

Mariss Jansons, famed conductor, dead at 76

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Mariss Jansons, who died November 30 at the age of 76, was one of the world's greatest conductors, and at the same time one of the most beloved, by audiences and above all by the musicians he led. The German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* called him "the most honest and empathetic conductor in the world and the one with the greatest integrity."

Born on January 14, 1943, in the Latvian capital of Riga, Jansons was exposed to music from the time he was three years old. He went on to receive his formal musical education in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). Over the last 40 years of his life, he was at various times the chief conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, the Royal Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and, until his death, the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra in Munich.

Developing or maintaining these ensembles as world-class orchestras, Jansons found time to conduct the London Philharmonic, the Leningrad Philharmonic, and the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonic Orchestras as well. He was above all associated with the music of two great symphonists who were born some 50 years apart: Gustav Mahler, whose nine symphonies, song cycles and other works were composed principally between 1890 and his death in 1911; and Dmitri Shostakovich, whose career (including 15 symphonies) spanned from 1925 until his death 50 years later.

Though Jansons was also known for connections to contemporary music, his most noteworthy performances and recordings were of—in addition to Mahler and Shostakovich—the music of Richard Strauss, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Brahms and Dvorak.

Jansons came from a musical family. His father, Arvids Jansons, became one of the most famous Soviet conductors of the post-war period. His mother, Iraida, an opera singer, was Jewish, and gave birth to him in secret, as she hid from the Nazi occupiers during the Second World War. Riga was not liberated by Soviet troops until October 1944. Jansons's grandfather and an uncle were murdered by the Nazis, as were nearly all of Riga's Jewish population.

Latvia was incorporated into the USSR following the war. The Jansons family moved to Leningrad in 1956, when Mariss was 13 years old. After receiving training first at the Leningrad Conservatory's prep school and then the Conservatory itself, he also studied at the Vienna Conservatory. In 1968, he came to the attention of Herbert von Karajan in Berlin, and was later able to study with the latter in Salzburg, Austria.

However, when Karajan invited him to be his assistant at the Berlin Philharmonic, the Soviet Stalinist authorities intervened and

prevented Jansons (who was not even informed about the invitation) from going. Instead, Jansons became the assistant of Evgeny Mravinsky at the Leningrad Philharmonic in 1972, aged just 29.

Unlike many others, Jansons remained based in St. Petersburg, now Russia, until the end of his life. He does not appear to have had strong political views, but perhaps was moved by the role the Red Army played in the fight against fascism. In later interviews, he also stressed the significance of his education at the Leningrad school of conducting, which, compared to similar institutions around the world, placed a unique emphasis on practical training. Meanwhile, in Vienna, he learned how to carefully study scores in their historical context. As he explained in one interview, he had received his musical education at the two best schools of conducting in the world.

Jansons undoubtedly benefited from the remarkable musical culture in the Soviet Union, despite the bureaucratic conformity and repression of Stalinism. In an interview with German television, Jansons stressed the importance of the "atmosphere" in which he matured, and the significance of the examples set by the work of figures such as the composer Dmitri Shostakovich, violinist David Oistrakh and cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, who made music "at the highest level."

In 1979, Jansons took up the first of his major conducting posts, in Oslo. He remained with the Oslo Philharmonic until 2000, while beginning to set his sights on a bigger and more varied international career. In the 1990s, he became the principal guest conductor of the London Philharmonic and also conducted the London Symphony Orchestra. Appointed music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony in 1997, he became widely known for his work in this mid-sized American city.

However, the severe jet lag that resulted from his frequent transatlantic flights during his stint in Pittsburgh led Jansons to give up that post in 2004. Meanwhile, he had taken over the leadership of the Munich-based Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (BRSO) in 2003. While remaining at the BRSO, he also became chief conductor at the Royal Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, where he remained until 2015. During this period, while Jansons was leading both these orchestras, a panel of music critics polled by *Gramophone* magazine rated the Amsterdam orchestra first in the world, and the Munich ensemble sixth, an astonishing tribute to both Jansons's technical and interpretive skills.

The conductor suffered from a serious heart condition for many years. His father had died in 1984 while conducting a concert of the Halle Orchestra in Britain, and Jansons had a near-fatal attack

while on the podium in Oslo in 1996. After he began his work in Pittsburgh, he had an electric defibrillator implanted so as to restart his heart in case of an arrhythmia. This in fact happened while Jansons was conducting in 1998. He managed to complete the concert, even though in excruciating pain.

Despite medical concerns, the conductor remained as active in recent decades, although at times he appeared frail and in uncertain health.

Jansons led the BRSO at Carnegie Hall on November 8, only a few weeks before he died. The program included Strauss's *Four Last Songs* for soprano and orchestra, featuring German soprano Diana Damrau. The intermission lasted nearly twice its usual length, however, before Jansons returned to conduct a performance of Brahms's Fourth Symphony. He was forced to withdraw from the following evening's scheduled performance, replaced by Vasily Petrenko.

Mariss Jansons created a strong bond with the musicians who worked under him and with audiences. In this he resembled the renowned Claudio Abbado, with whom Jansons also studied. Abbado led the opera orchestra at La Scala in Milan and the Berlin Philharmonic, among other orchestras, as well as working to train young musicians.

Jansons's energy and warmth have been noted by many who knew him. Indeed, his approach to music and conducting was marked by optimism and a joy in life. In a German-produced documentary, he stated, "Even if you might experience difficulties and misfortune in life, maybe dramatic or even tragic moments, life is nevertheless wonderful."

This outlook no doubt helped shape his approach to music. It made him and his interpretations stand out in a cultural climate that, especially since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, has been damaged by discouragement and cynicism. His interpretation of Schubert's 9th Symphony, for instance, far from being melancholic, is distinguished by a highly nuanced expression of the varying emotions contained in the music.

Jansons gave everything for the music, and inspired musicians to do likewise. He was known in particular for his insistence on teamwork and a "democratic" style, in contrast to the aloof or dictatorial approaches of many of his predecessors. He insisted on honesty, including criticism when warranted, but he worked closely with his orchestras, and was not one to seek the spotlight, or fame for its own sake.

Michael Rusinik, principal clarinetist for the Pittsburgh orchestra, said after Jansons's death, "He conducted every concert like it was his last...everything was incredibly passionate and incredibly energetic." Another musician added that Jansons "was focused on bringing out the feeling in the music more than perfect beats and technique, always trying to find ways of expressing a phrase."

This focus on expressiveness was revealed in an interview Jansons gave to Universal Editions. The conductor explained the connection between Mahler and Shostakovich, in his view—both could only be understood in relation to their "struggle in society." Mahler "embraced the whole world—the universe, nature, human beings, tragedy, sarcasm, love, hate...it's all there, like a mirror." Jansons stressed, this is "my method for all," whether conducting

Beethoven, Shostakovich or Bartok.

To his credit, Jansons combined approaching music on a high intellectual level with an absence of elitism. As the above comments make clear, he held a humane and broad conception of music. He shared this approach with Leonard Bernstein, about whom he said, in another interview, "I like Bernstein as a composer, enormously as a conductor, but, above all, as a human being. I knew him and he was a fantastic man, a fantastic human being."

Jansons argued for a wide musical education and serious social engagement. He opposed the cultural austerity that is now the rule, along with austerity for all social programs. Jansons, who compared the significance of a good concert hall for an orchestra to that of a good instrument for an instrumentalist, fought for over a decade for a concert hall in Munich for the BRSO. Only a letter signed by more than 28,000 Munich residents finally secured a promise from the city to build a hall for the world-class orchestra, which has, however, not yet been completed. A German obituary noted, "Mariss Jansons has received from Bavaria, Austria, Germany and Latvia the greatest honors imaginable for a musician. He would have exchanged them all for a concert hall, for the future of the orchestra."

The words of world-famous violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, in tribute to Jansons, raised this issue once again. "Mariss Jansons was a musician in a league all his own," she said. "Having chosen Munich as my home and as a great fan, I will always feel ashamed at the grotesque resistance his decades of engagement for an urgently needed concert hall met with.

"If we want to truly honour the legacy of this unique man and musician, it must be by completing a concert hall which conveys us musicians with immediacy and directness—as Mariss Jansons' conducting was able to!"

Some examples of Mariss Jansons's legacy that can be found online include the videos [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Here is a series of video tributes from colleagues.



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