

# Meeting world leaders

## *EUYO Chief Conductor, Vasily Petrenko on November 11 concert*

A subtle rain was falling down, and the sky above Paris was of a pale greyish colour. A gloomy day indeed, fitting for commemorating «the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month».

Depending on what country you come from, this day is called *Onze-Novembre*, *Jour de l'Armistice*, *Wapenstilstand*, *Waffenstillstand*, *Remembrance Day*, *Veterans Day*, *Armistice Day*.

Such an array of names shows how diffuse are the memories of the war that wrecked the world one hundred years ago.

In the Champs-Élysées, under the Arc de Triomphe, where the tomb of the Unknown Soldier rests, two large seating areas were thoughtfully arranged, to be occupied by 84 heads of state. They listened to *La Marseillaise*, Bach's Cello Suite No. 5 and then Ravel with Yo-Yo Ma joined by Renaud Capuçon; they heard girls and boys reading texts and memories from that day, and *Blewu* by Angélique Kidjo. President Emmanuel Macron gave a powerful speech, calling for peace to be a lasting gift for new generations. Then, the European Union Youth Orchestra stepped on stage. How did you feel? Were you impressed to be the apex of such a ceremony??



Vasily Petrenko conducting EUYO under the Arc de Triomphe © Mission du Centenaire

**VP:** Firstly, I have to say that is very important to memorialise in such a way the end of the World War, and for that, I have to give credit to the French government for creating such an impressive commemoration. Every war finishes, every war has victims; our duty is to remember.

That was reflected in the whole ceremony, as well as in the eternal flame burning under the Arc de Triomphe. Also *Boléro*, which the European Union Youth Orchestra performed, displayed that. All the elements were there. When I was in front of the Orchestra, I led them as if I was in a concert hall. It did not matter that many heads of state were there, or that the event was broadcast by television to millions of people.

To me, the most important thing was to encourage the Orchestra to perform *Boléro* at their best. And they did.

**Many people complimented the performance, in fact. A splendid *Boléro*.**

**VP:** I am glad to hear that. Unfortunately, the bad weather did not help us. We had little time to rehearse on the spot on the day before, and as they were preparing the Arc de Triomphe for the ceremony it was noisy around. On the other hand, to perform there is quite unique, and I am so glad that we overcame the difficulties. I believe that performing *Boléro* for such an occasion will spark the interest in classical music. As the performance was broadcast worldwide, some young boy or girl might get interested in classical music seeing people of their age be part of such an orchestra. We also had funny moments.

**What happened?**

**VP:** The Orchestra was grouped on one side of the stage, and there was a space of, let's say, three-four meters between them and the stage properly. Since it was raining, a corridor of umbrellas was created for the musicians to get on stage, protecting the instruments. I was there, handling the umbrellas for them. Well, that was my little participation.



**After the concert, you were invited at the gala dinner with the heads of state.**

**VP:** Yes. For me personally, to see all the heads of state, and to meet most of them was also a very interesting experience. We all are accustomed to seeing them on a screen, of course. But they are normal people, in the end, some more interesting, some less, some special. And you could talk with them on normal subjects, which is good.

**So, did you talk to some of them?**

Emmanuel Macron, to Vladimir Putin, and to other presidents as well. You know - they are normal people, after all.

**And what were you talking about?**

**VP:** Mostly about music, and some of them told me that they really enjoyed the concert. They were very kind.

**You asked them something?**

**VP:** Oh, well, I invited most of them to come and see our next concerts, and Emmanuel Macron seemed quite interested. But I don't think that they can actually come, not all together at least. They are very busy people, you know, and there are security concerns when a head of state attends to a concert.

**Going back to the concert: there was a moment in which you gave the Orchestra a signal to stand up on the final cadenza. Then, after a second, the heads of state looked themselves in the eyes and rose up all at once. It was a powerful moment. Was it spontaneous?**

**VP:** It was agreed in the orchestra. I gave a signal to the orchestra to stand up, as it is a custom. But I did not realize that all the heads of state were standing up until the very end, when I turned up to bow for the applause.

**It was a symbolic moment - the power of music moved the most powerful world leaders. And this happened on the very day in which Mrs Bryer left us.**

**VP:** I was notified of her passing the day after the concert, having just landed in London. It was terrible news, indeed. She was a great person, a great supporter of the arts, a great ambassador for the European Union Youth Orchestra. Her role during those years is not to be underestimated. She was the core of the Orchestra for so many years, a fierce fighter for the future of the Orchestra members. It is a big loss, but we have to go forward and continue what she had in her mind. Her legacy will live through us.

**Is there any upcoming project with the EUYO you are really looking up to?**

**VP:** Yes, there are several projects that I am eager to get involved in. A concert in Oman, that will mark a second visit in the Middle East after that of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. I always love to work with the EUYO, and I can't wait to meet up with them again.

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