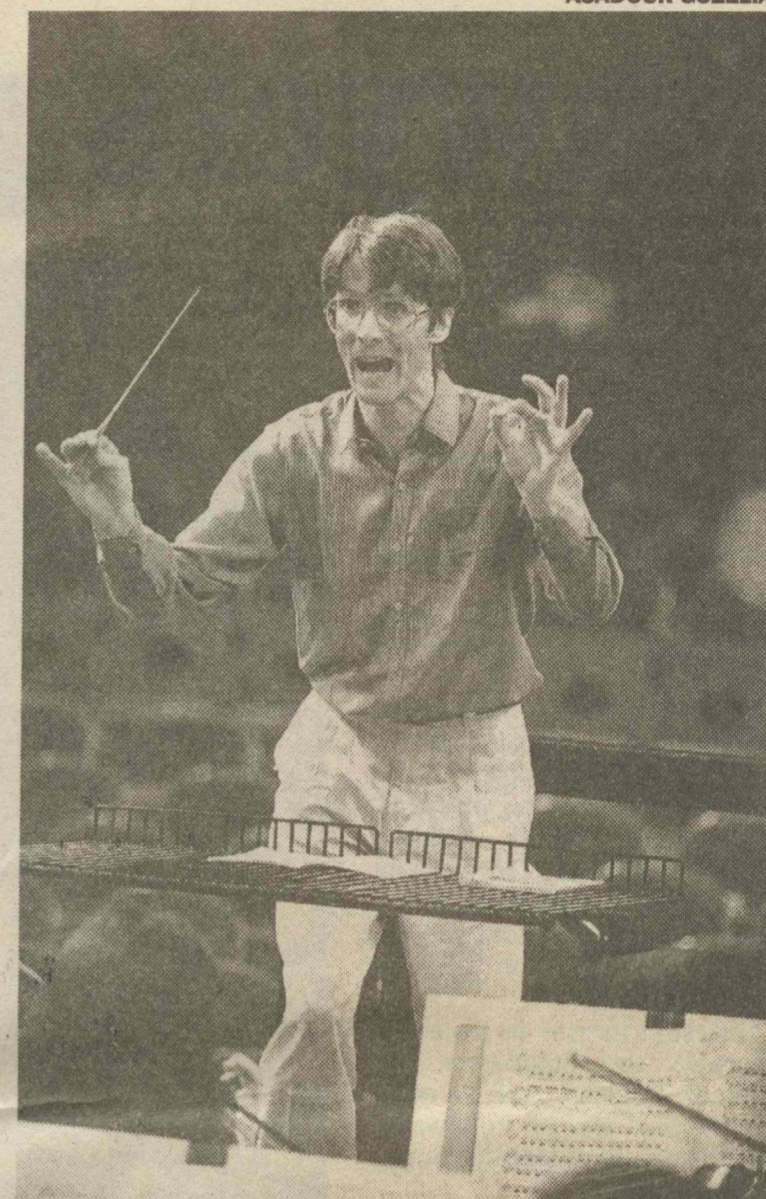


As two national conductors' competitions reach their climax this week, Mark Pappenheim presents platform views

ASADOUR GUZELIAN



Baton-raisers Neville Creed, David Wroe and Alexander Ingham, hopeful competitors in early rounds of the Fourth Leeds Conductors' Competition, which reaches its final stages tonight at Leeds Town Hall

Crisis? What crisis? With three young hopefuls going through to the finals of the Fourth Leeds Conductors' Competition tonight and a further five finalists taking part in the launch of the new Donatella Flick Conducting Competition in Croydon on Wednesday, why should anyone be worried about a future shortage of world conducting talent? But if there is really no crisis, why have orchestras like the Hallé taken so long to find replacement music directors — and why should the Arts Council think it necessary to launch its own Young Conductors Scheme to create work experience programmes in tandem with the country's leading bands?

According to Norman Lebrecht, author of the recent polemic, *The Maestro Myth*, conductors' competitions are only a symptom of the crisis: "Expecting a great conductor to emerge from a competition is like expecting *Mastermind* to produce the next Nobel Prize winner. What's really needed is to reconstruct the infrastructure that worked for 150 years — putting young conductors back into very junior positions in the provinces, getting them to sit around, make the tea and watch what everybody else is doing — if they're any good, they'll get their big break."

Mark Wigglesworth's career stands as the very opposite of the Lebrecht theory. Winner of the 1989 International Kondrashin Competition in Amsterdam, Wigglesworth has just been appointed both Music Director of Opera Factory and Associate Conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Yet, when he entered the Kondrashin Competition only

## Fingers on the baton

two years ago, he was fresh out of the Academy and, by his own admission, "had no experience at all". Modestly, he attributes his success to luck — "my priorities and the jury's seemed to coincide. My performance may not have been very together, but I think it was quite exciting." Isn't he worried that his victory has catapulted him to premature stardom?

"There's nothing dangerous about competitions in themselves," he insists. "What's dangerous is what you decide to do afterwards." Which, in Wigglesworth's

real opportunity to build a relationship with a single orchestra and learn the craft as you go." That desire to learn over time is what attracted Martyn Brabbins to apply for the new Flick competition even after carrying off first prize in the Leeds three years ago. Where the Leeds offers money and concert bookings, the Flick's £5,000 first prize is actually intended to buy the winner a further extended period of specialist study in the opera houses of Italy. "I was quite surprised I was selected," Brabbins admits, "and in fact I

the cold, passionate, Northern approach. Now, if I'm lucky, I'll get the warm, passionate, Southern approach too. But I'm very philosophical about these things." Such stoicism is perhaps born of his experience in a Japanese competition where 350 applicants were whittled down to 30 on the strength of seven minutes' music-making — 3½ of Haydn, 3½ of Stravinsky. "I was knocked out in the first round," says Brabbins, "which left a very sour taste — it was so mechanical."

Lord Birkett, Chairman of the Flick

that the orchestra itself has a vote, worked out through a complicated system of PR.

All the same, anxieties about competitions led the Arts Council to launch its own Young Conductors Scheme last month to create

year-long work experience opportunities for young conductors with major orchestras. The two Bournemouth orchestras, the London Philharmonic and the RLPO are all taking part in the scheme. While the others have yet to decide the best approach, the RLPO have already selected their conductor, Christopher Gayford, in conjunction with the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. Given that he was junior fellow in conducting at the RNCM and has already been booked by Opera North to share next season's *Don Giovanni* with music director Paul Daniel, some might ask whether he really needed the assistance of the scheme. Ian Blatchford, the Arts Council music officer in charge, is aware of the difficulties. "If we're not careful, it's going to end up being a bit of a stitch-up with the music colleges, which is obviously something we want to avoid. But a lot of orchestras are a bit suspicious of competitions and although talent-scouting doesn't look terribly fair, it's often the best way of going about things."

□ *Fourth Leeds Conductors Competition: finals 7.30pm tonight Leeds Town Hall (box office 0532-476962)*

□ *First Donatella Flick Conducting Competition: rehearsals Wednesday 10am-12.30pm, 2-6pm; performances Thursday 10am-1pm, 2.30-5pm. Fairfield Halls (081-688 9291)*

*'Expecting a great conductor to emerge from a competition is like expecting Mastermind to produce the next Nobel Prize winner,' says Norman Lebrecht*

case, was absolutely nothing — surprising given his current commitments and the string of bookings that went with the prize. "Win a competition and you can get one date with any orchestra in the world — the trick is to be invited back. I'd rather they asked me because of who I am rather than which prize I've won. Maybe if I'm still waiting for them to employ me when I'm 90 I'll claim my rights."

Wigglesworth reckons the best prize is the one Simon Rattle won in the John Player Competition — an Associate Conductorship with the Bournemouth. That, Wigglesworth explains, gives you "a

wasn't even going to apply — I thought I'd done enough competitions. The reason I did, though, was the opera house attachment — not the glory, not the money, but just the chance to be able to go and work, and learn a new language in a new culture." This thirst to continue learning is the more remarkable considering that Brabbins, like Sian Edwards, winner of the first Leeds Competition in 1984, is a pupil of the legendary Russian master, Ilya Musin, teacher of generations of Soviet conductors from Rudolf Barshai to Valery Gergiev. It's a matter of broadening his range, Brabbins explains: "I've had

Jury, isn't too worried about such agonies: "I suspect it's probably quite good for steeling their nerves anyway." Even Brabbins concedes that it isn't entirely detached from professional realities — "inasmuch as you're put in front of strange orchestras all the time and just have to get on with it. And anyway, the whole Russian approach, which is a very all-embracing, physical and emotional one, is a matter of being able to communicate instantly through your physical gestures." Any worries that flashy podium antics may fool an audience and a jury are counteracted at Leeds — one of the virtues of which is