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Interview with Maximilian Cem Haberstock

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After taking your first steps in music, what person or event had the greatest impact on you? What meaning did music take on for you during this early period?

One experience that I remember very clearly — and which certainly played a part in my decision to become a conductor — was the first time my parents took me to a symphonic concert. Until then I had already heard recitals and some chamber music, but this was the first time I experienced a full orchestra live. I was nine years old, and it was in the old Gasteig in Munich; the Vienna Philharmonic were on tour with Riccardo Muti — not the worst place to begin, I would say.
I still remember it as if it were yesterday: In the second half, after the interval, they played Richard Strauss’s early tone poem *Aus Italien* — vivid, energetic, and brilliantly orchestrated. I was completely overwhelmed, fascinated by the endless variety of colours in the orchestra, by its sheer power — and, if I am honest, also by its force. It was unlike anything I had ever encountered before. No piano could ever come close to that.

Another deeply formative influence was Mariss Jansons — a great conductor I had the privilege of knowing personally. For four years, from 2015 until his passing at the end of 2019, he was a tremendously important mentor to me. Our many conversations were a constant source of inspiration. From him, I truly learned how to train an orchestra — how to shape the rehearsal process in a way that achieves results which extend far beyond the concert at hand and ultimately leave a lasting imprint on the ensemble’s identity.

Starting your own orchestra at the age of 15 takes a lot of courage! What were your priorities when establishing the Young Philharmonic Orchestra Munich, which includes 68 young musicians from over 20 countries? We would love to hear about this journey from you.

I founded my orchestra, as you mentioned, when I was fifteen — at first for a rather simple and practical reason: I wanted to gain experience as a conductor, and I needed an orchestra that would allow me do so. At that age, it was clear that no professional orchestra would invite me to step onto the podium. I had conducted a few school and youth orchestras, but only occasionally, and I felt that wasn’t enough. So I gathered a handful of friends and young musicians from the conservatory (University of Music & Performing Arts Munich) and created what was then a small ensemble — the Arcis Chamber Orchestra. Our first concert, a Haydn programme in December 2019, was met with such enthusiasm that a year later we followed it with an all-Mozart program with about twenty-four musicians.

Then came a pause in 2021 and 2022. My original motivation — to gain experience — had been fulfilled. I was beginning to receive invitations to conduct professional orchestras. Not yet the Berlin Philharmonic, of course — but nonetheless serious, professional ensembles of adult musicians. My little orchestra had served its initial purpose.

The real rebirth came in 2023, under a new name and with a new idea: the Young Philharmonic Orchestra of Munich. The inspiration for this was largely driven from my time at the Verbier Festival. I had been invited to this prestigious festival three times; most recently in 2021 as the conducting assistant to James Gaffigan. The Verbier Festival Junior Orchestra, which he conducted, consisted of some of the finest musicians between sixteen and nineteen years of age — and I was seventeen at the time, right in the middle of that age group. Mr. Gaffigan insisted that I live together with the orchestra, and through that experience I formed close friendships with some of the best young musicians of my generation.

In a way, the new orchestra started as a Verbier reunion project. Of course, not all our members came from Verbier, but that circle formed the core. What I wanted was a platform where I could create something of my

own — entirely free from the usual restrictions that guest conductors face. Take rehearsal time, for instance: I don't think I've ever had a guest engagement where I didn't have to negotiate for more rehearsals. It is always limited. With my own orchestra, I can determine such things freely, and that makes an enormous difference artistically.

Our first project in 2023 featured 52 musicians and included, among other works, Mendelssohn's *Scottish Symphony* and Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations* with Alban Gerhardt as soloist. In 2024 came an all-Brahms programme including the *Double Concerto* with Daniel Müller-Schott, followed in 2025 by a Beethoven tour to Salzburg Mozarteum and Munich Herkulessaal — by then we had 68 musicians from more than 24 nations. Our upcoming tour in March 2026 will take us to some of the most beautiful concert halls in Prague, Wiesbaden, Frankfurt, and Munich, with a total of 93 musicians on stage!

It is important to me to emphasize that this orchestra was never conceived as a "youth orchestra" in the conventional sense, nor primarily an educational institution, similar to GMJO, EUYO, or VFO. While we also bring together exceptional young musicians, our purpose is different: to unite the very best of my generation in a long-term process of artistic growth. Over time — performing and developing together — we hope to build a new world-class orchestra for the future. That is the vision behind it.

You are known as a "young genius" in the classical music world. Does this label make you feel a sense of responsibility, or do you prefer to remain within the natural flow of art?

If I'm honest, I'm not particularly enthusiastic about terms such as "young genius" or "young prodigy," because it suggests that personal success is based on some kind of magic or luck. In reality — apart from a little talent — something entirely different is decisive: persistent and serious work. I believe that true good fortune lies much more in being well prepared at the moment when an opportunity presents itself.

For me, that also means, feeling a great sense of responsibility — every piece, every rehearsal, every concert is a new beginning. That's what keeps me grounded.

As one of the most promising young conductors of your generation, which music genres and composers do you have a particular interest in?

My musical focus lies quite clearly on the German Romantic tradition that begins with Beethoven. At the very core of my repertoire stand Beethoven and Brahms, and surrounding them the entire circle of German Romantics — Schumann, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Wagner, Bruckner, and also Richard Strauss. That is not to say that I avoid music outside of this sphere — quite the contrary. I greatly enjoy conducting composers like Tchaikovsky or Shostakovich, for instance. But the centre of gravity of my musical world remains firmly rooted in Beethoven and the German Romantic tradition.
In addition, I very much enjoy performing Mozart — though only under the right conditions. I consider him, perhaps, one of the most demanding composers of all.

Being a pianist, composer, and conductor requires great inner discipline. How do you maintain an inner balance between these three areas?

In all honesty, I don't really manage to keep a perfect balance — and perhaps that's all right. It is, of course, wonderful to have a broad foundation and to let the experience and expertise from one discipline influence the others. One learns a great deal that way. But I'll never forget the advice Mariss Jansons gave me when I was eleven years old: that all of this is very well, but focus is essential — without focus, nothing truly works.
That's why I consider myself first and foremost a conductor, and only secondarily a pianist and composer. That doesn't mean I intend to give up either of those fields; I continue both. I take great joy in playing the piano and in composing, and both are, in fact, immensely helpful to my work as a conductor. But at the centre of everything I do — both practically and artistically — stands my conducting.

Are there any orchestra conductors you look up to? What do you think are the qualities that make a good orchestra conductor?

One of my greatest role models is Wilhelm Furtwängler. From him, I have learned above all two things. The first is the ability to build large-scale works with an inner architectural coherence and dramatic tension. Take a symphony, for instance: it's about spanning an arc of tension from the very first note of the first movement to the last note of the final movement — so that, despite all the different moods, characters, and emotions one experiences along the way, it ultimately forms a single, unified whole that captures you entirely and never lets go.
The second thing I learned from Furtwängler is that one needs to be willing to risk everything, if one wants to achieve truly breathtaking moments. A perfect example of this can be found in Furtwängler's performances of the slow movement of Beethoven's Eroica in December 1952. There are live recordings from both December 7 and 8. The one from the 8th has become legendary — unsurpassed — while the performance from the 7th, though certainly not bad, lacks the overwhelming emotional force and intensity of the later one. Why? Because in the slow movement, Furtwängler took such an extraordinarily slow tempo that he was constantly on the verge of breaking the arc of tension; the entire performance could easily have collapsed at any point. And on the 7th, it actually does — the tension doesn't quite hold. But on the 8th he succeeds, although, interestingly, the tempo actually is even a shade slower. The result is one of the most powerful, emotionally shattering interpretations of that movement ever captured — perhaps ever achieved — and it exists only because he dared to take that risk.

Those are the two main lessons I've drawn from Furtwängler. But there is also Herbert von Karajan, who was my great idol throughout my youth. Furtwängler came later for me — though today I would call him my greatest model, Karajan has remained a central one to this day. From Karajan I learned how to shape and create sound. I think there has rarely been a conductor in history who mastered color and sonority with such perfection. By studying his recordings — and also his rehearsals, many of which have fortunately been preserved — I learned from him how to form sound, how to sculpt it.

Another idol and role model of mine - as I mentioned at the very beginning of this interview - was Mariss Jansons, whom I had the privilege to experience live as Chief Conductor of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra in Munich. Few others were such true educators of orchestras as Jansons. The countless rehearsals I was fortunate to attend with him were like masterclasses in how to shape and train an orchestra.

In general, I believe the most essential qualities a conductor must possess are, first of all, the ability to feel the music deeply — to have a clear and vivid inner conception of how each work should sound, and the willpower to make that inner vision a reality. Equally important is the ability to communicate that vision clearly to an orchestra.

But beyond that, a conductor must be a broadly and culturally educated personality. Conducting is not merely the act of producing correct notes; it is about penetrating the essence of a work — intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. And that requires genuine education, curiosity, and depth of culture. That's something I genuinely believe in.

When interpreting a piece, how much do you prioritize staying true to the composer's intent versus expressing your own voice? Where does the performer's freedom begin and end for you?

I have some difficulties with some of the nowadays popular ideas regarding fidelity to the text. What exactly does it mean? A conductor who seeks to be textually faithful often aims to represent the score as objectively as possible. But even fundamental questions — how loud is a forte, how soft a piano — have no definitive answers. Musical notation is, by its nature, inherently imprecise. Therefore, an entirely objective interpretation can never exist; every interpretation is, to some degree, subjective.

Furthermore, the score itself should never be treated as a completed work of art. The art emerges only in the moment it is performed. The score is a guide — a set of symbols and instructions — suggesting how a work might come to life, but it is not the work itself. So what, then, is the interpreter's true task?
Wilhelm Furtwängler expressed this most beautifully in one of his many essays. In essence, he said that the composer begins with a vision of a grand whole — a piece of art they wish to express in sound — and through work, revision, and experimentation, they arrive at the finished score. The interpreter is then presented with that score, often the only source available, since most composers are no longer living to explain their intentions. Within the score lie the details of how the work should be realized, but the vision itself — the overarching concept — is only implicit.
It is the interpreter's job to trace this path in reverse. Through study, reflection, and deep engagement, he seeks to understand the original vision. And once he believes to have grasped it — though one can never know it with absolute certainty — he dedicates all of his musical means to serving that vision. Not the score alone, but the vision behind it. I find this a wonderfully precise way of expressing what interpretation truly means.

Attempts at literal, letter-by-letter fidelity are doomed from the start. Yet total, arbitrary freedom is equally misplaced. Furtwängler goes as far to suggest that excessive literalism and excessive arbitrariness are simply two sides of the same coin. The true job of the interpreter lies in striving to bring the composer's vision to life — and in doing so, the performer inevitably brings themselves into the process.
For me personally, conducting for instance a Beethoven symphony is, in a way, like engaging in a dialogue with the dead composer in heaven.

What kind of mental preparation process do you go through in those few minutes before going on stage? What emotion keeps you centered in those moments?

Before going on stage, I always feel an overwhelming sense of excitement — it's something I genuinely look forward to. I like to have a few moments of quiet beforehand, but getting ready — fixing my hair, putting on my frock coat or tuxedo — has become a kind of ritual in itself. It helps me focus while keeping that sense of anticipation alive.

When I perform with my own orchestra, though, the feeling is a little different. I carry a greater sense of responsibility — not only for the music but for the entire evening, for the musicians, and for everything around it. There are always a few last things to check or people who need something from me, and I actually find that reassuring. Once I know everything is in place, my mind is clear.

The moment I step onto the podium, the performance flows as if in a trance — time seems to loose its meaning. I prepare very intesely and thoroughly in rehearsals so that in the concert itself, I can let go completely and put my trust in the musicians, in the preparation and in the moment itself.

What inspires you?

Even though it may contradict the familiar cliché of sudden "eureka" moments — and may not sound particularly romantic at first — I believe that true inspiration most often arises from continuous engagement with a subject. When one immerses oneself deeply in a particular idea or theme, that very process eventually generates the best ideas. And, interestingly, it is often in the moments when one sets the work aside that inspiration appears most vividly, precisely because the mind continues to turn it over in the background.

I'm certainly not alone in this view — Richard Strauss and Thomas Mann are perfect examples. Both had fixed "office hours," so to speak. Strauss composed every day during specific times, and Thomas Mann did the same with his writing. Of course, not everything produced during those hours was brilliant — probably quite the opposite. But that steady discipline, that daily confrontation with the work, is a necessary step towards reaching what is truly great.

Which of your projects or concerts have excited you the most?

Of course, the very first times of everything were the most exciting — my first concert with my own orchestra at Schloss Nymphenburg in 2019, for instance. But each project with my orchestra is special to me. It involves months of preparation: I personally select the musicians and work closely with them toward a shared vision. That process makes the experience uniquely fulfilling and deeply exciting every time.

At the same time, I've been fortunate to work with many wonderful orchestras as a guest conductor. My very first engagement with a professional orchestra was particularly special: *Beethoven's Ninth Symphony*. I was barely 18 years old at the time, and that performance was also my first collaboration with a choir. The entire experience — from the first rehearsal to the final ovation — was unforgettable.

Shortly after that came my first professional engagement in Turkey, with the Borusan Istanbul Philharmonic Orchestra, as part of a concert organised by Güher & Süher Pekinel featuring their top scholarship recipients, among whom I was the only conductor. I worked on Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* with the orchestra. Although the concert was unfortunately cancelled when the country entered a period of mourning, I was fortunate to have had enough rehearsals to experience the feeling of standing before a truly wonderful group of musicians.

Another milestone was my first opera in the pit — Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*. I was only eighteen, yet the opera house entrusted me with everything: the orchestra, the choir, the singers, even the choreography. It was an incredible opportunity and an experience I'll never forget.

As a child, my grandmother often took me to the Bavarian State Opera, where I watched countless performances with her. Growing up in that environment gave me a deep love for opera, and this first real experience in the pit made me realise how much I enjoy conducting it. Since then, I've also led performances of Bizet's *Carmen* and Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*. I learned enormously from each of these productions — and every time I'm reminded of Carlos Kleiber's words from a 1999 letter: *Opera is where you really learn technique; once it's truly in your hands, you can forget it and make music.*

When you compare the music scene in Turkey with your experiences abroad, how do you feel?

Every country has its very own musical atmosphere. In Turkey, I've met truly wonderful musicians — full of passion, energy, and generosity. There's a very warm Mediterranean spirit in the way people make music together here — full of life and deeply inspiring. Of course, in Central Europe there's a long orchestral tradition and certain structures that have developed over centuries, and which bring a different kind of working rhythm. But in the end, what matters most is the shared commitment to music, and that I feel equally strongly in Turkey as anywhere else.

How do you see the future of classical music? How do you think technology, artificial intelligence, or changing aesthetic sensibilities will affect the essence of music?

Naturally, technological progress — and artificial intelligence in particular — will also leave its mark on our field; that is unavoidable. Yet the fundamental essence of music-making will never change. One must never forget that music is something created by human beings for human beings. Beethoven expressed this most beautifully in a line he inscribed at the top of the manuscript of his Missa Solemnis — almost like a dedication: "From the heart – may it go again to the heart."
The very foundation of our Western culture lies, in my view, in an unceasing striving — a striving towards the infinite, towards the unattainable, even towards the almost superhuman. It is this spirit that permeates all areas of life. It is therefore no coincidence that it was within our culture, and not within any of the great civilizations before us, that so many technical and scientific achievements once thought impossible came to be realized — flight being only the most obvious example. Who would have dared to dream, centuries ago, that man would one day fly?

This same striving towards the infinite is also the essence of our art — and most purely embodied in music. One might recall Goethe's Faust: "He who strives with ever-growing effort, him we can redeem." That line is, in a sense, programmatic for the entire Western spirit.
A machine, however, cannot strive. Artificial intelligence can process vast amounts of data, recognize complex patterns, and even emulate aspects of creativity by drawing upon immense archives of human experience. But what it cannot possess — by its very nature — is will. And will, a strong inner will, is the foundation of all striving. Machines can reproduce something with flawless accuracy, but that very perfection makes it clinical. And if one were to deliberately program it to err, to introduce a degree of human imperfection, that too would be artificial — intentionally wrong, and thus just as contrary to the essence of our art. The greatness of Western art lies precisely in this paradox: the pursuit of perfection that must never be fully attainable. The striving itself is what ennobles it.
As for changing aesthetic ideals — they will, of course, continue to evolve. They always have. Each era brings its own sound ideals, its own interpretative habits, its own sense of beauty. Such change is inevitable and, to some degree, even desirable. But where this particular Zeitgeist will lead us, no one can say. That remains speculation.

Could you give some advice to young people who are new to music?

Educate yourselves well! Read widely — literature, philosophy, history — and engage with everything that belongs to our shared cultural heritage. All of this will shape your musicianship far more profoundly than you might imagine.
Johannes Brahms once expressed a thought along these lines when he was asked a similar question. His advice was to practise an hour less each day and instead read a good book. I can only agree with that wholeheartedly.

Which operas or major music projects do you plan to direct in the future?

I'm about to conduct my very first major opera production in Turkey — Mozart's *Don Giovanni* — at the Antalya State Opera and Ballet. The premiere will take place on 13 December, with a second performance on the 16th. I'm very much looking forward to it! Right after that, still in Antalya, I'll also conduct the New Year's Concert, for which I've created a festive programme with a touch of Viennese flair. I hope the audience will love it.

Soon after comes a tour with my own orchestra, the Young Philharmonic Orchestra of Munich, performing between 15 & 19 March in Prague (Smetana Hall), Wiesbaden (Kurhaus), Frankfurt (Alte Oper) and Munich (Herkulessaal). Preparations for this tour began right after our last project in May, and we're now working on it intensely.

Beyond these two big projects, I'll also be conducting in Bursa and Adana — two cities where I have never performed before, so these will be my debuts there. And looking further ahead, in 2027 I will be conducting a concert with the Borusan Istanbul Philharmonic Orchestra, for which we are already developing a truly exciting programme. So there are many things to look forward to in the coming months and years.