



by Jennifer Melick

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**What are today's conductors and solo artists wearing onstage? Everything from tuxes to mini-skirts. A survey of the scene, and what it all means.**

**B**ack in the day, Ivo Pogorelich created a ruckus when he wore leather pants and grew his hair long, and Nigel Kennedy came in for criticism with his punk hair and raggedy look. More recently, Yuja Wang has received a lot of media attention for her ultra-miniskirts, and what would a performance by violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter be without one of her strapless gowns? Yannick Nézet-Séguin recently stopped wearing a necktie while conducting, opting instead for an open collar, which prompted one journalist to question whether this was disrespectful. And at one 2014 Tanglewood concert by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, it was hard not to zoom in on Renée Fleming's spectacular, voluminous white shawl brushing the shoulders of violins and violas as she swished on and off the stage. Fleming quipped that like musicians carrying cellos and double basses on airplanes, she wouldn't mind an extra seat for the many gowns she likes to wear.

Opting here for white tie and tails is Thomas Wilkins (right), music director of the Omaha Symphony Orchestra, principal guest conductor of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra, and family and youth concerts conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.





"I can wear long skirts when I'm 40," pianist Yuja Wang said in a 2014 newspaper interview.

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Karina Canellakis (below), assistant conductor of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, is among conductors who have been known to wear ponytails in performance, perhaps signaling a less formal approach to appearance among young female conductors.



Masataka Sijmitisu



## Statements

Sybarite5's members aim to look as if they were going on a first date, looking nice but trying "not too hard to impress."

Brian David Braun

When it comes to orchestra concerts, the conductor and the soloist are the most visible figures in the concert hall. That's not to ignore the attire of an orchestra's critical core, the ensemble itself, another topic for another article. But—as the late Joan Rivers would have said—can we talk? In a time of rapid change for orchestras, just how conservative are they, and does increased openness to change extend to the area of concert attire? Are women held to a different standard than men? With conductors like Gemma New, Karina Canellakis, and Anu Tali on the U.S. orchestra scene, is the swinging ponytail set to become a new fashion for music directors? And why does Joshua Bell often leave his shirt untucked?

If these seem like silly or superficial questions, consider the findings of a 2013 study from University College London, which found that when asked to pick eventual winners of international music competitions, the study's more than 1,000 participants on average chose correctly 53 percent of the time when watching six-second videos of a performance, with no sound, but just 26 percent of the time when listening to audio of complete live performances. The effect was actually *more* pronounced among participants who were professionally trained musicians.

Most people would probably agree that, since what we see is intimately tied up with what we hear, the visual aspect of a classical concert is not a minor matter. And that includes clothing. "Attire is important," says bassist Louis Levitt, a member of the string ensemble Sybarite5—Levitt plus two violinists, a violist, and a cellist. "It's part of your presentation, and one of the many things that includes is what you're wearing. And that will change the audience's perception of what you're doing." Sybarite5 goes for a "casual yet polished" look, says the quintet's cellist, Laura Metcalf. "We felt like if we were going to do all the other things we do as a group—how we present ourselves onstage, talking to the audience and so forth—but then



Anne-Sophie Mutter often performs in strapless gowns.

Anja Fiers/Deutsche Grammophon

Violinist Joshua Bell in his role as music director of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. Bell likes seeing people dressed up at concerts but thinks casual concerts are a good idea, too—especially for attracting younger audiences.



Ian Douglas

wear gowns, it just wouldn't make any sense. We try to keep our look the same regardless of where we're performing. We're not going to be wearing ripped jeans in Carnegie Hall—we don't want to be disrespectful to a venue—but we want to maintain this image all the time and break down the boundaries between us and the audience, even in a very traditional, formal venue." A typical outfit for them is (for the men) jeans / button-down shirt / vest, and jeans / (often sleeveless) top for the women.

For soloists and conductors, and for a chamber ensemble like Sybarite5, attire is a way to make an artistic statement, to stand out from the crowd, and—let's be candid—provide something nice for the audience to look at. For this unscientific "state of the state of orchestra fashion," we spoke to several soloists and conductors who are highly visible on today's orchestra stages. A random sampling of their opinions on this subject: Tuxedos are archaic, uncomfortable, and should be abolished. The outfit you wear should adapt to reflect the style of music you are performing. Your attire should be con-

sistent from performance to performance, regardless of repertoire. You should perform wearing the same style of clothing as in publicity photos and posters promoting the concert. Your outfit should be physically, and psychologically, comfortable. Your clothes should never distract from the music. A performer should dress as if going out on a first date. Your outfit should help lower barriers between you and your audience.

In short, there is no one attitude, and views on concert attire are as numerous as the musicians who perform on today's concert stages.

### The Soloist: Quest for Comfort

For violinist Joshua Bell, comfort is key, whether it's performing as a soloist or in his role as music director of London's Academy of St Martin in the Fields. "The criteria I'm looking for when wearing something is, number one, comfort," though he jokes, "The most comfortable thing probably would be tattered jeans and a t-shirt, but of course I don't want to go out in that!" In the beginning of his career, he says, he wore "what everybody else wore—tails with white tie, which for a violinist is awful. The tie, right where the violin is supposed to go, just gets in the way. I abandoned wearing tails around 1996 or 1997. I wanted to find something more comfortable, so I dropped the tie, and then eventually I dropped the jacket. The last couple of years I've been trying something new. Instead of a tucked-out shirt, which I wore for many years, I've been wearing a tucked-in shirt with a vest. A vest kind of keeps it looking a little neater, and it has no sleeves, so it leaves me a lot of room to move. I prefer black shirts because white shirts can get grimy. Also, white on black can look a little bit like a waiter! A black shirt is more economical. I've been toying around with slight color changes, like underneath the vest, wearing a dark blue, so there's a tiny bit of contrast, a little bit of color. Leading the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, I wear the same thing as playing a solo concert. Your outfit affects how you play, and how you feel, so consistency is also really important. Every little thing you do, even how you feel in your shoes, can actually affect your technique as a player."

Bell is torn in his feelings about traditional concert attire. "There is something nice about seeing the orchestra dressed nicely and you really feel like you've escaped the

chaos of the outside world. Part of me enjoys that. There's a time and a place for that. But there's another part of me that thinks that may be scaring away some of the younger people who associate that with being stuffy, and stuffy is just a word I don't ever want to hear associated with classical music! So if it helps bring younger people for the orchestra and the soloists to be dressed a little more current, then I am all for that. Casual concerts are a great idea."

And, Bell adds, "Nobody should be talking about your clothes. I would get tired if every concert review mentioned my clothing. As an artist you want people to be talking about the music." Still, he says, "I get a lot of comments! Lately I've been getting a lot of nice comments about my new Louis Vuitton shoes. I've thought a lot about coming up with a comfortable sneaker that would look really dressy, but I haven't done that yet. The nice thing about being a man in today's society: basically we get our uniform

and we stick with it.

And nobody worries too much about it. It's so much harder for the women. They seem to be scrutinized."

**"There are no rules today. One can wear almost**

**anything—anything that fits,"** says Anu Tali, music director of the Sarasota Orchestra.

### Conductors: Changing Rules—and Roles

For Anu Tali, the Finnish-born music director of the Sarasota Orchestra, embracing her own style and trusting her own instincts are key to what she wears. "When the musical substance is there, one can wear most anything—anything that fits," says Tali. "For me it is more about how people carry it off. I wear a more conservative, formal outfit on stage, but that is me. There are no rules today. So, no need to get mad or irritated. The world is what it is today. The only way to change it is to act differently. Some people tolerate or enjoy attention more than others, but we all have one thing in common—we are onstage first to be heard and second to be seen. My advice to artists looking to push the boundaries on concert attire: trust your inner feeling of taste and comfort. Get over the prejudice and the fact that people will always talk. Everybody is different in shape and personality, so there is no one answer."

For Sarah Ioannides, music director of the Spartanburg Philharmonic in South Carolina and the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra in Washington, practical considerations come first. "I am a busy person. I am a mother of three children, and I have

Courtesy of Sarasota Orchestra





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two orchestras. I have limited time to shop, to decide what to wear, to get my clothes pressed, picked up from venue to venue.

“Sometimes I’m traveling with a ton of weight in scores. I choose lightweight clothing that breathes, and heavy suits tend not to be my favored things. I do vary what I wear, and it also goes along with the style of music. I tend to go for black, because the baton is more visible [against it]. I don’t want what I’m wearing to be distracting, and I do want it to be stylish. I try not to be too casual, because it’s not my personality anyway. But I do like to be comfortable, too. Those are the three things: style, comfort, and not being overly distracting.

“It’s an interesting topic. First of all, you’ve got an orchestra dressed in essentially late-18th- or early-19th-century costume. On the other hand, that’s a male costume: tailcoat. It’s not a woman’s costume, and you have a lot of women in orchestras. So that opens up a multitude of possibilities. These days we have such differing standards for what is okay to wear, in some people’s opinions, and not okay in others. There’s a mixing of modern thought versus antiquated thought on the subject and they are all coexisting and there’s a lot of vibrant discussion about it as a result of us not all being in the same place. Quite often I get told by people, ‘You should wear this.’ Or sometimes somebody says, ‘What she wore was feminine’ or ‘too feminine.’ Well, I’m sorry, I’m female. And I’m not going to wear a suit just because men wear suits. That’s fine for some women, and occasionally I will wear a suit, and that’s fine too.”

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, says that there are “almost as many variations to conductor attire these days as there are conductors,” noting that what he wears “reflects who I am: my age, my generation, my sense of style are always expressed.” Like Ioannides and Tali, he points out that what he wears shouldn’t detract from the music, and needs to be comfortable, but that “Different attire may better suit different concert experiences. Perhaps Saturday night is date night, and so



“There are almost as many variations to conductor attire these days as there are conductors,” says Yannick Nézet-Séguin, music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Here, he opts for an open collar.

tails and formalwear is very appropriate. But a midday Family Concert is more casual, and for a concert in the community we may want an even more informal look.

“Orchestras are wearing ‘uniforms’ that date back over 100 years, and in Philadelphia the musicians are open to exploring alternatives,” says Nézet-Séguin. “We all made a decision together for our PopUP concert last fall to wear brightly colored tops. The audience was delighted that they could pick out their favorite performers more easily. It was a big success, and we continue this practice now for certain concerts, including our Neighborhood Concerts and other community concerts.”

Ioannides also says she enjoys when the musicians change up their attire. “I like it when the orchestra has a sense of style as well. A few times I have experimented with the orchestra’s clothing, and it really seemed to change the atmosphere in the audience. In 2005 with the El Paso Symphony, we performed Jan Sandström’s *A Short Ride on a Motorbike* and *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* by John Adams. The orchestra were offered the option to wear, if they liked, motorbike gear when performing. And they totally got carried away. The concertmaster walked on with a white helmet, some wore bandannas, leather trousers—it just made it a whole unstuffy, relaxed atmosphere. On the flip side of that, I also see young audience members dress up. I was at the Seattle Symphony’s Sonic Evolution concert in June, when the

League Conference was happening, and it was amazing to see it absolutely packed with young people. They *were* dressed up! Young people wearing their best outfits, and they were happy to be there.”

### Perfecting the Group Image

Sybarite5—violinists Sami Merdinian and Sarah Whitney, violist Angela Pickett, cellist Laura Metcalf, and bassist Louis Levitt—might be best known at this point for their concerts featuring virtuosic arrangements of songs by Radiohead. But this alternative chamber ensemble is strongly connected to the orchestral world as well, much like the JACK Quartet and the ensembles eighth blackbird and ICE. Among Sybarite5’s upcoming performances is *Beatbox*, a commissioned concerto by Dan Visconti, with a world premiere in March 2015 by the South Carolina Philharmonic, followed by performances at orchestras including Michigan’s Midland Symphony and the Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra in Minnesota. Sybarite5’s members say it’s important to have a consistent look, and that the look is something they all take seriously.



Soprano Renée Fleming with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood, led by William Eddins, July 2014. Fleming jokes that she should buy an extra seat on the airplane to accommodate the gowns she likes to wear when appearing on concert and gala programs.

Henry Scott

## Dispeker Artists

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“On the stage, we make an effort to look more like we look in real life. We decided we would wear what we’d wear if we were going out,” says Angela Pickett. “It’s important for people to relate to what’s onstage, that they feel like it’s not outdated,” says Sami Merdinian. “One of the things I always think about is what I would wear on a first date. You’re dressing to impress, but not trying hard to impress,” says Louis Levitt. “Before the group started wearing less traditional concert attire, I don’t think I realized how important it was,” says Sarah Whitney. “People kind of listen with their eyes sometimes. It can be intimidating for a new audience to go to a concert where everyone is onstage in tuxedos, especially for a younger crowd that may not be used to that very formal kind of event. A less formal look makes it more accessible.”

With five members, Sybarite5’s discus-

sions about what to wear can get heated. “Oh, yeah, there’s conflict,” jokes Levitt. “We can talk about shoes for a half hour! We have gotten into fights—not fistfights, but intense discussions over footwear have been had.” Says Merdinian, “I can say that I went shopping with Sarah and Angela in L.A. on one of our tours to get the shoes that I usually wear. Because I have to get their approval.”

On the subject of the traditional tuxedo, Sybarite5’s opinions are united. Says Merdinian, “Everyone says you should love your work, be happy. If you have to dress in a tuxedo and tails four nights a week, it’s getting in the way of being comfortable at work.” Levitt adds, “As a double bassist if I have to perform in a tuxedo, it’s two sizes too big, so I can go around my instrument. I believe the reason why people wear tails is because at some point in time that was the highest expression of the most formal wear, and that was showing the most respect. That was maybe 100 years ago, and things have changed. Maybe the Oscars, or the Grammys, what are people wearing on the red carpet—that’s maybe a more accurate expression of what is formal now. Nowadays, unless you’re selling yourself as a period ensemble, or if you’re in a production of *Rigoletto*, I just don’t understand why an orchestra wears tails. What is interesting and what I think is very healthy is to have the discussion about it.”

Sybarite5 seriously considers feedback about how they look, and in some cases it has changed their approach. “We’ve gotten positive feedback, we’ve gotten negative feedback,” says Levitt. “I’ve had people say, ‘Why is one person wearing spaghetti straps and one person wearing pink?’ I’m a guy—I don’t think I even know the difference.” Pickett says, “That comment made us really aware that we maybe weren’t all dressed for the same event, and that’s something we should try to have as a rule.”

For Levitt, “It’s very strange if I see someone’s bio picture—say they’re a soloist—and they’re very casual, and they show up and they play with an orchestra, and they’re wearing something that doesn’t fit their picture. For people not familiar with classical music, they think, ‘It’s not what I thought I was getting into.’” Metcalf says, “We want to be recognizable. In this field there is so much competition, so we want to do everything we can to make ourselves recognizable across the board, and if presenting ourselves in this way helps us to do that, then it’s just one more way we can advance ourselves.”

In the end, it’s not always possible to please every audience member. Says Levitt, “My grandmother always said, everything we do is great, except, could we just dress a little bit nicer?” **S**

JENNIFER MELICK is managing editor of *Symphony*.



**Gustavo Dudamel, music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, in classic summer attire.**