The great communicator

BY HILLARY HAUSER

In the ratings game of American orchestras, critics talk about the "Big Five" (with the Chicago, Cleveland, Saint Louis symphony orchestras always in there somewhere), then sometimes there is mention of a "sixth" orchestra among the five — the Pittsburgh Symphony.

Lorin Maazel, illustrious conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony, doesn't care much for such ratings and terms like Big Five or Top Ten don't have much meaning for him. Music is not (as he once told an interviewer) "a sporting event, thank God, and I feel in competition with no one."

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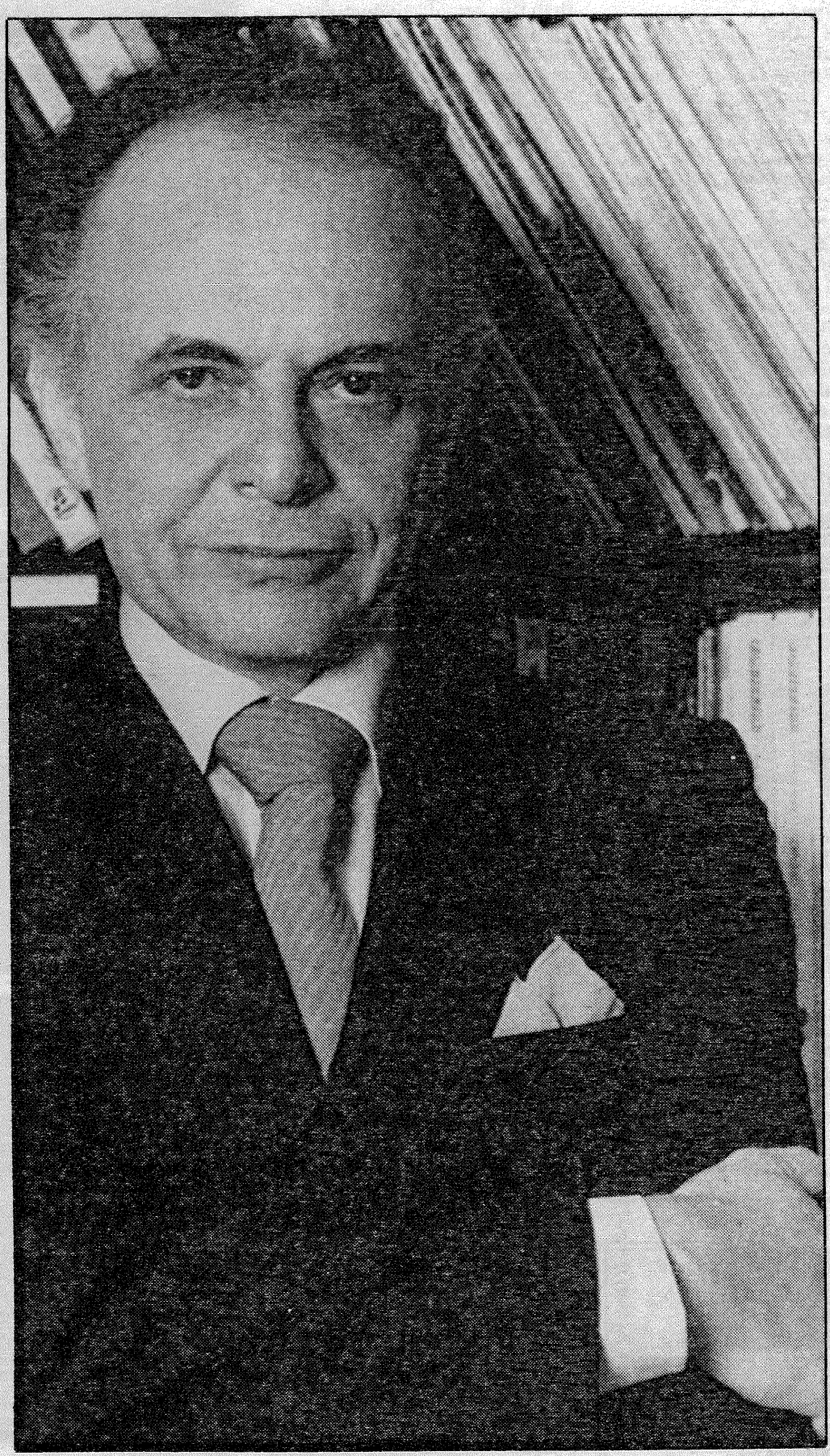
>
> **LORIN MAAZEL, Conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony.**

At the same time, at the start of his career Maazel gave himself just five years to get to some recognizable place of greatness, or he would go and do something else. "There's nothing more horrible than hearing bad orchestras," he said. "Nothing worse than being mediocre. I loved music much too much to participate in it in a mediocre way."

Speaking by telephone from Pittsburgh about his upcoming concert in Santa Barbara (Thursday at 8 p.m. at the Arlington Theatre, a Community Arts Music Association event), Maazel was warm and relaxed. And honest. He said he didn't know if he'd enter the music profession today, the competition has become so tough. He had recently juried the finalist for the second oboe position in his own orchestra and was shocked to learn how many musicians had turned out for it. "I was amazed to learn the competition had been so fierce."

Despite Maazel's caution on the subject, there is always room — and a stage — in any profession for a superstar, that individual whose light begins to shine at a single-digit age, who develops early and rapidly a flair, style and flashing technique. Originality, eccentricity, strong-mindedness, and perhaps an ego so strong as to stir up envy, admiration and (above all) controversy also helps. This especially seems to be the case with conductors, those supreme figures of power whose flick of the wrist has a hundred men jumping all at once.



Lorin Maazel: A flair, a style and a flashing technique.

Maazel, 63, first conducted at the age of — 9 — at the New York World's Fair. The work was Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony." His memory of that experience is not of being able to conduct a symphony while all other 9-year-olds were trying to figure out their ABCs. His memory is that he "enjoyed it" because he was "communicating." (An intense desire to communicate, incidentally, is common thread among musical superstars).

Maazel said he just "waded" into the profession, but the wading doesn't sound very slow or labored. First of all, he was a virtuosic *wunderkind*. Born in Paris in 1930 of American parents, he came to the United States — Pittsburgh — as a child, studied violin and took up conducting with Vladimir Bakaleinikoff, who supervised his World's Fair debut. At 15, Maazel conducted the Pittsburgh Symphony in Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto (Byron Janis, age 16, played the solo piano). After studying philosophy and literature at the University of Pittsburgh, he joined the violin section of the Pittsburgh Symphony.

Eventually, Maazel was told by his teacher, Maestro Victor DeSabata, professor at La Scala and guest conducting in Pittsburgh, "You're an American, that's great, but you're going to have to go abroad, learn Italian, German opera . . ." (Grow up and be a cultured man," Scriabin once advised the young Vladimir Horowitz. Maazel agrees.)

Maazel did what he was told. He went to Europe on a Fulbright Scholarship to study, made his professional conducting debut in Italy in 1953 (age 23), and six years later he became the youngest conductor and first American in history to conduct at the Bayreuth Festival. He was in his 30s when he conducted the Brahms second piano concerto, in Salzburg, for the most memorable artist he said he has ever worked with: the great pianist Sviatoslav Richter.

Maazel was solidly launched. Since then he has been conductor, manager or artistic director of prestigious orchestras such as the West Berlin Opera Company, Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, Philharmonia Orchestra of London, Vienna State Opera and National Orchestra of France. In this country he was appointed conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra

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Intense, passionate conductor

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from George Szell in 1972, and even though Szell was a hard act to follow, Maazel brought the ensemble to new artistic heights in the 10 years he remained there.

He established new relationships with the Pittsburgh Symphony in 1984, when he was appointed its artistic director, and four years later he became conductor, succeeding Andre Previn. Maazel's contract with Pittsburgh will extend through the 1995-'96 season.

Maazel also conducts the Vienna Philharmonic, the Munich Symphony Orchestra of the Bavarian Radio (beginning in September), and opera exclusively at La Scala. The Maazel family (German actress wife, Dietlinde Turban, and seven children) lives in Monte Carlo seven months out of the year and in Pittsburgh for the remaining five.

So, what is it that has established Maazel as one of the world's great conductors? Wunderkind, virtuosity can only go so far. What is the message Maazel communicates in his music?

Dreams, perhaps.

"We live in a very pragmatic civilization," Maazel said. "We're taught how to do things, do them well. But we're made up of other things, too. We have other voices, other needs, and there's very little expression for these voices, these needs. People need to walk out, wander, dream — satisfy the need to dream ... We don't do that very much. We watch television, which is pathetic, passive. What are you going to do? ... Music really occupies all your faculties. It cleans out all of the cobwebs."

Through music Maazel may communicate dreams, but he's also, apparently, a strict disciplinarian, demanding the utmost from his orchestral charges. There is a story that the chiropractors in Pittsburgh do a booming business when Maazel is in town, presumably because his musicians are tense from fear of displeasing him. Reviewers comment on how his orchestra members dare not take their eyes off him when he's on the podium, with the result that in performance they are as one instrument. The intensity of his leadership — and of his music — is renowned.

About the story of the chiropractors, Maazel is amused but also finds validity. "I'm glad to know I have such command," he said. "Yes, I have a lot of energy — nothing is as dull as a dull performance. How can a musician play well if he's bored stiff?"

A comment for thought: Among the world's great conductors who have frightened the wits out their musicians there seems to be a common thread: an absolute conviction about the music being played — which is a vital ingredient of successful communication.

A conductor is, after all, far more than a time-beater; through every muscle of his (or her) body come signals of intensity, passion, anguish, languor, love, melancholy or fury — which must be picked up instantly by the conductor's receptive subjects. In addition, these supreme feelings must be communicated through absolute technical accuracy.

Arturo Toscanini redefined objectivity and literalism as it relates to conducting: The wishes of the composer are supreme, rhythm and tempo should not fluctuate, notes must be observed as honestly and scrupulously as possible, the conductor should keep himself out of the score. Although sounding like a sure formula for dry music, it wasn't — Toscanini's music was expressive and expansive. Nevertheless, his insistence on accuracy was legendary, and when Toscanini didn't get what he wanted out of his musicians, his near-apoplectic rages were terrible.

Maazel represents the Toscanini school of clarity and objectivity. He, too, insists on obedience. Reviewers talk abut the Pittsburgh Symphony being a "precision instrument" with Maazel a "daredevil" who "reminds us that the art of conducting is a tightrope walk between technique and intellect." As for fear and quaking among his charges, who knows? Perhaps only the chiropractors in Pittsburgh.

Maazel's performances are, fortunately, characterized by the same intensity and passion surrounding his personality. ("He is very romantic, he stretches things, brings out extra lines, creates big effect, is a big visionary!" one enthusiastic fan exclaimed.)

Once on stage Maazel is known to become so involved as to forget where he is. He recalled the time he was conducting the Berlin Opera Company, in 1966, in a production of "Lohengrin." During the wedding scene there was a short circuit in the orchestra pit and a fire broke out. The musicians escaped, but Maazel was so into the music he kept conducting. "Just when I began to wonder why I didn't hear anything I realized there was a full fire in progress," Maazel recalled. "There was no place to run except into the public — by that time the whole pit was in flames."

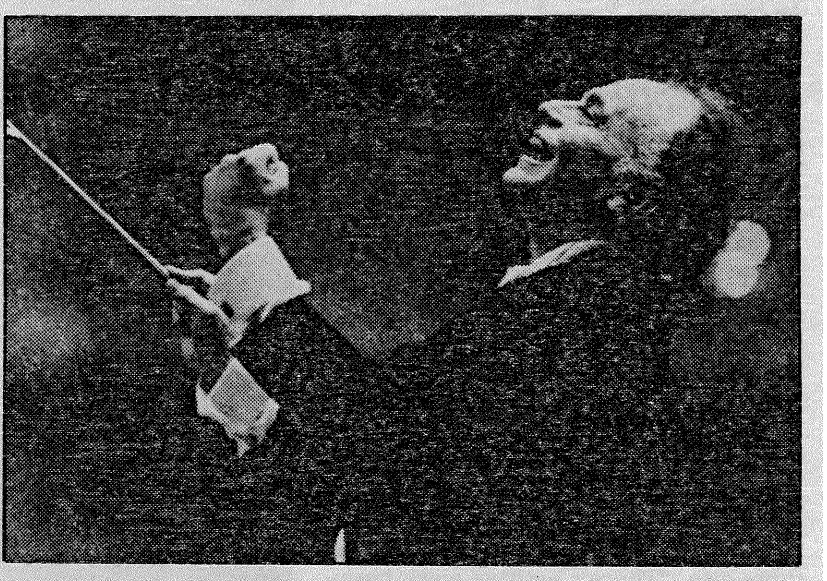
There is plenty of fire in the program Maazel will present in Santa Barbara — Rachmaninoff's Third symphony in A minor, Stravinsky's "Song of the Nightingale," and the Suite from Bartok's wild and sexy ballet, "The Miraculous Mandarin." (This was one of the programs the Pittsburgh Symphony presented in Europe during its summer tour just past; it is also interesting to note that one of Maazel's illustrious predecessors, Fritz Reiner (conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony from 1938 to 1948) was known for his wild, titanic performances of "The Miraculous Mandarin."

Maazel had much to say about his Santa Barbara program (to be repeated in Cerritos and San Francisco on a tour that ends in Mexico City), and his most significant words are perhaps hints of what Santa Barbarans can expect from his performances: "Intense, sensuous music," "Complex," "Brilliant," "Music to Raise the Dead."

The Miraculous Mandarin?

"Wow!"

Hillary Hauser is a classical music teacher and free-lance writer who lives in Summerland.



Ben Spiegel

Lorin Maazel: "Music is not a sporting event, thank God, and I feel in competition with no one."

Santa Barbara Chamber Orchestra

Conductor: Heiichiro Ohyama

APRIL 25 - 4:00 PM • APRIL 27 - 8:00 PM

Beethoven - *Overture: Egmont, Op. 84*
Beethoven - *Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 15 in C Major*
Beethoven - *Symphony No. 8, Op. 93 in F Major*

Soloist: Mikhail Yanovitsky

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