



Can Young Ensembles Be ‘Conducted’?

Russell Cowieson

Probably the question I have most often heard at conducting workshops is, “and what about when you are dealing with a school band?”. The presumption is that somehow they require a different approach, and they would not respond to being dealt with in what is perceived as a more high ended, adult or professional approach.

The best conductors motivate, enthuse and challenge their musicians. They believe that the best rehearsals are shared experiences, which involve dialogue and listening to and learning from each other, trying to discover the true nature of the music they are performing. This is not a model reserved purely for the Simon Rattles of this world. I would argue that this ‘professional’ approach is necessary at all levels, and am convinced that by adopting this role we best serve our young musicians.

Gesture

One of the challenges of conducting lies in attaining a vocabulary of gesture, which you can use to reflect the sound you want to hear. It is possible to learn or refine gesture through personal practice or by attending masterclasses or courses (the BASBWE course at Canford Summer School of Music being a fine example) but ultimately:

*‘Gestures are entirely personal...as personal as a voice.’ Boulez. **

Of course, if you are going to ask your band to respond to your conducting, then you had better make sure that your gesture exactly conveys **what you want**.

‘The accuracy of the gesture resides in a perfect coincidence between arm, hand, and intention.’ Boulez

The best gestures, therefore, are those which you are comfortable with and which you know to be effective and relevant to the music. Once you have developed a range of gestures then you can start to expect, demand, that your young musicians start to respond to them.

Many young groups pay little or no heed to the conductor because they have been conditioned not to! I regularly hear well rehearsed bands whose performances bear little or no relation to the gestures of the conductor. In most cases this is probably just as well because the quality of the conducting does no justice to the obviously fantastic work taking place in rehearsals.

If the ensemble is playing well and giving an enjoyable performance then does it matter if there is little or no relationship between its music making and the conductor’s gestures? I think it does, because the problem with this approach - ‘drilling’ an ensemble to give a specific performance - is that it leaves no room for adjustment, in the moment, of ensemble, balance, intonation, tempo or acoustic related problems.

‘A highly professional person knows how to work as efficiently as possible.’ Boulez

It really is worthwhile taking time out of rehearsals to train the musicians to understand and respond to your conducting. Just a little time spent asking them what they think certain gestures mean and how to respond to them on their instrument, will be extremely rewarding in the short and long term. It makes rehearsals more interesting, ultimately more efficient and challenges the musicians to respond to a more mature approach to music making.

Language

Daniel Harding (Principal Guest Conductor London Symphony Orchestra) was recently asked “What makes a good conductor?” He said that the best piece of advice he got came from the leader of the CBSO who said: “Don’t be afraid to talk to us”. Harding then goes on to say, “If you do everything with your hands and eyes, it’s like having a conversation in a language you can’t speak, you end up saying what you can, rather than what you want to, or need to say. The great lie of conducting schools is that you can do everything with your hands.”

Gesture therefore is no panacea. If we accept that a balanced approach requires a use of gesture and language, where does the balance lie? In my experience, the level is tipped far too heavily towards the verbal when dealing with young ensembles and that the nature of the language could be greatly improved to benefit the rehearsal experience.

One of the first benefits of improving the quality of your gesture and training your ensemble to respond to it, is that you now say less. As a result when you do speak it has more impact. Try to avoid always telling young musicians what to do. Instead, use questions like "Who do you think has the most important voice at letter D?" or "What character is the composer trying to convey by using this articulation?" . Using language in this manner turns the rehearsal into a joint discovery of the nature of the music. It forces the musicians to think and it encourages them to evaluate and listen to themselves and others.

Leading by Example

'There's a relationship of mutual consent, of give and take, between the person conducting and whoever is playing.....What's fatal is to show up without having an opinion and let yourself be swayed by what you hear. The musicians notice that at once. Not only will they lose confidence in you, but they will mistrust what you do - or what you don't do, for that matter.' Boulez

The most elegant gestures and eloquent use of language mean nothing if not underpinned by thorough conviction for the music. This conviction can only come through in depth study of the score and a strong belief in the artistic merit of the music. What a privileged position we are in to be able to programme for our young ensembles, at the same time what a weight of responsibility this brings. We must

present music which, to paraphrase Tim Reynish, satisfies both us and the musicians in terms of emotional content, melody, harmony, form and orchestration. I am convinced that it is essential we use this model regardless of the grade of piece required.

An in depth study of any piece of music of artistic integrity (grade one to six) is rewarding, because knowledge of the score enables you to improve the quality of the rehearsal experience for the musicians; to improve the quality of the performance and ultimately through this shared positive experience bring you and your young musicians closer together through music.

*Vermeil, J., *Conversations with Boulez. Thoughts on Conducting* (Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1989).

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