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Book review: *Conducting for a new era*, by Edwin Roxburgh

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Conducting for a new era, by Edwin Roxburgh. Woodbridge: The
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It is rather poignant to read this book in the days following the death of Pierre Boulez, since he emerges from its pages as doubly crucial to the new concept of conducting that Edwin Roxburgh so meticulously dissects. While the rhythmic complexity and delicate timbral balance of Boulez's work as a composer (including the seminal *Le Marteau sans maître*, extracts from which feature on the DVD that accompanies the book) demanded new levels of precision and clarity in their direction, the distinctive style that he developed as a conductor was undoubtedly the biggest influence on the gestural vocabulary of his fellow interpreters of the postwar avant-garde canon—Messiaen, Stockhausen, Berio, Birtwistle—on which Roxburgh focuses. Boulez's trademark abandonment of the baton—a choice that Roxburgh defends as essential for much modern repertoire, notwithstanding the baton's usefulness for acquiring basic conducting technique—is the visual signifier of an approach that changed the art of conducting as fundamentally as Berlioz and Wagner had a century earlier. Moreover, the backwards expansion of Boulez's repertoire into the nineteenth century in later life exemplifies another of the themes that runs through this book, the mutually informative relationship between contemporary and earlier music: Roxburgh cites examples from Rossini and Tchaikovsky as well as more expected figures and (perhaps

surprisingly in a study necessarily so concerned with rhythmic precision) quotes Mahler's *aperçu* that a metronome mark may be valid only for the first bar.

The starting point of Roxburgh's investigation, however, is not Boulez but Stravinsky, in particular *The Rite of Spring*. The irregular metres and constantly changing time signatures of that controversial masterpiece made entirely new demands on conductors: unlike in more conventional repertoire, where vagueness of gesture does not necessarily endanger the integrity of the music, here a single error can potentially cause the performance to collapse. The need for careful planning of beating patterns and for an exact and consistent approach to the angle and height of the beats is emphasised by Roxburgh as part of a thorough consideration of rhythm. Not surprisingly, this is the most extensive section of the first part of the book, which is devoted to the technical demands of the contemporary repertoire, but other topics are not neglected: there are interesting accounts, for example, of the approaches needed for music that contains aleatoric elements, that combines live performance with tape or 'live' electronics, that requires the conductor to follow a click-track, or that invites instrumentalists to use unconventional or 'extended' techniques. All these discussions are informed by Roxburgh's own practical experience as a conductor, with helpful advice on personal preparation, marking up scores and rehearsal planning as well as analysis of the new approaches to gesture that contemporary music often requires the conductor to evolve. The range of music that is referenced (and generously illustrated with music examples) is a particular strength of this part of the book, with insightful accounts of very recent music by composers such as Thomas Adès, Julian Anderson and Tristan Murail as well as iconic works by Ligeti, Lutosławski and Carter.

The second part of the book is devoted to insights drawn

from a series of interviews with Roxburgh's professional colleagues. Particularly illuminating comments include those from the conductor Lionel Friend, the singer Jane Manning and the violinist Nona Liddell, though it is slightly frustrating that these are not developed into longer discussions, an approach that the arrangement of the section into topics precludes. The final section consists of a series of case studies of ensemble works chosen in part because they embody particular technical or aesthetic issues with which a conductor often has to grapple: the balance between an improvisatory approach and strict control in *Le Marteau sans maître*; the role of a conductor in a piece originally intended to be performed without one and the coordination of vertical relationships between apparently independent entries in Stockhausen's *Zeitmaße*; the task of beating at an extremely fast tempo (crotchet = 252!), the understanding of instrumental colour and the extent to which the music's external referents should be taken into account in performance in Messiaen's *Couleurs de la cité céleste*. The last question is also relevant in *Silbury Air*, which is inspired by a mysterious prehistoric mound in Wiltshire, but a much greater concern is Birtwistle's 'pulse labyrinth', the intricate grid through which he seeks to achieve precise control of the relationships between the music's different tempi. So demanding was this for the conductor that Birtwistle created a revised version in 2003, twenty-four years after the original, in which more conventional notation was used; Roxburgh's discussion includes an interesting comparison between the two versions and argues the importance for the conductor of close study of the first, even though only the revision is now permitted to be performed.

The case studies are extremely detailed and require a score for full comprehension: the number of musicians who will have the opportunity to conduct these works and thus to draw full benefit from Roxburgh's discussions is very small, but a much greater number will be able to gain from

applying his rigour in other repertoire. Such is the meticulousness with which Roxburgh clearly prepares scores that it is slightly surprising to find errors of both fact (it is Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony and not the Fifth as stated here that contains a 5/4 movement; Adès's Shakespearean opera is not *A Midsummer Night's Dream* but *The Tempest*) and spelling ('principle' is used when 'principal' is meant, 'dependant' is substituted for 'dependent') in his book. Despite these minor cavils, however, *Conducting for a new era* makes a significant contribution to the understanding both of the art of conducting and of contemporary music. Although some of the discussion is perhaps unavoidably heavy-going, Roxburgh's outstanding knowledge of and clear commitment to the music of his contemporaries and the thoughtful integrity of his musicianship are ultimately inspiring.

About the review author

MICHAEL DOWNES is Director of Music at the University of St Andrews and Artistic Director of the Byre Theatre. He is a reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* and has lectured on music and opera for organisations including the Royal Opera House and Glyndebourne. He conducts the St Andrews Chamber Orchestra, which brings together the best players from the University community: recent performances have included Beethoven's final three symphonies and the world premiere of Sally Beamish's *North Sea Edge*, commissioned to mark the University's 600th anniversary. In 2009 he founded Byre Opera, whom he has subsequently conducted in annual productions including Britten's *Rape of Lucretia* and *Albert Herring*, Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and Handel's *Acis and Galatea*. He also conducts the town-gown St Andrews Chorus, now the largest choral society in Scotland with over 175 singers. He was one of the founding artistic directors, with Sonia Stevenson, of St Andrews Voices, a new festival of vocal music which was launched in October 2012.