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INTERVIEW WITH BRITISH CONDUCTOR PAUL MANN

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SUMMARY. British conductor Paul Mann is a regular guest with many major orchestras throughout Europe, the US, Australia, and the Far East. Orchestras with which he has worked include the London Symphony Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, St Petersburg Philharmonic, RAI Torino, Orchestra dell'Arena di Verona; the BBC Orchestras, City of Birmingham Symphony, Hallé, among many others. Mr Mann has guest-conducted extcollaborations with USA and is a regular guest with the New York City Ballet. Projects with the LSO included collaborations the legendary rock group Deep Purple in two widely acclaimed performances of Jon Lord's Concerto for Group and Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall, the live DVD and CD of which remain international bestsellers. Paul Mann was chief conductor of the Odense Symphony Orchestra in Denmark until 2008 and has made numerous critically acclaimed recordings for such labels as Bridge, Warner Classics, Da Capo, EMI, and Toccata Classics.

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AG: *Were you born into a musical family? Are your parents musicians?*

PM: No. I'm a freak of nature in my family. The nearest thing to being a musician was my grandfather, who used to go around the pubs telling jokes and playing his ukulele, but otherwise, there have been no musicians in my family. And the story my mother would tell you is that, on my first birthday, my grandfather picked me up, put me up on his knee at the piano and took my hand; suddenly, I started hitting the keys enthusiastically. I don't remember this, of course, but I do remember always wanting a piano. I got it and started piano lessons on my fifth birthday. So, the attraction towards music was obviously in me, but it was not put there, as far as I know, by anybody I can think of.

AG: *What was your early music education? What did your first teachers focus on?*

PM: My first teacher was my uncle, my grandmother's brother. So, obviously, I got away with murder, I didn't have to practise anything. He saw me once a week, I played whatever I wanted, whichever way I wanted, and of course I was the neighbourhood genius. It wasn't until much later that somebody said, 'Hang on, maybe you need a little bit of discipline'. I had talent, but not discipline. Therefore, my first teachers had to undo all the bad habits that I got away with for a long time with this very kind old man, who was the local church organist. My first serious piano lessons consisted of all the things that we all hate: endless hours of scales and exercises. I used to read the newspaper while playing my Hanon exercises – it seemed to me like a good idea. And I suppose that is the reason why I am not a concert pianist. After a while, I didn't like being in a room alone with that big black beast. It seemed to me too lonely. And that's probably why, in the end, I didn't practise all the time. It's too lonely for me. But I do love the piano and whenever I conduct a piano concerto, I feel drawn back to it and miss it.

AG: *Do you play through the piano part before the concert?*

PM: Well, no, but somehow, being in proximity to a concert pianist makes me wonder what the situation would have been, had I made a different turn and arranged priorities differently in my life. Still, I believe it was a temperamental thing. I used to get a lot of scores out of the library and sight read. I was a good sight reader, but not a very good 'practiser'. So, I had a kind of facility that got me so far, but no further. I haven't played in public for 7 or 8 years. Mind you, the last time I played was in the Albert Hall, so I suppose if you got to play once every 20 years, it may well be in a nice place. But on the whole, I don't play much.

AG: *In the UK there are only a handful of specialist music schools. You went to one of them – Chetham's. What did you study there? And how would you describe the learning environment?*

PM: Perhaps not many people know what Chetham's is. It's a school with about 300 students only, a normal school, where you do all your normal subjects, but you are admitted based on your musical talent. You pass an audition on whichever instrument you play, and you're expected to have a second study as well. Tuition is amazingly expensive – it costs £33,000 a year now – but if you get a place to study, you are eligible to get at least some of the money in the form of a grant from the state; and that was essential for me, because my parents had no money at all and could never have afforded to send me there. I go there to conduct the orchestra every now and again. They're unbelievable, the level is just astounding. I studied piano and composition, and I tried playing all sorts of instruments quite badly: all wind instruments, trombone, and French horn. I never learned the violin, but I could play a B-flat major scale on the trombone; that was about my limit.

At Chetham's, not only have I received this fantastic training on the instrument, but I benefited a lot from the school environment. Before that, I had been in a pretty rough normal school. I am from a town near Newcastle, in the North-East of England. In those days, when you left school, your options were: you could be a coal miner, a ship builder, you could work in an office or something like that; but the idea of being a musician was certainly absurd. Therefore, I was given a very rough time at school. And it wasn't until I got to Chetham's, among all these other musicians who probably had similar experiences to mine in normal schools, that I suddenly realized I wasn't a freak after all, and maybe there's actually nothing weird about wanting to be a musician. So, it was just fantastic! It was very demanding, and the atmosphere was very competitive. In trying to get ahead, we were pretty unpleasant to each other, sometimes. You could be in a practice room and somebody next door would play the same thing, and you'd get into some kind of showing-off competition, in ways that are not very healthy. And that was encouraged then. But it's nicer now – I notice it when I go back to work with the kids. Chetham's is a wonderful place. It has the oldest library in the English-speaking world, dating from 1353. I think they should film Harry Potter in there, it's exactly what it should look like. And if there are such things as ghosts, that's where you'll find them. I'm very proud of that place and I'm proud I have been given the chance to study there.

AG: *You mentioned earlier that, after playing the piano for some time, you wanted to play with other people, too. One thing that impressed me greatly in the UK is the fact that music is introduced to children, from the very beginning, as an opportunity to make friends and play in ensembles, thus the social aspect of music-making is emphasized. Would you say this is the main reason British musicians make such good ensemble players?*

PM: It could be. But it could also be just a question of training. For instance, at Chetham's, you get your solo lesson and also a group lessons, in which you are expected to play in front of all your colleagues and they are taught how to comment and criticize a colleague in a polite and constructive way. I think this is very helpful.

And one of the things I've noticed in many places is that, if you're a violin player, for instance, you go through your education learning the Sibelius and the Tchaikovsky concertos, which you'll never get to play as a soloist with an orchestra. On the other hand, it can easily happen that you get your first job in an orchestra without knowing Brahms's *Fourth Symphony*; and suddenly you realize you've got three days to learn a piece that you've never seen before in your life. There's something wrong with an education that's focusing young people on the wrong repertoire. At the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, where I studied, we had a repertoire orchestra that played something different every week. Monday afternoon, they would sight-read *Petrushka*, *Enigma Variations*, Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*, Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, whatever they brought out of the library. So, by the time you left college, after 3 years of study, you had half a chance of being prepared for the repertoire of a symphony orchestra. There was this element in the education plan, and it has got better and better. And, generally, British musicians are encouraged to respond quickly. Conductors often find that British orchestras are so fast that they don't know what to do with the rehearsal time they are given. You take two days to prepare a concert in the UK, but here you'll take five days. The difference is just in the training.

But I don't know why British musicians tend to play in ensembles. I did just because I was not constituted to be a soloist. If you think conductors live a lonely life, you should look at the life of a soloist! As a conductor, you at least get to spend a week in the same town. As a soloist, if your concert is on the Friday, you are going to fly in on the Wednesday, rehearse on the Thursday, play on the Friday, fly off on the Saturday and do it all over again. And in that time, maybe you'll speak to the conductor or have dinner with him. I'm always aware of how awfully lonely a soloist's life is, and it would have never been good for me. I'm too bad at being left in my own company.

***AG:** Is there a method of teaching sight-reading?*

PM: No, probably not. It's probably one of those things that you've got to practise… We had really good libraries in the UK when I was growing up. They are less good now, because less money is being spent on them. But back then, even in quite a small town, there would be a public library with a music section. I used to borrow lots of stuff and play it: operas, musicals, piano music, everything I could find. I had a pal who, almost 40 years later, is still one of my best friends; he and I used to play duets. And we'd get the

Brahms and Beethoven symphonies and just hack our way into them. It was very messy, but at least I got to know the music. And it's good to have a teacher who makes you read much repertoire and doesn't let you stop. You have just to keep going, whatever happens and however disastrous it might sound; gradually, your fingers will find their way.

I once turned pages for somebody in a masterclass. When she was about half-way down the page, she was already indicating me to turn the page. She was actually memorising in advance, not just reading bar by bar. She was reading ahead, like a simultaneous translator in a press conference. Unbelievable! I've never seen anything like that. I certainly wasn't as good as that, but, at school, I got a reputation for being able to sight-read well. That's why, if there was a masterclass or an audition, I would be asked to accompany at the piano. And that was excellent practice! British orchestral musicians are terrifyingly good sight-readers. They can play anything, and they can do it quickly and accurately. It's in the training, it's all about the education. I had a wonderful teacher who, if he said I could do something, I could do it. So even if I didn't think I could, the fact that he said I could, made it possible. Such a teacher gives you all sorts of wings that you didn't know you had.

AG: *Who were the musicians who influenced you the most during your student days and early professional life?*

PM: Some musicians were good influences and some were not so good influences. My best influence – and I can talk a lot about him – was my piano teacher, Dennis Matthews. He's totally unknown in Romania, but in the 1940s and 1950s, he was a very famous pianist in England. He was not at all a glamourous figure though. Dennis was an incredible musician who seemed to me to know everything. And whatever I played, lessons lasted a day, not just an hour. As I went in, in the morning, he'd be finishing the crossword puzzle and he would have – as I subsequently discovered – deliberately left a few clues not done. If I could fill in the missing words, he would buy the lunch. He always bought the lunch anyway, but at least it meant that I could try and show off to him. He was the one who, if I wanted to play something, would urge me to learn it by the following week. And so, there was no choice, I had to do it even if I didn't think I could. I first went to him when I was 13 and stayed with him until he died, 10 years later, in 1988. And still, every day, he's there, all his influence is still present.

But when I started to notice other famous musicians, they started to influence me. That has proved a dangerous thing, because I started to imitate them. We all imitate. Growing up, we imitate our parents; we have to learn somehow. When asked by a young composer how to find his own, original voice, Ravel answered beautifully. He said, 'Imitate somebody whom you

admire. You won't be able to. And the extent to which you are not able to imitate, that's you.' I think that's a beautiful statement. The extent to which you are not able to imitate someone else, that little bit, that's you, that's the part to develop. You see people whom you want to imitate – for a long time, in my twenties, I wanted to be Leonard Bernstein – but you can't, because everything that's good about them is inimitable. Superficially, you can imitate all their actions or gestures, but what makes a person unique is available only to him. Therefore, people like that can be quite bad influences. Carlos Kleiber was another conductor I wanted to be like. But he's totally unique, thus, for the same reason, there's no point in trying to be him. And gradually you realise, if you're lucky, that actually, after all, you're you. And you start to spot things in yourself that are individual. I don't have children, but for those who do, it's fascinating when you start to see their personalities emerging. There's a moment when they stop being just generic babies and start being individual human beings; and as musicians we are a bit like that. There are these emerging moments in one's artistic growth; and like Ravel said, that little bit where you forgot to imitate, that was you. Bernstein himself said the same about his composition lessons with Copland. Copland told him, 'Yeah, that's all just warmed-up Stravinsky and that's just stolen Scriabin, but *those* two bars, that's you. Develop those!' And if you're lucky, someone will help you identify what's you. I think a good teacher – if I can put it in this way – a good teacher gives you your own personality. As a student, I played to Alfred Brendel, a very famous pianist. I went to play to him because an opportunity came through someone. But nobody plays to someone like Brendel, unless they want to be like him. Such a famous person is not going to help you be yourself, because his influence is too strong. The experience of playing to them is wonderful, but that's not going to give you that kind of enlightenment.

If I think back to all the people who influenced me, it's not just musicians. I think it's really important to be influenced by your favourite sportspeople, your favourite writers, your favourite poets or playwrights or actors. Online there's a wonderful masterclass in acting by Michael Caine, in which he talks to young actors about working with cameras, working in studio, about film acting specifically. And he's talking about all sorts of things relating to acting. I tell everybody I know, 'If you want a great music lesson, watch that masterclass, watch him talking to these actors.' Everything he says is applicable to us in some way. He speaks about this question of imitating. You know, Marlon Brando, for instance, one of the most distinctive actors in the world, he started out imitating someone. They all did; and then they became themselves. Michael Caine is talking about the same things that I've been talking about. He says a wonderful thing about movement and how you need to make sure that you can be followed by the camera, without sudden,

unpredictable motions. It's like conducting an orchestra: you can't just suddenly turn the truck around the corner. And sometimes, the best way to learn something is in terms of another discipline. I worked a lot with rock musicians, I know quite a lot of people in that area, and I've learnt as much about classical music from them as I have from all these other famous classical musicians. I like interdisciplinarity, when somebody says something and switches a light on, and you think, 'I can use that.'

AG: *We spoke a little about ensemble playing. What enables us to play together?*

PM: Listening to each other.

AG: *What does it mean to listen? I must confess that, before I went to London to study, I was told very often to listen, but not too often what to listen for.*

PM: Well, yes. That's why it takes a lifetime to be a musician. I learnt such a lot from players in orchestras! I was lucky to have had two jobs as assistant conductor with orchestras in the UK; first, with one of the regional orchestras in Bournemouth and then with the London Symphony Orchestra. There were a few people in both of those orchestras whom I identified as people it would be good to talk to. In every orchestra there will be people who shout loud and make lots of noise and give you the benefit of their 'advice'; and they are the best people to ignore. Anybody who volunteers advice is probably best ignored. But people you have to go to and ask, 'Would you mind, could we have a talk sometime?' are well worth listening to. There was an old guy in the first violins in Bournemouth, who was very kind to me in this way. He was noticing things I was doing, which maybe I should think again about, things I should approach differently. But he would never have dreamed of volunteering his advice. And another guy in the LSO told me, 'Every week I sit in the orchestra with a different conductor. After rehearsing for five minutes, it is clear that he's not listening to us. And I think, "Well, if you're not listening to us, I'm not going to listen to you either."' There's really no excuse for standing in front of the London Symphony Orchestra – or any orchestra, but certainly not a great orchestra like that – and conducting so much the recording in your head, in your imagination, that you're not listening to what these great players are giving you. That's a very good way to start as a conductor. We're all so keen to make an impression; but that can wait. The first good impression we make is by showing the orchestra that we are listening to them and that we respect their artistry, as well as our own. I think orchestral musicians can show you things you didn't think of, or that you can pick up on. It is similar to the interaction between actors: you can learn your part and prepare your lines, but how you deliver them is going to depend on what the other actors are doing in the scene, or what the circumstances are.

So, listen to *that* in the first place. Michael Caine says something else in that masterclass, which is wonderful. He relates filming a scene once and waiting while the other actor was speaking. The director stopped and asked, 'What are you doing?' Michael Caine answered, 'I'm not doing anything, I'm waiting for my line'. 'But,' the director said, 'you're not reacting.' 'I don't have anything to say.' And the director told him, 'No, it's not true that you have nothing to say. You are thinking of all sorts of fascinating things that you could say but are choosing not to.' I think that's really nice!

Similarly, as musicians, listening to what other people are doing can give us all sorts of other possibilities about how things might go. And I'm sure that's why the members of a string quartet have such a complicated relationship with one another; there are four extremely strong personalities, each of whom must have within that strength of character sufficient flexibility to continually respond to the others. And in an orchestra, it's that same process, but amplified to much bigger numbers. I think that's one practical answer to your question 'what to listen for?'. It can be quite frustrating for orchestral musicians when the conductor keeps telling them to listen, without telling them what to listen for. You know very well that, when you sit in an orchestra, you are being assailed on all sides by sound coming at you from all directions. Sometimes it's coming at you in a confusing way. Depending on the acoustics of the hall, you might be hearing something totally different to what the conductor hears, as he's standing over there, the trombones are over there, the percussion's up there and the harps… Just saying, 'Listen!' isn't very helpful in those circumstances.

Colin Davis was the principal conductor of the LSO at the time I was there. Particularly as he got older, he was conducting in a very relaxed manner, in a sense, letting the sound of the orchestra come to him. He had a wonderful way of looking as if it was all just happening around him and all he had to do was sit there and enjoy it. Of course, it was a deception, he was causing it all! You have to show that listening to the orchestra is actually inspiring you, it's filling you with joy to be among these musicians.

AG: *So, we listen to any inflection in the sound, any slight turn of phrase, any alteration to the pulse that might indicate what the other person will do next…*

PM: Yes, that's one thing. On the other hand, it also has to do with Michael Caine's advice I mentioned earlier about making sure the camera can follow you. You must show what you are about to do before you do it. I worked a lot with a rock band called Deep Purple. At the first rehearsal with them, I heard one of them say, 'I'll give you a horse's eye.' It turned out 'horse's eye' meant, 'Look at me, and I'll show you what I'm going to do.' Then something would happen in an improvised section and it would turn the

whole thing around just on the spur of a moment. I did about forty concerts with them and every night it was different. Amazing! So, I think the listening depends also on the other player being capable of transmitting something. But assuming they are, you can get wonderful things from them. I make a lot of recordings with really good orchestras. I've just done two records this year with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. When I listen back to them now, I find details that I know I didn't initiate, details that come from them, it's their artistry, their idea, their phrasing; they are all responding to each other and all I'm doing is bringing it all together. In a sense, I am enabling the listening in a group of people who just need to be brought together. Actually, conductors are there to help, but unfortunately, we don't always do that.

AG: *It seems to me that another important aspect is the difference between pulse and beats. How would you define pulse? How does it work? How do you manipulate pulse as a conductor?*

PM: I would say that pulse is a life thing. It shifts greatly with the moment of the day, your blood pressure, your heart rate and all that. Pulse is a living thing; the beat is not. The beat is just a functional, mechanical device whereby you try to hold everything together. And I find myself sometimes saying to orchestras, 'Don't watch so much.' Sometimes orchestras are watching for the beat instead of listening and feeling the pulse. But if the orchestra is good and the conductor is really smart, he can take the pulse of the orchestra. There are pieces of music that go naturally at a certain speed, and the less you are concerned with being precise, the more precise it will be – that's a really unusual thing to say. Very often, when something is going wrong, it's because the tempo is wrong. There's a famous recording of Bruno Walter rehearsing Mozart 36. It used to be done, traditionally, firmly in 6. And the more Walter rehearses, the worse it gets. The orchestra don't understand where to play the short note, they don't understand how long to hold the long note, nothing is working. And if you listen to it, the reason it's not working is that it's much too slow. Mozart never intended it to be in 6, he never thought we would be so stupid as to do it in 6. If we do it in 3, everything is solved. And poor old Bruno Walter spends the whole side of one LP record trying to rehearse these 6 bars. Very often I find this: if something is not working, it's because my tempo is wrong. Sometimes I conduct the same thing in successive weeks with different orchestras in different countries, and find that I have to change the whole concept of how the piece works in order to suit the pulse of that orchestra, the acoustics of the hall or the pulse of the audience. Sometimes, you can have silent, attentive, incredibly concentrated audiences; other times, you have audiences where the phones are going off all the time, the lights are flickering and the seats are creaking and you must do Tchaikovsky 6 or Mahler 9 in that kind of environment. So, pulse must

take into account all of those things. I think that's why metronome marks are not very useful in the end; usually, composers write the metronome mark based on the first bar or two of the piece, so by bar 3, the metronome mark is already out. And we all know the controversies about metronome marks in Beethoven and other composers. Strangely, the more precise the composer tries to be, the least reliable the metronome marks are. You know, Bartók writes a timing for each section: this should last 2 minutes and 12 seconds. It's absurd, because it doesn't account for all these factors. I used to conduct ballet. In one ballet, we had a recording of a choir on a tape and we had to synchronize the orchestra to it; and of course, the only way to do that is with a click-track. So, at that point I had to put a head-phone on and bring the orchestra in. With a bit of luck, we didn't get off the click-track and the tape came in at the right moment. And we did that every night, seven times a week for many weeks a year, on tour. And there were nights when the dancers would come and swear, 'the tape is running fast tonight' or 'the tape is slow tonight, there's something wrong with the tape machine.' And of course, it was the same every single night. But for them, the pulse of their bodies was just different that night. So, if you want to summarize, the beat is absolute, but the pulse is always relative, I would say.

AG: *That's a very good definition. It takes into account what happens inside us and inside those two clicks. The moment the next beat comes is decided by what's happening during the previous beat.*

PM: Exactly, it's the space between the beats. One of the things I learned from the great rock drummer Ian Paice, the drummer in Deep Purple – something he showed me not with words, but just by his playing – is that the beat is not a moment, it's not an instant. The beat is a space in which it can come at different places. Listen to Duke Ellington playing *Harlem*. The beat is right at the end of the space, just before it becomes the next beat. That's what swing is, and that's what a big band drummer would do. He would delay the beat so that it comes right at the end of this space. Whereas, of course, if you're playing a Mozart symphony, you don't do that. Therefore, all these things are in the nature of the music, in the feeling and the technique.

AG: *How do orchestra musicians read a conductor? Is it all intuitive or is there a convention?*

PM: There are obviously some rules, but I can teach you those rules in half an hour. I can teach you how to beat 4, how to beat 3 and 2. That's not difficult. It's all the rest that's difficult. The language of physical expression is actually very limited. But, of course, if conductors only had that, conducting wouldn't be much of an art. The art is in all the other things which you do or don't do. All of the great comedians – you can think of any great comedian who makes you laugh – very often they don't have to say anything, they are

just funny, their mere presence is funny. Likewise, there are conductors who don't have to say anything, and they just change the atmosphere in the room; the orchestra plays differently just because they are there. And there are other conductors who don't. That's where the art of conducting starts to get a bit mysterious and magical. There's a story told by the timpanist of the Berlin Philharmonic about the orchestra rehearsing Schubert's *'Unfinished'* symphony one day. He was sitting there, counting the bars rest, the conductor was not very interesting and the sound of the orchestra was nothing special. And suddenly the sound of the orchestra changed. As he lifted his eyes, he saw at the back of the hall that Furtwängler, the music director of the orchestra, had walked into the hall. And just him standing there in the doorway was enough to make everyone play for him. That's the mysterious part of how orchestras read conductors, because if you asked them why or how they were doing this, they probably couldn't tell you. It's just his presence and personality that inspires.

AG: *Yes, people talk about Klemperer emanating his musical intentions, especially in his old age, when his movements were much reduced. I'm sure that, partly, his influence came from the respect that musicians had for him, but certainly, at least to some extent, it came from what you said, the fact that his personality made every intention so convincing that it was more difficult to resist it than to go along with it.*

PM: There can be a situation where a teacher doesn't have to care whether the student wants to obey or not; it's the nature of the relationship: the teacher says, and you do it. A conductor can't function like that. He has to make the musicians feel like going along with him. This is where politics comes into it. I think it very strange that, at the moment, we are running all over the world into a dangerous time of polarization. In any discussion, you're either for something or against it, with no space in the middle of any argument. As a result, people want, or appear to want, authoritarian political leadership. But in the orchestra, it's not like that. It's not like that in orchestras in the UK, where we've never had a dictatorship – at least not one that we admitted to it being a dictatorship – but certainly orchestras in Romania are particularly resistant to people imposing themselves in an authoritarian way. And that suits me very nicely, because I'm not the authoritarian type. You have probably heard those recordings of Toscanini rehearsing, screaming abuse at the orchestra in ways that now would be completely unacceptable. So, that kind of authoritarian rule doesn't work.

Schoenberg was asked once how he composed, how he manipulated all those elements. And he said, 'This is the centipedal question. It's like asking the centipede how it walks. If it starts thinking of all his legs, it can't walk.' Conducting is a little bit like that. I'm very suspicious of people who

have rules and rigid ideas about how to do things, because every conductor has a personal way of interacting with the orchestra. Orchestras play with many conductors and react very differently to each one of them, without being able to explain exactly why some manage to elicit their enthusiasm and involvement while others don't. Moreover, orchestras love to say, 'We can tell within the first five minutes on Monday morning whether this is a good conductor or not.' And this is just not true. Sometimes they can, but for the most part, their relationship shifts though the week, either for the better or for the worse. A conductor can be tough and difficult and demanding and release something in the orchestra that no-one else has. So, the relationship between the conductor and the orchestra is not a science, that's for sure.

AG: *How important is discipline in orchestral playing? We've talked a lot about listening and being able to react quickly. How would you define discipline?*

PM: First of all, not making it more difficult for the other people around you. It's hard being a musician, it's really hard. So, everything you can do to make it less difficult is a good idea. I think orchestral musicians tend not to look past their own instrument and sometimes don't consider how their behaviour affects those around them. That can be the result of many years of not taking care and not keeping the atmosphere how it should be. The enemy of it all is frustration. I find that in Romania – I can say this because I've lived here for a little while now – one of life's characteristics is frustration. Romanians are so good at being frustrated all the time; just watch the traffic. When working with Romanian orchestras, I feel I have to sometimes de-pressurize them before I apply a new kind of pressure. There's good pressure and bad pressure, like in life, you know, there's good stress and bad stress. And that's how you try to create a nice atmosphere for them so that they don't feel they have to fight against it.

But ultimately, discipline is just a personal thing, isn't it? You get up in the morning and no-one's going to force you to practise, no-one's there saying, 'If you don't do this, this will happen.' You just need to motivate yourself. That's what I didn't have when I was young, and I had to acquire it later. In a period when I'm not traveling for concerts and I'm at home studying and preparing all sorts of future things, no-one's going to make me do it. Discipline is very important when you're on the road, traveling. I'm sure many people think like this, 'I'm staying in nice hotels, traveling around, starting to get a bit of money and I can afford things,' and you can see why so many of us end up addicted to alcohol and to drugs. Because if you don't have a safety valve to stop yourself indulging in whatever you want to indulge in at any given moment, it all collapses really fast.

Sometimes, conductors who are not themselves disciplined are standing up in front of orchestras trying to make *them* disciplined. And this is where a moral dimension comes in, too. You talked about Klemperer, who famously described himself as an 'immoralist,' but actually that wasn't true. There was a moral authority about him, that resulted from his discipline, from all that accumulation of experience, of knowledge and of having something to bring that made everyone respond. On the other hand, there's Bernstein, who was very good at disguising the amount of discipline that went into what he did, and that's why it was very easy to underestimate the solid ground on which all that wild and outrageous behaviour was based.

AG: *I remember when discussing the score of Brahms's First Symphony with you some 12 years ago, you told me about the second movement, 'It's a song for Clara!' That remark of yours instantly brought me clarity as to the character and mood of that movement. Do you often define for yourself the character so concisely? Is that the way you think?*

PM: Not necessarily. I like discovering secrets in pieces. There are composers who left their secrets for us to discover. Others didn't. But Brahms left a lot of secrets in his music, a lot of coded messages of various kinds. Elgar is another composer who did that. Alban Berg's *Violin Concerto* is full of secrets, most of which have been decoded now by history. Brahms's *First Symphony* is an example of a piece that has a lot of coded messages about his love for Clara Schumann. I think that a conductor who doesn't have curiosity for all these things is missing something. Moreover, he's not telling the orchestra, either.

There's a bit in Tchaikovsky's *Sixth Symphony*, in the first movement, just before the big crisis climax, where the brass is playing a chorale tune. If you don't know that that chorale is from the Orthodox burial service, then you don't understand the music. Tchaikovsky is imagining his own burial. You hear the brass intoning that chorale and the strings erupting in this enormous climax of despair and horror; it's like staring into your own grave. If it's just a brass chorale to you, you miss the point completely. You could listen to Brahms's *First Symphony* not knowing that the second subject of the first movement is a quote from Schumann's opera *Genoveva*. That was something that Clara recognised immediately. In the opera, the character is going to war and he's singing to his friend, 'Take care of my wife, look after her while I'm away.' And Brahms put that into his symphony. For him, it was as if Schumann, who spent the last years of his life in a mental asylum in a complete mental breakdown, was entrusting him with the duty of taking care of Clara. As both Brahms and Clara Schumann destroyed all their letters, we have no way of knowing what kind of relationship they had. But we do know that all those things are in the music; therefore, it's our job and our joy to dig

them all out. I find this really fascinating! Composers don't do things casually; usually, they are doing everything for a reason. There will be people saying, 'Oh, that's accidental. That reference to Schumann is subconscious.' There are some composers for whom that might be true, but for Brahms, probably not. Brahms was very careful about things like that and also very secretive. And, of course, sometimes, when you are guarding secrets of friends, you're very careful not to betray them. But these people are long dead, so it's our business now to dig out all their secrets.

AG: *It's clear how passionate you are about these things. Whenever I've seen you rehearse, I have noticed how you inspire the orchestra by giving them these clues that fascinate you so much. And often, you use quite poetic imagery. But sometimes you must be very practical, very technical, you must tell them how much vibrato you want them to use, or if you want to ask for softer or harder sticks in the timpani…*

PM: One rule: don't ever talk to a timpanist about his sticks. You can say, 'I'd like it clearer or softer or stronger, etc.' He'll hate you forever if you start talking about that without being a timpanist yourself and without knowing very well what you're asking for. But, coming back to your question, it depends on what I feel the orchestra needs. I mean, I wouldn't go into the Saint Petersburg Philharmonic and start lecturing them about Orthodox burial services. They would just think I was an idiot, because of course they know that already and don't need me to tell them that. But for young orchestras or student orchestras, these little-known details can make all the difference between it being boring and totally life-changing, absorbing; and that's mostly because they are playing these pieces for the first time. I did Tchaikovsky 6 with the Chetham's orchestra and we played it in the Barbican Centre in London. And all of this was new to them. Most of these students were too young to have experienced the kind of profound grief that is found in that piece – a bereavement, for example. We are talking about 15–16-year-old kids. Some will have gone through a painful experience, of course, but at that age, most of them, probably not. And yet, it doesn't matter, because it's all in the music and it all comes out at them, even if it hasn't been put there by life yet. So, it was useful for them to talk like that.

Sometimes you sense that an orchestra is lost in the technical stuff, and you just want to liven things up by reminding them of something meaningful. It can also be the opposite, and people can just start to switch off from too much poetry and too many ideas; and too much imaginative talking can actually stop them functioning after a while and they just lose their concentration. 'Just tell us: loud, soft, short, long; just get on with it.' Generally speaking, I like orchestras that are not like that. I tend to get on best with orchestras that are interested in extra-musical details.

AG: *My last question. I'd like to read to you a few quotes about tempo and then ask you a question. Brahms was asked by Joachim to provide metronome markings for his Fourth Symphony. The composer refused, but sent a copy of the score with tempo modifications written in pencil. In a letter accompanying the marked score he wrote, 'tempo modifications [are] useful, even necessary, for a first performance.' When the piece is new to the orchestra, 'I often cannot do enough pushing forward and holding back, so that passionate and calm expression is produced more or less as I want it.'*[2] *Another quote, by Pierre Boulez: 'Until one finds the right speed – not necessarily a constant speed, but one that fits the moment, and can vary with the context – until one finds that tempo, then even in one's own compositions the interpretation remains weak and prevents the music from swelling forth.'*[3] *A third quote, by John Barbirolli: 'Wagner laid it down that the two fundamental principles underlying the art [of conducting] were: (1) giving the true tempo to the orchestra; (2) finding the "melos," by which he means the unifying thread of line that gives a work its form and shape. Given these two qualities, of course, we have the conductor in excelsis, and most of our lives must be spent in trying to obtain these qualities, the more especially the first.'*[4] *When Brahms tells us that a certain degree of 'pushing forward and holding back' is necessary in order to render or highlight the passionate or calm expression; when Boulez tells us that the right tempo is the one that suits the moment and must change in accordance with the nature of the music; when Wagner and Barbirolli tell us that we should devote our lives to finding the true tempo, I am perplexed that so many conductors nowadays (and instrumentalists too) take the composer's metronome marks at face value and maintain that constant speed throughout the movement. If all we need to do is play at the speed indicated by the composer, then there is nothing to 'find,' is there?*

PM: I do a lot of music editing for various publishers, particularly for my own projects. I often record rare pieces that have not been done before. For this, I'm using the composers' manuscripts and putting them into the computer program. I then make the computer play the piece back to me, so I can check that the notes are right and there's nothing wrong with the transpositions. It's very useful; you only have to choose a tempo. But you could do the same to a Brahms symphony. You could tell the computer, 'Alright, Brahms 4. It's going to go like this to the end.' Of course, it's not a piece of music like that. So, in that sense, Brahms was right about metronome marks; they don't tell you anything more than you could find out for yourself, which is that the music itself will tell you what's too fast and what's too slow. Yes, the tempo is something

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2 Dyment, Christopher. *Conducting the Brahms Symphonies*. The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2016, p.16.

3 Holden, Raymond. *The Virtuoso Conductors*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2005, p. 7.

4 *Ibid.*

that can be the last element in an interpretation upon which you decide. You can decide on all sorts of other aspects before that. I can sometimes go into a rehearsal still with a number of possibilities in my mind and the *moment* will tell me, 'That's it, that's the tempo.' And only by doing it will I discover that. No amount of sitting at home with my little metronome or listening to other people's recordings will tell me what the most convincing tempo is. Just my own pulse and my own sense of feeling the space and the hall and making the orchestra play at its best. And that's something you can prepare only in theory… I mark my scores very carefully, and it can happen that I am in the middle of a big ritenuto and I look down the score and it's written in big capitals 'NON RIT.' I'm doing exactly what I instructed myself not to do, because at that moment it feels right. And I'm sure that if we heard Brahms conduct his Fourth Symphony, we'd be shocked by how free the pulse was then. Now, our ideas are much stricter than we would even be able to understand. If recording had been invented even a generation before it was, we would have had a chance to really hear what they did. I'm restudying at the moment Mahler's *First Symphony*. What wouldn't you give to hear Mahler conduct that? And I'm sure we would hardly recognize it now.

AG: *There are a couple of piano rolls of Mahler playing the first movement of the Fifth Symphony and the last movement of the Fourth. And the amount of rubato that he takes is very unusual for our ears.*

PM: Yes. We'd be shocked by the standard of the playing as well, by how rough it was. All I can say from my experience is that, if I'm doing a piece for the first time, it's going to be different in concert to what I prepared. When it's a piece that I'm doing again, I find it's changed somehow without me noticing. It's a little bit like the seasons, the weather changes and the light changes and even the view from your own window looks different somehow than it did the day before. It's the same when you open a score and the notes that you thought you knew look all like they've been rearranged somehow. And the amount of detail in a Mahler score is extraordinary; however well you know it, you never hold it all in your mind at the same time. And so, looking at it one day, you might be noticing more one element of it or another, and thus the interpretation possibilities are endless. You never stop learning! When I was young, I thought interpretation decisions would get easier with age, but I'm sorry to tell you they don't. They get harder; the more you know, the harder it gets. I find I have to study more; I have to spend longer studying, making sure that I know what I'm doing. And whether that's because I'm slowing down or because I'm more aware of how difficult everything is, I don't know. I think when you're young you don't know how hard something is, so you just do it. And I'm sure that's why children, when they are told by adults, 'That's *not* how you draw a house; people don't look like *that!*' Adults can beat all the creativity out of us far too soon, so then you have to rebuild it in your own way. That's a lifetime's work.