

FIRST, AN admission. I can't read music, nor do I really understand what a conductor does, except keep the beat amid a great flourish of hand gestures, cues and, presumably, a well-aimed baton. That, you'd have to agree, is hardly the ideal place to start from when you've been assigned a story on conducting, generally, and, more specifically, Australia's most famous living maestro, Simone Young.

But it gets worse. So ill-informed am I about conducting that when I stumble upon a conversation that occurred almost 150 years ago, I'm tempted – from a vague desire to validate my own ignorance – to agree with those who dared criticise these commanding, semi-divine figures of the stage.

The conversation was between the Spanish violin virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate and Enrique Granados, the brilliant Catalan composer, and it was Sarasate voicing furious indignation:

"Enrique, do you know what is happening today? I mean these conductors with their little sticks. They don't play, you know. They stand in front of the orchestra waving their little sticks and they get paid for this, get paid well, too. Now suppose, Enrique, suppose there were no orchestra and they stood there alone. Would they pay them just the same, them and their little sticks?"

Who knows the great Granados' response, but it wasn't just Iberian displeasure filling the 19th-century air over this relatively new species of musician.

In 1836, Robert Schumann, the German composer, pianist and music critic, had let fly with a jeremiad against "the vanity and self-importance of conductors who do not want to relinquish the baton, partly because they want to be constantly before the audience, partly to hide the fact that a competent orchestra can take care of itself without their leadership". (Robert Schumann was, by all accounts, a woeful conductor.)

All this suddenly feels highly relevant given that Cate Blanchett's new film, *Tár*, has opened in cinemas around the country this week, with the two-time Oscar winner playing a ground-breaking but unhinged – and totally fictitious – conductor of a major German orchestra; while *Knowing the Score*, a documentary on the very real – and utterly sane by comparison – Simone Young, chief conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, is due for national cinematic release next month, and will air on the ABC on March 7.

Conducting has somehow entered the zeitgeist (perhaps it never left) and I am caught between my own witlessness on the subject, and the beseechings of both my editor and my 93-year-old classically trained musical mother to turn my gaze on what has been for me, until now, a mystery art form.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL BOUD, PETER BREW-BEVAN

Simone Young (at left), and (above), conducting the Sydney Symphony: "Music is possibly the one art form that gives you the chance to expand your mind freely. In visual art you are dealing with an image. Reading literature is concrete text. Whereas music appeals to one's senses, but it also appeals to one's intellect and imagination."

A QUESTION, MAESTRO

With two films about conductors creating buzz this summer, the role of the person on the podium is very much in the zeitgeist. But what are they actually doing when they wave that little white stick about? Australia's greatest living conductor, Simone Young, tries to explain.

BY David Leser



“Darling,” my mother says, “you simply *have* to write this story. The way Simone uses her hands and arms ... it’s just extraordinary. Nobody does it like her.”

My mother should know. Not only has she seen hundreds, possibly thousands, of operatic and symphony orchestra performances over nearly nine decades, she is also the daughter of a woman, my grandmother, who, at the age of 20, performed Beethoven’s Third Concerto at London’s Queen’s Hall with the famous Englishman Henry Wood conducting.

My mother’s grandfather, my great-grandfather, was also a gifted violinist who conducted his own orchestra in Sydney at the age of 17 and often played obligatos for Australia’s acclaimed soprano Dame Nellie Melba when she returned home to perform.

So my mother, as I wrote in this magazine a few years ago, “lives for music”, and she knows her music, at least her classical music. She knows her crotchets from her quavers, her allegros (quick and lively) from her adagios (slow and leisurely). She knows her Schumanns and Schuberts from her Chopins and Shostakovichs, and she knows her conductors.

“I heard Otto Klemperer five times play Mahler’s Second *Resurrection* Symphony in Sydney at the Town Hall during the 1950s,” she tells me. “I saw Yehudi Menuhin when he was on the wane. I saw Riccardo Muti in Salzburg. I saw Daniel Barenboim conduct often, too, but I also heard him in London play a duet after supper one night. He was just 14 years old and he and the solo pianist at the concert that night played Schubert’s *Fantasia* for four hands. I’ve had that *Fantasy* in my heart ever since.”

My mother then begins to sing: “*Da Dum Da Deeeee Dum ... Da Dum Da Deee Da Dam Da Dee Da Dum Da Dum Da Dum...*”

PERHAPS IT’S true to say that wherever – and whenever – musicians have come together to play, there was always someone starting things off, counting the time, taking the lead. As Harold Schonberg, the late music critic for *The New York Times*, wrote in his definitive 1967 book *The Great Conductors*, “[The conductor] is there because somebody has to be the controlling force. Somebody has to set the tempo, maintain the rhythm, see to it that the proper ensemble and balances are kept, try to get out of the score what the composer put into it. From his baton, from the tips of his fingers, from his very psyche, flows some sort of electric surcharge that shocks a hundred-odd prima donnas into bending their individual wills into a collective effort.”

Catherine Hewgill, principal cellist with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra for the past 33 years, expands on this idea while also acknowledging the challenges involved in defining what a conductor actually does.

“It’s such a difficult question,” she tells *Good Weekend*, “and you’d think it would be very simple. But the number of people who come to me and say, ‘I see this person standing up in front of the orchestras waving their arms around. Do they actually make a difference?’

“It’s really hard for a non-musician to understand, unless you’ve sat in an orchestra under several different conductors.

“So at the most basic level, what they do is they help us play together. They help us with balance between all the instruments: who should be playing louder, who should be playing softer. They help us produce the kind of sound they’re looking for. They, of course, choose the tempo that they want the piece to be played in, or different sections of the piece to be played in. That’s the housekeeping part of it.

“On top of that is where it becomes difficult to explain, because a conductor has to have an ability to



Left: Italian conductor Riccardo Muti leads the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 2012.



Above: SSO’s then chief conductor Charles Mackerras in 2002. Right: Maestro Leonard Bernstein in 1983; musicians and audiences alike loved his demeanour.

convey what they want expressed in the music without using words. And how do you do that?”

Exactly. How do you do that? It’s in the overall architecture of the piece, Hewgill says. It’s in the hands and the way sounds are shaped. It’s in the rehearsal process. It’s in the body of knowledge a conductor brings to a score, and here she references Riccardo Muti, the famous Italian conductor with whom she’s worked.

“We gave a young conductor a chance to come and conduct the orchestra for a minute and he [Muti] said, ‘You need to know so much more than just how to wave your arms around. You need to read everything you can get your hands on to be able to grow into a fine conductor. You have to have so much knowledge in every area that is more than music.’

“So it’s about some kind of ... I don’t know ... pulling together of all the big elements in the universe and trying to convey that to us, the musicians, and then getting it to come out the other side.”

It is no small feat, as Harold Schonberg wrote, to weld five score musicians “into one singing giant”, particularly when some of the musicians might believe they could wield the baton better.

“An orchestra can be a very nasty beast,” Hewgill agrees. “If you can imagine standing in front of 100 judgmental people – that’s just how artists are – then it can be quite a frightening experience for a conductor. Not for really seasoned conductors, but for younger, less mature conductors.

“So an orchestra can tell basically within the first five minutes what the conductor is like, what strengths they have, whether it’s going to be a successful union between the particular conductor and the orchestra.”

And how can you tell? “Obviously it’s the way they speak to the orchestra. It’s the immediate control that they may – or may not have – over the players. It’s how they’re putting their ideas across, not necessarily [by] speaking about those ideas, but just by what they’re doing with their body and their eye contact and

what they are showing in their knowledge of the music. We can pick all that up in five minutes.”

Does a conductor need to be bossy by nature?

“Yes,” Hewgill replies emphatically. “Great conductors have great egos. And they need to have them. They need to be fearless and strong, and they need to have an incredible belief in themselves.”

Does Simone Young possess these qualities?

“Oh, I think in spades. I’ve been working with her for many years and she has matured and grown. She has gathered up all this experience and knowledge over the years. I also think because she’s a female, in her earlier years it was difficult for her because there weren’t so many female conductors as there are now. And she felt, I think subconsciously, [that she had] to prove herself every time she stood up in front of an orchestra.

“She doesn’t have to prove anything now. She’s not a male or a female [conductor]. She’s a conductor and she’s a great conductor.”

I MEET Simone Young for the first time in a crowded bar in Sydney shortly after a preview screening of *Knowing the Score*, where the audience is swept along on the trajectory of this gifted musician’s life and career. Young and I can barely hear each other above the din, except to acknowledge our interview scheduled for the following week and the fact the producer of the documentary, Margie Bryant, has made her aware of my family’s musical background.

In the documentary we learn from Young’s mother that her daughter was jerking to the music in her pram when she was nine months old (“I think all babies do that,” Young later says airily). She was stretching her hands to the chords of Debussy’s *Sunken Cathedral* when she was seven; watching with fascination during her childhood as the Opera House slowly began taking magnificent shape on Bennelong Point; studying composition, piano and conducting at the Sydney Conservatorium; hearing her first-ever symphony at the newly opened Sydney Opera House.

We are reminded of her becoming assistant conductor to the only two Australian chief conductors of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, first Charles Mackerras in 1982, then Stuart Challender in 1987. (In 2019 Simone Young became the third Australian appointed to the position.)

We see her as Daniel Barenboim’s assistant at the Berlin Opera while in her mid- to late-20s, and then as the first woman invited to conduct the Vienna State Opera in 1993, then again four years later while eight months pregnant with her first daughter.

Journalist: How are you going to juggle a baby and the baton?

“One in each hand,” Young replies sardonically. “I [have] had male colleagues who could stand next to me and their stomachs were bigger.”

We also learn she would conduct in her sleep, that her husband Greg Condon would occasionally cop the third beat in the middle of his back in the dead of night; and that when she was effectively sacked as Opera Australia’s music director in 2002, just over halfway through her first term in office, it took her a long time to get over what *The Sydney Morning Herald* described at the time as a “dramatic coup worthy of Wagner”.

Stuart Challender said to her early in her career, “You are a big fish in a small pond. Go to Germany.”

So she returned to the country of Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms and Wagner to take up the dual role of general manager and music director of the Hamburg State Opera and music director of the Philharmonic State Orchestra Hamburg.

It was an extraordinary double billing, normally filled by two people, and she would hold both jobs for nearly a decade, until 2015. She continued to conduct around the world – Lausanne, Paris, Zurich, Berlin, Vienna, New York – then in 2019 was invited to return to her cherished Sydney Opera House as chief conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, a three-year term that began in 2022.

Her first performance in July last year was, fittingly, Mahler’s *Resurrection* Symphony, the genius orchestral exploration of life and death, birth and rebirth. It was fitting not just for the acoustically enriched Opera House Concert Hall, which had undergone a \$150 million makeover. It was fitting for the musicians who had endured a hellish period of COVID-related disruptions and cancelled performances, and for Young, herself, who had been so unceremoniously discarded by the national opera company two decades earlier. “One stands humbled and a little apprehensive at the start of a Mahler symphony,” she says, “because there is a masterpiece in front of you.”

THE SECOND time I meet Simone Young we are in another raucous bar, this time 32 floors above Sydney Harbour on a glorious late spring afternoon. Young orders the charcuterie and cheese platters and a non-alcoholic cocktail, comprising grapefruit and spiced salts. “If I drink alcohol,” she tells me, “I’ll go straight to sleep.” It is the day after she’s conducted Beethoven’s *Fidelio* to a packed house in the white-sailed building below us, and she will do so again the next day, before departing her hotel at 3am for a 6am flight to London, then straight into hospital for surgery on her injured rotator cuff. “I’ve built up 30 years of damage in the left rotator cuff,” she replies after I ask her whether she’s injured. (I’d heard the rumours, but also seen the previous week at the People’s Choice concert that she seemed to be favouring her left arm.)

“There’s some damage in the other [right] one, too,” she offers, “[although] far less severe. But quite a lot of damage in the left rotator cuff. And then I had a fall at the end of April [in Paris] and it just ripped apart what was left of any tendons that were holding the top of the joint together.”

Are you in pain? “Yes.”

So the Sydney Symphony’s chief conductor is in considerable discomfort, pressed for time – she can give *Good Weekend* only an hour – and, to complicate matters further, the rehearsals for *Fidelio* are in turmoil because of the late withdrawal, due to illness, of South African soprano Elza van den Heever, who was due to perform the key role of Leonore.

Thankfully, Australian soprano Eleanor Lyons and New Zealander Madeleine Pierard have stepped in at the 11th hour to share the role, except that in the next few hours Lyons will also fall ill, leaving Pierard with the herculean task of performing the role without having rehearsed with the orchestra.

With some of this in mind I wonder how to strike the right notes, so to speak, for this interview. Perhaps with a question about the mystery, the otherness, of music itself and whether – for Young – there was ever a time before music.

“I don’t think there was,” she replies, “because music accompanied the things I enjoyed doing. There was



Above: Cate Blanchett plays a fictional conductor in the movie Tár. Left: Blanchett and Young at a preview of Knowing the Score, the upcoming documentary about Young.

music at kindergarten. There was music in my grandparents’ house. There was a piano which my grandmother could play. There was music on the radio. I don’t remember being aware of a world that didn’t contain music of some kind.” I mention to Young a quote from Nick Cave in which he describes music as being able to “lift us closer to the sacred” than any other art form.

“I think he’s absolutely right because music is possibly the one art form that gives you the chance to expand your mind freely. In visual art you are dealing with an image. Reading literature – and I’m a great reader – is concrete text. Whereas music appeals to one’s senses, but it also appeals to one’s intellect and imagination. And if there are no visual pictures or words to limit that, or to define that, then music appeals to an infinity of possible imaginings that takes us closer to the divine, perhaps.”

What role for silence? “Silence is possibly the least valued commodity that we have today. People are scared of silence. They think of silence as a vacuum. I think of silence as the space between the sounds.”

And sounds, according to Young, have weight. They are three-dimensional – and one of her tasks as a conductor is to take that vertical weight of sound and carry it through the horizontal line that is time. “It’s amazing once you explain that to people, the mystery of musical notation actually diminishes because ... it is actually very logical.”

Prior to this interview I had asked Young – through her publicist – to bring the score of *Fidelio* with her so I could better understand what she was seeing on the page, then endeavouring to transmit to her musicians. The score for this, Beethoven’s only opera, is nowhere in sight.

“I couldn’t imagine why you would want it,” she says. GW: Well, because part of this story is to understand what conducting is. Because I think it’s one ...

Young: “Yes, but you’re not going to find that out from the score.”

GW: I imagined that perhaps ...

Young: “You’re not going to find out what acting

is from reading a script, or what direction is from reading a script.”

GW: All right, but if you were to show me ...

Young: “I have the score downstairs ... they said you need the score for the interview, but a score is a very personal thing. It’s like the family Bible.”

GW: What do you mean by that?

Young: “Well, it’s my reference. I have things marked in there. It’s a guide for me through the work that has a much more personal connection with myself than it would have with any other conductor.”

GW: So this is your interpretation of *Fidelio*?

Young: “Yes and my study of it over more than 30 years ... It’s another language. It’s like a Braille book for someone who is blind. I mean, it’s my language, the music and the fact that the text is in German as well, that’s an added complication. There is a system to it. As I said, it’s a vertical-horizontal system. You read it from left to right, as we read English. The notes for the violins are written above the notes for the violas, above the notes for the cello (cellos), above the notes for the double bassist. So you’ve got everything arranged.”

GW: Well that tells me something I didn’t ...

Young: “Everything is arranged according to pitch. Just like in piano music, the right hand is written above the left hand because the pitch of the right hand is higher than the pitch of the left hand.”

GW: Okay, but you can see why the general public would not understand that. And I think that’s a beautiful insight into ...

Young: “See, we talk about the general public as though reading music is a skill that just a handful of people have. Most schoolchildren can basically read music because they learn the basics of it at school. And we were all schoolchildren once.”

CONDUCTORS HAVE been called many things over the centuries. Autocrats. Despots. Didacts. Egotists. Dispensers of wrath. Time beaters. Teachers. Kings of the stage.

For most of history, of course, they were almost always men and many of them deserved these labels. According to Harold Schonberg, Fritz Reiner and Arturo Toscanini were “instrumentalities of fear”, with one baleful glare from Reiner enough to turn musicians into “whimpering blobs of protoplasm”.

Gustav Mahler proved the ultimate tyrant. In seeking an impossible perfection from his musicians, he would often rage, swear, stamp his feet, insult his singers and go out of his way to pick on weaker players, some of whom he would then humiliate further by requiring

them to play solo. “For this,” wrote Schonberg, “an orchestral musician would gladly cut a conductor’s throat.”

American maestro Leonard Bernstein was the opposite. Musicians and audiences alike loved his demeanour, his humanity, his collaborative instincts, his conducting style and the way he flailed the air and moved his hips, often subjecting his body to such outbursts of passion he would become airborne.

For Bernstein, the baton was “a living thing, charged with a kind of electricity”, and yet, as he wrote in *The Joy of Music*, the stick only really began to replace the concertmaster’s violin bow in the early 1800s – during Beethoven’s time – when orchestras began getting larger. Before that, conductors – more often than not also the composers – used rolls of paper or leather stuffed with calf’s hair or, in the case of Jean-Baptiste Lully, bandleader at the court of Louis XIV, the French “Sun King”, a staff that he rammed so viciously against his foot during one performance he ended up dying of gangrene.

According to Bernstein, the first real conductor – as we’ve come to understand the term – was Felix Mendelssohn who, from the age of 12, was conducting his own private chamber orchestra at home. Mendelssohn was all about precision, using his baton of leather-bound whale bone to realise the score faithfully and unerringly.

For Richard Wagner, everything about Mendelssohn’s approach was wrong because Mendelssohn failed, as Bernstein later wrote, to “personalise the score” ... to colour it with the conductor’s “own emotions and creative impulse”.

The cult of the conductor began with Wagner, not just because of the way his writings and technical ideas influenced all the baton wielders to follow, but because he would brook no challenge to what he believed was the flawlessness of his own taste, knowledge and passion. He shaped a generation of conductors and composers – and Simone Young is an inheritor of this shaping, heir to centuries of experimentation and development in music, as well as a warring-of-sorts for the soul of music and how it should be played.

Not bad for a girl raised in the Sydney seaside suburb of Manly with the ability to look at notes and hear them perfectly in her head (as in “absolute pitch”) and also capable, through the perceptual phenomenon known as synesthesia, to see a colour for every note and key. (In the case of D, for example, it’s always yellow.)

In her early years she learnt to play piano, organ, guitar, flute and clarinet and, in her adulthood, she became fluent in German, French and Italian, while also proficient at reading Russian and Czech. (How else to understand a composer’s intention if you can’t understand his or her language?)

Then she became the first woman to smash the glass ceiling and walls of one of the most male-dominated professions in the world, a staggering accomplishment she regards as about as interesting as an old boot.

GW: Am I right in saying you were the first woman to conduct in Berlin?

Young: “Yes.”

GW: And in Vienna?

Young: “Yes. And in Paris and in Dresden and in Munich and god knows where else.”

GW: In Bergen?

Young: “Oh, probably, I have no idea.”

GW: And the Australian Opera?

Young: “No.”

GW: So Cologne, Berlin, Hamburg, Vienna?

Young: “I really don’t care ... what’s much more interesting is the fact that after nearly 30 years, they love me so much in Vienna [that] they’ve made me an honorary member of the company [Vienna State Opera], an honour that has been reserved for conductors like [Herbert von] Karajan and [Karl] Böhm.”

Don’t ask her about whether there is a power play between a conductor and orchestra because she doesn’t much like that question, either.



Above: Sydney Symphony principal cellist Catherine Hewgill: “If you can imagine standing in front of 100 judgmental people – that’s just how artists are – then it can be quite a frightening experience for a conductor.”

“It’s got NOTHING to do with power,” she says, clearly exasperated. “See, this bothers me about the perceptions of my profession, that it has to do with power. It has as much to do with power as a musician playing a piano has to do with power. The orchestra is my instrument. I’m the pianist. The orchestra is the piano.”

I ask whether she thinks Cate Blanchett is a good conductor, given that she’s seen the film *Tár*. [Blanchett reportedly put in enormous hours with Australian-born, London-based conducting coach Natalie Murray Beale to inhabit the role of Lydia Tár, as well as take piano lessons and memorise great sections of Mahler’s Fifth and Elgar’s Cello Concerto.)

Young: “If she was acting a brain surgeon, would you ask, ‘Is she a good brain surgeon?’”

GW: Well, no, I wouldn’t [laughing].

Young: “No, so there you go [not laughing]. She’s an excellent actor who’s extremely good at playing a conductor. How about that?”

Time is running out and I still haven’t asked Young whether there are basic tenets to conducting ... *Of course there are, you imbecile* ... and to my eternal relief and delight, Young begins explaining bars of music, accents, upstrokes, downstrokes and time signatures, drawing arrows and numbers on my notepad, waving her arms around like, well, like a conductor, and then completely throwing me with a question any schoolchild could apparently answer.

GW: Four four time?

Young: “You’ve got a downbeat.”

GW: Yes.

Young: “That’s the one. The upbeat is going to be ... do the maths.”

GW: The upbeat is going to be the second ...

Young: “No ... in a bar of two, the downbeat was on one, the upbeat was on two. In a bar of three, the downbeat is on one, the upbeat is on three. In a bar of four, the downbeat is on one, the upbeat is on ... ?”

GW: Four.

Young: “Exactly.”

GW: Okay ... so it’s really a piece of cake?

Young: “It really is. So that’s the when ... that shows the musicians the when. To show them the how ... What’s that character?” (Young looks at me sternly.)

GW: Stern?

Young: “Stern. Martial. Strong. Tough.”

(Young now looks at me with something approaching serenity.)

GW: Smooth?

Young: “Exactly ... again it’s not rocket science ... but then it gets interesting. There’s the bars, but the phrases move in different ways. All really interesting music goes across meter. If it sticks squarely to the meter, it’s either techno or it’s really boring. So you get things like ... let me see, what’s well known? Beethoven Five. Opening. You have a two-bar phrase. *Ba ba ba bam* ... two bars ... the next one is a three-bar phrase because it’s a bit longer. *Ba Ba Ba Bammm*. The next one, four-bar phrase ... *ba ba ba bamm di di da dam di di da damm* ... four bars ... same the next one ... *ba ba ba ta ta ti ta tum ta ti ta tum* ... four-bar phrase ... now *pa ta ta ta ti ta ta tam ti ti ta tam pam pam pam* ... seven-bar phrase.

“Now you could break the seven-bar phrase into four and three, and it would sound: *bapa ta ta ta ta ta ta* ... or you take it in the direction of the phrase *pa ta ta ta ta ta tam ta tam*. You’re deliberately going across the meter. That’s what the conductor does. The conductor shows the musicians where the phrases go.”

So here we are, high above the shimmering white curves of the Sydney Opera House, and the chief conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra is singing Beethoven’s Fifth to me, tapping the table and waving her arms around as the ruckus in the bar grows louder and the barman is jiggling his cocktail shakers like a maracas player on a Caribbean cruise.

THE NEXT night I am in the front circle of the Sydney Opera House concert hall watching Simone Young conduct *Fidelio* with a torn left rotator cuff, one that will require – I am reliably told – a shoulder replacement and nine weeks of convalescence in her home in Sussex, England. (This has forced her to cancel concerts in Vienna, Zurich and Stockholm.)

She is mesmerising as she coaxes and commands notes from the orchestra, jiggling and jutting her body, scooping and caressing the air with her hands or, alternatively, waving her baton like a sword or magic wand, or both.

“She looks possessed ... in a good way,” my singer-songwriter daughter Jordan writes in my notebook. “Almost shamanic, like someone casting spells on a headland as a storm rolls in.”

“Is there something a little Kate Bush about her movements?” I reply, passing my notebook back to her in the dark.

“Yes, actually it’s very *Wuthering Heights*,” she says. “It’s like watching a dancer.”

Or, as Louise Herron, chief executive of the Sydney Opera House, tells me, watching a painter pick up her brushes and colours, or a great conductor expressing herself with “swan-like arms”.

And yet every time Young raises her left arm I almost wince knowing the pain that she’s in, and wondering how she keeps going. What I don’t know is that between the time we did our interview the previous evening and this performance now, she has also fallen ill.

“She was very sick [that night],” Catherine Hewgill, the principal cellist, tells me a few days later. “She literally couldn’t speak, she was feeling so terrible, and when she was taking her bows, at one point she had to really hold on to the rail on the podium. She was obviously feeling like she was about to faint.”

“She was [also] having to deal with not just one soprano [becoming] sick, but then the replacement soprano [following suit] and dealing with all these things. But would she ever crumble? She would be the last person to crumble.”

And that might not technically be part of a conductor’s job brief – refusing to crumble – but it might just be part of what makes Simone Young a true maestro. ■