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A musical model

by Jay Nordlinger



Sir Neville Marriner

Sir Neville Marriner had a long conducting career—fifty years, give or take—but I will write just a short post about him. The conductor died last Sunday. I want to say just a couple of things about him, for now. I may go whole hog later on.

I am grateful to Sir Neville, in part for this reason: he showed a sane path in Baroque and Classical music. He did not go in for “period practice,” and caught a lot of grief for it. He was considered a “conservative” at a time when “period practice” was cool. Even *de rigueur*. He stood apart from it, resolutely and even bravely. Also, he did not go in for heavy or Romantic approaches to Baroque and Classical music.

Actually, virtually no one did. This accusation of “Romanticism,” or “bloatedness,” was a canard, really, or a straw man. It was a bogeyman, set up by the “period” people. They pretended that musicians such as Böhm and Krips had no sense of Mozart, for example. Which was nuts.

I don’t want to say that Sir Neville found a “middle way,” because that sounds like a compromise, and neither fish nor fowl. No, Sir Neville demonstrated what I would call the musical way: everything he did made musical sense. He was such a sensible musician. But that makes him

sound boring. “Sensible” is almost a putdown, in some contexts. Not in this one, not in mine: Sir Neville was musical from his head to his toes, and he breathed musicality, in everything he did. You could rely on him. He would not put a musical foot wrong.

He wasn’t too heavy or too light. He wasn’t too fast or too slow. His phrasing was smooth, but not obnoxiously so, if you know what I mean. He was a natural and honest musician. He got himself out of the way, so that composers and their music could speak. He was a transparency for music.

Let me go national on you: What is it about the English? About so many English musicians? The words we apply to them are “tasteful,” “judicious,” etc. Again, that makes them sound a little boring—a little safe. But no. Myra Hess, Janet Baker, Neville Marriner—these were three who knew. Who knew how it ought to go.

And Marriner and his way will live forever, through the scads of recordings he made. Usually, people don’t call him “great,” because he wasn’t weird or intimidating or pompous or controversial enough to be thought great. But if *he* wasn’t great, a lot of people aren’t, believe me.

What a musician, what a model.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled “Music for a While,” can be found [here](#).