

The Art of Communication by Gesture - Part 4

By Geoffrey Brand

As a conductor I regularly remind myself of the enormous trust, hopefully belief, which a composer evinces in the act of passing the fruits of his creative labours into the hands of another, who may, but often will not, be known to him and who is charged with the responsibility of presenting the composer's work to those who, by choice or chance, come to share in the revelation. Since the emergence of conductors, composers - almost without exception - have experienced misgivings: the pains of the composer in the conductor's hands! A number have committed themselves to paper; here are three examples:

Hector Berlioz on the orchestral conductor:

"Music appears to be the most exacting of the Arts, the most difficult to cultivate, and that of which the productions are most rarely presented in a condition which permits an appreciation of their real value, a clear view of their physiognomy, or discernment of their real meaning and true character. Of producing artists, the composer is almost the only one, in fact, who depends upon a multitude of intermediate agents between the public and himself; intermediate agents, either intelligent or stupid, devoted or hostile, active or inert, capable - from first to last - of contributing to the brilliancy of his work, or of disfiguring it, misrepresenting it, and even destroying it completely. Singers have often been accused of forming the most dangerous of these intermediate agents; but, in my opinion, without justice. The most formidable, to my thinking, is the conductor of the orchestra. A bad singer can spoil only his own part; while an incapable or malevolent conductor ruins all!"

The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)
(translation by David Cairns)
Published: Gollancz Panther edition

Johann Mattheson:

"The greatest difficulty in performing the work of someone else consists indeed in the need for a sharp forceful judgement to meet head on the sense and individuality of a stranger's thoughts. He who has never learned how the originator himself would like to have it done will hardly do it well but will take away the vitality and charm, often in such a manner that an author, were he to hear it, might be hard put to recognise his own work."

Johann Mattheson (1681-1764) German composer and scholar, from his treatise *The Compleat Music Director* (1739)

Aaron Copland:

"Purposeful singing is what concerns most composers most of their lives. Purposeful singing to me signifies that a composer has come into possession of musical materials of related orders of experience; given these, the composer's problem then is to shape them coherently so that they are intelligible in themselves, and hence, communicable to an audience. In music the process does not stop there. The musical work must be reinterpreted, or better still, recreated in the mind of the performer or group of performers. Finally the message, so to speak, reaches the ear of the listener, who must then relive in his own mind the completed revelation of the composer's thought!"

Aaron Copland (1900-1990) from *Music and Imagination* (Harvard University Press)

Make of those out-pourings what you will and there is much to ponder in each of them. They offer important considerations for a conductor to confront. Composers the world over show the need to feel able to trust a conductor's work; reputations may help but I have found they count for far less than trust based on personal experience.

It is worth reminding ourselves that a person standing before an orchestra, wielding a stick, and generally influencing the sound, style and shape of the music is a comparatively recent development. Previously any musical direction came almost without exception from the composer or arranger of the music who, understandably, wished to present it himself.

Very soon, the emergence of non-composer directors brought differences in approach; with the arrival of conductors the doctrine of substitution was embraced.

I leave you to ponder the composer/conductor relationship, but to end I should like to share a little exercise which I find useful. As conductors we aim to convey musical information by gestures, seeking to communicate the music in terms of its structure, shapes, dynamics, mood, atmosphere, nature - and so on. This is very much a conductor's approach. However, to my knowledge, I have yet to meet a composer who thinks in terms of gestures as a means of communication when actually conceiving and writing or conveying his music into a visual form.

I find it can help to consider what sort of gesture can be made which is best likely to capture and extract the spirit of the music. The gesture must not interfere in its role of conveying those essential elements - the shapes, dynamics, tempi and so on, but should supplement them. Try making gestures, with a baton if you wish, to convey visually your own name. If you have more than one forename, include it. Show the rhythm of your name; the capital letters; emphasise pitch changes of consonants or vowels, just as you normally speak them; include in your gesture anything which communicates an aural concept. If you have someone prepared to share this exercise with you, so much the better. How well can they read or "hear" what you are gesturing. Try moving on to short sentences e.g. "my birthday is in September" - or whatever. Introduce dynamics - nuances - spacing - phrasing - indicate the object of the sentence - and so on. Try adding longer sentences; the more imaginative the better, and remember, the aim is to convey and make sense by gesture.

Isn't that what we aim to do as conductors?

Geoffrey Brand

Advertisers Index

Alfred Publishing Co	52
Arbiter Group	25
Ariel Music	6
Brass Band Insurance Services	8
British Reserve Insurance Co	26
Boosey & Hawkes Instruments	32
Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers	38
Canford Summer Music School	31
Club Europe Concert Tours	6
Dawkes Music Ltd	22
Gower Music International	26
Harlequin Music	46
Herts County Youth Wind Orchestra	51
Howarths of London	31
John Myatt Woodwind and Brass	54
Just Music	49
Klavier Wind Recording Project	50
Maecenas Europe	8, 46
Molenaar Edition	44
Musician's Benevolent Fund	10
Neil A Kjos	inside front cover
Rosetti	inside back cover
R Smith and Co	4
Samuel King Music Publisher	8
Schott	26
Studio Music	42
Warwick University Music Centre	6
Yamaha-Kemble UK	outside back cover

BASBWE members - introduce a friend and get
£5.00 cashback!