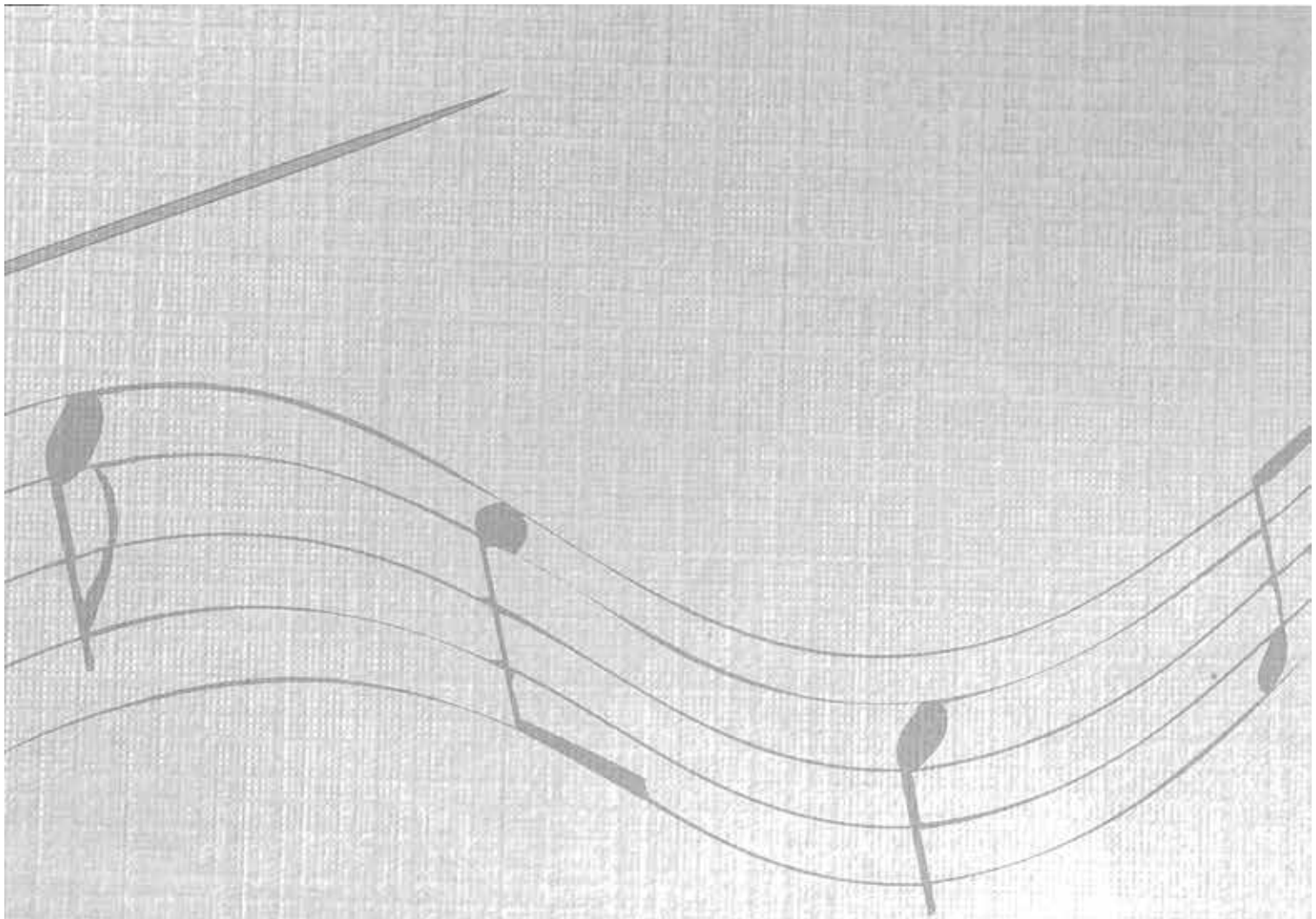




The Right Note

Writer Jamie Lee Loy
Photography courtesy Photographie, Roberto Giostra, and Sylvain Pelly



"My parents may have thought I would outgrow this and become an astronaut or pilot," says Kwame Ryan, playfully. "But at the age of six I told them I was going to be a conductor."

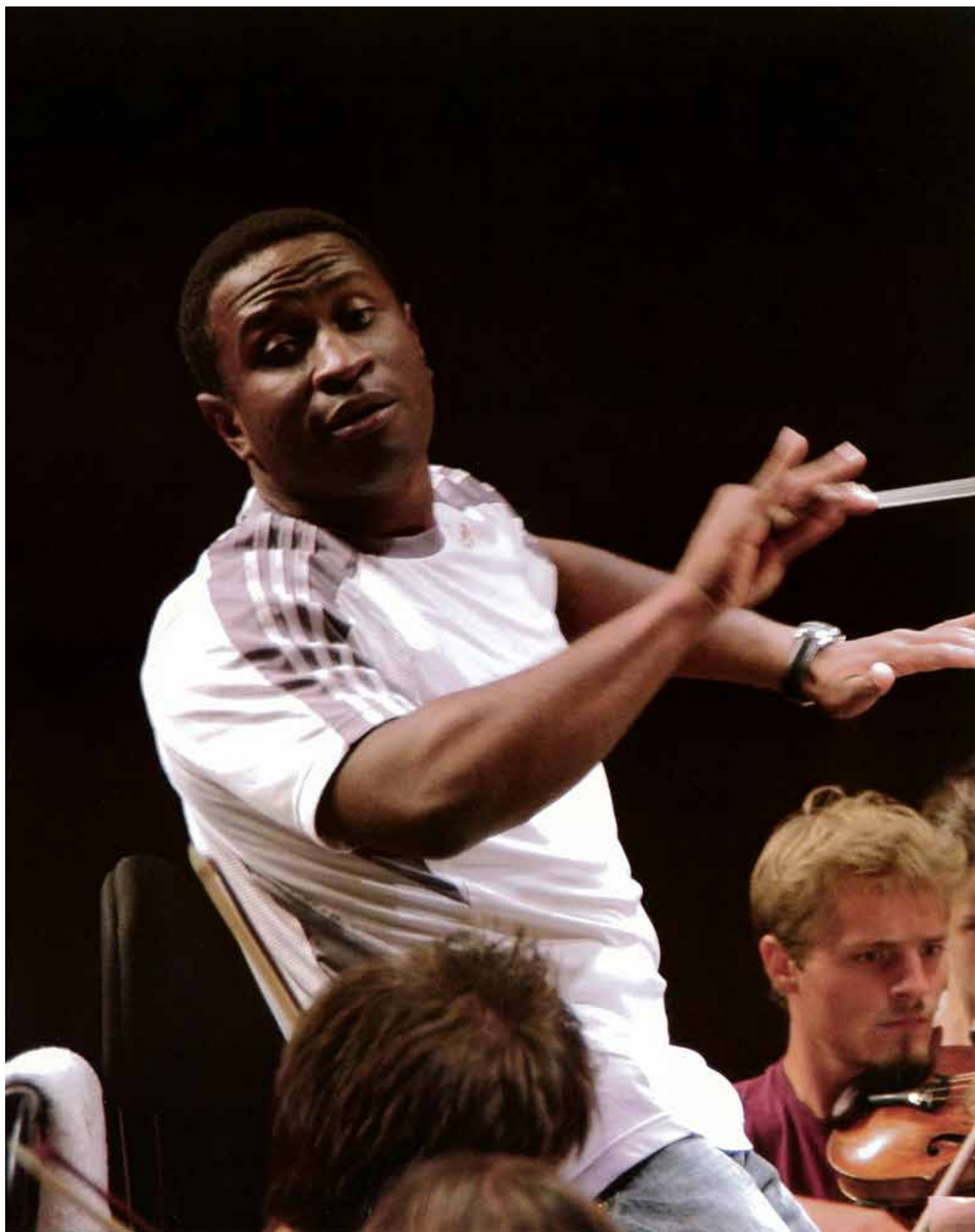
As a boy, Kwame Ryan would sit in the darkness of the Little Carib Theatre, Woodbrook, engrossed in the story unfolding on the stage. He would scribble observations.

"My greatest joy was writing notes to the director Helen Camps and the actors, suggesting changes in timing or even in areas of the script I felt could be less linear," he recalls. To his amazement his remarks were announced in the dressing room, the director advising her group to

"have a look at these important notes."

These early experiences and rehearsal visits with his actress mother Joya Gomez helped to nourish Kwame's strong sense of self. "I was just seven and this desire to be on stage was regarded as openly as anyone else's. Maybe this is why the Opera House is so dear to me—it is the theatre I remember. The lights, the magic, the sense of wonder and fantasy."

Internationally acclaimed conductor Kwame Ryan is visiting home and actively seeking a relationship with Trinidad and Tobago, the country he knew and loved as a child. "There were opportunities I would have wanted at a certain age,



maybe I can now provide some to those who do not have them." At the peak of his career and celebrating his fifth season as the Music Director of the Orchestre National Bordeaux Aquitaine in France, Ryan performed at a fundraising banquet hosted by Trinidad's Heroes Foundation in November 2012.

"It's not possible to make a lengthy, enduring career in the performing arts without guidance and people who push you to try new things," he says. Ryan's formative years were spent in Trinidad, and his early memories are infused with visits to theatre productions and warm interactions with local talent such as Helen Camps and John Isaacs. He is convinced that this is the ideal time in his life and career to mentor, and to give back to a place that nurtured his early instincts in music.

His involvement with the Heroes Foundation extended beyond his

role as musical director. He also connected prestigious international and local talent in a performance that left the audience enchanted, and launched the possibilities for young local string musicians to attend his orchestra in 2013, and continue their mentorship with his acclaimed international peers who performed alongside them at the banquet.

Philip Julien, founder and chairman of the Heroes Foundation, has known Ryan since kindergarten. "We were so close that my mom knew to call his mom before calling the police. This was a day I went home after school with Kwame without notifying her. We were comfortable and like family from a young age."

Julien recalls early clues that hinted at Ryan's future greatness and humility. During a sport's day at their primary school in St Augustine, six-year-old Kwame and Philip were competing

in the same race. "Just short of the finish line Kwame stopped! The crowd was shocked. His parents were bellowing for him to cross the finish line for God's sake. It's right there! He didn't take them on. Other jubilant runners sprinted past him, not believing that University School's own Hasely Crawford had stopped short of the finish line. One by one, they whizzed past Kwame, who was absolutely calm and unfazed."

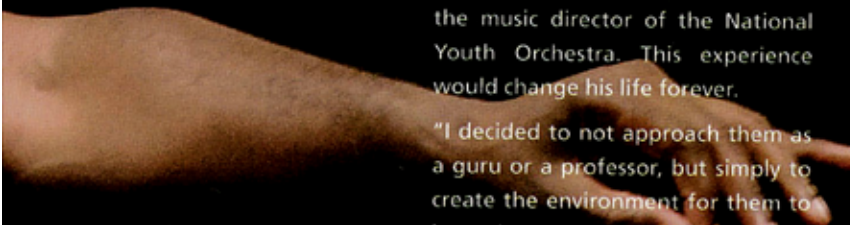
Julien was the last of the runners. "Then I lumbered up... and as I passed him, and without missing a beat, Kwame turned, and jogged alongside me, finishing the race, together. We finished last...but we finished together."

For the past five years, mentorship had been a dormant yet recurring possibility for Ryan, following his first experience working with the Foundation.



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A close-up photograph of a person's hand, with the index finger pointing towards the text on the left side of the page. The background is dark and out of focus.

"I had listened to the kids speak about their ambitions, and I simply gave them feedback, trying to offer them what I myself may had been looking for at that age. It was inspiring to listen to them." However, until recently, despite a magnificent reputation and awards in his field, Ryan still shied away from the role as a mentor. "I wasn't quite 40 and I remember being in the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, and how much awe I had for my professors. I was intimidated by this honorary role and did not feel I had enough to give back to a younger generation. I felt as if I was still figuring myself out."

However, Ryan's interest in guiding others was re-ignited by a spark of opportunity in France in 2009. On encouragement from his own mentor, the then General Director of the National Opera in Paris, he accepted a two-year placement as the music director of the National Youth Orchestra. This experience would change his life forever.

"I decided to not approach them as a guru or a professor, but simply to create the environment for them to have the experience as fully as they could. I approached it in the spirit of my inner child and it was a blast! It's been the best experience I have had in my professional career." Ryan received a National Award in France during his tenure, and decided that his valuable work in France could be of equal or more value in the place

that had first shaped his future path.

Kwame Ryan was born in Toronto Canada, while his parents were studying at the University of Toronto. A month later, his father Selwyn Ryan obtained a job as a political scientist in Africa, and the family moved to Uganda, including his older sister and his mother. At the age of three, he moved to Trinidad, which is where he spent his childhood years until the age of 14.

Describing his mother, a teacher, as the more "artsy" of his parents, Ryan recounts how seriously she paid attention to his interest in music. "She got me a piano, then music theory lessons, singing lessons and then a violin."

Ryan attended boarding school at Oakham in Rutland, England, and then studied musicology at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. Then an opportunity to apply for an exchange programme in Tübingen, Germany presented itself.

"Tübingen is a beautiful part of South Germany and I wrote about loving Strauss and Wagner, and justified that the programme would allow me to learn the language of composers I revered." He was facing a turning point in his life with no definite career path on the horizon, and the experience created history for the unsuspecting student.

"In Tübingen you couldn't move more than two kilometres in any direction without happening upon a new arts



"Doubt is an important tool for an artist," he says. "It makes you question yourself and challenge your capabilities. I am my most comfortable on stage because the work has already been perfected. It's when I'm in rehearsals surrounded by others with differing opinions that I am nervous. I have to lead them. The hard work comes in prior to this moment, it makes me more confident."

Although Ryan is blessed with the freedom to work on music he feels a connection to, he has grown restless and yearns for something different.

"I usually know what I am doing two years in advance and it's become quite tiring. It would be nice to return to some professional spontaneity." As his current directorship ends in 2013, Ryan has decided to use this as an opportunity to work with musicians in a freelance capacity, to pursue more projects in Trinidad and Tobago and with young people. "If I go directly back to being a music director that will be another six years and that will take me nearer to 50. I think I am more capable and beneficial to mentoring and engaging

young musicians now and at the current moment, more than ever."

Kwame Ryan is not anticipating the discovery of the next conductor from Trinidad or France or wherever life leads him. He is more intrigued with the idea of creating a safe and productive environment for the young people he works with. "Music for me has a social power that can be harnessed by anyone," he says. "I don't want to lead them to any particular path in music, only guide them in finding their own voice." **MPT**



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infrastructure. Even if it was smaller than in England, it was not just six or seven big centres like those in Edinburgh, Manchester or London, rather it was quadruple or more of that. It was the land of milk and honey for performing musicians." This bountiful creative environment would soon become Ryan's home, and he learned to speak German fluently. "Life is like that sometimes," he muses. "I always intended to return to England but one year turned into two, and then two into 22. I started my career there and never looked back."

Ryan also credits his eclectic taste for music to the various musical influences of the islands. He has a strong affinity for romantic 19th century repertoire but in his spare time he listens to jazz, hip-hop, and Indian music, especially the sitar. He claims no particular style of music as his favourite. "Once the music moves me or speaks to me in some way I listen. And this is similar to how I conduct an orchestra as well."

For more modern or difficult works, Ryan uses advanced computer software that plays each instrument at once to

render the sound of an orchestra. He reworks each detail until he has played and improved every individual sound of the symphony. Prior to rehearsal the piece is mapped perfectly. As a qualified yoga instructor and what he terms a "tekky geek," Ryan has mastered the discipline and calm of meditation with the obsessive pursuit of perfection of form and design.

This methodical approach does not mean that Ryan is never worried or afraid. The day before rehearsals are his most trying times, and he likens the feeling to panic.