

Sara Mohr-Pietsch asks 'What do conductors actually do?'

Sir Roger Norrington: It's an extraordinary thing how an experienced and charismatic conductor can completely transform the sound of an orchestra.

Simone Young: There's a very precise science about conducting; I mean there is a set school of gestures, there is a clear set of instructions in the work that you're dealing with, but as it is about communication the interpretation can then be as individual as the person themselves.

Sir Roger Norrington: You can do conducting all sorts of different ways, what you need is imagination. You need to be able react to the music and bring out all its secrets, all its hidden perfumes.

Sara Mohr-Pietsch: This is Maida Vale Studio 1 where the BBC Symphony Orchestra rehearse and record; and down there at the front of the orchestra you can see its nerve-centre, the conductor's podium. There have been, over time, some great orchestral partnerships: Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic, Georg Solti and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and Proms founder Sir Henry Wood and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Some conductors have had a huge impact on popular culture, like Leonard Bernstein in America or Leopold Stokowski who famously jostled with Mickey Mouse in Walt Disney's *Fantasia*. Other conductors have got embroiled in politics: Wilhelm Furtwängler conducted in Nazi Germany throughout the

Second World War; or the East German conductor Kurt Masur who had a huge part to play in the fall of the Berlin Wall.

You'll notice that all of these are men's names: it's taken hundreds of years but slowly the gender barrier is being breached. Marin Alsop became the first woman to conduct the Last Night of the Proms in 2013, and Simone Young has become the first woman conductor to record Wagner's Ring Cycle.

Conducting hasn't always been a job in and of itself. It started off as a way for performing musicians to keep time: first of all in the mediaeval church to keep the singers together, and then as a role for an individual musician, using a tool, either a staff that they would bang on the floor or a baton which was an evolution of the violin bow. It wasn't until the 19th century that conductors stepped out of the ranks of the orchestra to lead without also having to play. There are some famous composer conductors as well, like Berlioz or Mahler or Wagner who drove up standards and paved the way for what we now know as the international conductor, a trend that was also fuelled by the rise of the recording industry in the 20th century. Today conductors are among the highest paid and most respected musicians.

If you've ever been to an orchestral concert you'll have experienced something of the cult of conductors. They are clearly the most important person in the room, standing up waving their arms in front of the orchestra, but at the same time they've got their back to you, the audience and you don't hear them at all. So what is it that conductors are actually about? They're waving their arms around – how do they use those gestures to get what they want out of an orchestra? What do they want the orchestra to be doing? In

this iWonder Guide we're going to be finding out, what do conductors actually do?