

Follow the baton

Conductors who chase work around the world rich only in experience

By **BRETT OPPEGAARD**
Columbian staff writer

Like most orchestra conductors, Don Appert has earned the highest academic degrees in his field. He travels via airplane to exotic locations. He wears a tuxedo to work.

It's a job, mostly baton-waving, that looks easy and seems glamorous. But generally it's not. Conductors do most of their hard labor in rehearsal halls, without adoring audiences cheering. They have to prepare the dozens of players for each show in just a few days, while managing their diverse personalities and artistic whims. As much as conductors get credit for performances, they also get blame. There are way too many of them for the amount of work available, and conducting gigs are so coveted worldwide that travel is an occupational necessity. The opportunities so few, that people respond to openings from thousands of miles away for little financial return. Only the elite — as well as most devoted and ambitious — survive for long.

If you go

A review of Saturday's Vancouver Symphony performance, page D9.





STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Besides leading the Clark College Orchestra and the school's music department, conductor Don Appert takes his skills overseas, joining the elite class of musicians able to work internationally but also a group that's not always compensated at such a high level. Appert's stints as a traveling conductor have generated some lows but also many highs, including traveling the world and making music in places such as this ornate church, at right, in Ovada, Italy, near Milan.



Appert, head of the music department at Clark College, has been one of the few to find and develop such work in Southwest Washington. He leads the school's community orchestra. He teaches, and as an artist, feels the compelling need for growth. So he trades his podium at the college for chances to conduct elsewhere, just to create music with a wider variety of people. Other hopefuls in this area try different approaches. One combines five part-time jobs. Another organizes his own events. One even commutes from Europe.

That conductor, Salvador Brotons of the Vancouver Symphony, made his typical transcontinental commute last week to Vancouver to prepare his group for concerts this weekend (tonight is the second and final performance). It's the most prominent conducting job in the county, yet he makes only \$20,000 a year doing it and has to cover his own airfare from Spain. The conducting circuit is so cut-throat, the price Brotons pays is worth it. He's able to say that he conducts an orchestra in America, which gives him more clout in the worldwide conducting marketplace.

To put such opportunities into perspective, America employs 1.7 million chief executives, 950,000 lawyers and 830,000 doctors,

Conductors:

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according to recent census data. The 3,500 conductors in this country, for comparison, are specialists scarcer than professional baseball players (5,800), neurological surgeons (4,600) or college presidents (4,200).

American schools of higher education meanwhile are producing about 13,000 graduates and 6,000 post-graduates in music-related fields each year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, creating a formula destined to produce vast frustration. With that ratio of supply to demand, conductors like Appert are expected to train as intensely as a medical doctor while being paid like a public school teacher.

"It's a dreadful dichotomy," the 53-year-old says. "Everybody wants to be reasonably successful money-wise, and you invest so much time and effort into (the business), you don't want to be always scrimping and scratching."

Diversifying his experience and creating a wider network of support for his skills were parts of the motivation behind Appert choosing to start

Will travel for (conductor) work

With the dearth of conducting jobs available, every significant opening gets worldwide attention. Orchestras search for the best talent, wherever that might originate, and conductors must be willing to travel anywhere to get ahead. Here's a list of some of the top jobs in the region and the world as well as the conductor's home country:

Orchestra	Conductor/Music director	Born in
AMERICA'S "BIG SEVEN"		
Boston Symphony Orchestra	James Levine	United States
Chicago Symphony Orchestra	Daniel Barenboim	Argentina
Cleveland Orchestra	Franz Welser-Möst	Austria
Los Angeles Philharmonic	Esa-Pekka Salonen	Finland
New York Philharmonic	Lorin Maazel	France
Philadelphia Orchestra	Christoph Eschenbach	Germany
San Francisco Symphony	Michael Tilson Thomas	United States
REGIONALLY		
Belleuve Philharmonic	Fusao Kajima	Japan
Eugene Symphony	Giancarlo Guerrero	Nicaragua
Oregon Symphony	Carlos Kalmar	Uruguay
Seattle Symphony	Gerard Schwarz	United States
Spokane Symphony	Eckart Preu	Germany
Tacoma Symphony Orchestra	Harvey Felder	United States
Vancouver Symphony	Salvador Brotons	Spain
AROUND the WORLD		
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra	Simon Denis Rattle	England
Israel Philharmonic	Zubin Mehta	India
NHK Symphony Orchestra (Japan)	Vladimir Ashkenazy	Russia
London Symphony Orchestra	Valery Gergiev	Russia
Montreal Symphony Orchestra	Kent Nagano	United States
Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (Netherlands)	Mariss Jansons	Latvia
St. Petersburg State Symphony Orchestra	Ravil E. Martynov	Russia
Sydney Symphony Orchestra (Australia)	Gianluigi Gelmetti	Italian

traveling as a guest conductor in the late 1990s. He since has performed with orchestras in such places as Australia, Romania, Italy, Russia and Portugal. He's already booked to conduct in Turkey later this year and in Poland and Germany in 2007. Appert only speaks English, but in this business, language isn't an issue. The inside joke, Appert says, is that there are only six words a conductor needs to know in any country: shorter, longer, faster, slower, softer, louder.

Yet he also says the trips invariably don't end up being about the money. He's yet to make more than \$2,000 on an international gig. There have been plenty of associated hassles, too. He's been mugged in Russia, surprised by his itinerary in Italy, which included all-day bus trips to remote towns across the countryside, and tricked by a Swedish shyster.

His first podium exchange was with a conductor in New Zealand, who came to Vancouver and conducted the Clark College Orchestra but then died suddenly a few months later, before Appert was able to schedule his return visit. Appert's second attempt at a podium exchange also backfired. After corresponding over the Internet, he invited a young Swedish conductor to Vancouver to lead the college orchestra. The man came, performed poorly, Appert says, so bad that Appert now is convinced that the man fabricated his background.

During the concert, the musicians became muddled and out of control, Appert

says, "I would have stopped the performance and started again." Afterward, when Appert tried to contact the young conductor about his return trip to Sweden, the man stopped returning Appert's messages and disappeared back into cyberspace. Undaunted, Appert kept trying to forge some kind of relationship that would work, finally finding a youth orchestra in Australia that offered to provide him housing and meals in exchange for his collaboration. Even with a college staff development grant, he and his wife, Linda Appert, a professional singer, who also performed on the trip, ended that excursion \$2,000 in the hole. But Don Appert gained an important conducting experience, an intriguing footnote for his résumé, which helped him enter the international conducting circle, beckoning with its potential for better pay and more artistically challenging situations.

Premiere conductors do receive exorbitant salaries, with some making nearly \$2 million per year. But that high end is a misleading anomaly. There are more millionaire performers on the bench of the Portland Trail Blazers than in front of American orchestras. Most of the conducting jobs aren't even full-time. But that doesn't make them any less alluring.

"It may seem simplistic," Appert says, "but the joy you get as a conductor, making music with other people, for other people, is one of the great joys of life. ... It's extremely exhilarating. It's a sense of power. It's

a little bit mystical."

Appert, who was trained at the prestigious New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, has a repertoire a dozen pages long and still hasn't been able to crack the finalists lists for conductor openings at small orchestras in such places as Missoula, Mont., Newport, Ore., and Olympia.

Travis Hatton, who also studied at the New England Conservatory, spent five years leading a professional orchestra in the Czech Republic before moving back to the United States to raise his family in Vancouver. Nearly a decade later, Hatton is combining five part-time jobs in this area (including conducting the one Vancouver Children's Opera production per year and giving pre-concert talks at Vancouver Symphony) to make a modest living.

Michael Kissinger, founder of the Bravo! Vancouver concert series as well as the Vancouver Wine and Jazz Festival, earned his doctorate at another top conservatory, the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. Kissinger sends out résumés a half-dozen times a year for conducting positions throughout the country that he thinks are reasonably attainable. At best, he acknowledges, he's been able to get a few follow-up calls, which is why he's focused so much on creating events here that give him the opportunity to conduct.

"Not enough jobs," Kissinger says. "There's just not enough work."

That's part of the reason

even small orchestras, such as Vancouver Symphony, can attract talent from afar.

"The world is open," the Spaniard Brotons says. "The world is competitive. (Symphonies) want to have the best person, not the closest person or the one with the most local ties."

This hyper-competitive state is why more than just the biggest national orchestras search the globe for talent. In this region alone, the Bellevue Philharmonic is led by Fusao Kajima of Japan. Eugene Symphony has Giancarlo Guerrero of Nicaragua, and the Spokane Symphony features Eckart Preu of Germany.

The Oregon Symphony — based in Portland and among the top 25 largest orchestras in the nation — is directed by Carlos Kalmar, who was reared in South America and educated at the Vienna Academy of Music in Austria. Besides the Oregon Symphony job, he also is the principal conductor of Chicago's Grant Park Music Festival. Yet even with the training and accomplishments he had as a youth, he says nothing has come easy to him in this profession.

"The same week I got my degree in 1984, I won a very important international competition for young conductors," Kalmar says. "I thought, everybody thinks, that when you win a big competition, OK, they are going to invite you to have chances that others don't have. ... Nothing happened. Absolutely zero."

Kalmar says he spent about a year after graduation unemployed or working odd jobs, coaching musicians and singers, before he finally was able to get a gig in a tiny German town "in the middle of nowhere." He was able to leverage that job into another and then another, until the late 1980s, when he had his break, being picked to lead the Hamburg Symphony. That led to the Stuttgart Philharmonic and Anhaltisches Theater in Dessau, Germany, which led to a post at Tonkünstlerorchester in Vienna, which finally led to Portland. It's a rise in the ranks emblematic of every conductor's dream. Kalmar still officially lives in Vienna, with his wife and two daughters. But he acknowledges that he travels nine months a year, including various guest conducting gigs. He's always searching for the next big break.

Kalmar says of the 14 conducting students that graduated in his class in Vienna, only one other musician still is in the business.

“When you start your career, you don’t know where you are going,” Kalmar says. “Later on, when you realize what your possibilities are,

you have to make a conscious decision. Do you want to have an international career, which includes being away from your family, being outside of the city where you want to live, traveling? Or just accept the fact that you are not going to be the big traveler and not have the big career. ... But your possibilities, artistically speaking, are limited to the place where you work.”

Appert acknowledges feeling those drawbacks of creativity — despite financial stability — after spending a few years at Clark College. He says the tours around the world have kept him stoked and looking for his muse.

“There are very different styles of performing in different parts of the world,” Appert says. “As part of that collaborative process, it’s exciting to see what (the musicians) will bring to the piece. ... The orchestra is the ultimate instrument. It also presents the ultimate challenge. Can I do this? (Taking) as many as 70 or 80 people and somehow not only keeping them together but making music.”

He adds, “But you have to persevere, if you want to do this. If you really want to do this. If you don’t really want to do this, with all of your heart and soul, then you better not.”