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MUSIC; Too Few American Maestros? Try Making Them

By JAMES R. OESTREICH

AWADAGIN PRATT is to perform here on Saturday evening on the Millennium Stage at the Kennedy Center. There would be little news in this statement if Mr. Pratt were playing piano, for he is widely known on that instrument, in concert and on records. Even the actual news, that he will be conducting the National Symphony Orchestra in Beethoven's Eighth Symphony, is less than earthshaking, for many instrumentalists are taking up the baton these days in varying states of preparedness and with varying success. In fact, Mr. Pratt, who is also a trained violinist and who won a Young Maestro Award in connection with his conducting studies at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore in 1995, has already conducted several orchestras.

What makes this occasion noteworthy is that he and three other fledgling maestros, though far from world-class, will be taking the podium in a fine state of preparedness, as the climax of the National Conducting Institute. The institute, in its second season under the sponsorship of the Kennedy Center and the orchestra, and the directorship of Leonard Slatkin, the orchestra's music director, is that rare program that offers more than its name might promise. At a time when many on the American musical scene are lamenting the relative paucity of rising American music directors at major orchestras, the institute is geared to help train young Americans to assume just such posts.

Conducting, in the strictest sense -- the sheer technique of conveying meter, tempo and expression -- may be the least of it. Not that there is nothing to be learned on that count. "I found his instruction tremendously helpful to gain independence in my left hand," Mr. Pratt said of Mr. Slatkin.

But the hard lessons come elsewhere. On this subject, Robert Spano -- who, as the music director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic and, come September, the Atlanta Symphony, proves the exception to that lack of young American maestros -- likes to quote his teacher Max Rudolf, the author of the textbook "The Grammar of Conducting."

"The best way to learn conducting is by doing it," Rudolf is supposed to have said. "The second-best is by observing. The third-best is having a teacher."

The National Conducting Institute, in three isolated weeks each year, offers opportunities for all of the above, and more. It addresses the broader aspects of conducting: everyday practicalities, rehearsal techniques and psychological factors. Although these lessons, too, will require actual podium time to sink in, Mr. Slatkin, with vast experience of his own, can at least point to a few head starts and shortcuts.

But the most unusual feature of this program is a week spent basically without Mr. Slatkin, presented in partnership with the Orchestra Leadership Academy of the American Symphony Orchestra League. The participants are immersed in management, meeting intensively with orchestra administrators and league representatives. As one exercise, each participant submits a plan for an entire season of programs, which is then scrutinized from a real-world perspective. How expensive will it be, and what simple, harmless economies might be possible? How will it play at the box office? Does any particular combination of works place unreasonable demands on players?

"It does a wonderful job of preparing you to deal with a large orchestra," Kenneth Allen Woods, the music director of the Oregon East Symphony and the Grande Ronde Symphony, also in Oregon, said of that first week, in April. "But I was also overflowing with ideas of what to take back to a small orchestra, of ways of working with unusual resources." In particular, he began to explore possibilities for joint efforts with a nearby Indian reservation in a serious treatment of folk music. Mr. Woods will conduct Strauss's "Till Eulenspiegel" on Saturday.

The institute, "designed to assist talented conductors of academic, community or part-time orchestras make the transition to conducting and leading major, full-time, professional orchestras," in the words of a brochure, is a brainchild of Mr. Slatkin's.

"When I was just starting out, even with all the musical background I had, I didn't know what to say to an orchestra, what to do," Mr. Slatkin said. His parents -- Felix Slatkin, a violinist and conductor, and Eleanor Aller, a cellist -- were both members of the acclaimed Hollywood String Quartet, and their home was a constant center of musical activity.

Mr. Slatkin was speaking in a rare free moment during the second week of the institute last month. The four participants and six auditors dogged his every step. They watched him rehearse the orchestra for the conclusion of a three-week British Festival, a hectic final weekend of 18 works. Then they met with him and with several members of the orchestra in mentoring sessions to discuss the pieces to be performed this week and more general matters.

Mr. Slatkin has accumulated a quarter-century of wisdom since his days as a speechless neophyte. "If you feel uncomfortable talking to the players, talk to the personnel manager," he said now, dispensing random advice at a couple of working lunches. "Everything has to run through the personnel manager, the one person who operates between management and the orchestra."

He veered in a new direction: "Whenever possible, try to get to where you're conducting the night before. This is for your own well-being and contractual safety. In fact, the New York Philharmonic now has it in my contract."

Transportation delays, he went on to explain, had caused him to miss the opening piece on a program in two consecutive appearances with the Philharmonic. In one case, grounded in Washington, he took a bus to Philadelphia and, after further complications, a taxi to New York. "Unfortunately," he added, "I can tell you that a cab from Philadelphia to New York costs \$275."

He raised other musical and practical issues in scattershot fashion:

*"The art of collaborating in concertos is the most important thing a conductor has to do, because you have to learn to listen."

*"With a reduced orchestra, I do at least one rehearsal with one extra player on a part, in case anyone gets sick."

*"The more you can show in a read-through with body language, the more respect you'll get."

*"I don't know any soloist who ever thinks the orchestra is quiet enough."

THEN it was on to the assigned works. Martin Hackleman, the principal horn player, discussed the opening horn solos in "Till Eulenspiegel," allowing the maestro to eat.

"It's nice not to get pointed at," Mr. Hackleman said, arguing for a certain freedom of interpretation. "But I don't want the conductor to ignore me, either." He used the evocative term "vulnerable player" for a soloist in such an exposed circumstance.

Another player, Alice Weinreb, a flutist, was crucial throughout the discussion of Ravel's "Daphnis et Chloé" Suite No. 2. But Mr. Slatkin set the tone. "I would start the piece without a stick," he said. "It sends the wrong message. You convey sound with gesture, and here the gesture dictates the whole mood of the piece."

The Ravel, it turns out, will be conducted on Saturday by Eugene Castillo, though no one (except, perhaps, Mr. Slatkin) knew that at the time. Mr. Castillo is the music director of the Camellia Symphony Orchestra in Sacramento and a former staff conductor of the San Francisco Ballet.

"There is nothing quite like this program for someone like me," Mr. Castillo said. "Nobody tells you how to talk to the press, the community, the orchestra. Here it's an information overload."

Comparable institutes are the venerable conducting program at the Tanglewood Music Center in Massachusetts, now directed by Mr. Spano, and the American Academy of Conducting at the Aspen Music Festival in Colorado, also in its second year, directed by David Zinman, who was long the music director of the Baltimore Symphony. Although both extend over longer terms, neither offers a comparable exposure to the overall workings of an orchestra or the opportunity to conduct a professional orchestra. At Tanglewood, the participants work not with the resident Boston Symphony but with the Music Center Orchestra, made up of students. At Aspen, an orchestra of 55 is constituted for the purpose, including the 24 participants themselves.

"There is nothing like this, working with an orchestra of this caliber," said Paul Haas, who will conduct Copland's "Salón México" on Saturday. Mr. Haas is the pops conductor of the Corpus Christi Symphony and an assistant conductor of the Haddonfield Symphony in New Jersey and the National Repertory Orchestra.

On this point, all the participants this year agree. "The most important aspect of the institute is the performance experience," Mr. Woods said. "You're not just being thrown to the wolves or given a junk assignment, the two things that typically happen to young conductors. Here the players have made an investment in preparing us, and they'll try to make it work."

An opportunity to conduct the orchestra is extended even to the auditors, also young conductors who, like the participants, pay tuition. Throughout, they play a more active role in the institute than their title might imply. They take part in discussions. They do not get to rehearse and perform publicly, but they conduct a reading of a movement: this year, from Dvorak's Seventh Symphony or Brahms's First. Even this is a valuable experience, a chance to test Mr. Slatkin's maxim that "you should be able to show almost everything you're trying to get through gestures."

Mr. Pratt, the pianist, was an auditor last year. And in response to a question about the progress of women through the program, Mr. Slatkin suggested that one of the current auditors could well return next year as the first female participant.

As for the participants last year, one of them, Jason Weinberger, who recently earned his master's degree from the Peabody Institute, served as a cover conductor for the National Symphony a number of times last season, including that week of the British Festival.

"The scope of the program here is totally unique, showing how a music director works and what he does," Mr. Weinberger said. "That may be even more valuable than doing the performance. I learned more here than I learned in graduate school."

Robert C. Jones, the orchestra's president, hopes that Mr. Weinberger is not the only loyal alumnus. "We have to continue to maintain the people we've developed," he said. "We encourage them to think of the orchestra as an alma mater."