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Andris Nelsons rehearsing with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, where he is music director. The 31-year-old conductor is to open the Bayreuth Festival in July.

Taking the composer's lead

The Latvian conductor Andris Nelsons doesn't want to hog the spotlight

BY GEORGE LOOMIS

A big ego might seem to be a fundamental attribute of an orchestral conductor. But the capacity to lead is far more important. Putting ego aside, the young conductor Andris Nelsons lets an orchestra know early on that their joint task is to achieve not what the conductor wants, but what is best for the composer.

Mr. Nelsons's approach may sound naïve, but it has helped propel him to the forefront of young conductors. British critics have been lavish in their praise after his appointment as music director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, a post he assumed last season. And word of his talent spread quickly through the musical world. Mr. Nelsons, 31, made his Metropolitan Opera debut last October, and in July presides over the opening performance of the Bayreuth Festival in his debut there. He was to have made his debut with the Dresden Staatskapelle orchestra on Thursday but had to cancel because he was engaged to replace his teacher and mentor, Mariss Jansons, who is ill, at the premiere of an eagerly awaited revival of "Carmen" at the Vienna Staatsoper.

"It is extremely important that the human chemistry works to achieve the musical result best for the composer," said Mr. Nelsons, in a telephone interview. "This can be sensed very quickly. It is

dangerous to talk too much in rehearsal. Orchestras expect conductors to have ideas as well as to be confident and clear in their technique. But they can't be talked down to. They know the music — sometimes better than the conductor."

The electrifying performances Mr. Nelsons is capable of achieving result from a delicate balance. "It's tricky," he said. "I always want the music to sound as if it were composed yesterday. But you can't exaggerate the excitement just to make a piece sound different. You have to recreate it in an open and honest way."

Only 10 years ago Mr. Nelsons, a native of Riga, was playing trumpet in the National Latvian Symphony Orchestra. As he tells the story, the Oslo Philharmonic, then led by another Latvian conductor, Mr. Jansons, who was visiting the capital on tour. Just before the concert, Mr. Nelsons was asked to take over in Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* for a trumpet player who was sick. "I grabbed my trumpet and did it." After the concert Mr. Nelsons approached Mr. Jansons about studying with him, and a long association was begun.

"Mariss is the biggest influence in my life as a conductor — my most important teacher and mentor," Mr. Nelsons said. "He is an amazing conductor and musician, and has self-discipline and a work ethic."

Furthermore, "he represents two traditions," Mr. Nelsons said, explaining that Mr. Jansons had worked extensively with Evgeny Mravinsky in Leningrad and Herbert von Karajan in Vienna. It would seem that Mr. Nelsons learned more than music. When we had a light

supper in New York, Mr. Nelsons exuded a thoughtful, soft-spoken, caring demeanor not unlike that of his mentor.

Prior to encountering Mr. Jansons, Mr. Nelsons also studied conducting in St. Petersburg and at the conservatory in Riga. He was born into a musical family. Through his mother, who founded Latvia's first early music group, he became immersed in Renaissance and Baroque music. His father is a cellist. Mr. Nelsons would like to see children generally encounter music early.

"Musicians have many tasks, but they also need to worry about the future of classical music. If it's left to orchestras to build younger audiences, it can be like chemotherapy — it might work

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and it might not. Children need to start early. Nobody asks them if they want to study math. Music should be the same way. Later they can decide."

Mr. Nelsons's initial platform was the Latvian National Opera, where he became music director at the age of 23. "Everything happened quickly, but gradually. I'm happy it wasn't all very sudden because I was very young and am still young."

Having never conducted publicly, he won his post with the Birmingham orchestra after making a dazzling impression with it in a private concert and in a

recording that same week.

When he was 5, his stepfather took him to a performance of "Tannhäuser," kindling a love for Wagner. "I listened to it before on L.P.s several times, so I knew the themes."

As his Bayreuth debut approaches he has spoken to Daniel Barenboim about the Festspielhaus's notorious tricky acoustics, which make it difficult to coordinate the singers and the orchestra. He hopes to adjust quickly.

The new production of Wagner's "Lohengrin," with the Birmingham symphony, will be directed by Hans Neuenfels, who is known for his radical productions. "We have met and discussed musical aspects. It is his production but I will try to see that it doesn't go against the music," Mr. Nelsons said.

Whether or not he succeeds is likely to become a point of critical contention, yet Mr. Nelsons makes clear his receptiveness to Regietheater.

"If a production is too literal, Wagner's underlying idea may not come across strongly enough," he said. "He was such a prophet. In 'The Ring' the world collapses because of an obsession with money, a point even more relevant today."

Despite his heavy symphonic schedule, Mr. Nelsons is determined to keep a hand in opera. And he keeps opera in Birmingham's schedule. "They like to do it and it helps keep them flexible."

"Lohengrin," in fact, is set for June. Given the near impossibility of obtaining Bayreuth tickets, or for those who choose simply not to make the pilgrimage this year, it should be a tantalizing possibility.