

exploring career options



Photo: Grant Leighton

Conductor

Marin Alsop **Interview by Amy Entwisle**

As a young girl, Marin Alsop decided that she wanted to be a conductor. Ignoring the fact that she was told women were simply not conductors, Alsop went on to become the first female conductor to head a major American orchestra when she was appointed music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in 2005. She is the first conductor to win a MacArthur Fellowship, and was recently named Musical America's Conductor of the Year for 2009. With intense focus and innovative efforts, Alsop continues to break new ground, reaching out to communities beyond the symphony hall and bringing people young and old closer to the music she loves.

When did you realize that you wanted to become a conductor?

My father was concertmaster for the New York City Ballet, and my mother was a cellist in that orchestra. I started piano when I was very young, and began studying violin at five. When I was nine, my father took me to hear Leonard Bernstein conduct a Young People's Concert. I said, "That's what I want to do."

What do you have to know to become a conductor?

You need a well-rounded background in music theory. Analyses of compositions is helpful, to be able to take a piece apart. You need fluidity in score reading. It's critical to play at least one, if not several, orchestral instruments, and to have experience playing in orchestras of a certain standard and quality. You also need wide knowledge—not only of music, but of history—so you can give pieces context and bring that across to your musicians. Then you have to have another skill set for dealing with your orchestra, and for interacting with your audiences and the greater community. The more skills one develops, the more successful one can be.

That sounds like many different jobs. Why conduct rather than play an instrument?

When you play an instrument, it's great to be one

cog in the bigger wheel, but you're basically playing one part. I wanted more responsibility for the overall architecture of the experience, to be the messenger for the composer, and that's in essence what the conductor does.

Can you describe the dynamic between a conductor and the orchestra?

The musicians are looking to the conductor for leadership, guidance, and inspiration. Every group has a different chemistry or a different personality, but they're looking to you to set the tone, to be the advocate for the composer, and then they're ready to do their best to actualize that.

What is a typical day like for you?

There is no typical day for me, and I like that. I usually get up at about 5:00. I like to study while I work out, looking at scores or writing speeches. I'll either have interviews or meetings. It's not just about what you're doing when you're on the podium. When you're a music director, it becomes a lot about administrative duties. Auditions, program planning, public speaking, and interviews take up a lot of time.

Do you think it was more difficult for you as a woman to be successful as a conductor?

It took until the 21st century for a woman to lead a major American orchestra, so that says a lot. But I don't think gender should come into play. It should be about passion. I encourage young people to follow their passion even if it seems a closed door because of gender, or age, or whatever. It's a matter of finding a different door to go through, or climbing in through a window. If you're talented and passionate, if you work hard enough, you can do whatever you choose.

As a woman, do you feel extra pressure to be successful?

I don't think that there's any extra pressure on me because I'm a woman. There's extra pressure on me because I am who I am. I'm very demanding of myself. I'm an extremely driven human being.

Do you remember the first time you conducted an orchestra?

What conductors do

Conductors lead amateur and professional musicians, including soloists, ensembles, choirs, youth and community music groups, and orchestras. Their work usually involves a combination of studying and preparing musical scores for rehearsal and performance, practicing, planning musical programs and publicity, organizing rehearsals and concerts, training choirs, auditioning musicians, and writing program notes.

Where they work

You may find conductors teaching, working as music directors of orchestras, and in churches and professional music venues, including theater, film, and television.

Education required

Conductors have degrees in music and a broad knowledge of music history and of the style and functions of instruments. They play one or several instruments, and have typically taken post-graduate courses on conducting.

It was at a concert somewhere in New Jersey, and Mel Tormé was on the program. The conductor didn't show up, and I was concertmaster. All my friends knew I wanted to be the conductor, and they said, "Oh, Marin could step in." It was Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, and that was the first piece I ever conducted with a professional orchestra.

People who come to the symphony may have heard a piece played a dozen times. What do you hope to impart to your audience?

The conductor's goal is to be true to the composer. My motivation is to get the story of the piece—regardless of whether there's a programmatic story, or an unspoken story—across to the audience. When people come to my concerts, if they're listening to a Tchaikovsky symphony, I hope they think, "This really feels like the right flow, and the right dynamics, and the right emotion for this Tchaikovsky piece, and it has a narrative that appeals to me." I hope they feel informed, entertained, educated, and inspired, and I hope that's why they come back.

Many of us listen to music for relaxation and entertainment. What do you do for relaxation?

I work out, and I like to read. I study German. I like languages, and I watch DVDs. I think I do the same things most people do.

Are you concerned about the economy's effect on the symphony orchestra?

These are tough times, to be sure, but we shouldn't be shortsighted and cut back on the arts, because they are our connection to our soul. They provide an escape and transcendence from tough times, and I think it's very healing for people. It's a communal experience as well.

On your website, Handel wears sunglasses. The caption reads "Too Hot to Handel," and there are links to iTunes. Can the symphony be hip?

Our biggest challenge is probably the competition for people's attention, because there are so many new ways of communicating and

being entertained. Americans in particular are so busy. We work really hard. The competition to get people to the symphony is a tricky thing. We're trying to offer more digital internet support. I do little webumentaries where I talk about the pieces. We send out program notes in advance. We're trying to make the concert experience more user-friendly. The image of classical music as an elitist, stuffy experience is—at least in Baltimore—starting to dissipate. I'm hoping to continue to break down that image so that it's a destination point for every person in the community.

In pursuing other careers, many musically talented young people often become less in touch with their music. Do you think it's possible to do both?

If one is going to be a musician of a certain level, it requires enormous amounts of practicing and studying. Developing that along with a career in science or law or another very time-consuming profession will be difficult. I'm interested in exploring ways to keep people in touch with their musical histories and their enjoyment of playing music. Maybe we need to have a renaissance, a resurgence of playing music as a social activity. Perhaps that's something the BSO could take the lead in for young people. I've done this with older adults in England in a program called Rusty Musicians, for people who have had their clarinet in the closet for 20 years. They come every Saturday for a few months and work with woodwind players. Eventually we do a concert, and it's great fun.

What advice would you give to kids?

You have to have an intense drive to be a conductor, completely obsessed by the idea. If you are, use every opportunity to study. If you play in an orchestra, learn the scores as you're going. Start taking lessons. Start observing people. I began studying scores when I was 10 or 11 years old, and I think that served me really well. If you have an interest in something, go to people you admire or respect and ask for help; ask for advice from them. Don't be shy about that, because I think people are far more generous than we give them credit for. **i**

Job outlook

Employment for music directors and conductors was expected to grow 13% between 2006 and 2016. Those skilled in multiple instruments and music styles have the best prospects. The Internet and other new forms of media may provide more opportunities.

Salary range

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics listed the median annual salary for music directors in 2006 as \$40,000, the latest figure available. It is important to note that salaries vary widely according to company, location, and experience. Many music directors have multiple appointments, often spanning multiple continents. Top conductors can earn well into seven figures.

What you can do now

Study instruments, preferably privately or with an accomplished musician. Play in a school or community band. Listen to music and learn the scores. Attend a summer music program or camp.

For more information

"So You Want to Be a Conductor?"
www.classicalmusicgeek.wordpress.com

Summer Programs in Music
www.cty.jhu.edu/imagine/linka2.htm

Symphony Magazine's Career Center
www.americanorchestras.org/utilities/symphony_magazine.html