

## **Eduardo Chibás – On Conducting**

I first heard Bruckner in a musical appreciation class in high school. It was a short selection from the Ninth Symphony, and I went out immediately to buy it. I was in love with Bruckner from then on. Although Beethoven is the center of my musical life, Wagner and Bruckner are also of immense importance. In fact, there have been periods in my life when I have listened almost exclusively to Bruckner.

I am not at all a religious man, so that the mystical/religious aspect of his music does not interest me much. I know that this is what moves many people towards Bruckner. However, I am interested in life and the human struggle, the raw material of heroic art. It is dangerous to assume that Wagner and Bruckner were heirs of Beethoven, since individuality is such an important aspect of the heroic ethic that heroes and heroic artists rarely, if ever, have any heirs. On the other hand, heroic artists all share certain values and attitudes which sometimes lead to astounding coincidences. As an example of this, I have put together a presentation showing the coincidences in form and content between Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling and Beethoven's Eroica Symphony. Thus, it can be useful to use what one learns from one of these artists to understand the others better.

In the music of Bruckner, it is the sublime experience, together with its elemental erotic and demonic content, that mostly fascinates me. The catharsis accompanying a sublime experience can liberate one from the debilitating limitations of everyday life. This is perhaps the fundamental objective of heroic art: liberation. Some may say that this is similar to the religious experience. The difference between the heroic and religious experience is that the first is, in Wagner's expression, "purely human". In terms of musical interpretation, the religious perspective will emphasize the mystery and immensity, while the heroic perspective will emphasize the human struggle and, as stated before, its erotic and demonic elements. The attitude towards the demonic elements is particularly important. A "Catholic" attitude would look to either minimizing or exorcising them. A "heroic" attitude would look to incorporating them in the creative process of life. The difference stems from their objectives: the first involves trying to be good rather than evil, while the second involves trying to be the best you can be. In this regard, Bruckner's music seems to me to fall more into the second of these. But maybe this is simply bias on my part.

After this explanation, it shouldn't be surprising that my favorite conductor is Furtwängler. Fortunately I discovered him very early in my musical formation. When I was at Columbia, I even did a radio program on WKCR devoted exclusively to Furtwängler recordings. I also find Jochum, Asahina and Barenboim particularly illuminating. I have been lucky enough to hear Barenboim live on many occasions. I have also been able to see him rehearse. This has been a tremendous help to me.

About my conducting, let me tell you that I think that the technical aspects are greatly exaggerated. Certainly, there has to be some talent for it, as well as the hubris required to tell a hundred professional musicians how to play something. Certainly, you have to decide how you are going to beat every measure, but this is not really very difficult. Intonation is difficult, and I have to rely on my memory for that, but one could argue that professional musicians should be

responsible for playing the right notes. Tempo changes are also difficult. However, empirical experimentation in rehearsals, and even in concerts, should allow a conductor to figure out how to accomplish this well enough, if never perfectly: a truly improvised change of tempo, based on the necessity of the moment, will never come off perfectly (Furtwängler live recordings are a good demonstration of this, even with the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics).

Having tackled these problems, which I insist are not very difficult, the real issue is what the music is about, or what ideas it should communicate. This is only important with music that contains ideas, but certainly it applies to Beethoven, Wagner and Bruckner. Next, you have to decide how it should sound so as to communicate these ideas. These are very difficult issues in that they require a great deal of thinking. Having listened to recordings all my life, and having concentrated on precisely these aspects of the interpretations I was listening to, I have a certain advantage here although there is always a tremendous challenge in deciding how you want it to sound. A true interpretation cannot be a copy. However much I admire a Furtwängler interpretation, I cannot copy it for the simple reason that it will not sound authentic. One has to be true to oneself. Thus, I avoid listening to recordings before a concert, unless it is to analyze a technical problem. I try to let the music unfold in my mind over and over so as to get my own sense of where it is going. Unfortunately, most musicians today spend all their time learning the technical aspects described above, but don't think much about the ideas in the music. Many don't even think that there are ideas in the music at all. Bruckner has been more fortunate than most composers in that the conductors who do Bruckner usually have deep involvement in his music. Beethoven, on the other hand has been thoroughly destroyed in the last 60-70 years.

Once you have decided how you think the music should sound, you then have to get the orchestra to sound that way. This, of course, is what rehearsals are for. In my experience, it is surprising how much of the "sound" happens spontaneously. Each conductor seems to generate a particular sound through body language and the way he raises and lowers his arm. Dynamics and balance usually require work. In this regard, having had no formal training, I have to find my own words to communicate what I want from the orchestra. A conductor friend of mine who has often seen me rehearse his orchestra (the Carabobo Symphony) tells me how he enjoys seeing me get what I want in rather unusual ways. Still, this is a struggle for me and I suffer tremendously in rehearsals.

It is interesting that sometimes I change a preconception as to how something should sound during the rehearsals when I find it sounds forced or doesn't come out naturally. I remember some specific passages in the last movement of the Bruckner Eighth, which I did at a slower tempo than I had originally planned. The tempo relationships in this movement are particularly difficult!

During this whole process I often ask myself why I got myself into such a mess. It is fortunate that at the end of the concert there is usually great satisfaction. Ultimately, however, the greatest reward is how much one can learn about the works one interprets and how this learning can enrich one's life.