

# I just wave my arms, man

by Peter Shaw

## What does a conductor do, exactly? Ask Marc Taddei, one of New Zealand's busiest and most versatile.

He comes bounding onto the stage, smiling broadly. Grasping the baton with both hands, he takes a single low bow, then turns to face the orchestra. Pause. Then up go the arms, always at the exact speed that indicates both to the players and audience something of the quality of sound that will follow. You know that you're in good hands because there's a professional at work.

Indeed, conductor Marc Taddei, currently in his fourth season as music director of the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra, has been a professional musician for 20 years. His life proceeds as a series of frantic dashes between Auckland, where he lives with his wife, violinist Justine Cormack, Wellington and Christchurch. If you want to catch him for a chat, the best way is to organise a flight that coincides with one of his. Or, better still, to wangle a dinner invitation, for he is a truly magnificent cook.

His face is very well known to people who go to orchestral concerts, because for 13 years from 1987 he was the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra's highly visible principal trombonist. Then in 2000 he decided to take a year's leave of absence to see how a conducting career might shape up.

It wasn't an easy decision. "I'd really cherished my time at the NZSO. I loved playing the trombone. I had so many fond memories of conductors, of music we'd played. I was scared I'd miss the camaraderie among the players. Justine had left the orchestra to complete her PhD in the US. I'd actually been doing as much conducting as playing, so I thought that this was the best time to make a move and see what eventuated." He didn't have to wait long before engagements started to roll in.

Taddei had long nurtured the idea of becoming a conductor. "Actually, the idea had been in the back of my mind since my early years at the Juilliard School in New York. I'd played the trombone in the orchestra conducted by Roger Nierenberg, a marvellous music educator and my first inspiration. Although I majored in the trombone, it was Roger's idea that I should be a conductor. So it was always on the cards, in a way."

The NZSO years provided a wonderful training ground for the quietly nurtured ambition. "I watched like a hawk. Not that that's anything unusual. Orchestral players are always interested in what's going on at the front. Sometimes I saw things that didn't work. For instance, I saw conductors who were too aggressive – a terrible mistake – or over-earnest. I learnt that my own approach would have to be quite different."

It's often said that conductors are dictators to whose every whim talented musicians must bend their individual creative will. Indeed, some of the greatest conductors of the past have been renowned for their ferocity with players. Taddei acknowledges this, but immediately quotes NZSO Conductor Laureate Franz-Paul Decker's statement that, "You cannot make music against anybody, only with them." Says Taddei, "Decker could be tough, sure, but in the end it was all about co-operation towards a common artistic goal."

"I'm always in search of the perfect rehearsal. You know, when you don't say too much. It's about when to interfere and when to leave things alone. Though it's always dangerous to leave something alone in the hope of it coming right on the night, there have been occasions when a little underpreparation can produce spectacular results. Mind you, I've never actually seen a perfect rehearsal, though Decker could come close to it when he wanted to and so could Eduardo Mata."

Asked about the extraordinary notion that conductors don't make much difference, he laughs. "Conductors make no noise. It's the musicians who do that. But we have a huge effect speaking at rehearsal and then by using physical and facial expressions to get a particular inspiration across to the players. However, in the end, I just wave my arms, man."

"But you have to be trusting of your orchestra, too. You may have a specific idea about a passage in your mind only to find that in rehearsal a player does it better. You'd be a fool not to modify your interpretation. There's no such thing as the perfect interpretation, anyway."

Audiences, too, have to trust a conductor. Taddei is particularly proud of what he has managed to achieve in Christchurch during his four-year tenure as music director of the CSO. "When I first went there, musical tastes were staid to say the least. I had a mandate to professionalise the orchestra, to extend its repertoire and to give audiences more exciting programmes that they would accept readily. There's an awful tendency to treat audiences as dumb. No. They want to learn, to experience, to be moved, to be part of a sense of occasion."

In the early months of his directorship there were nuts-and-bolts things to deal with. Players sometimes came to rehearsal underprepared. Break times were not always adhered to. The music library was not well maintained. Auditions were perceived as not being fairly run. All this needed attending to.

Then there were musical issues. Taddei says, "Balance was a real issue. The players had to listen more to each other. I held lots of sectional rehearsals – that came from Decker, who was a huge inspiration. The result was that the musicians played more in tune and with a greater sense of ensemble."

Then there was programming. Obviously, Taddei got it right. In 2003, there was a 35 percent increase in concert attendances. In 2004, this went up another 17 percent and earned the orchestra a handsome profit of \$90,000. In 2005, there has been another 12 percent increase. "I'm thrilled about this. It goes against an international trend in which orchestras have seen a big loss of audience share. But not in Christchurch!"

One of the advantages of having such a music director is Taddei's natural ability as a musical all-rounder. He is modest about this, saying that as an orchestral player he got used to playing in a properly musical way whatever was put on his stand. But his Bernstein-like ability to be wholly convincing in music of all styles and types is quite special. Next year he will conduct the CSO in Mahler's Ninth Symphony. Daringly, he programmed Mahler's enormous Second Symphony with the Wellington Youth Orchestra in 1999. Yet he is just as at home performing with Goldenhorse, Bic Runga, Art Garfunkel and Kenny Rogers.

The first week of August saw him in Auckland conducting the NZSO brass in works by Gabrieli, a special Christchurch Art Gallery concert of contemporary New Zealand music with the CSO, two large-scale symphonic concerts with the Auckland Philharmonia and more rehearsals with the Wellington Youth Orchestra. The public often forgets that these programmes require extensive rehearsals, all of them of a wide range of music from different periods.

Taddei's acute sense of theatre made him the ideal collaborator with Angela Brown, the charisma-laden American soprano who recently stunned Auckland audiences in performances of Strauss's Four Last Songs. Too often attempted by sopranos who should stay well away, they were peerlessly sung by Brown and beautifully accompanied by Taddei directing the Auckland Philharmonia. The preparation was thorough. Together they sorted out the Aotea Centre's deadly acoustics, both regretting, as did so many in the audience, that they were not across the square in the Town Hall.

Taddei is typically self-effacing when accepting congratulations about his skill as an orchestral accompanist, acknowledging the singer's role in setting the tempi for each song and for performing them with such unflinching beauty of tone. But everyone who knows them recognises that an unsympathetic accompaniment can ruin even the greatest vocal effort. Brown's huge talent was matched by that of conductor and orchestra.

And so it was a couple of nights later when they joined forces with baritone Gregg Baker to present opera excerpts by Verdi and Gershwin, as well as a group of Afro-American spirituals. Taddei's ability to react to the singers' spur-of-the-moment changes of tempo, elongation of phrases or individual notes was seismographic. He admitted afterwards that 90 percent of what had happened in performance was never rehearsed at all. "You just have to be ready!"

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## The Taddei show

Ian Dando

### **Marc Taddei is to Christchurch what Sir William Glock was to the BBC Proms.**

Marc Taddei is to Christchurch what Sir William Glock was to the BBC Proms. His innovations this year alone surpass those of the Christchurch Symphony's entire history before he arrived as its music director four years ago. The orchestra's previous CEO had provocatively rubbished New Zealand music as "the kiss of death". How ironic, then, that 1500 people turned up to hear the quintet of new Kiwi works that made up the musical part of Timeless Land, an intermedia programme involving, as Taddei said, "interaction between our country's music and visual arts using new technologies of film, computer interaction, real-time manipulation of images and electro-acoustic music".

"Stravinsky's Rite of Spring in July was my beach-head programme," he added. "As the 20th century's icon of modernism, it was waiting to be picked off. But Timeless Land is my most innovative one."

Eve de Castro Robinson's Len Dances opens the concert vigorously with a heavily assertive, sometimes rowdy scoring not at all like her normal style of airy filigree decoration. Her busy writing, with many things happening at once, evokes Len Lye, who lived life to the full and loved his parties as per Castro Robinson's dance pastiche writing of charleston and rumba. Roger Horrocks's video screens a range of Lye's innovative art, and for one breathtaking minute at the end the orchestra ceases playing to let Wayne Laird's amplified sounds of Lye's kinetic sculptures speak for themselves.

Working with film-maker Rick Harvie, composer Harry Harrison is also Lye-inspired. His repetitive writing explores the relationship between Neil Dawson's spiralling sculpture "Chalice" in the Christchurch Square and its environment in a four-movement jazz piece. Strong over-amplification coarsened impact. Harrison's Insideout, which boasts players like pianist Tom Rainey and trombonist Scott Taitoko, is a well-stacked jazz band.

David Downes is a self-sufficient intermedia man. His electronic writing with piano-dominated sonorities is slight, yet apposite to the aggression in his superior and more exploratory computer-generated visual imagery. In Generation a swinging light-bulb self-destructs, releasing the human figure inside. Pylons develop aggressive limbs, flaying the landscape. The bold strokes of Downes's elemental rhythmic energy are what make him popular with dance choreographers such as Michael Parmenter.

Chris Cree-Brown's sure evolution from studentish electronic fragments 12 or so years back via his first mature orchestral writing in works like Icescape of 2002 to his new Celestial Bodies is spectacular. Its 10 movements, comprising five orchestral, two electronic and three chamber with electronic, show the sure-footed maturity of a composer with one strong and clear personality in both electronic and orchestral writing. The visual input is from the camera of Julia Morrison, whose oil on water picture-taking interacts simultaneously with her impressions of the music.

I hope the impact of this strongest of all pieces wasn't diluted by audience exhaustion. A non-stop 75 minutes of what average concert-goers would perceive as solid modernism is force-feeding innovation and self-defeating. A second half of Anthony Ritchie's more digestible Timeless Land added up to a far-too-late 10.45pm finish. Limiting the first half to two works – say, the Cree-Brown and de Castro Robinson – would have been ideal.

The expansive Ritchie is well-proportioned between his music and visual projections of Grahame Sydney's mainly Maniototo-inspired paintings interspersed with Natural History images, with readings by Owen Marshall and Brian Turner from their book Timeless Land.

The music all goes on a bit long with one mood and tempo. Ritchie wrote it two years ago. This should put it on the cusp of his new liberated style as in his excellent 24 Piano Preludes, recently recorded on Atoll. Ritchie admits that most of the ideas in his thematically rich writing derive from the magic-square technique central to his new modernism. But the work is more a summing-up of his conservative past and echoes of Lilburn's landscape writing are all too pervasive. Its final minute, which is almost pure Lilburn down to the Scotch snaps, is typical.

Taddei's message in this concert, presented in conjunction with the Christchurch Arts Festival, is to "celebrate the state of our arts without any cringe – that our artists are world-class". Christchurch could say the same of Taddei's bold programme. He has extended the city's musical taste to an adventurous point where backtracking to its conservative past is no longer an option.

**TIMELESS LAND, Christchurch Town Hall.**