

Eugene Ormandy

The Art of Conducting

The art of conducting, one of the most complex and demanding activities in the realm of music, comprises both the visual public performance and the constant application of technique. Although they are inseparable in performance, they can be analyzed in the light of the unique problems which each presents. Similarly, the conductor himself functions on three levels, each dependent upon the other, all culminating in the performance itself.

Personal Study. On the first level, his period of study, the conductor prepares himself both technically and artistically. On this level he must be musician, historian, stylist, orchestrator, and listener. He must study the score so that he "hears" it in his mind. As he does this he evaluates the music and makes a beginning toward balancing the many strands of musical line. He must understand the historical context in which a particular work is conceived, and bring to bear upon the growing interpretive edifice a thorough knowledge of the stylistic requirements inherent in the work. To study such a masterwork as Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony without some knowledge of the composer's response to the ideals of the French Revolution and Napoleon's unique political position in 1806 is to study music in a vacuum. Needless to say, it was not created in a vacuum. Among the elements of stylistic validity are tempi and dynamics. A Mozart allegro differs by far from a Tchaikovsky allegro. Similarly, a forte in Haydn is an entirely different matter from a Wagner forte.

A thorough knowledge of the orchestral colors and timbres enables the studying conductor to "hear" the orchestral sound while he studies. When conducting older composers he must sometimes compensate for the technical inadequacies of the times by delicately rewriting certain passages in terms of today's more complete orchestras and more highly skilled players. Present-day performances of such works as the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven, the Great C Major Symphony of Schubert, the symphonies of Schumann, to mention but a few, are rarely given without many instrumental changes.* Even so "pure" a conductor as Toscanini did not deny the composer the benefit of today's heightened instrumental resources.

Finally, while he studies, the conductor must "listen" objectively to the work, pacing its progress, spacing its climaxes, deriving a general aural concept of the musical architecture, and evaluating its merit as it will be heard by the public. He must recall Richard Strauss's dictum: "Remember that you are making music not for your own pleasure but for the joy of your listeners."

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*Written several decades ago, this assertion is no longer a given.

Rehearsal. The second level upon which the conductor functions is the rehearsal, in which he prepares the orchestra both technically and artistically. It is on this level that he acts as a guide to the orchestra, building up in their minds a concept of the work parallel to his own, for the eventual public performance requires an enlightened and sensitive orchestra playing not "under" a conductor, but rather "with" him.

During the rehearsals he must clarify all problems of metrics and tempi, elucidating his own pacing of the work. He must temper all dynamic markings so that the instrumental "sound" is balanced in all its components. The older composers always wrote the same dynamics vertically for each simultaneous part, straight down the page in their scores. It was only composer-conductors like Mahler or Wagner, who realized the pitfalls of dynamics incautiously marked.

As he rehearses, the conductor, surrounded by the physical sound of the work, checks his own concept of the music, comparing it with the actual music. In those particular instances where the two do not fit, he must alter one or the other. It is essential that the two, the concept and the actuality, run amicably along. In addition, there are instances, such as the lengthy oboe solo in Strauss's *Don Juan*, where the prudent conductor who is fortunate enough to possess a highly sensitive oboe player permits him to "have his head," acting almost as an accompanist rather than a leader.

Performance. It is in performance that the conductor operates upon the highest and most demanding level. Here the work is finished technically; the orchestra is fully prepared for all of its demands; the conductor, his study and preparation behind him, now immerses himself in the music, identifying himself with it both emotionally and mentally. But it is at this crucial time that the most difficult function of the conductor comes into full play. He must, while identifying himself with the music, keep a constant watch upon the progress of the work, allowing a portion of his analytical mind to constantly evaluate the sound and pace of the performance. He must be prepared to instantaneously make any adjustments, large or small, in the actual performance required for the fullest realization of his inner concept. Many factors make this necessary: a different hall, a player's momentary inattention, the effect of several thousand persons upon the acoustics, even the understandable enthusiasm of performance which might affect the tempo. At such a moment the experience of a conductor tells, for the young conductor, new to such emergencies, tends to do one thing at a time. Music does not permit this, for it flows in time, and all adjustments must be superimposed upon the uninterrupted continuum.

In the extent to which he succeeds on any or all of these levels lies the measure of the conductor's merit, both as a musician and as an artist. In his study he can separate the art from the technique, but in performance he must strive fully and constantly for a total artistic experience. Otherwise he can never fulfill his high calling: creating the reality of the work itself.

Legendary maestro Eugene Ormandy (1899–1985) was Music Director of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra from 1931 to 1936 and Music Director of the Philadelphia Orchestra from 1938 to 1980, where he was responsible for creating the famous "Philly sound."

The Nature of Conducting

At the College-Conservatory of Music, we talk often about the nature of conducting. In preparing this edition of *The Modern Conductor*, it occurred to me that while much is written about how to conduct, little is understood either of why it is necessary or what function it serves.

On the most basic level, the conductor is responsible for communicating information about moment of attack and tempo. These two unglamorous questions, "When do we come in?" and "How fast does this go?" lie at the core of the craft, before any question of interpretation, inspiration, architecture, or emotional depth—in short, art—can be addressed.

The conductor's first service is to answer the above questions. A string quartet can begin together with the nod of the first violinist's head. The same gesture simply will not be read by the bass trombone from the back of a large symphony orchestra. Similarly, a baton has no intrinsic artistic value or need. We use the baton because it is more easily seen by a large group than our hands are.

While an ensemble may agree on principles of execution, specific issues—tempo, dynamics, sound, mood, mode of playing, balance—could be the subject of more than 100 well-intended, valid, but opposing views. Our string quartet may be able to discuss and agree on interpretative issues, but an orchestral open forum would obviously prove impossible. Thus the conductor is called upon to decide these issues. She or he **serves the ensemble** as the arbiter of taste.

Being the arbiter of taste ~~for the ensemble does~~ not mean that the conductor is endowed with a mystical, unique power or connection with the spirit of composers past or present. It implies and demands that the conductor thoroughly assimilate the composer's will as expressed in the score. Through study, the conductor is able to interpret in the highest, best, and most meaningful sense of the word. He or she thus **serves the composer**, trying to grasp the significance of symbols whose specific meaning is never as obvious as the printed page leads us to believe.

Music being by nature a communicative art, it is not played in a vacuum or merely for our own pleasure. As Beethoven wrote on the score of his colossal *Missa Solemnis*, Op. 123, "From the heart, may it go again to the heart." The composer writes to be heard, not merely played; to be heard by a public whose only access to the composer's soul is through performance. Thus it is the conductor's responsibility to bring the composer's voice to the public through the ensemble. In this sense, the conductor **serves the public**.

The task of imparting and sharing what we know of music with future generations of performers and listeners is not merely the conductor's sacred responsibility; it is among our greatest delights. We did not generate our musical skills *ex nihilo*, nor did we teach ourselves the languages of music. As part of a musical continuum that has endured for centuries, we are obligated to teach, to give back what in turn was given to us; thus we **serve the musicians of tomorrow**, as we do serve and were served by the musicians of past and present.

Now that our responsibilities are clear, let us learn how to conduct.

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