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Roads Not Taken: 11 Conductors Tell Us What Else They Might Have Been



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There's something magical about watching a conductor at work — how they internalize the work before them in all its component parts, in turn uniting the ensemble and bringing the music to life. It seems an almost superhuman effort. But conductors are human too, and like the rest of us, sometimes they think about what else they might have done instead of walking onto a podium with their baton.

We asked eleven of them what other career paths they might have taken. Here's what they had to say.

Leon Botstein: American Symphony Orchestra



Conductor Leon Botstein

[\(Steve Pyke\)](#)

I would choose to be a watchmaker, a restorer of rare and complex timepieces from before the computer age. Complex and beautiful timepieces reflect a synthesis of art and science, and therefore beauty and utility. They celebrate the work of both the human imagination and the human hand much the way music does. The design and measurement of time in a great timepiece, like the experience of music, remind us of the sanctity and gift of each individual, from composer and performer to listener.

James Conlon: LA Opera, RAI National Symphony Orchestra



Conductor James Conlon

(Dan Steinberg/LA Opera)

I decided I wanted to conduct when I was 13 years old and I never seriously considered any other profession. Had I considered another path, I probably would have been a writer. But the good thing is, in recent years, I have learned that I can actually do both!

Jeri Lynne Johnson: Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra (Philadelphia)



Conductor Jeri Lynne Johnson

[\(Vanessa Briceno Photography\)](#)

There are only three truly universal things: music, religion and mathematics. After (very briefly) considering a math major in my freshman year of college, I ended up double majoring in music and religion. So if I were not a musician, I would probably be a professor of religion at a university explaining the iconography of Buddhist thangkas or translating and interpreting some Vedic scripture.

JoAnn Falletta: Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, Virginia Symphony Orchestra



Buffalo Philharmonic Music Director JoAnn Falletta.

(Cheryl Gorski)

It is hard for me to imagine not being a musician (since I have thought of myself in that way since I was seven years old), but if that door to an enchanted life had not opened for me then, I would have dedicated myself to writing. I am in love with words, with their rhythm, sound and color, with their weight and possibility and complexity. Music for me became the *ultimate* language, because of its limitless freedom and prismatic ambiguity, and I believe that my fascination with words and foreign languages has helped me in my understanding of the architecture of the world of music.

Thierry Fischer: Utah Symphony



Conductor Thierry Fischer

(Marco Borggreve)
Explorer.

Jane Glover: Royal Academy of Music, Music of the Baroque



Conductor Jane Glover

(Lancome Teintdole)

When I was seven I wanted to be a policewoman, and by the time I was 13 I wanted to be an actress. I would have been completely dreadful at both. I truly wish I had taken up

a stringed instrument in my youth (I was an oboist), possibly the viola, for all those wonderful internal lines and textures. But I think if I hadn't become a conductor I would probably be doing more teaching and writing, which I do, but always in conjunction with conducting (which means often that deadlines are missed — my new book, *Handel in London*, has taken me 10 years!).

Sarah Ioannides: Tacoma Symphony Orchestra



Conductor Sarah Ioannides

[\(Tom Concordia\)](#)

I envision myself a neuroscientist, studying the effect of classical music on brain development; how we are changed as performers, students, listeners and ultimately as members of a civil society. I believe we would show its value to humanity and society, an essential component of education, as important as Math, English and the Sciences; even its role in peace-making, and the optimal wiring of our minds. Invigorated by my work as a neuroscientist, and inspired by nature and the animal world, I would spend the weekends as an environmental scientist / conservationist who is also a pilot, free like a bird to explore the beauty of our planet.

Bernard Labadie: Orchestra of St. Luke's



Conductor Bernard Labadie

[\(Dario Acosta\)](#)

Although I'm not an especially gifted polyglot, languages have always fascinated me, and I could very well have ended up dwelling in that world. But I would eventually have given it up to pursue the other great passion of mine after music: wine. The geography, the history, the people, the places, the techniques ... It's an endless universe that has always captivated me. The easiest and best way to travel the world is in a glass!

Susanna Mälkki: Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra



Susanna Mälkki led the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the Ravinia Festival in July

[\(Patrick Gipson\)](#)

I would love to do something combining working for everyone's birthright to green spaces and assuring good conditions, good schools and play time (including music lessons) for children. An environmentalist-educator?

Francisco Núñez: Young People's Chorus of New York City



Francisco Núñez, founder of the Young People's Chorus of New York City

(Stephanie Berger)

I always thought I would be an electrical engineer because I always loved math and science. But I also loved playing piano, so I knew music would always be a part of my life. But now, after 30 years of working with children, I realize that it was not what I wanted to do, but who I wanted to impact. It doesn't really matter what I do, as long as I am able to effect change in young people and offer them a sense of hope. I always say that I would be doing this same thing if I were a soccer coach — looking for excellence, working with different groups of young people and offering them all they need to succeed. But I would never give up playing the piano, and I still pick up *Popular Science* magazine to catch up on the latest electrical innovations.

Xian Zhang: New Jersey Symphony Orchestra



Xian Zhang with the NJSO in April 2016.

(Fred Stucker)

I would still be a pianist, as I was prior to my switch to conducting, or I would be an architect or a literature translator. I love languages.