

ARIADNE

AUF NAXOS

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIK NIELSEN, CONDUCTOR OF BLO'S PRODUCTION OF *ARIADNE AUF NAXOS*

31-year-old Erik Nielsen flew in from Germany last summer to conduct Tanglewood's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* in place of James Levine.

BLO: How does it feel to be one of the youngest, high profile conductors around?

EN: I didn't know that I was one. That I'm young is immaterial, but being a conductor is a lot of work and responsibility.

BLO: After your experience last summer filling in for James Levine at Tanglewood, how do you feel about conducting a fully-staged opera in the BSO's hometown?

EN: I'm excited to be able to spend some time in Boston. I've only really flown through the city. I love New England and especially its connection to colonial America and Europe. I've really missed not being in Tanglewood this summer and am looking forward to seeing some colleagues and friends in Boston.

BLO: How would you describe your style of conducting?

EN: I feel like the composer is my boss and I'm his psychologist. I try to read his mind to understand exactly what he wants, and through rehearsing and efficient gestures (and sweat), I attempt to achieve those results with an orchestra and the singers and the staging.

BLO: Who are your greatest inspirations?

EN: Mozart and Wagner.

BLO: Could you ever imagine doing anything else?

EN: I never tried. Of course, I could play in an orchestra or specialize as a pianist. But my training was always oriented to be a conductor, even though I mostly wasn't studying conducting officially. I suppose I would have gone into science or math. I do like numbers and equations. After I've finished analyzing a score of mine, it looks a lot like a page from a chemistry book.

BLO: What do you enjoy most about opera?

EN: Mozart.

BLO: Who are your favorite composers to conduct?

EN: Wagner and Bruckner.

BLO: What attracts you to conducting Strauss? How do you feel about his music?

EN: Strauss is difficult. I like conducting it, because it requires a good handling of the orchestra. All of the instruments have fantastic and interesting material to play, but establishing a hierarchy is essential. Otherwise the orchestra will be too loud and active—A pure cacophony.

BLO: What is your take on *Ariadne auf Naxos*? What is your conception of Strauss' controversial work?

EN: Bigger is not better. Strauss of course is known for *Elektra* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*: massive and/or long works. In *Ariadne*, Strauss starts with a chamber orchestra and reduces it even further to a chamber ensemble for a large portion of the piece. He addresses issues of text and/versus music, which he deals with further in *Capriccio*, and also mythology and theater. It's also refreshing not to be dealing with blood and guts and murder and revenge. I think all composers have moments of "reduction" in their writing (often because of economic factors), and the products are most often highly stimulating works.

BLO: How is conducting this production different from your work in the past?

EN: This is my first opera production in the US.

BLO: How do you feel about this production being the North American premiere of the Welsh National Opera production?

EN: Importing productions is a good thing. There is too much emphasis in opera on doing everything new and different. An imported production has generally proven itself very successful in its "hometown". It allows an opera company to offer something new to its public but also can save costs by not paying for an entirely new production. In Frankfurt, my experience has been only positive with "imports".

BLO: What do you hope the audience will take away from this production?

EN: Good singing, good acting, good music making. They must take away with them everything that they can't find in movie theaters.

BLO: Do you have any must-see New England destinations?

EN: I do...but I know that I never end up having the time and energy when I'm involved in an opera production. I was recently in London for 2 months and managed to see very little.