Leif Segerstam’s Pedagogical Legacy

ABSTRACT

Leif Segerstam served as the professor of conducting at the Sibelius Academy from 1997 to 2013. Renowned for his virtuosity with the baton, Segerstam shaped the education of over 50 Finnish and international conducting students during his tenure. This article delves into Segerstam's pedagogical legacy, exploring his artistic background and outlining his technical and pedagogical principles through interviews and the author's experiences as a student at the Sibelius Academy. It concludes with an analysis of the impact of Segerstam's teaching on his students' careers.

Purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the success of formal conducting education in Finland, offering an overview of Leif Segerstam’s term as the professor of conducting at the Sibelius Academy. The Sibelius Academy’s conducting class, renowned for producing distinguished alumni such as Esa-Pekka Salonen, Jukka-Pekka Saraste, Osmo Vänskä, Susanna Mälkki and Mikko

Franck, has maintained an exclusive reputation, typically admitting one to three students annually from a pool of 40–50 applicants.[1]

Focusing on the period from 1997 to 2013, corresponding with Segerstam's leadership, this study provides an insider's perspective based on the author's master's studies during this timeframe.

Leif Segerstam commenced his professorship in August 1997, and concluded it in July 2013, encompassing sixteen full study years. As Segerstam inherited the conducting class from his predecessor Eri Klas and subsequently passed on his students to the next professor, determining who qualifies as a Segerstam student becomes crucial. Despite the Sibelius Academy adopting the Bologna process in 2005 which standardized the study durations for bachelor's and master's degrees, the institution has traditionally been very lenient regarding study timelines, allowing individuals to remain in the class for extended periods of time, sometimes up to 7–8 years.[2] For the purposes of this study, Segerstam's students are defined as those who initiated their formal conducting studies in the Sibelius Academy conducting class between 1996 and 2011 (inclusive). It is noteworthy that the graduation percentages have varied through the years, with instances of very prominent Finnish conductors choosing not to graduate, but instead dropping out the moment their careers took off.[3]

Finnish conducting school

[1] There are also informal ways to become a conductor in Finland, through private studies or creating an alternative route to the podium. Good examples of this are the chief conductor designate of Concertgebouw Orchestra, Klaus Mäkelä, who never formally studied conducting in any institution, and the current Artistic Director of the Savonlinna Opera Festival, Ville Matvejeff, who studied piano at the Sibelius Academy, but is completely self-taught as a conductor.
[2] This is made possible by the fact that all higher education in Finland has traditionally been free of charge. Today a modest tuition fee is required from students coming from outside the EU.
[3] The laissez-faire attitude of the school when it comes to finishing one's studies is quite fittingly illustrated by the fact that recently the Arts University even gave the "Alumna of the year" nomination to a conductor who never finished their studies at the Sibelius Academy.

The term “Finnish conducting school” evokes images of iconic Finnish conductors, such as the famous Sibelius interpreter Paavo Berglung (1929–2012), the inaugural Karajan competition winner Okko Kamu (b. 1946), and the longstanding Music Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Esa-Pekka Salonen (b. 1958). Finland boasts a remarkable representation in the realm of conducting, with perhaps only Estonia, its southern neighbor, rivaling its number of internationally acclaimed orchestra conductors per capita.

The roots of the Finnish conducting tradition trace back to 1882 when Robert Kajanus (1856–1933) founded the orchestra of the Helsinki Philharmonic Society. In those days a special education for orchestra conductors did not yet exist anywhere in the world, so most conductors were composers by their way of education. The next prominent Finnish conductor, Georg Schnéevoigt (1872–1947), rose through the ranks of Kajanus’ orchestra as a cellist until he started his own rival orchestra, the Helsinki Symphony Orchestra, in 1912. Schnéevoigt, celebrated as a baton virtuoso, embodied a marked contrast to the more reserved conducting style of Kajanus. This duality has characterized the Finnish conducting scene ever since, evident in the contrasting approaches of the “Apollonian” Paavo Berglund and the “Dionysian” Leif Segerstam.

Against the backdrop of this rich Finnish conducting tradition, the Sibelius Academy established its conducting class in 1943, marking a pivotal moment in the country's musical education landscape and laying the foundation for the training of future generations of conductors.

The Sibelius Academy conducting class

Established in 1943, the Sibelius Academy conducting class has evolved under the guidance of distinguished instructors, shaping the future of Finnish conductors. Jussi Jalas (1908–1985) served

as its inaugural teacher, succeeded by Leo Funtek (1885–1965), who introduced a small rehearsal ensemble, a practice still observed in Finland today. The class's stature was elevated in 1973 with the appointment of Jorma Panula (b. 1930) as a full professor.

Inspired by the orchestral resources available to conducting students in prominent Russian conservatories, Panula envisioned a similar opportunity at the Sibelius Academy. This vision materialized in the creation of the “Kapubandi” or conductor's orchestra in the 1980s. Comprising approximately 25 players, this chamber orchestra dedicates six hours weekly to the class, providing invaluable practical experience (Dollman 2016, 71).

Another important feature of Panula’s teaching was his use of video analysis as a pedagogical tool. Dollman states: “Panula began using video as soon as the technology became available in the 1970s, despite the challenges that the early forms of the technology presented, and this has remained fundamental to the teaching process in Helsinki ever since.” (ibid.)

The technical diversity among Finnish conductors can be attributed to the absence of a singular conducting tradition at the Sibelius Academy. Best described as “east meets west,” the technical instruction at the academy reflects a blend of influences. Panula drew inspiration from figures like Dean Dixon (1915–1976) and Franco Ferrara (1911–1985), while Leif Segerstam, who succeeded Panula, studied under the French conductor Jean Morel (1903–1975).

Panula further enriched the curriculum by inviting esteemed guest teachers such as Arvid Jansons (1914–1984), Ádám Fischer (b. 1949), and Ilya Musin (1904–1999) to complement his own instruction. In the interlude between Panula and Segerstam, the professorship briefly belonged to the St. Petersburg-trained Estonian conductor Eri Klas (1939–2016). This diverse array of

influences enabled each conducting student to construct a unique set of technical tools, aligning with their individual understanding, personality, and artistic preferences.

Figure 1. Leif Segerstam. Photo by Pekka Elomaa, Archive of the Arts University Helsinki

Who is Leif Segerstam?

Leif Segerstam, born in 1944, emerged as a musical prodigy, studying officially at the Sibelius Academy for just one year, 1962–63. However, his connection with the academy predates this period, as he had spent ten years studying violin and piano at its youth department (Lindgren 2005, 53). Jussi Jalas, son-in-law of Jean Sibelius, served as Segerstam's conducting teacher at the Sibelius Academy (ibid. 59). Before joining Jalas' class Segerstam participated in Herbert

Blomsted's masterclass in Norrköping together with two other Finnish musicians, Onni Kelo and Tauno Marttinen (ibid. 64).[4] This course was a pivotal experience for Segerstam, and he recollects that Blomstedt wanted the conductors to use their hands just as an instrumentalist uses their instrument (ibid. 65). Segerstam made his professional conducting debut in Tampere at the age of 19, directing Rossini's *Barber of Seville* (ibid. 84).

Segerstam spent the years 1963–65 in New York studying at the Juilliard School of Music. There his professor was the French conductor Jean Morel (1903–1975) and his fellow students were the American conductors James Levine (1943–2021) and Leonard Slatkin (b. 1944). Morel advocated for a minimalistic conducting style, emphasizing clarity and informativeness in the conductor's gestures (Lindgren 2005, 95). Specializing in opera and ballet, Morel believed that conducting education should commence with opera before progressing to the symphonic repertoire (ibid.). Additionally, Segerstam attended music courses in Aspen in 1963 and 1964, where he received guidance from conductors Jorge Mester (b. 1935) and Walter Süsskind (1913–1980) (ibid. 105).[5]

Returning to Finland, Segerstam's career soared. He secured positions at the Finnish National Opera, the Royal Swedish Opera, the Finnish Radio Orchestra, the ORF in Vienna, and later in the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra. Simultaneously, he engaged in an extensive schedule of guest conducting with major orchestras and opera houses worldwide. His final chief conductor role was with the Turku Philharmonic from 2012 to 2019, and he continues to guest conduct in Finland and abroad. Beyond his prowess as a conductor, Segerstam is a prolific composer, boasting an impressive portfolio of around 350 symphonies, most of them crafted in his distinctive "freely pulsating" style (Music Finland 2023).

[4] Onni Kelo (1930–2015) was the first Finnish conductor to receive his training in St. Petersburg under the legendary Ilya Musin (Mäkilä 2022). Tauno Marttinen (1912–2008) was a Finnish composer known for his use of the 12-tone technique.
[5] Incidentally, both Herbert Blomstedt and Jorge Mester studied with Jean Morel in Juilliard in the 1950s.

Leif Segerstam's tenure at the Sibelius Academy

Leif Segerstam assumed the role of the professor for the Sibelius Academy's conducting class in 1997 and his tenure spanned until 2013, aligning with the Finnish legal retirement age of 68 for government workers. He taught over 50 students during his tenure.

Segerstam, in his own estimation, actively engaged with his students for approximately half of each semester, sharing teaching responsibilities with his assistant and visiting instructors (Lindgren 2005, 402). The teaching format included two orchestra rehearsals held on Fridays and Saturdays. During these sessions, students received about 15 minutes of podium time with the orchestra each day, followed by video feedback (ibid.).

One peculiar method of teaching Segerstam used was gathering around a table with his students so that everyone would sing a line from the score while Segerstam was conducting (Lindgren 2005, 406). Furthermore, he organised masterclasses for his students, leveraging his connections to orchestras he guest conducted. When he was appointed the chief conductor of the Turku Philharmonic Orchestra, he invited a string of his current and former students to guest conduct the orchestra (Kvist 2012).

Officially, the students were given four years to complete their conducting degree, but many students stayed much longer in the class. There were also exceptions where the student stayed in the class just a year or two, and in Segerstam's opinion this is not a problem "if the student has talent" (Lindgren 2005, 403). In his class at the Sibelius Academy the first-year students studied and

conducted the same repertoire as the fourth-year students. To graduate, the students needed to conduct both a symphonic concert and an opera performance in front of a jury.

Segerstam says that the student needs to have musical talent, personality, soloist-level command of an instrument, and “motoric and breathing factors” (Lindgren, 404). Segerstam claims that he can explain the technical demands of conducting to the student in a couple of weeks, and the rest of the semester he will keep saying the same things. A beginner cannot be asked to copy the teacher, but everyone needs to find their own way of conducting in a clear and informative way (ibid.).

Segerstam also admits that he does not expect from the beginning Finnish students as high a technical standard as from the foreign applicants, perhaps reflecting the fact that at the time Sibelius Academy was the only place in Finland where one could study conducting (ibid., 403–404).

Segerstam's paramount emphasis in conducting education was what he termed “calligraphic quality,” where clarity equated to beauty, and extraneous elements were meticulously eliminated (Lindgren 2005, 407). According to Segerstam's student Pietari Inkinen, the subsequent layer beyond calligraphy was the expression of emotions (ibid., 409). Inkinen lauded Segerstam's generosity in providing detailed advice, in stark contrast to some visiting teachers who were more guarded, potentially due to concerns about emerging competition (ibid.).

Segerstam’s ideas about conducting technique

Leif Segerstam takes great pride in his approach to conducting technique, considering it a pivotal factor in achieving success as a conductor. Anecdotes from his former students highlight Segerstam's dedication, describing instances where he invested extensive hours in perfecting details,

such as the precise cueing for a backstage trumpet. Segerstam is also very particular about his way to hold the baton. He favours longer batons with extended cork handles. His preferred grip has the handle nestled deep in the palm, balanced on the thumb, with the index finger positioned atop the stick, complemented by the other fingers rounded next to it much like in a bow hold.

A defining characteristic of Segerstam's conducting patterns, contributing to what he terms "calligraphic clarity," is their symmetry (Figure 2). He teaches his students to beat the first beat in front of the shoulder, the second (in a four-pattern) in front of one's stomach, the third symmetrically as far to the right from one than the two is to the left of it, and the fourth next to one, but slightly higher up. The bottom of the beat follows a subtle figure-eight trajectory, with Segerstam often requiring a distinctive "click" with the tip of the baton to accentuate each beat.

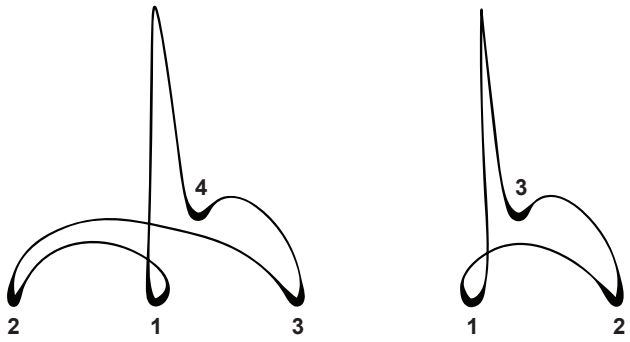

Figure 2. Leif Segerstam's basic 4-pattern and 3-pattern.

Segerstam wants it to be clear even to the last desk what the pattern is in the right hand, and especially the "and – one" at the end of the bar (YLE 2013). He calls it the "natural handwriting". As for the left hand, Segerstam generally discourages parallel movement – the left hand is the

“monitor” that conveys the general character of the music, capable of inspiring, inviting, suppressing, or encouraging musicians. It adds a nuanced layer to the conductor's communication. Furthermore, Segerstam considers facial expressions crucial, with open eyes being the “mirror of the soul.” Through the conductor's visage, one should discern the motivation behind the music – whether it's “love, hate, life, or death.” (ibid.)

Segerstam expresses disdain for right hands lacking a “calligraphically natural” appearance, emphasizing the need for them to resemble a piece of nature, “like a tree.” In contrast, he encourages the left hand to embrace versatility, serving as a dynamic tool to convey atmosphere, motivation, mood, or even issue warnings. As he eloquently states, “The left hand can be really versatile, but the right hand has to be as calligraphic as the Chinese characters.” (Dollman 2013, 61)

Research materials – a database of enrolled and graduated students

To research the success of Sibelius Academy’s conducting teaching during Segerstam’s tenure I asked the registry of the Arts University of Helsinki to provide me with information about all master’s students who have majored in conducting there. I received from them a file which listed all their symphonic conducting majors between 1981 and 2020 – altogether 97 names. I then narrowed down the names to those who spent most of their time studying with Leif Segerstam while he was the professor between 1997 and 2013, ending up with 50 students. The criteria I used was the enrollment year of the student, which should fall between 1996 and 2011. This, however, is not the full picture of Segerstam’s teaching. There are also some students who attended the conducting class while majoring in some other subject such as an orchestral instrument or composition, and they are not included in this list unless they later decided to change their major to conducting.

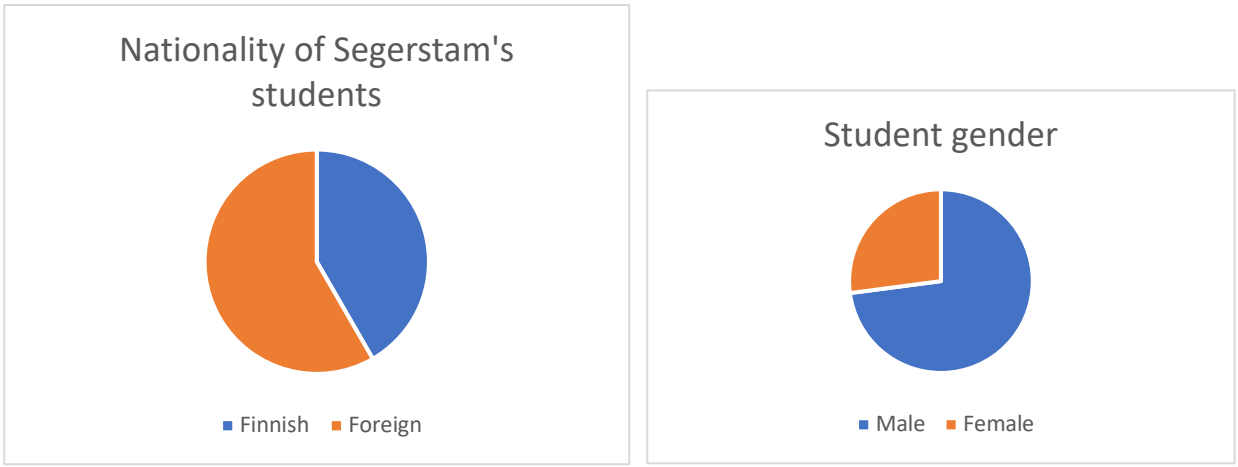

Figure 3. Nationality and gender of Segerstam's conducting students

While compiling the data, certain irregularities in the database entries surfaced. For instance, Susanna Mälkki's biography indicates her presence in the Sibelius Academy conducting class from 1995 to 1998, primarily under the tenure of professor Eri Klas. However, official records state that she was enrolled as a master's student in the conducting class in 2003—three years after her graduation recital date in the registry. Another ambiguous case involved an experienced conductor of an older generation, accepted in 2001, who promptly conducted their graduation recital.[6]

Due to uncertainties regarding whether these two conductors can be unequivocally considered as Segerstam's students, despite their enrollment years falling within Segerstam's tenure, I made the decision to exclude them. Consequently, the final list comprises 48 students, including 20 Finnish-born and 28 foreign students (58%). It's noteworthy that some foreign-born students opted to

[6] One possible explanation for these irregularities comes from Mikko Franck, who is one of the Finnish high-profile conductors who chose not to graduate from the Sibelius Academy. Franck has said that in the early 2000s (around the time when the Sibelius Academy was about to join the Bologna process) he was contacted by the Sibelius Academy administration and asked if he would like to receive his master's degree. "I had taken no required courses in music theory or music history, no language exams nor written any papers. But they told me that it is in Sibelius Academy's interests to graduate as many master's students as possible. They suggested a private session where I would be asked a few questions to formally test my knowledge. After that they would take note that I know everything, and I would graduate as a Master of Music. It would only take half an hour. I told them, why not reserve a full hour, and make me a Doctor of Music? Or we could invite some more examiners, sit for one and half hours and make me also a Doctor of Medicine, since it is so easy. I of course declined this offer, because it would have been so unfair towards the students who work hard for even six years to pass all the necessary courses." (Rautavaara et al. 2006, 83–84)

establish their residence in Finland and have subsequently acquired Finnish citizenship. Among Segerstam's students, thirteen were women (27%), while 35 were male students (Figure 3).

How to define the success of conducting education?

The success of conducting education can be assessed from various perspectives. From the university's viewpoint, success may be measured by the percentage of graduates compared to those who drop out. For students, a successful education equips them with tools for their profession and potentially opens doors to various conducting opportunities in the market. From the music industry perspective, a successful conducting education supplies professionals to meet the industry's needs, spanning symphony orchestras, opera theatres, ballet companies, and other conducting professions.

My primary focus lies in the intersection of the last two points. The Sibelius Academy's conducting class is often regarded as a "centre of excellence" that prepares individuals for prestigious and demanding positions in the music industry. If the education fulfils its promises, the graduates should eventually secure a conducting position in a professional symphony orchestra or sustain a career as a guest conductor with professional orchestras and opera companies.

The nature of the conducting education at the Sibelius Academy predominantly centers around symphonic music, with a focus on preparing students for careers in professional symphony orchestras. While students are exposed to opera conducting, it is not systematically taught. Other conducting professions, such as ballet, movie music, crossover, music for drama theatres, working with amateurs or engaging in music education, are scarcely addressed during the studies. Given the curriculum's emphasis, I opted to define the success of Sibelius Academy-educated conductors based on certain criteria: holding a title (music director, chief conductor, principal guest conductor)

in a professional orchestra, opera, or ballet company, or alternatively, establishing a guest conducting career, either independently or with a management.

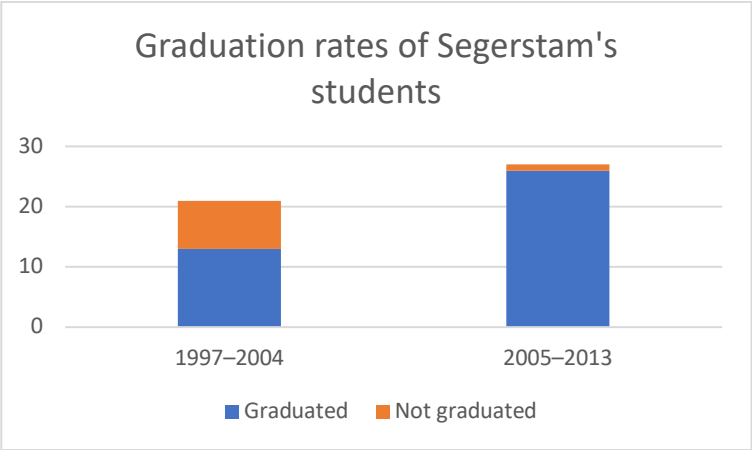

Figure 4. Graduation rates before and after the Bologna process (2005).

It's also noteworthy to consider graduation rates before and after the implementation of the Bologna process in 2005. Finland was among the early adopters of the Bologna process, initiated in 1999 to standardize the degree structure across European countries. In 2005, the Sibelius Academy transitioned to the new system, consisting of separate bachelor's and master's degrees. Finland anticipated that this new system would reduce dropout rates and shorten study times. Simultaneously, changes in the funding structure for Finnish universities were underway, with funding linked to the number of degrees awarded. Consequently, both student study times and dropout rates exhibit significant differences before and after 2005 (Figure 4). It is also plausible to speculate that the unusually large class of 2005 during Segerstam's tenure was influenced by concerns that student numbers might be reduced following the shift to the new system.

Career development of Leif Segerstam's students

After establishing the criteria for assessing the professional success of the conductors educated in Segerstam's class I conducted a comprehensive review of their professional activities. My method involved making a web search with the name of each conductor. Most names on the list of Segerstam's former students were already well known to me and it was easy to acquire information this way. Conducting is by its nature a public profession and professional orchestras extensively publicize their concerts on the Internet, allowing for a reliable evaluation of one's professional scope through web searches.

Several conductors were identified on the rosters of major managements, while others had concert activity shown on the websites of professional orchestras. The website of the Association of Finnish Symphony Orchestras (http://www.sinfoniaorkesterit.fi) played a crucial role by listing concerts of all member orchestras, spanning decades. Additionally, many conductors maintained personal websites, offering insights into the nature and breadth of their musical activities, including conducting alongside playing, composing, and arranging music.

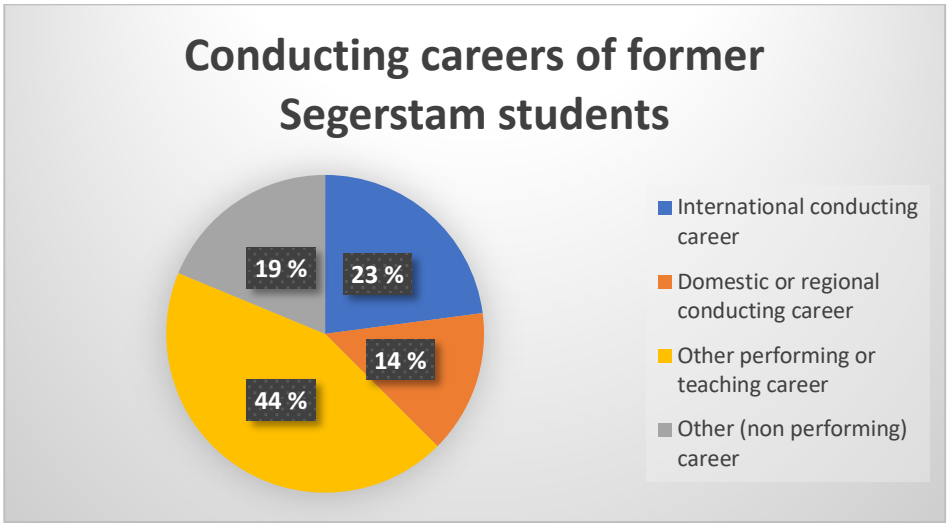

Figure 5. Conducting careers of former Segerstam students

Out of the 48 former Segerstam conducting students assessed, eleven currently boast a genuinely international conducting career (Figure 5). This is evidenced by contracts with foreign professional symphony orchestras or a proven presence as guest conductors in the concert seasons of various symphony orchestras or opera theatres worldwide. Furthermore, seven conductors have established themselves with either a domestic career (conducting actively in their home country) or regional career (for example working in the Nordic countries or in the Baltic region) with professional symphony orchestras. In sum, eighteen conductors out of 48, or 37,5 %, have successfully entered the exact profession for which they trained within the 10+ years after completing their studies.

For those who did not pursue careers as professional orchestra conductors, thirteen nevertheless continued conducting as their primary activity or as a significant part of their musical careers (Figure 6). Among them, two conductors specialize in working with professional wind ensembles, while four primarily engage with amateur symphony orchestras. The category also includes two choral conductors and five individuals working in academia, either conducting a student orchestra or teaching conducting and related subjects, such as score reading.

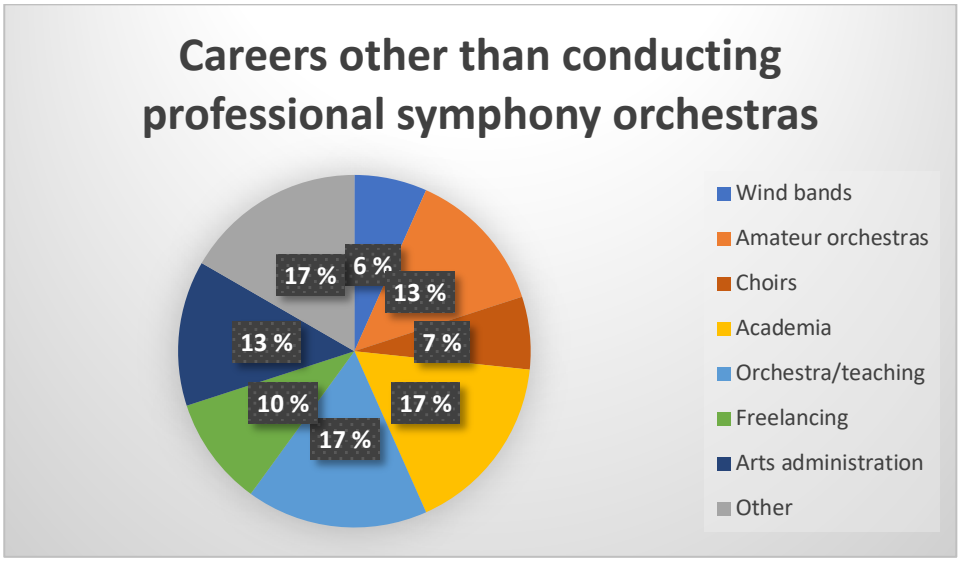

Figure 6. Careers other than conducting professional symphony orchestras

Another group consists of individuals who ceased conducting and reverted to their main instruments or now conduct only sporadically as a part of their musical activities. Out of these eight subjects, five work as orchestra musicians or music teachers, and three are freelancers involved in various musical endeavours. It's noteworthy that combining a conducting career with playing in an orchestra poses significant challenges. Some study subjects tried their hand at conducting for several years, even holding chief conductor positions in regional orchestras, before returning to their instruments and securing stable positions in orchestras. One subject maintained an orchestra position for an extended period before transitioning to a role teaching conducting in academia and resigning from the orchestra.

A substantial number (9) shifted entirely away from playing and performing as musicians. Four found employment in arts administration, two embarked on new careers in IT, and for the remaining three, I could not ascertain reliable information.

Figure 7. Leif Segerstam teaching his class at the Sibelius Academy. Photo by Pekka Elomaa, Archive of the Arts University Helsinki

Conclusions

During Leif Segerstam's tenure he instructed over 50 conducting students at the Sibelius Academy. Based on the information provided by the University of the Arts Helsinki we took a closer look at 48 master's students, who spent most of their study time under Segerstam's direct influence.

Of these 48 students 39 finished their degree, and nine discontinued their studies without obtaining a degree. Of those who dropped out, eight had started before Sibelius Academy's adoption of the

Bologna process in 2005. Post-2005 only one of Segerstam's students chose to drop out before completing their degree.

Among the 39 graduates, 30 % currently maintain active careers conducting professional symphony orchestras. The remainder pursue careers as conductors in academia or with amateur ensembles, wind bands, or choirs. Others have chosen pathways as musicians whose main occupation is not conducting, in arts administration, or in occupations unrelated to music making.

Of the nine students who did not finish their degree, six (66 %) have successfully entered the conducting profession. Curiously, it appears that statistically, dropping out from conducting studies is a better predictor of professional success than completing one's degree. This trend, however, shifted after the Bologna process implementation, aligning with the institution's heightened incentive to encourage degree completion for funding purposes.

Considering the Sibelius Academy's aim to produce high-caliber artists working with professional symphony orchestras or opera houses, 37,5 % of the students have achieved this goal within a decade after professor Segerstam's retirement. Can this be considered as success? That cannot be determined by this study alone. The result should be compared with other well-known conducting schools globally, such as the St. Petersburg Conservatory, the University of Performing Arts in Vienna, or the Juilliard School in the USA. Additionally, comparisons with Segerstam's predecessors' (Eri Klas and Jorma Panula) students would provide context.

In any case this study serves as an introduction to the topic, encouraging further research. When the Sibelius Academy advertises its conducting program with the phrase "With us, you can become one of the best conductors in the world," it is important to know how probable it is for the graduate to

land a job with a professional symphony orchestra within a few years. It is nevertheless a positive sign that altogether 31 of the 48, that is, 64,5 % are conducting either symphony orchestras, whether professional, student or amateur, wind bands and choirs and thus directly benefiting from the education they received at the Sibelius Academy.

Another aspect unexplored in this study is the effectiveness of Sibelius Academy's training for the broader music industry. The absence of ballet studies is a significant drawback in any conducting program, given the profitability of staging popular ballets in opera houses. Incorporating studies in conducting movie soundtracks, crossover, and musicals could enhance graduates' employability in a diverse range of music-related professions. There is also another question – since many of the graduates end up conducting amateur and student orchestras, should the education prepare the students for that possibility as well, or should the focus be strictly on professional ensembles?

Finally, this study briefly addresses a fundamental aspect of conducting studies – the teaching of conducting technique. It is observed that only a few of Segerstam's students emulate his conducting technique. Perhaps the calligraphic technique, once considered essential, is no longer deemed necessary due to two factors: 1) modern orchestras are technically proficient, reducing the reliance on gestures, and 2) improved language skills among international conductors and orchestra members mean that verbal communication often suffices, diminishing the importance of gestures. In my view, the observed decline of conducting technique represents a loss to the art and profession of conducting. Leif Segerstam stands as one of the last true virtuosos of the baton, and he still has much to teach to the younger generation, provided they are willing to observe and listen.

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Sasha Mäkilä's conducting career has taken him to four continents and to major ensembles, such as the Cleveland Orchestra and the Mariinsky Theatre. Originally a cellist, Sasha Mäkilä studied conducting at the Sibelius Academy (Finland) and at the St. Petersburg State Conservatory (Russia). After completing a three-year tenure at Orchestre National de France as maestro Kurt Masur's assistant he was nominated a Conducting Fellow at the American Academy of Conducting in Aspen. Mäkilä is a prizewinner of the Vakhtang Jordania International Conducting Competition (USA, 2006), and in 2013 the University of Helsinki presented him with the Pacius Award for his contributions to Finnish musical life.