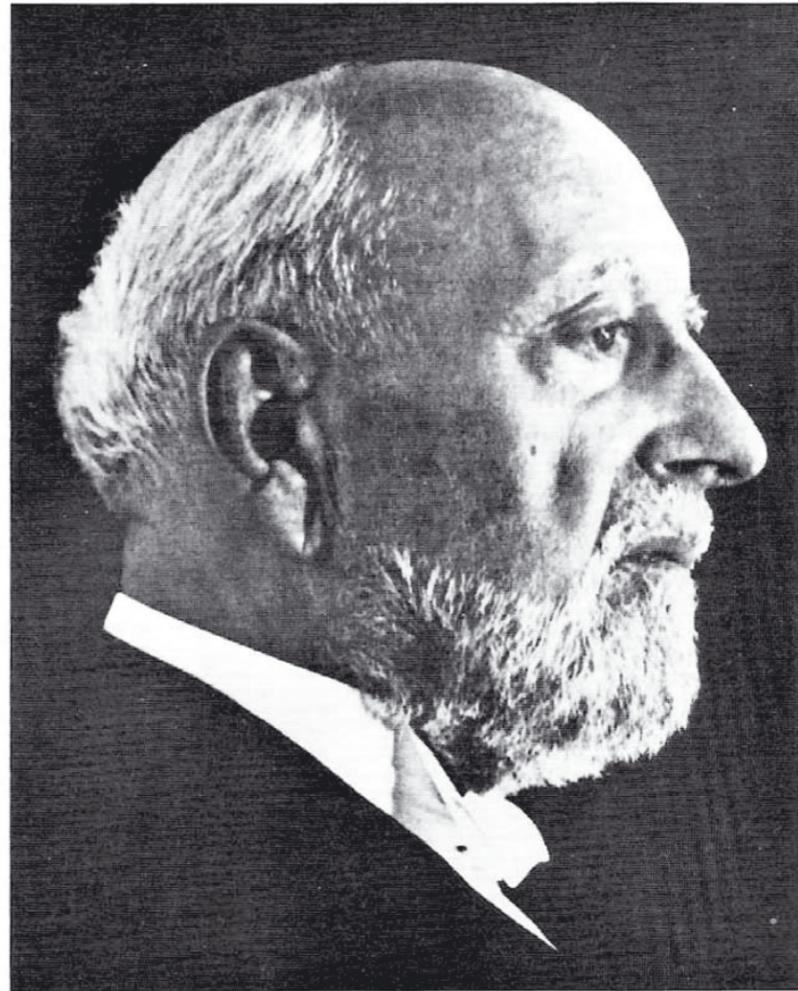


Fortune favours the bold.

SUISSE



Ernest Ansermet

Beginner's luck can start off a career. But in the long run, fortune favours the bold: The story of Ernest Ansermet and the OSR.

When your editor asked me to write about the OSR, I couldn't help but ask back „you mean about Ansermet?“ I didn't try to be smart or funny. It's just that the stories of the OSR and Ansermet are closely linked. Very closely even—which is hardly surprising as Ansermet was not only the founder, but also the orchestra's principal conductor for half a century. (A smart-aleck answer would have been to ask your editor which OSR I was to write about — the Orchestre Symphonique Romand or the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. But I chose not to nit-pick. After all, Ernest Ansermet founded both of these OSRs. First the Romand, then the Romande.)

Neither did I ask the really interesting questions. Because they surfaced only later. For instance:



How does a young math teacher and musical autodidact get to conduct the world premieres of Stravinsky's Pulcinella and L'histoire du Soldat, Prokofiev's Buffoon, Falla's Three Corned Hat and many others of the period's most important ballets? How is it possible that a provincial orchestra from Switzerland becomes one of the world's most famous despite being „second-rate in tone and technique“ (James Reel)? **And right on topic for this magazine: Why are some of the most highly praised and best sounding LPs of all times performances of Ansermet and the OSR recorded by Decca in Geneva's Victoria Hall? Intriguing, to say the least...**

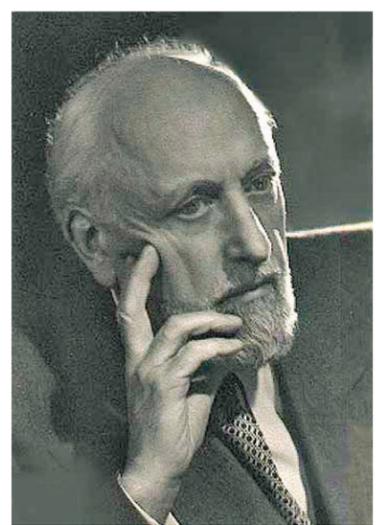
Reverie and contemplation

Ernest Ansermet was born on November 11, 1883 in Vevey, Switzerland—a small town on the shores of Lake Geneva and now known as Néstlé's home turf. His father was a geometer, his mother a teacher. She also played the piano and gave little Ernest his first piano lessons. Ansermet remembers: „Music has been my first vocation. My mother's piano playing and my father's singing helped me find an easy access to music already in my childhood—and the access was

further assisted by my natural inclination to reverie and contemplation, which are the sources of music.“

Despite growing up in a musical family, he studies mathematics and physics at the university of Lausanne. Barely 20 years old, Ansermet finishes his scholastics with a diploma and starts to teach math. In 1905 he moves to Paris with the intent to do his doctorate at the Sorbonne. In hindsight it must be considered great luck that he discovers and explores Paris' thriving musical life instead of pushing his PhD. He meets a lot of interesting people, among them a fellow by the name of Francisco de Lacerda, whom we'll meet again soon. He enjoys Paris for one year and returns to Vevey without academic merits. He marries Marguerite Jacottet and resumes his job as math teacher in Lausanne. But his soul was lost – or sold? –, and in 1909 he decides to fully devote himself to music. He travels to Germany and studies some of the greatest Kapellmeister of his time — Richard Strauss, Arthur Nikisch and Felix Mottl — rehearsing with their orchestras. Watching other conductors at work was more or less his only education as a conductor, he was pretty much an autodidact who taught himself the art of the baton.





Beginner's luck

Back home he studies Cari Ehrenberg's rehearsals with the Orchèstre Symphonique de Lausanne — and it is with this orchestra that he will give his debut on March 15, 1911, conducting works by Beethoven, Debussy, Bach and Jacques-Dalcroze. He is 26 years old and the critics are very encouraging. Later in the same year, the conductor of the Orchèstre du Kursaal de Montreux falls ill. His name is Lacerda — remember Paris? Ansermet substitutes for three concerts and receives rave reviews. When Lacerda resigns in 1912, Ansermet is appointed as his successor. **In the same year and by coincidence he meets a young Russian composer backstage after one of his concerts. His name is Igor Stravinsky, and their meeting will not only be the beginning of a lasting friendship but probably also the single most important moment for Ansermet's career.**

Two years later in 1914 a devastating war begins that will envelope nearly all of Europe. And even though Switzerland is spared, WWI nevertheless triggers three incidents that will have a major impact on our young conductor's future. Number one: the Montreux Kursaal Orchestra is disbanded and Ansermet is without a job. Number two: the French army drafts Pierre Monteux and sends him to the

Marne battle. Number three: The Swiss Army declares Ansermet unfit for service.

Ansermet can't live without conducting and forms his first OSR (Orchèstre Symphonique Romand). Against all odds and despite massive problems — it was probably not the best of all times for new orchestras... — the OSR plays 12 concerts in 1914. But Ansermet has to teach math again to survive. But not for long: On Christmas day 1914, Bernhard Stavenhagen dies, the conductor of the Société des concerts abonnement de Genève (subscription concerts). Ansermet is asked to substitute for one concert scheduled less than a month later. He accepts and again receives rave reviews. And like in Montreux, Ansermet is offered the job for which he substituted. Ansermet, the super sub? First he profits from Lacerda's illness, then from Stavenhagen's death... But he declines the offer. An act of reverence? Hardly — he quite simply had a much better offer.

Stravinsky's recommendation

Remember Pierre Monteux, number 2 of the three WWI incidences? Before being sent to the trenches, we was the conductor of Serge Daghilev's famous Ballets Russes, who now needs a new conductor for his company's upcoming tours. Daghilev asks his compatriot Stra-

vinsky for advice — and Stravinsky recommends his friend Ansermet, who was available because of WWI incident number 3. Ansermet toured all over the world with the highly regarded ballet; the Ballets Russes US-tour in 1916 was a tour de force with no less than 105 performances in as many days. Touring South America, Ansermet was offered the task of forming Argentina's national orchestra literally from scratch. He couldn't resist, the challenge was too tempting...

On his travels with the Ballets Russes Ansermet got to know the world, and the world got to know him. He became familiar with the music of the contemporary Russian composers and premiered many of their works. Performing in Paris, he befriended Debussy and Ravel and consulted with them on how to perform their music.

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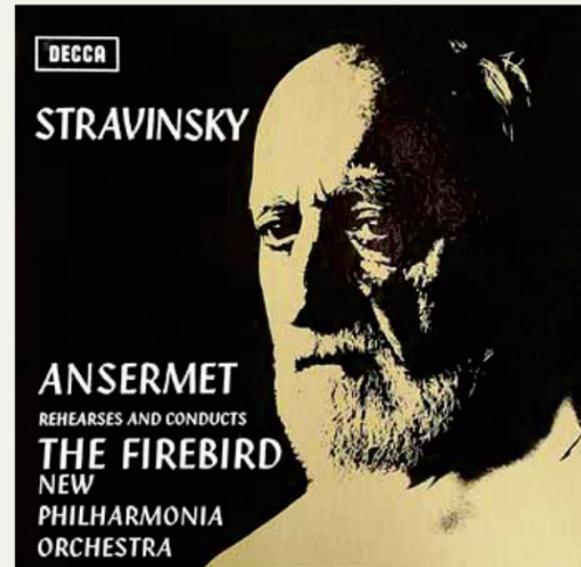
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A man on a mission

He could have committed himself permanently to Daghilev's company. But Ansermet wanted more than just to tour the world with the Ballets Russes. He was a man on a mission, his vision was to establish a strong musical tradition in the Suisse Romande (the French-speaking part of Switzerland, approx. 30% of the population). He wanted to have his OSR again. „You must be mad to return to Geneva and start your own orchestra! Be warned that cities with a population of less than 500 000 are too small to keep a high class orchestra alive!“, he was told by Coope, an experienced Russian conductor. But Ansermet had done his math and replied that the Suisse Romande was more than the equivalent of a city with half a million inhabitants. He was, in his own words, „decided to devote my musical work to his country“. His strategy—one orchestra for the whole region—was very bold. Not only had Lausanne and Geneva their own orchestras, there was also a long-standing and deep rivalry and animosity between the two big cities of the Romandie.

But Ansermet managed to convince several sponsors of his concept. With their financial support, he started recruiting the musicians for his orchestra: strings from Italy, woodwinds from Paris and horns from Vienna were supplemented by selected musicians of the existing Geneva ensemble.

WW1 was barely over when on November 30, 1918 Ansermet and his 62 musicians debuted as the Orchestre de la Suisse Roman-



de in Geneva's Victoria Hall. The program of the first half consisted of works from Händel, Mozart, Brenner and Jaques-Dalcroze. The second half was devoted to Rimsky-Korsakov's Sheherazade (which Ansermet also performed on the OSR's golden jubilee concert 50 years later). The following concerts were a musical tribute to Debussy who had recently died.

Praise for precision

Right from the start Ansermet and the OSR performed a lot of modern French and Russian music, thus establishing themselves as outstanding interpreters of contemporary music. Very soon the OSR started touring and they became famous for „accurate performances of difficult modern music“ (Wikipedia). Other sources attest Ansermet to be „a scholarly and progressive musician capable of fine interpretations of both classical and modern works“ (Nicholas Slonimsky). James Reel writes: „Although the OSR (...) could be criticised for its wiry strings and sour woodwinds, the group delivered to Ansermet highly accurate perfor-



mances notable for their clear textures and delicate timbral balances“—performances „that cut right to the heart of the music“.

A Swiss conductor—and former math teacher! — being praised for qualities like accuracy and precision? Talk about clichés! But Ansermet achieved these attributes under circumstances that were nothing short of amazing; and despite Geneva being the city of Rolex and Patek Philippe, Ansermet's days must have had much more than 24 hours. Or is there another explanation for how he successfully performed the tasks of three demanding fulltime jobs at the same time?

Job number one was being the musical and administrative director of his OSR. As if this wasn't responsibility enough, he filled the same positions also for job number two, Argentina's national orchestra. Job number three was his work with the Ballets Russes — at least until he quit in 1923. Ten years, from 1918 to 1928, he spent the winters in Geneva performing with the OSR and the summers in Buenos Aires with the Argentine National Orchestra. His reputation grew and grew and he received invitations or offers from all the world's big orchestras. But he was faithful to his OSR and declined most of them. Initially at least.



The stubborn diplomat

Ansermet has been described as ardent and vehemently arguing his opinions. But he was also a highly intelligent person with impressive marketing and diplomatic talents. When the rivalry between the cities and cantons of the Romandie began to threaten his OSR, he conceived a plan that was just plain brilliant: He formed chapters of the Association des Amis de l'OSR in Lausanne and Geneva, the two cities that enjoyed most of the OSR's live performances. He then invited the public and businesses to join the association and contribute financial support to the OSR. **Ansermet also realised very early how important radio would become to make his OSR known, and convinced the RSR (Radio de la Suisse Romande) to enter in a partnership with the OSR. It was thanks to these clever moves that OSR started to live up to his name and actually became the orchestra of the Suisse Romande. Mission accomplished!**

Another episode shows Ansermet's marketing talents: In 1937 he starts to think about ways to provide his musicians with work in the summer months during which he is not able to employ them for the OSR. He comes up with a very clever idea — a summer music

festival. Butwhere? Lucerne comes to his mind; the city that he considers Montreux's equivalent in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. He presented his concept to the mayor, who realised the potential and supported the idea. Bingo: the Lucerne Festival was born (initially called Internationale Musikfestwochen). The festival's first ever concert in July 1938 was performed by Ansermet conducting an orchestra with a considerable number of musicians from the OSR. (It certainly helped the festival's meteoric rise that Arturo Toscanini accepted the invitation and left his exile in the US just to perform in Lucerne. The second festival in 1939 took place in an extremely tense political situation. Ansermet and Toscanini participated again; this time Toscanini opened the festival. His concert was broadcast by more than 80 radio stations in Europe and America. Lucerne also attracted artists that for various reasons could or would no longer play at the Nazi's festivals in Salzburg and Bayreuth — among them Bruno Walter and Vittorio de Sabata.

Getting famous by making famous recordings

If it were only for his concerts and for founding the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, Ansermet would most like-





ly be forgotten by now, 38 years after his death. But he made himself immortal with his recordings. And while Ansermet's and the OSR's reputation is mostly — and justly — based on the many superb recordings for Decca in the 1950s and 1960s, these are just a small fraction of his oeuvre!

He made his first recordings in New York when he toured the US with the Ballets Russes in 1916. It shouldn't be surprising that one of the works he recorded was Rimsky-Korsakoff's *Sheherazade*... These in every aspect historical recordings were later transferred from Shellac to CD and reissued on the Lys label.

His last recording was made in 1968 when he was 85 years old: Ansermet and the New Philharmonia Orchestra performing Stravinsky's *Firebird*. His last record is also one of his best—and in any respect one of the ultimate interpretations of Stravinsky's *Firebird*.

The quantity and the quality of recordings he has made in the 52 years between 1916 and 1968 merits the hyperbole „gigantic“: Decca alone issued 314 performances by Ansermet. But he has also recorded hundreds of records for other labels and with other orchestras. Some of his records are unanimously reckoned to be among the best recordings of music ever made, in terms of interpretation as well as in terms of the sound quality. And some of his records are milestones in the history of recorded music—such as

Europe's first commercial stereophonic recordings that were made by Decca in May 1954 featuring Ansermet and the OSR performing Tchaikovsky's complete *Nutcracker*. One secret behind the OSR's legendary sound on Decca recordings begs to be revealed: the wonderful acoustics of Victoria Hall in Geneva. The hall sounds so outstandingly good that Decca went all the way and constructed a permanent recording studio into the venerable building. It's also not surprising that all Decca recordings with the OSR were made in the OSR's home. Talking about legendary: this goes also for the partnership between the OSR and Decca. It started back in the 1940s and is still going strong!

However, the co-operation between the OSR and the Radio de la Suisse Romande dates back even longer than the one with Decca. And most likely was also more important for the orchestra's success. And this for quite obvious reasons: because more people had radios than record players, and because records were expensive whereas listening to a radio broadcast was free. The „mercredis symphoniques“ broadcasted by the RSR added considerably to the OSR's fame and reputation all over the world. By the way: Often enough these RSR broadcasts were live rehearsals for Decca's next recording with the OSR...

All in all no less than 672 concerts of Ansermet conducting the OSR were broadcasted by the RSR. Just in case you wonder where the exact number comes from: the RSR archived every single broadcast on tape. And it still has

all the 672 tapes in the vaults. The – now defunct — Société Ernest Ansermet issued a selection of these recordings on eight LPs and restricted the sale of these to members only. These records by now are extremely rare and expensive collector's items. And what, if not these astronomical sums, could tempt the RSR to delve into its vaults and put those tapes to better use than just let them rot and collect dust? What about broadcasting them again? Or put them on a server for public download? There's still hope... (Especially because the RSR is still a partner of the OSR and continues to broadcast from Victoria Hall!)

Committed to the truth.

It is obvious that Ansermet had a lot of luck in the early stages of his career. He was at the right places at the right time, and he knew the right people. Meeting Stravinsky may have been a lucky coincidence – but it was no coincidence that Stravinsky recommended him to Daghi-lev. („Nobody plays my music better than Ansermet. Not even I myself“, Stravinsky once said.) And his success with the Ballets Russes has nothing to do with luck—but very much with talent, devotion and determination.

Ansermet's reputation as an outstanding conductor for contemporary composers is justified. His recordings of Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel, Britten,

Honegger, Martin and similar composers are sui generis. They still and unanimously count as the reference that all conductors should use to measure up their recordings of these artists. The perennial quality should not come as a surprise – after all, Ansermet had personal contact with all of these composers and was friends with many. And he talked at length with each of them about their music to determine how it is to be interpreted.

But surprisingly, it's not his recordings of the contemporary composers that make Ansermet so outstanding, timeless and unique. Quite the contrary — his interpretations of the classic German composers like Bach, Beethoven, Brahms or Haydn are the reason why he was truly one of the greatest conductors of the 20th century.

Ansermet played their music bare of all the subjective romantic passion that was so predominant those days. Unable to consult with the (long dead) composers, he based his interpretations on the scores alone and treated them with the utmost respect. He analysed the scores meticulously and with great precision until he found what he called „the music's authentic emotion“. This approach made his 1960s recordings of the great classic German composers sound unusual, different and definitely not at all „Germanic“.

Ironically his recordings were criticised for being cold and not poetic in France and other Latin countries—whereas in all English and German speaking countries, they received high praise for their warmth, balance, precision and beauty of style... The public's and critic's lack of understanding towards his approach to the classics made him suffer.

But the growing appreciation the vivacity of his interpretations has received in recent years proves that Ansermet wasn't wrong. He was just ahead of his time. He died at age 85 on February 20, 1969 in Geneva.

The legacy lives on.

The Orchestre de la Suisse Romande still enjoys an excellent reputation, still tours internationally and still premieres works of contemporary composers. It still gives subscription concerts in Geneva and Lausanne and plays for opera performances at the Grand Théâtre de Geneva. The current musical director is Marek Janowski from Germany who was appointed in 2005. The Orchestra's website (www.osr.ch) offers a searchable database with information on cast and programs of all the OSR's concerts since the beginning in 1918. A complete and searchable discography of Ernest Ansermet and a list of his most recommended records can be found on www.scona.ch ■

