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It's good to be Lizzo

Entertainer on the rise shows no signs of being pigeonholed. **PG 4**

Television review

'Mr. Iglesias,' 'Family Reunion' boost Netflix's nostalgia streak. **PG 4**



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Jiajing Ding conducts a small ensemble of the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra in *Serenade for Strings* by Antonin Dvorak. Ding is one of 10 fellows taking a Summer Conducting Seminar over 11 days in the Mattin Center of Johns Hopkins University.

Taking up the baton

Inside the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra Conducting Seminar

BY ELIZABETH NONEMAKER
For The Baltimore Sun

Some musicians are born conductors. Markand Thakar, music director of the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra, is one of them.

He remembers receiving an LP for a Christmas present at the age of 5. "It said, 'Conduct your own orchestra.' It had a little red baton and I remember pretending to turn pages and conducting the record player."

Other musicians, though, might not develop an interest in conducting until much later on, when a teacher notices their potential or after they've already established careers as performers.

But picking up conducting is not as straightforward as picking up an instrument. The roster for a full-sized symphony can include as many as 100 different performers. How do aspiring conductors actually practice?

In 2010, Markand Thakar offered a solution by holding the first Baltimore Chamber Orchestra Conducting Seminar. Students could learn fundamentals of conducting and implement them with a professional ensemble over just four days.

Since then, the program has grown. The seminars are now held twice a year: five days for the winter sessions, 11 for the summer. Summer sessions kick off with a five-day "boot camp," meant to build a technical foundation, and end with conducting sessions in front of the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra.

Over the past year, Nicholas Finch has attended both the summer and winter sessions. The format has allowed him to explore conducting while maintaining his career: Finch is principal cellist with the Louisville Orchestra.

For Finch, conducting "was one of those things I'd thought about, but never seriously. The task seemed so overwhelming, and I was afraid to dip my toe in the water. But once I did, I realized it was less scary

than I thought it was going to be."

There are a number of acclaimed conductors who've had similar starts: Finch pointed to the example of Osmo Vänskä, music director of the Minnesota Orchestra, who worked as an orchestral clarinetist for several years before he began to study conducting.

"You do go into it with a certain advantage if you've been in the belly of the beast for so long," said Finch.

After all, orchestral musicians know what it's like to play under great conductors. When Leonard Slatkin guest-conducted the Louisville Orchestra, Finch remembered that "everything he did was helpful. It's difficult to quantify exactly what that was. But when you're working with a conductor like that, it's like driving in a Rolls Royce. Everything operates so well."

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Orchestra

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Other conductors, especially those who are still learning, are not always so helpful — and they may not even be aware of it.

In fact, gaining the feedback one needs to improve is one of the challenges of learning conducting. More often than not, it's poor etiquette for a player to challenge a conductor's authority by offering a suggestion or providing a critique, especially in front of other musicians.

Alternatively, good players will just know what to ignore. Finch recalled a bit of wisdom from Louisville's music director, Teddy Abrams. "If you're playing an instrument, you get the feedback immediately if you're doing something wrong," said Finch. But if a new conductor does something wrong in front of, say, the Cleveland Orchestra, "they'll still sound like the Cleveland Orchestra. You could walk away saying, 'Hey, I'm pretty good!'"

That's where workshops like Thakar's come in. At "a workshop like this," said Finch, "you have someone there who will give you feedback immediately that in other circumstances people wouldn't feel comfortable giving to you."

The BCO Conducting Seminar isn't just any workshop, either. Participants repeatedly cited its thoroughness as unique to Thakar.

"This is one of the best," said Jiajing Ding, a fellow at this summer's seminar and a current master's student in piano performance at The Juilliard School. Thakar "teaches technique from the basics. We have technique sessions every day, one in the morning and one in the evening." Ding said that's "not what [she] encountered" at the two other conducting workshops she's attended.

Markand Thakar certainly knows what he's talking about. In addition to his own career as a conductor, he previously served as co-director of graduate conducting at the Peabody Institute. He's also authored a book on the principles of conducting, among others.

So what qualifies as solid conducting techniques?

According to Thakar, it's all about freedom. "It's unnecessary muscle tension that prevents us from connecting our gesture to the sound," he said.

That freedom extends to a conductor's frame of mind: Conductors should think of their role as collaborating with the sound, rather than dictating it.

"There's a common sense that the function of a conductor is to galvanize the very different musical sensibilities of all these individuals in the ensemble," said Thakar. "Instead, I believe that we can all hear essential things. We're most effective when we lead [the musicians] in their response to sounds."

During a morning technique session at this summer's recently concluded conducting seminar, Thakar repeatedly instructed participants to relax, to drop their elbows and shoulders. That morning, they were focusing on communicating gradual crescendos and diminuendos (when the music gets louder and softer, respectively).

Participants took turns leading the group in singing a major scale, growing louder on the ascent and softer on the descent. If a conductor's hands moved too quickly, they would reach the crescendo too soon and the phrase would lose shape.

Other gestures were less intuitive. "Don't poke, just sink," Thakar reminded students, referring to a tapping gesture with the fingers whenever they indicated a beat.

Tiny, unnecessary movements like these don't just lack meaning; over the course of a two-hour program, they could also lead to injury.



KIM HAIRSTON/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTOS

Maestro Markand Thakar, music director of the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra.



Maestro Markand Thakar, music director of the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra, left, instructs Alan Truong, Monterey, California, in how to hold a baton.



Isaac Terceros, from Santa Cruz, Bolivia, practices conducting a small ensemble of the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra from his seat before taking the podium.

"I think this is true for playing an instrument as well. The real skill is learning what not to do," said Finch. "It's really easy to flail your arms around in a pattern and make a passionate face and have an idea about music, but real masters know how to pare it down to what's really essential."

The morning technique session was followed by two hours of working with live musicians in small ensembles. (Participants don't work with the full chamber orchestra until the last three days of the seminar.)

When Jiajing Ding stepped up for her turn to conduct the first movement of Beethoven's 14th string quartet, Thakar

reminded her of the importance of staying balanced and tall.

"Which means..." he said, trailing off, as the class began laughing. He pulled out a wooden platform attached to a rounded base. Ding's job was to conduct while balancing on the board (spotted by participants on either side).

"You don't want to not fall because you're tense," Thakar said. "You want to not fall because you're aligned." Ding began, righting herself when the board tipped, as the sound of the quartet grew fuller.

Thakar has trained dozens, if not hundreds, of conductors over his career, and

his students have secured positions with orchestras all over the world.

As part of that preparation, Thakar invited Henry Fogel to the seminars to coach participants during a "career day."

Fogel has enjoyed a long career as an arts executive, serving as president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras. Having been part of the hiring process for numerous conductors, his advice to participants is invaluable.

Fogel stressed the importance of job candidates addressing the particular needs of the orchestra to which they're applying, as search committees can wade through "anywhere from 125 to 200" applications for open positions.

Additionally, aspiring music directors should show an awareness that their duties extend beyond the concert hall.

"Orchestras cannot afford to only matter to their ticket buyers and subscribers," said Fogel. "They take an enormous amount of donated money out of the community and call themselves a community resource. If you're a community resource to the tiny percent that subscribe to your concerts, you're not a community resource. I want conductors who have ideas about that."

(Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's Marin Alsop, for example, Fogel regards as "a model of how to be a music director when you're not conducting.")

As for when they are conducting? For Thakar, it comes back to the idea of conductors "conforming to the sounds."

Generally, the more a person knows about music, the more they are able to be enriched by it. When asked whether there are things that general audience members can know about conducting that would enhance their concert experience, Thakar was adamant.

"No!" he exclaimed. "I could tell them plenty of things they ought to know about conducting, but that's going to take away from their experience. Because if they're sitting in the hall and thinking, 'Oh look, he's doing this here, he's doing that,' then they've lost the experience of the music."

"Put your iPhone down and absorb the sounds," Thakar said. "It'll take you to a magical place."

Elizabeth Nonemaker covers classical music for the Baltimore Sun as a freelance writer. Classical music coverage at The Sun is supported in part by a grant from the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation, the Rubin Institute for Music Criticism and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. The Sun makes all editorial decisions.