

# NZ Listener

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## How to conduct a revolution

by Ian Dando

**Thanks to dynamic New Jersey-born conductor Marc Taddei, Christchurch has thrown off its safe, quaint musical heritage.**

Since his appointment as music director and conductor of the Christchurch Symphony, Marc Taddei has turned repertoire on its head, and Christchurch is loving it. Who said the Garden City – more English than England, home to manicured tastes and unrattled china – is only for conservative stodges? “Not so,” retorts Taddei. “They take the moderns in their stride and are no more conservative than any other city in the country.”

He claims that the Christchurch Symphony (CS) now has the widest repertoire of any New Zealand orchestra, from a Lully Suite of 1678 to the newest Chris Cree-Brown of 2003; from blues, soul and rock to the latest Bic Runga.

Things weren't always this way. For nigh on 20 years, CS's repertoire suffered from bedsores. Programme planners locked it largely into the 18th and 19th centuries, confining it mainly to Germanic standards, pop Russia (piles of Tchaikovsky) with a nod and a wink to Mother England via Elgar. That changed when Taddei strode into town in 1999. He quickly added France, Spain, Latin America and the US to the CS music map, and nailed his colours to the mast with Webern's Symphony.

New Jersey-born Taddei, 40, always had visions of becoming a conductor after gaining a Juilliard MMus, specialising in trombone. In 1987, he won the post of NZSO Principal Trombone. Shortly after, he cut his teeth as conductor, founding a new group with interested NZSO colleagues – the Twentieth Century Classics ensemble. Its specialty under Taddei's direction was the tough prewar moderns, mostly Schönberg, Webern, Berg and Varèse.

In 1998, he married Justine Cormack, concertmaster of the Auckland

Philharmonia. By the time Taddei added the post of AP associate conductor to his CS one, he was on a roll and at the crossroads: stay with the salaried security of his NZSO post, or plunge gung-ho into the financial unknown of fulltime conductor? He consulted with Ian Fraser, then CEO of the NZSO. Fraser's advice: "Although we'll certainly miss you as our Principal Trombone, I see your true destiny as a conductor. Go for it."

Taddei never looked back. In addition to conducting stints with every orchestra here, including the NZSO, he has concerts in Fort Worth, and Portland on the near horizon, and is in discussion with a number of other orchestras in the US and Canada.

Good for him. But how does he reconcile the roles of NZSO and the CS? Several years back, a small but articulate pressure lobby wrote an influential series of feature articles in the editorial pages of the Christchurch Press, claiming that the NZSO were fat cats. They should be disbanded, ran the argument, and their financial spoils divided among the "impoverished" regional orchestras.

Taddei: "I'm absolutely appalled by this lobby. Since 1948 the NZSO has been the country's musical flagship. To disband it would be cultural vandalism, nothing less. The CS, NZSO and AP orchestras are all performing at a level far above what one would expect, given their current level of funding. Don't destroy what's already been carefully nurtured for over 50 years. Rather, take a look at how the whole orchestral sector can develop to offer a vibrant cultural life for New Zealand, and increased job opportunities for our many top student musicians, instead of them joining the brain drain into overseas orchestras."

Vision and financial reality become intertwined. The CS is the cog in the wheel of a city whose music-making per capita is probably the most active of all our cities. Its concerts are the tip of the iceberg compared with its need to service every group big enough to need orchestral accompaniment. This can sometimes be hectic: in July, two organisations appeared simultaneously in different venues. The CS had to bifurcate itself, one half servicing Royal New Zealand Ballet's Prokofiev Romeo and Juliet while the rest handled Canterbury Opera's Lakmé season.

This puts the CS in the invidious position of being a semi-professional orchestra trying to handle a fulltime professional load. That's expected for its 38 tenured salaried players. But for part-timers who make up the other 30 or 40, they must feel stuffed after a day job then coping with rehearsals night after night.

CS manager David Catty and his board temper some of their vision – “To expand our programmes, the number of retained players and increase our regional influence” – with reality. “The world doesn’t owe us a living,” says Catty. “There’s so much competition in Christchurch alone for the charitable dollar that, without a bold plan and steely sense of direction, we won’t get past go, let alone collect \$200. Even though your long-term goal is to drain the swamp, in the interim you still have to fight off the alligators.”

All of which makes Taddei the chief crocodile hunter. His stage presence and conducting are as lively as his repertoire planning.

“Sure, an orchestra must sometimes give an audience what it wants,” he says. “But it must also continually expand repertoire horizons like any good art gallery or library. An orchestra must keep ahead of audience taste through vital programming that earns their trust. If not, you may as well pack your bags. Orchestra and audience will suffer slow death by artistic stagnation.”

How much ahead of public taste? “You can’t be too confrontational like Boulez and the New York Philharmonic. He aggressively force-fed them with piles of tough moderns. New Yorkers dug their toes in.”

The CS’s annual tally is 12 Masterworks for the classics buffs, four Proms and four Pops. He frames the Masterworks series with two “bookend” ones containing massive frescoes – Mahler’s Symphony No 5 to start the year and Beethoven’s Choral Symphony coming up soon. “I also plan a lot by ‘threads’ from one concert to another. One is the complete Beethoven piano concertos. Another is modernism featuring Dallapiccola, Gorecki, Schönberg and Farr.

“The other thread is French baroque, which is unjustly neglected in this country. Italian and German baroque get a fair hearing, thanks to the popularity of Vivaldi and the Bach Brandenburgs. But what about Lully and Rameau? They’re refreshingly different because of the predominance of ballet in operas during the Louis XIV era.”

Taddei is quick to discern repertoire gaps and plug them. “I notice how many orchestras go direct from the classic era to late romantics like Mahler, yet miss out the early ones such as Mendelssohn and Schumann. That’s a gap I hope to fill. I’ve already done one Schumann symphony. All four are worth a listen, yet still neglected.”

He has thrown four exceedingly tough ones at the players in the past year – Mahler’s Symphony No 5, Debussy’s *Jeux*, Strauss’s *Metamorphosen* and Ives’s *Putnam’s Camp*. Three years ago, all these would have been unthinkable. Did the players curse him for it? “Not at all. If they can acquit repertoire of that difficulty, it does wonders to their technical improvement and morale. With *Jeux*, the diaphanous nature of the orchestration and its virtuoso scoring make it very exacting. The work is in a continual state of flux. It has 85 tempo changes in a 17-minute work.”

Making it a bitch to conduct, I add. *Taddei nods*.

“With Mahler No 5, the difficulty is its 75-minute length and its emotional depth, plus Mahler’s style of treating the orchestra as a number of small, transparent chamber groups. Their ability to bring it off proved the CS has graduated from a cohesive corporate body to an orchestra of soloists as well. Same with *Metamorphosen*. Strauss calls for 23 solo strings each with their own part in a complex texture where the melodic lines rapidly change from one soloist to another.”

And the Proms? These used to be typical middlebrow fare of pop from Broadway shows, film music and suchlike. *Taddei* has turned this on its head, too.

“It’s patronising to target Proms for middle-brows. You’re dealing with potential converts to Masterworks classics, so small soundbites are the key – one symphony movement rather than the whole thing. I don’t give a toss whether the content is known or unknown. For instance, we programmed Ginastera’s fiercely gaucho ‘*Malambo*’ [unknown here] from *Estancia Suite*. It brought the house down. Now it’s almost our signature piece. Two years later we gave them the full *Estancia*.

“In the last Proms I even included Ives’s almost unplayable *Putnam’s Camp*, outrageously modern in its day. But it’s a small soundbite. By giving the audience an introductory spiel profiling this American work, there’s no problem. They lapped it up.

“The Pop series are the slippery ones to design. But I think we got it dead right with the recent *Bic Runga* one. We sold the house out with a different and much younger audience. Pop artists jump at the chance of appearing with an orchestra. We’re also featuring original and vital New Zealand music.

“It’s easy to fall into the trap of having the pop singer and combo up front, with the CS sidelined to add the odd sweetener chord. But now we’re involving the orchestra as a more equal partner, thanks to the arranging skills of Tom Rainey. I would like to think quality pop is for everybody. Good music is good music regardless of style.”

**Christchurch Symphony, conducted by Marc Taddei, with solo pianist Diedre Irons, the Christchurch City Choir and narrator Elric Hooper, Christchurch Town Hall, November 22. Beethoven Piano Concerto No 5, Schönberg A Survivor from Warsaw, Beethoven Symphony No 9 Choral.**

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