Some thoughts on score study

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The obvious bit

Knowing the score is one of the most important aspects of the conductor's role. Musicians are usually not stupid, and even a relatively inexperienced amateur can tell when the conductor is bluffing. Therefore it is vital that the conductor has as much in-depth knowledge as possible of the document which offers the best insight into the composer's intention.

Erich Leinsdorf, in his excellent text, *The Composer's Advocate*, reminds us that the score is not the music. One might think of the score in the same way as an architect's drawing – the building does not exist on paper, but it is the primary source from which it will be created. Neither is it the only thing you will need to come up with the end product.

Therefore, it goes without saying that the conductor should begin the process of studying the score in detail well before the first rehearsal. Your players will not notice - let alone be impressed - if you are fully conversant with the score at the first rehearsal, but they will certainly be critical if you are not.

Recordings – sense or sacrilege?

At this point it may be appropriate to address (with some trepidation!) that thorniest of all thorny issues: the role that recordings should or should not play in score study.

What one might term the 'traditional view' is that recordings should play no part in the process. The conductor should learn the score by reading it, or playing it on the piano, and reverting to other source material as appropriate. To listen to recordings of the work is to take a short cut through that time consuming process, will leave the conductor with only a superficial knowledge of the work in question, and very possibly result in a re-interpretation of someone else's work. Or so the argument goes.

However, I believe that most serious conducting students and the majority of professional conductors (particularly those at the younger end of the business), do use recordings to a greater of lesser extent – even if they may not admit as much in public!

Certainly, the profession has changed dramatically in the relatively recent past, and the days where a 'maestro' could build a successful career on a small and focused repertoire of maybe 20 or 30 major works are, generally speaking, long gone. That conductors tend to have to know a lot of repertoire, and be able to learn new pieces quickly, in itself suggests the 'traditional view' is unrealistic in practice.

Certainly, a conducting student preparing for a course or competition where the required repertoire may only have been published a month or two beforehand will simply run out of hours in the day trying to learn a long list of pieces if he or she is to adopt the traditional approach.

My own view is that one must take a pragmatic approach, and judiciously use recordings as an aid to the process provided that the dangers can be borne in mind. Five top tips in this regard:

1. If at all possible listen to more than one recording. This will avoid being taken in by a conductor who has chosen a particularly extreme tempo, or perhaps taken some unusual interpretative decisions, or even decided he (and I deliberately omit 'or she' here) knows better than the composer and indulged in a little bit of 're-composition'.
2. Listen to the recordings early on in the score study process and if possible stop doing so before the rehearsals start. This will to allow your own interpretation to develop.
3. Have the courage of your convictions and if you take a different view of something than what you hear on recordings – no matter how exalted the conductor and orchestra – go for it. Your interpretation will usually be better than your regurgitation of someone else's interpretation.
4. Don't practice conducting the piece with the recording playing – it's not like that in real life!
5. Don't necessarily stick to the big names – they (and I mean orchestras as well as conductors) may be better able to pull off an idiosyncratic performance than you.

Method

So how to actually study the score? Given that we have discounted sticking on a CD and conducting along to it half a dozen times, how do you start?

There is a concept called *Seven trips through the Score* which is taught in various forms in several European conservatoires. It advocates a methodology based on going through the score, start to finish, seven times, focusing each time on a different aspect and increasing knowledge incrementally.

The seven stages are:

1. Instrumentation and transpositions
2. Form analysis
3. Harmonic structure
4. Melodic line and its instrumentation
5. Phrasal analysis
6. Dynamics
7. Special effects in the score and manner of execution on the instruments

Whilst this approach may appear a little rigid and inflexible to some, and one could query the absence of matters such as tempo and articulation, it seems to me to be a good place to start from in evolving one's own method.

From a personal perspective, I am certainly concerned initially with structure and find that, until I am comfortable with both form and the more detailed phrase structure, I find it difficult to put matters such as instrumentation, architecture of dynamics, and how long or short a fermata should be, into perspective.

Some advocate a part-by-part approach – play or sing each in turn – the premise being that the conductor must know every part and how the lines interrelate with each other. Others insist the only real way to learn a score is to harmonically analyse each and every chord, using that as the basis on which decisions as to tempi, phrasing and dynamics are taken.

Ultimately, the correct method to use is the one which works best for you, and it goes without saying that as you gain experience your approach will change.

Marking the score

Again, huge differences of opinion exist. For some conductors, any marking of the score is nothing short of sacrilege and a gross violation of the composer's wishes. Others cover the pages with such a mass of text, hieroglyphics, chord symbols and numbers, that the notes seem to have become almost incidental.

My approach is as follows:

1. Mark phrase lengths at the top of the pages (possibly also above the string parts if it is a big orchestral score) I usually do this in red pencil. I do not advocate drawing thick bar lines down through the score at every new phrase as I feel this can break up the melodic line

2. Mark important cues, dynamics or other details in blue. I try to keep this to a minimum, especially in classical repertoire. I never use a highlighter!!

3. Other markings will be in ordinary pencil. These could include:
   (a) metronome markings – although by no means an inflexible rule, at every major tempo change I will know the speed I plan to adopt
   (b) translations of unusual markings – of course, one should be familiar with the common terms in the major languages but often there will be unusual instructions or less familiar languages
   (c) occasionally some harmonic analysis, but only when it is particularly important or unusual

4. Everything else I will do in separate notes. For example, I often sketch out the phrase structure and use that as a learning tool particularly with larger pieces. Although I would never conduct from it, I find it useful to be able to sit down with the first movement of a symphony sketched out on one sheet of paper

5. Whether you should or should not mark the individual parts is a whole topic all of its own, and not one that is directly relevant to this article. However, if it is acceptable and appropriate in the circumstances, doing so can be a very effective part of your score study. A similar approach, which I often adopt with student and non-professional groups, is to do a separate set of rehearsal notes to give to the players prior to the rehearsals, particularly if time is short

Other source material

Whilst the score is the primary source, there are many other places to look for information. A selection of these would include:

1. Books, journals, articles and other published material about the composer, the work in question, or the circumstances surrounding its creation. Of course, this can range from a bewildering mass of material in the case of Beethoven or Mozart, to a few paragraphs on the internet or in a CD sleeve for a more recent composer whose work is not established

2. Recordings of both the work in question, and other works by the composer – particularly those composed at around the same time

3. In the case of contemporary music, the composers themselves. Most will be delighted to know you are performing their work and will be happy to share programme notes, rehearsal suggestions and other background information

4. Where relevant, the literature, art, theatre or other art form which inspired or influenced the work in question

5. Texts and other materials focusing on conducting. For example, the series of books by Norman del Mar, "Conducting Beethoven", "Conducting Elgar", etc. Whilst one may disagree with some of the interpretive suggestions, the fact that these books are written from the point of view of the conductor on the podium rather than the academic in the classroom, make them extremely valuable. Even if you are not conducting orchestras, I would recommend sitting down with one of these books and a score

And finally....

I have often heard it said by extremely successful conductors that the more experienced they become and the more often they revisit a piece they have conducted before, the more time they feel they need to devote to score study!

References
Leinsdorf, Erich, The Composer's Advocate (Yale University Press 1981)
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