

NORMAN LEBRECHT

Concertmasters used to be the powerhouse of the orchestra, lauded for their solos and setting the tone of the whole institution. So where did it all go wrong?

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN, woken in the middle of the night, I could rattle off the names of concertmasters in great orchestras the way a schoolboy recites his football team or a whisky priest his catechism.

At Karajan's left knee in Berlin sat Michel Schwalbé, the expressionless Holocaust survivor. In Vienna, it was Rainer Küchl, young before his time. Herman Krebbers personified the Concertgebouw. Michael Davis led the flash-André mob of the London Symphony Orchestra. Rodney Friend kept the New York Phil in tune for Boulez and Mehta. Samuel Magad ruled the line in Solti's Chicago.

And it was not just world leaders who gripped the imagination. Malcolm Stewart two-timed in Liverpool and Toulouse. Haim Taub was a national institution in Israel. Steven Staryk held sway in Toronto. Christopher Warren-Green at the Philharmonia was always poised for a maestro to stumble so he could take over. The concertmaster, 30 years ago, was almost as much the public face of an orchestra as its chief conductor and generally more responsible than him for maintaining morale and tone.

Things have changed. Today, even the most devoted fiddle follower would be hard pressed to name three current concertmasters, and those three would hardly put the shivers up a guest artist in the manner of the legends above. Something has gone out of the driver's seat and it's not easy to define what and why.

The collapse of the record industry is partly to blame. When symphonies were bought and sold over a Saturday morning store counter, the concertmaster got his name on the cover and, from time to time, a concerto to star in. Krebbers was epochal in the Beethoven, Friend pioneered the Britten and Schwalbé was peerless in the Four Seasons. By their mighty deeds did we know them.

The seat was often shared over the season with nominal co-equals but for

state occasions and *Sheherazade* it would be numero uno or die. Such was the demand for the leader's prestige and such was his financial premium that, when I published a list of soloist earnings, the New York Philharmonic concertmaster went around bragging that he made more that year than the young Joshua Bell.

Gold rush apart, there were other attenuating factors afoot. Young women came into the reckoning for the first time in an all-male preserve. Today, there are female concertmasters listed at most major orchestras – even at the Vienna Philharmonic, though Albena Danailova never seems to get the big dates – and, while the women go about their business with beauty and efficiency, some of the swagger has been toned down. Not everywhere, of course: Sarah Nemtanu is a formidable exception at the Orchestre National de France, as are the leaders of several UK chamber ensembles.

Nevertheless, it seems that conductors no longer look automatically to the front seat for total leadership. Some form friendships elsewhere in the ensemble, often with woodwind principals whose central position and lower work rate allow them a better overview of proceedings than the ever-busy concertmaster.

I may be a little premature in sounding the alarm but players tell me they are worried at the decline in concertmaster authority, the downgrading of a vital role and, with it, the historic preponderance of string power within symphony orchestras. I still see fine old-style concertmasters in regional and second-rank orchestras, fewer in the big time. Hiring soloists is no solution. What's needed is stronger personalities. Concertmasters need to make more noise, be less friendly to conductors. Like football captains they must stand up and be counted, for the good of orchestras and the general wellbeing of the musical ecology. Let's hear it more from the number one, right? ■



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YOUR COMMENTS

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY GOOD STRING QUARTETS?

◉ **A GREAT STRING QUARTET WITH FOUR** wonderful, matched players who all get along successfully is a rare and wonderful thing. The art form should be encouraged and supported far more than the current reality reflects. As someone who has done both quartet and orchestral playing full-time, I must state that both choices have their glories and drawbacks. Quartets are hardly immune to discord, frustration, ill will, lack of respect and poverty. Further, many of my colleagues in the orchestra world would change very little about their artistic lives.

BRANT TAYLOR

ANNA KARKOWSKA

◉ **RICH AMATEURS HIRING SKILLED** professionals to back them up is nothing new. Think of the sub-par royal performers Bach had to accompany to keep the bills paid. Activities like this help finance loftier artistic goals.

STEFAN GUFFMAN

Have your say on the issues raised in this column. Post your comment online at www.thestrاد.com