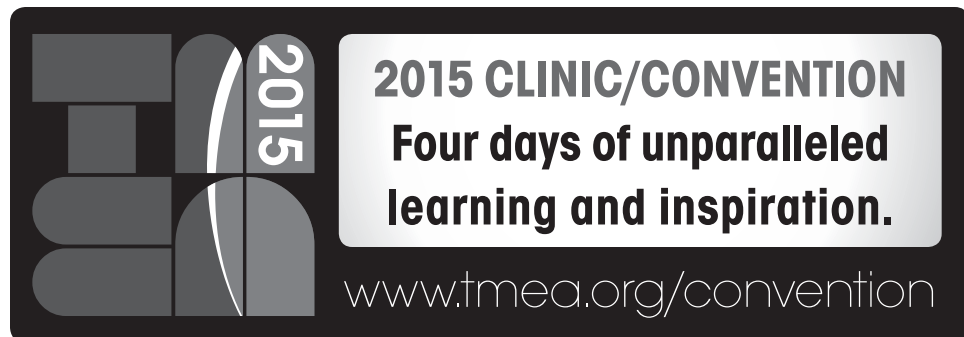
*In particular, he knows how to conduct legato-sostenuto—how to draw out tension and structure in a phrase with his left hand. That seems to be quite rare among conductors in my experience. Couple that with an uncanny sense of timing and pacing, a deep love of music, and an abiding respect for the orchestra, and you have the potential alchemy for a great and very exciting performance.*

The one last ingredient possessed by all great conductors (especially Nelsons), is a deep passion for music and the need to express that passion. In his rehearsals and concerts you can feel that passion, caring, and respect for the music. The players can feel it, and the audience can feel it. It's a love affair that burns deep inside all who truly love music.

I came away from my time at Tanglewood not with more knowledge but with *inspiration*. I was truly inspired to be a more joyous musician—a more expressive musician. In the age of “perfect performances,” perhaps we can all be more inspiring, more musical—more like Andris Nelsons. 

H. Robert Reynolds is the principal conductor of the Wind Ensemble at the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California. Reynolds will present four clinics during the 2015 TMEA Clinic/Convention as the Band Division featured clinician.

*Images of Andris Nelsons by Marco Borggreve.*



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