

# CONDUCTING THOUGHTS

Third in the series from Tim Reynish

## 3 – PREPARATION

### RECOMMENDED

Guide to Score Study for the Wind Band Conductor, Frank Battisti & Robert Garafalo, (Meredith Music Publications)

### ANALYSIS AND SCORE MARKING

Below is my personal method of tackling any score; some elements of it might be useful to you. The system of phrase analysis is very much part of the teaching in Vienna and St Petersburg, and I always like the comment by, I think it was, the pianist Rudolf Serkin, who said that he always liked to know how far a phrase was going to go when he entered it. Some conductors do not mark a score at all; those are the ones with a good memory or good eyesight, or both. I have neither. So I:

- 1 Analyse the phrase structure and put the length at the beginning of each phrase as a number in a circle.  
(I do not recommend marking heavy bars to split up the phrases)
- 2 Mark important lines (the Hauptstimme) and key leads (in red)
- 3 Mark important subsidiary lines
- 4 Mark metrical changes, usually following a plan of houses and triangles
- 5 Mark general dynamic levels and speed changes (in blue)
- 6 Analyse the key structure and pencil in main changes if necessary – (I tend not to do this to most composers unless the tonal centre is structurally very important: Sibelius or Bruckner)
- 7 Decide on a structure of dynamic levels; change dynamics to achieve better balance if necessary
- 8 Remind yourself of changes of pulse and tempo
- 9 Use a metronome to check on ideal speed, but then be flexible to needs of the ensemble and the hall. (I don't bother much about exact metronome speeds – Wagner reckoned that a good musician should know the speed by looking at the music)
- 10 Anticipate problems of ensemble, intonation, balance, and think of ways to avoid them – but they might not happen with even an inexperienced group so keep flexible.

### DYNAMICS

'It is at that very highest level of performance that a wealth of interpretative choices and decisions become available at least to the really sensitive intelligent and imaginative recreator. It is in this realm that there is not one pp, but many subtly different pps; not one f but many different kinds of fs, and not one slur but many different kinds of legatos etc. etc. The more basic point however is that it is pp not a p or a mf.' Gunther Schuller.

'Diminuendo signifies forte, crescendo signifies piano.' Von Bulow.

'For me an orchestra's lack of discipline is always reflected in a feeble dynamic range. Something I do very often is to push the dynamic register to the absolute maximum until it reaches what I think are appropriate levels for a given work.' Pierre Boulez.

### ANTICIPATING THE PROBLEMS

I believe that you need to have a game plan, which you then switch according to the players and their reactions. You must be reactive to their playing, their musicality and technique, you must listen, and balance leading and following.

In the wind orchestra we do not have to work hard at making a lot of noise. We must work hard to:

- 1 Control all dynamic levels
- 2 Anticipate dynamic events

In general: crescendo must start quietly  
diminuendo must start loudly

subito piano is more effective if preceded by a crescendo

subito forte is more effective if preceded by diminuendo

the first fortissimo is the smallest  
the last is the biggest

In a tutti forte or fortissimo, make sure that you keep the excitement to the end.

Build an architecture of dynamic levels in your phrasing and in your whole concept of the piece.

### BALANCE

Composers usually write one dynamic mark for the entire vertical scoring involved. They expect performers to adjust their instruments' relative strength according to the primary or secondary importance of their roles.

'There is one fundamental physical law that bears repetition, since so many musicians are unaware of it; a sustained note is always stronger than a moving voice. There is so much to be decided by the conductor who cares for a balanced performance that no amount of detail can possibly cover the permutations presented by such considerations as types of instruments (and players), size and acoustic of hall, seating arrangements, types of scoring.' Erich Leinsdorf.

'Preparing scores for performances, the conductor will discover the differences between a wind choir of 1810 and 1910 to be so great that any resemblance is almost co-incidental. The dynamics of brass instruments must be adjusted, especially on long-held notes.' Erich Leinsdorf on approximating the timbre of different periods.

### ARTICULATION

James Croft quotes the great Revelli as insisting on non-legato notes "not quite touching".

**Melodic articulation** Very often we gloss over the little breaks in legato lines, making the whole line sound legato. Very often there will be a counterpoint of possible commas or Luft-pausen, or the accompaniment will be tenuto while the melody is more broken up. I believe that clarity of articulation can bring variety and life to our lines. Think how a singer would articulate, or how a string player would bow.

**Accompaniment articulation** So often wind and string writing will be underpinned by slow moving block chords in lower wind or brass. If they are slightly detached it will keep the pulse alive.

**Staccato differentiate** between staccato crotchet, quaver and semiquaver (1/4, 1/8 or 1/16).

it will be longer in a dry acoustic, shorter in a generous acoustic  
it might be longer in crescendo, shorter in diminuendo  
it might grow longer in ritardando, shorter in accelerando  
it might grow longer at the top of a scale leading into another event  
might be longer in lyrical romantic music, shorter in jazz idiom or neoclassic

### Legato

Too much wind music (and orchestra music) is played too smoothly without due regard for the cut and thrust of the phrasing. Often detail is lost, counterpoint is confused, and harmonic progressions are blurred. The careful articulation of phrasing, and even exaggeration, is essential to clean performance.

### PHRASING

'A phrase lives essentially through the distribution of energy.' Pierre Boulez  
'Boulez is incapable of phrasing. It's as simple as that.' Hans Keller.

'In my view, the only way to conduct is to conduct with a purpose. If I hear

something that has remarkable moments but no special design, it leaves me unsatisfied.' Pierre Boulez.

A melodic phrase needs to be articulated. If we're talking about phrasing in general, let's talk about articulation, because articulation does indeed relate to a particular phrase, but also to a rhythm, to a form or a segment of form. It also related to the delineation of timbre and the delineation of polyphony.

We do not need to conduct the beats - the players will normally develop a corporate feel for the pulse.

We do not need to conduct the dynamics, except to control; the players should respond to the printed page but we need then to indicate balance.

We do need to conduct the phrasing and the overall architecture – we have the responsibility of co-ordinating the phrasing, organising the balance and constructing the architecture. No player can know exactly what his or her part in the structure of the movement is at any one time; only we, with the privilege of the score and our study, can develop this.

Phrasing is our most important job.

### PREPARATION FROM THE PODIUM

'Indispensable partners of knowledge are imagination, thoughtful intelligence, and ultimately the willingness to forget ourselves in the service of what we undertake to represent - the composer and his music.' Erich Leinsdorf.

CHARLES MUNCH on score correction 'One may examine the score and correct physical errors.'

GUNTHER SCHULLER on analysis

'Analysis is to me the thorough study of the score, of its specific notation in all its elements: melodic/thematic, harmonic, rhythmic/metric, structural, textural, "orchestral", formal, etc. Analysis in that sense is an all-encompassing retracing of the steps of composition, yielding the fullest possible understanding of what went into the piece in the first instance and what therefore needs to be "realised" in performing/re-creating it.'

BOULEZ on contriving a good balance

'There are times when respect for the musical text alone does not serve much purpose. You may have a secondary part written for a relatively weighty instrument, and a principal part written for a much lighter instrument. You have to change the dynamics. I have no qualm about doing that. As a fellow composer, I say to myself, "That's what he wanted to hear, but he didn't have enough experience to write down the exact dynamics". So I change them, that's all.'

'The composer has written a certain number of instrumental lines and on the whole, he hasn't done so just to make a general amount of noise. He's composed those lines so that we can hear certain things, so that we can experience a certain hierarchy that's dependant on his writing. What I try to do is to bring out that hierarchy in a very precise way, even when it's difficult.'

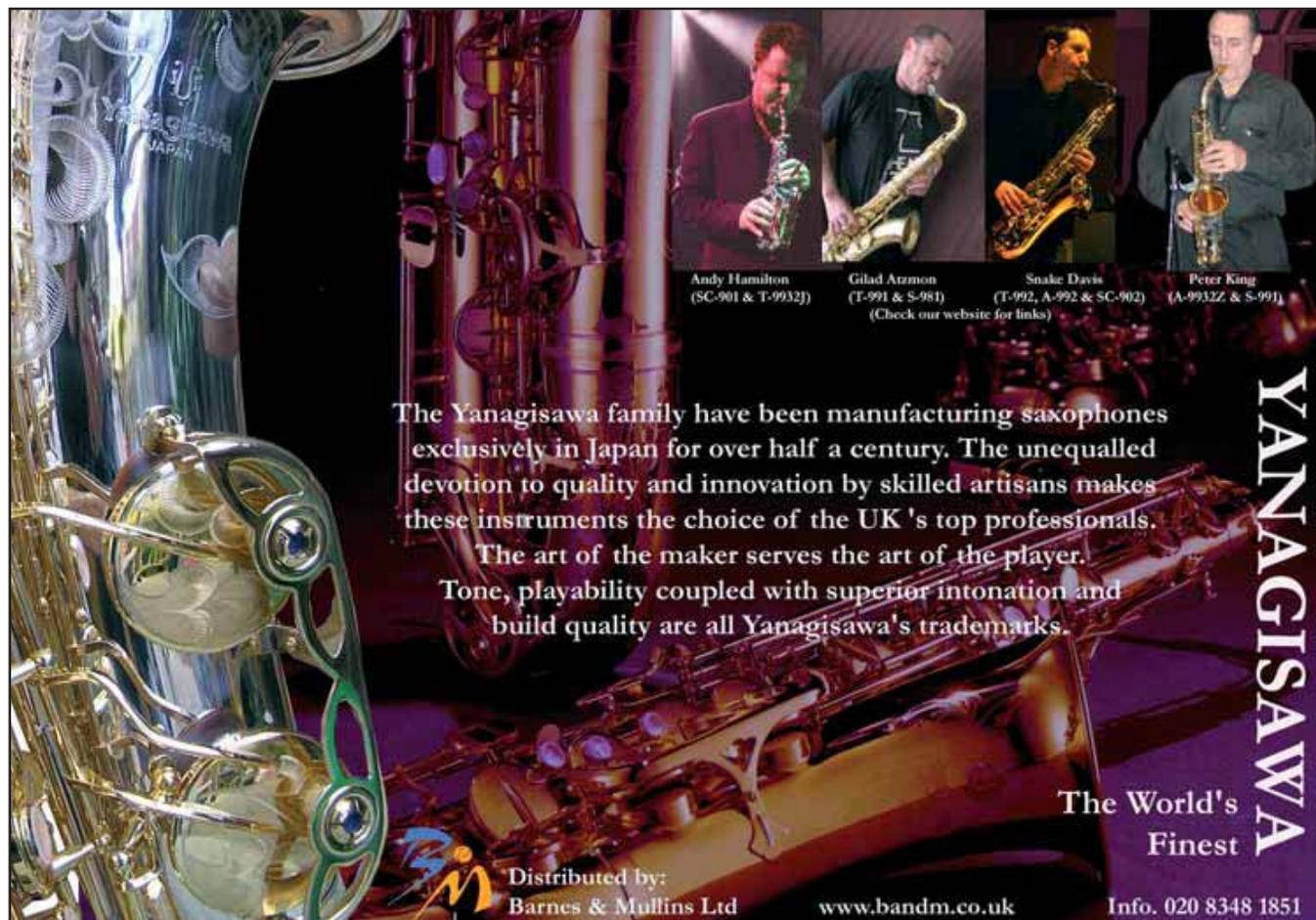
GUNTHER SCHULLER on conducting from memory

'The vast majority of conductors when conducting from memory are rarely or only intermittently aware of harmonic or tonal-function aspects, structural features, interesting counter-melodies or motives, timbral balance, intonation, unusual orchestral details.'

GUSTAV MAHLER on interpretation

'As a young conductor I too was in my performances of the great works artificial and erratic and added too much of my own, albeit with comprehension and spirit. Only much later did I arrive at the full truth, simplicity and recognition that real artistry can only be found through a total lack of artificiality?'

'However, I think that the youthful "artificial and erratic" performance of works is a necessary phase that we all need to go through. Without temperament we can show very little.'



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