

# The sorcerer's apprentice

**The conductor Andris Nelsons has leapt from student to star, writes Richard Morrison**

Looking more like a lanky sixth-former than a maestro with the world's top orchestras and opera houses at his door, Andris Nelsons greets me with a grin. "We've met before," he declares. His voice is not like his looks. It's a mature bass. I had forgotten that he was a trumpeter and singer before he was a conductor.

"Have we?" I reply, racking what remains of my brains. How embarrassing to have met the man regarded by many as the most promising young conductor in Europe and not recall where, when or why. "Yes, six years ago," he says. "You were interviewing Mariss Jansons. I was shadowing him as his student."

If a single remark could encapsulate Nelsons's extraordinarily swift rise in the classical music world, this would be it. Just six years ago this eager beaver was still humbly hanging on the every word of Jansons, his great mentor and fellow Latvian.

Look at the sorcerer's apprentice now! A month ago he made his debut at the New York Met, with *Turandot*. So much do they like him that he's back next year for Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*. Tomorrow he makes his Covent Garden debut, with *La Bohème*. And next summer he conducts his favourite composer, Wagner, at the shrine of shrines — Bayreuth — for the first time.

He is just 31. And we haven't even mentioned his day job as music director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra — where, to my ears and many others, his expansive, expressive gestures and great-hearted interpretations have stoked up the players' passions to an intensity not heard in Brum since Simon Rattle's day.

Rather wonderfully, none of this seems to have gone to his head. "It was so exciting seeing so many famous soloists in the canteen at the Met!" he says, like a little boy cadging autographs from sporting heroes. "Of course, as a student you have dreams. But all this has happened so fast."

In his case the dreams began pretty early. Born and brought up in Riga, he was



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5 when his stepfather took him to his first opera. Nothing too taxing — just Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. "Yes, it's a long opera, but it had a hypnotic effect on me. I was overwhelmed by the music. I cried when *Tannhäuser* died. I still think this was the biggest thing that happened in my childhood."

Maybe, but his family background almost guaranteed that he would go into music. His father is a cellist and conductor; his mother founded the first early-music ensemble in Latvia. Indeed, the young Nelsons honed his vocal skills on English madrigals (he even came to the Dartington summer school in England to study Renaissance singing with Evelyn Tubbs). His first instrument in music school was the piano, but at 12 he took up the trumpet — to such good effect that he was playing in the Latvian National Opera while still in his teens.

"Being in an orchestra myself helped me to understand the psychology of players,"

he says. "You realise how much teamwork matters. And of course it allowed me to watch many conductors at work. Some are diplomatic, some very sincere, some tyrannical. It doesn't matter. In the end an orchestra responds to conductors who know exactly what to offer them in leadership and inspiration. If you try to be liked, it doesn't necessarily make you successful."

Nevertheless, Nelsons has so far managed to be liked by almost everyone — musicians and audiences. That's a trait he shares with Jansons, whose immense influence on him is evident from every gesture he makes on the podium. If the encounter with *Tannhäuser* at the age of 5 set Nelsons on the path to music, it was his chance meeting with Jansons that spurred him to abandon the trumpet and try his luck as a conductor. Jansons was in Riga with the Oslo Philharmonic, and Nelsons was in the audience. A trumpeter in the orchestra

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became ill; Nelsons rushed home to get his instrument and played Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* on no rehearsal. Then instead of a fee he asked for a week sitting in on Jansons's rehearsals.

Jansons became his teacher, and his pupil was a fast learner. "The first time I conducted at the National Opera in Riga was when I was 21, and I became music director at 23," Nelsons says. Does he share Jansons's belief that the Latvian temperament is specially suited to well-balanced music-making? "There's something in it," he replies. "Part of us is very cautious. Latvians always try to be totally prepared. That's the head at work. But the performance comes straight from the heart. Whereas maybe the Russians leave more to chance."

If his meeting with Jansons suggests that Nelsons is good at seizing once-in-a-lifetime chances, his appointment as music director in Birmingham confirms it. When Birmingham Town Hall was about to reopen after restoration, the CBSO needed someone to lead it through a private concert doubling as an acoustic test. By then Nelsons was conducting in Germany and Finland, and word of his prowess was spreading. He conducted two works in the Town Hall — Dvorák's *New World Symphony* and Strauss's *Don Juan* — then made a recording of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto with the CBSO and another fast-rising Latvian, Baiba Skride. In that single week he electrified the band. Still only 27, he was offered the job on the spot — even though he had, at that point, never conducted the CBSO in public.

"I put it down to chemistry," he says. "Of course 100 musicians never think the same way about everything. But I can't imagine being music director of an orchestra that doesn't share the same dreams as I do."

He has decided to play to his strengths. "I don't think one conductor can cover the whole field, and I don't think one should. It's more honest to do music that's closest to your heart." In his case that means big Germanic and Slavonic stuff. People who like discreet, gentle music-making might like to avoid Birmingham next year. But the rest of us will be flocking to hear Nelsons conduct Strauss's *Alpine Symphony*, Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony, Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*, Stravinsky's *Firebird* and — as the grandest of grand finales next June — *Lohengrin*. Which is the work that Nelsons goes on to conduct at Bayreuth. Could there be even bigger Wagnerian things to come? "There's some thought about doing *The Ring* in Birmingham in 2013. Wagner's bicentenary," says Nelsons casually, though with a gleam in his eye. I bet there is.

**La Bohème is at the Royal Opera House (020-7304 4000), from tomorrow. Details of CBSO concerts at [cbsoco.uk](http://cbsoco.uk)**