

PART THREE

Issues

15 The conductor as artistic director

BRAMWELL TOVEY

In a famous 1941 wartime photograph (Fig. 15.1) Sir Henry Wood stands amid the ruins of London's Queen's Hall, atop the rubble and chaos of what had once been his artistic domain. The image is of desolation, but also defiance in the face of a Luftwaffe raid. Wood's biographer, Arthur Jacobs, has pointed out that two similarly earnest BBC officials were air-brushed out of the original.¹ Propaganda required the symbolism of the artist's civilizing vision amidst its destruction by the nefarious Nazis. Wood's hegemony over the Proms was drawing to a close. Although he was never officially artistic director, his association dated back to their inception in 1895. He died three years later, having seen his famous music festival transferred to the Royal Albert Hall where it prospers beyond his wildest dreams.

By way of contrast, in 1983 Simon Rattle was captured on film inspecting the building site of Symphony Hall, in Birmingham, with tousled hair barely suppressed beneath the regulation hard hat. Rattle was in the middle of an astonishingly successful period as Principal Conductor and Music Director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (his title changed during his tenure).² Not entirely coincidentally, the last two decades of the twentieth century saw the rebirth of Birmingham as an international city. 1960s urban planners had wreaked almost as much havoc as the Luftwaffe did in wartime. Concrete was universally employed as the material of the moment as the city was rebuilt. Paradoxically, *musique concrète* was successfully featured amongst Rattle's programming as he took the CBSO around the world for over two decades, winning renown for Birmingham and personally embodying the renaissance of its reputation.

Both Wood and Rattle presided over musical empires that were inextricably linked to their own prestige. Their longevity was exceptional: in Rattle's case a mere twenty years, while Wood was on the podium of the Proms for a few weeks shy of half a century. Despite the disparity in their tasks and titles, each was *de facto* the director of his institution's artistic activities and widely recognized as such.



Figure 15.1 Sir Henry Wood among the ruins of London's Queen's Hall in 1941

Conductors and directors

The music director of a modern, professional symphony orchestra is both the artistic director and an administrator, and is typically contracted to conduct between nine and fifteen weeks of concerts each season.³ If a conductor holds the position of principal conductor or artistic advisor the responsibilities are unlikely to be as comprehensive. Further, the programming issues for a conductor of a broadcasting orchestra, as well as personnel issues, funding, and administration, are likely to be quite different from those of an independent orchestra. In broadcasting orchestras, direction is more likely to be in the hands of producers or station directors with individual or corporate agendas. Self-governing orchestras also require a different emphasis in musical leadership. Sir Colin Davis (b. 1927) enjoys the position of Principal Conductor of the London Symphony (as opposed to music director) precisely because he does not have many of the administrative responsibilities outlined below, these being assumed by the orchestra members themselves.

The position of music director evolved from composers who were responsible for the musical affairs of religious or aristocratic patrons. Johann Sebastian Bach's association with the music of Leipzig (1723–50) and Joseph Haydn's period as Kapellmeister to the Esterházy family (1761–90) are the most familiar landmarks in the early history of musical direction. Both gestured from the keyboard and did little conducting, but their musical authority was founded upon their status as composers. François-Antoine Habeneck, who was associated with the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire in Paris (1826–49), and Theodore Eisfeld, the first named director of the New York Philharmonic (1852–65), were among the earliest musical leaders of permanent ensembles who were not major composers and whose function was to choose and perform the works of recently established masters.

The first recognizably modern artistic director of an orchestra was Felix Mendelssohn, who presided over the Gewandhaus Orchestra from 1835–47. His contract with the Leipzig town council (negotiated on his behalf by a lawyer) represented a radical change from the traditional patronage enjoyed by Bach and Haydn. While Bach and Haydn composed most of the music for their own performances, Mendelssohn became a musical patron himself, introducing works by Robert Schumann and Hector Berlioz and reviving the then neglected music of J. S. Bach, and he vigorously supported his musicians.⁴

After the peripatetic life of a piano virtuoso, Franz Liszt consolidated his musical activities in the city of Weimar (1848–61) under the patronage of the Grand Duke Carl Alexander. While this move was motivated by a desire to transform himself into an orchestral composer, Liszt also used his role as Hofkapellmeister (and the isolation of Weimar) to champion the music of the so-called "New German School." Twenty-five of the forty-four operas he conducted in Weimar were contemporary, and he was especially generous in tackling the difficult works of Berlioz and Wagner. The latter was particularly commendable as Wagner was *persona non grata* in Weimar after his role in the 1849 Dresden uprising.⁵ The problems and challenges facing modern music directors would have been familiar to Liszt. Local politics, interference from officials who oversaw the funding of his activities, social climbers, hostile critics, the jealous intrigues of composers ignored by him (and in the case of Schumann, supported by him), and endless innuendo about his private life all sound depressingly familiar to anyone in charge of a musical enterprise in the twenty-first century.

By the end of the nineteenth century, musicians like Hans von Bülow at the Meiningen Court Orchestra (1880–5) and Felix Weingartner at the Royal Concerts in Berlin (1898–1907) helped establish the importance of a musical figurehead for the many permanent orchestras that were evolving all

over Europe and America. The concept of the conductor (as opposed to the composer) as artistic authority of an orchestra was firmly entrenched by the beginning of the twentieth century. On the occasions when a composer was the artistic leader, such as Gustav Mahler at the Vienna Opera (1898–1908) or Edward Elgar at the London Symphony (1911–12), composing was regarded by their employers as more of a distraction than a complementary activity. During the second half of the twentieth century music directors of major orchestras were rarely conductor-composers.⁶

The modern music director

It is an axiom of orchestral life that it is impossible to make a financial profit from the establishment of a full-time orchestra. Independent orchestras can only be guaranteed in perpetuity by the establishment of large endowment funds, the interest from which is used to fund operations (as in the United States), or by considerable public funding based on national cultural aspirations (as in some European countries). Both means of funding require additional corporate and individual support. From the outset it appears necessary to establish a working formula between financial requirements and artistic aspirations; the successful music director must navigate both areas and will aim for *artistic excellence with fiscal responsibility*.

Music directors are usually appointed by representatives of the board, musicians, and the senior administration of an orchestra. External input is sometimes sought from recording contacts, soloists, music educators, or other experts who live within the community, but further external consultation with public funders such as arts councils, sponsors, or major individual donors is unnecessary. Occasionally board members (customarily business-oriented individuals) appoint music directors without wider consultation, particularly ignoring the opinions of their most valuable resource – the musicians. Such actions are irresponsible and contrary to the duties and obligations of governance to conduct all business in the best interests of the institution. A music director cannot expect to succeed without the support and respect of the musicians of an orchestra. Similarly, the quality of the partnership between the music director and the chief executive of an orchestra is extremely important. The best partnerships enjoy mutual support and a clear understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities.

Robert Sunter, formerly Head of Music at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, recently chaired an orchestra's search committee for a new music director and set out the following criteria for the hiring of a music director:

We agreed we were looking for someone with artistic and leadership qualities who would also understand corporate and individual fundraising, public and government relations, marketing imperatives and compromises and who would know how to continue to develop our audience base. Not only would the ideal candidate have to be ready to engage in these extra-musical activities, but he or she would have to be keen to do so.

We developed a matrix to evaluate candidates. Under artistic leadership, it asked if the conductor under consideration was currently a music director or had been one. Did he or she have any strong connections in the music industry? Did he or she have knowledge of and a commitment to (or a readiness to commit to) Canadian music and soloists? Was she or he a “team player”? Under musical leadership, we listed wide-ranging repertoire and experience outside the symphonic milieu – opera, ballet, chamber music, choral, children’s concerts, and pops [a very important part of most North American orchestral activities, but virtually unknown in Europe]. The key questions concerned technique and musicianship, rehearsal style and efficiency, organizational skills, rapport with our orchestra, rapport with other orchestras, stage presence, and audience communication skills. Last and paramount, was that difficult question of whether the conductor had: “The ability to raise the level of our orchestra.”⁷

Advocacy of the institution has been a prerequisite since the advent of public as opposed to private concerts in the early nineteenth century. More recently, since the decline of music as a school subject and the availability of music of all types on radio and recordings, live music itself has needed serious philosophical advocacy. This has been the largest social change in orchestral life since the Second World War and has led to orchestras developing “outreach” activities. In particular, politicians have realized there are few votes to be had in funding what is perceived to be (quite unjustifiably) an “elite art form,” unless popular initiatives are attached.

All music directors of independent orchestras are required to be part of their orchestra’s fundraising campaigns. Such activity is rarely vocational. In the present writer’s experience, potential sponsors and donors welcome the opportunity to hear the artistic vision of an orchestra articulated by its musical head. Special projects, such as new music, or rare events like Berlioz’s *Grande messe des morts* or Schoenberg’s *Gurrelieder*, usually require leadership gifts. Business people are often entranced by the magic of the footlights. Visionary philanthropy within the community enables the sponsor to stand avuncularly in the wings, yet visible for all to see, thus satisfying their paradoxical requirements of due modesty and wide publicity. Few conductors have the courage or knowledge to talk financial figures with sponsors. Boards should realize this and ensure that specific requests for money come from the chief executive, an appointed board member, or the

appropriate staff. An orchestra's music director is more valuable unsullied by the risk of rebuff. However, exceptional situations, such as impending bankruptcy or capital fundraising, perhaps for a new hall or renovations to existing facilities, will require the music director to be more closely involved. Similarly, when musicians' contracts are being negotiated, the music director's sympathies will lie naturally with the musicians. For this reason it is best to remain aloof from negotiations. Intervention in this process should be timely, appropriate, and above rancor. Politically, it is wise to ensure in advance that such intervention will be respected by both parties.

The administrative functions of the music director vary in direct proportion to the effectiveness of the chief executive. Once again, in marketing strategies the music director's vision should be central to the orchestra's self-awareness. In an ideal situation orchestra stakeholders (musicians, board members, senior staff, major supporters) will have collectively expressed their mission statement in both strategic and long-term planning documents. In reality, such documents are usually composed in response to the bureaucratic requirements of public funders. The music director will be the public voice of the ambitions of the institution. Where funding bodies require a music director's report as part of the grant application it is important to be pragmatic and sensible. This is no place for the hyperbole of agents or publicists.

It is unlikely that an orchestra will have sufficient local profile unless the music director is closely involved in the community. Visits to schools and civic organizations will help an orchestra maintain a healthy public persona. A clear personal understanding of the role of music and musicians in our society is essential. Most modern audiences lack a philosophical perspective of the part music plays in their lives. Similarly, close involvement with music teachers will bring a practical understanding that each generation needs to renew our understanding of music as an art form.

Although essential, advocacy is principally a political function and like other peripheral tasks (such as marketing and public relations) can only be an adjunct to the main role of providing artistic leadership to the musical institution.

Conducting the ensemble: musical leadership

First and foremost, the music director must be a conductor and musician of technical and artistic excellence who enjoys the respect and support of the musicians of the orchestra as *primus inter pares* (first among equals). It is the music director's responsibility to establish a working atmosphere where every musician can fulfill his or her individual potential. The establishment

of mutual trust between music director and musicians is of paramount importance, yet the psychology of this relationship remains disarmingly elusive to theory.

While the concert experience will always remain the supreme test of a music director's relationship with an orchestra, the rehearsal process provides the principal opportunity for a music director to achieve higher standards. Careful organization of rehearsal time and prior notification of how time is to be used ensures that musicians can be properly prepared. Undoubtedly, idiosyncratic behavior, poor rehearsal technique and lack of collegial respect will gradually undermine any orchestra's confidence in its musical leader.

Creating the ensemble: personnel

The music director has traditionally been responsible for auditioning and recruiting musicians. This essential function has been appropriately tempered in modern times by other musicians shouldering some of the responsibilities. The individual excesses of music directors have been curbed and the casting couch consigned to oblivion.

Most orchestras now require auditionees to perform anonymously behind a screen. This protects everyone concerned from accusations of bias or prejudice. The majority of applicants for positions in professional orchestras are below the age of thirty-five. Orchestras rarely appoint older players via the audition process. One victim of this process has been the experienced musician who no longer wishes to be musically naked in front of his or her peers. Violinist Sol Turner was a member of the Chicago Symphony under Frederick Stock but resigned to become a full-time member of the NBC Radio Orchestra. In 1962 while playing with the CSO as an extra musician under music director Fritz Reiner, he was distracted during his warm-up on stage.

I turned round and saw it was Dr. Reiner. My immediate thought was to apologize. "That's okay," said Reiner. "You know, your hair is grey, but your heart is still warm."⁸

The next day the personnel manager casually mentioned "the old man would like you to come back and join the symphony." Turner worked for Reiner, Giulini and Solti before retiring due to ill health in 1977. Such positive discrimination on the grounds of experience is beyond the scope of the modern music director.

By way of contrast Sir Adrian Boult describes an audition for the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1931, where he heard

a middle-aged and respected first violin member of London orchestras [London players still famously “moonlight” for other orchestras] who was a familiar figure for years . . . His audition included the last few pages of [the] *Götterdämmerung* first violin part and I sat back, prepared to fill in the glorious brass chording in my mind . . . Alas, I had no fun; the arpeggios were unrecognisable.⁹

Such situations underline the importance of job security to the professional musician and emphasize the role and responsibility of the music director in granting tenure.

Once the successful auditionee has passed into the ranks of the orchestra, the music director customarily has the power to confirm or deny tenure. There is often a great deal of peer pressure to continue the employment of individuals who after a trial period (one or two years) have become part of the orchestra community. The music director need only be concerned with the best long-term interests of the institution. Does this player deserve to be a tenured member for life? Short-term difficulties are of no consequence if the answer is negative, although the need to dismiss players can sometimes cause problems for the music director. In 2001, Charles Dutoit resigned his music directorship of the Montreal Symphony on the eve of his twenty-fifth anniversary season after the American Federation of Musicians publicly challenged his alleged decision to commence dismissal proceedings against several players.

Uniquely, in Great Britain musicians are invited to perform with the orchestra for any number of trial periods. These can be as short as one concert or as long as a year. Conversely, dismissal from Britain’s self-governing orchestras is far more ruthless and immediate than anything tolerated from a music director.

In most countries, however, contracts between managements and musicians have clauses enabling the music director to address a musician’s deficiencies. Such responsibilities need to be exercised with dignity and integrity. Initially, the music director’s authority should be used in a supportive fashion, in order that the musician can articulate any problems of a personal or technical nature that might be unknown. It is advisable to take soundings in confidence from the principal player of the section. Every orchestra is a community of artists and as such develops a strong identity. Nothing unites an orchestra more than maltreatment by a conductor. If a music director believes a musician is underachieving then the music director must expect every action to be closely monitored by the group at large. If the musician is not treated in a professional manner then the music director is likely to be isolated and without support, no matter how justified the concern.

The music director also oversees the use of substitute musicians. In the best situations, the principal of the section or the concertmaster will work

with the personnel manager to achieve the highest quality available. A music director relies on principal players and mutual trust is essential.

Curating the ensemble: programming

The music director is also a curator: a programmer of music that needs to include traditional, neglected and contemporary repertoire. While unlikely to choose every single work and artist in the season, the music director is likely to be the focus of critical comment and the orchestra's marketing initiatives.

Eccentricity of taste can only be of temporary interest; an intelligent music director should have a broad range of repertoire. While the music director whose command of the classical repertoire is strong is traditionally perceived to be the best orchestra builder, a willingness to recognize personal weakness or lack of sympathy in certain areas of repertoire is also important.

As part of the curatorial function the music director's duties customarily include selecting or recommending guest conductors. Astonishingly, this is sometimes abused as music directors seek podium exchanges to enhance their freelance careers to personal financial advantage. Despite the clearly unethical nature of this practice it is still in widespread use. For orchestras it flouts a fundamental principle of custodianship, namely to serve the best interests of the institution at all times. It is fallacious to believe that a lesser conductor will place the music director in a better light. Professional orchestral musicians are artists, and while opinions about individuals will vary, they want high-quality leadership; it is unwise to issue invitations without consulting their expertise.

The selection of soloists, too, brings up the issue of personal empathy. Since almost every orchestral program requires at least one soloist, it is highly probable that unfamiliar soloists will be needed each season. Regular auditions of young artists bring their own rewards. Knowledge of established soloists is an essential requirement, either through live performance or accredited recommendation.

The music director relies on an artistic administrator to keep abreast of emerging soloists (this task is sometimes performed by the chief executive of the orchestra). For the most part it is not necessary or desirable for conductors to liaise directly with managers, agents, artists, and other music producers. Indeed, such contact can compromise an artistic administrator's ability to negotiate on behalf of the orchestra.

Superficially, it may appear that the personal interests of the music director can be in conflict with the best interests of the institution. This need not be so, provided the music director adheres to the principle outlined

earlier of “artistic excellence with fiscal responsibility.” This mantra provides the basis on which a music director can enjoy support throughout an organization and ultimately lead to significant achievement.

It should not be forgotten that a music director cannot be responsible for financial profligacy. Given the public nature of the role, the music director will be identified with the financial fortunes of the institution, but every orchestra has its own system of checks and balances to ensure money is spent wisely. The music director, in alliance with the artistic administrator and chief executive, will present a season that should be scrutinized in minute detail by a programming committee and approved at a board meeting. Many orchestras, anxious to take advantage of last-minute opportunities, or just plain slack in their budgeting arrangements, appear to accept and market programming before budgets have been properly established. This is inadvisable and does not fit the principle of “artistic excellence with fiscal responsibility.” Ultimately, boards, not conductors, sanction budgets and bear responsibility for financial excesses.

Period performance

The growth of period performance practice in the last three decades of the twentieth century created a major change in programming choices. Modern music directors are faced with a myriad of new interpretative issues in the performance of Baroque and Classical music. Sir Henry Wood famously performed Bach’s Third Brandenburg Concerto with a full-size string section. Such extravagance today would be risible.

There can be no comparison between historically informed and idiosyncratically malformed performance practice. The often omitted aria in Handel’s *Messiah*, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” is exquisite when sung by a counter-tenor, but orchestras not directed in an historically informed manner will fail to provide satisfactory accompaniment for this timbre of voice. The chorus “Behold the Lamb of God” in Prout’s edition, with five hundred singers, is bereft of rhythmic effect and fails to communicate the very tangible pathos achievable with a period interpretation. Of course, the obvious fun in Beecham’s recording of the “Hallelujah Chorus” can be enjoyed at home without the embarrassment of having to witness cymbals, bass drum, trombones and clarinets floundering around in the rest of the work. Mozart’s realization of *Messiah* and Stravinsky’s *Pulcinella* “after Pergolesi” remain as reminders that genius creates its own rules. This is a battle already won and unlikely to trouble future generations.

Requesting wooden sticks from the timpanist or *senza vibrato* from string players would have been unthinkable in the middle years of the twentieth

century. Baroque styles of bowing can be replicated sympathetically on the modern bow, though not as effectively as on a bow of Baroque design. On assuming the position of Principal Conductor of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Orchestra in Canada in 1981 John Eliot Gardiner requested that CBC purchase Baroque bows for each string player. Sadly, this innovation was not sustained by his successor, and corporate accountants sold off the bows after Gardiner resigned. Should a music director encounter intransigence for historically informed practices, the likelihood is that he or she has failed to create the necessary atmosphere of experimentation in rehearsal.

For financial as much as artistic reasons, orchestras need to perform the music of Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi. While high-quality period-performance ensembles will continue to provide Baroque and Classical aficionados with a very attractive alternative to the traditional symphony orchestra, we should not banish this repertoire from our larger symphony halls.

There should be no doubt about the stimulating effect of programming neglected or unfamiliar music. For most orchestral players, early music provides a welcome relief from the routine of Classical and Romantic repertoire. Programme committees and marketers faced with financial criteria prefer a more traditional approach, and a perfect balance between familiar and unfamiliar is probably unattainable. In this area the music director's powers of persuasion will be sorely tried.

Educational programming

Music directors should participate fully in concerts for children. School concerts are downgraded in importance when the artistic leader is absent. It makes no sense that the orchestra's most publicized individual should be absent from the podium when children are attending.

This is, however, a specialist area where most music directors lack experience and knowledge. The music director should take advice and support from leading music teachers in the community. For school concerts, the guiding principle is to ensure that the teacher's preparation in the classroom is directly connected to the positive experience of the concert, and that can only happen by working with the local music teachers.

British orchestras and composers have developed sophisticated education programs. Musicians visit schools within the community and work on creative ideas that see fruition in performances on stage with the full orchestra. Composers provide musical frameworks into which creative work done in the classroom is inserted. Such activity provides insight into the composition and performance of music and is of immense practical value

to teacher and pupil. It is also challenging to musicians who must develop ancillary skills not normally utilized when playing within the greater collective.

Music education is under threat in many countries and needs visible support. It is worth remembering that in 1749 J. S. Bach was involved in a public debate over whether music was a subject worth cultivating in schools.

Contemporary music

The greatest of curatorial opportunities facing a music director are in the field of contemporary music. Many music directors eschew new music, preferring to leave it to guest conductors and assistants, but orchestras often have access to special funding for composer-in-residence positions. A composer-in-residence should not only write music for the orchestra, he or she should also be involved in the presentation and selection of new music and in educational and community activities.

Some composers have powers of verbal communication that overcome prejudice with a *bon mot* from the stage. Others antagonize listeners with autobiographical tales of woe, or perhaps are only able to communicate with a potted version of their doctoral thesis. Such alienation is avoidable and is a problem of presentation. Some funding agencies (the Canada Council, for example) insist that orchestras present new music alongside traditional works within major subscription series concerts. This line of thought contradicts all established common-sense practice for curating new work in other art forms. Who would think of exhibiting Damien Hirst alongside Michaelangelo?¹⁰ The well-meaning logic behind such philosophy, though, is to develop the taste of current symphony subscribers.

The art of curating a concert is most exposed when programming new music. Murray Schafer's work *No Longer than Ten Minutes* grew from frustration at the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's commissioning policy in the early 1970s. Milton Babbitt, disillusioned by the recalcitrance of the New York Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein, spoke publicly about his frustrations in reference to his NYPO commission *Relata II*:

Who will hear this piece? No one is concerned about my interested musical colleagues. There will not be a broadcast, a tape, a recording. There won't even be a published score. My associates across the country will not have any opportunity to hear it unless they get to Philharmonic Hall next week . . . the regular Philharmonic audience does not want to hear this piece. And why should they have to? How can it be coherent for them? It's as though a colleague of mine in the field of philosophy were to read his

paper on the Johnny Carson show. The milieu is inappropriate for the event.¹¹

Babbitt's comments focus on the key issue in the relationship of orchestras to composers: what is the appropriate milieu for the presentation of new music?

Traditional orchestral audiences are perceived to be naturally antipathetic to the creative edge in musical art. At least one North American orchestra accepts major gifts of \$10,000 from donors towards a specific concert, provided that no contemporary music is performed. Nonetheless, there is a great deal of interest in new music from audiences that might be more familiar with modern jazz or some elements of popular music. Indeed, the BBC Promenade Concerts at the Royal Albert Hall in London regularly draw capacity crowds of over six thousand for new music events. Several orchestras have established major festivals of new music (San Francisco and Winnipeg). While much harder for independent ensembles, such events are regularly accomplished by subsidized broadcasting orchestras.

Orchestra schedules are established around an annual pattern of subscription concerts. The selling of individual subscriptions provides most orchestras with the necessary cash flow to operate. Breaking this flow of activity requires an orchestra to take a financial risk. If a free week emerges outside subscription and educational activities many orchestras seek to sell their services to other organizations, such as choirs or ballet and opera companies. These groups are unlikely to pay the full cost of the orchestra but will generally offset a large portion of the bill and not involve the orchestra in any promotional costs. The presentation of new music is easily sidelined for such activity, but board members are financial custodians of public grants and need constant reminding that new music provides a fascinating and absorbing philosophical commentary on our times. The tediously repetitive refrain of "wishing to be relevant" finds no greater satisfaction than in programming contemporary music. The seemingly complex vocabulary of new music is far less daunting than, for example, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, performed in English in Paris in 1827, when Hector Berlioz fell in love with Harriet Smithson's Ophelia without understanding a single word.¹²

An orchestra without a strong creative component risks fossilization. A period of such activity, intelligently curated, provides orchestras with a valuable focus on the creative edge of music. Working with contemporary composers and turning musicians' attention to developments in musical language will enhance the group's accomplishments in other areas of repertoire. The marketing benefits are similarly profound, with new audience members often from those demographics allegedly difficult to reach.



Figure 15.2 Bramwell Tovey with Leonard Bernstein, conducting a festival of the composer's music with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1986

Commissioning new works

While musical history is littered with the withered reputations of conductors and orchestras who have disdained new techniques that have proved permanent, the relationship between a music director and the contemporary composer remains potentially fraught with difficulty. The music director must be the servant of a composer, be they dead or alive, and in the case of the latter, whether or not the composer's personality is as challenging as their music.

The commissioning of composers is customarily at the discretion of the music director whose choices should be made based on close acquaintance with the composer's oeuvre. Sadly, because of local politics those choices often fall on composers who are excellent promoters of their own work. There is no correlation between quality of work and self-promotion.

The music director must be prepared to support a composer's work through the entire process of commissioning, writing, rehearsing, and performing. This can only be achieved if the music director is confident of the composer's technical abilities and individual aesthetic. Sympathy with the composer's style or language is not always necessary. An open mind will reap the greatest rewards: "Fearless for unknown shores . . . Chanting our chant of pleasant exploration."¹³

For most composers at the outset of their careers the opportunity to hear their work performed by a professional orchestra is a great watershed in their lives. For a conductor or orchestra it may be simply a prelude to a more self-aggrandizing work on the same programme. Inevitably, a new work will take more rehearsal time than a traditional work of similar length.

Composers may not appreciate that professional players should not peak at rehearsal and that an element of trust is a necessary function of everyday business between conductors and orchestras.¹⁴ Without that trust there is little likelihood of improvement in performance.

Musical integrity

All of the above provides a practical guide to the task of the conductor as artistic director. The most important attribute, however, is musical integrity. Many great conductors of the past were despotic music directors. In the twenty-first century such behaviour is socially as well as musically unacceptable. Nonetheless, inspiration, authority, and discipline are essential in the performance of symphonic music. The notion of *primus inter pares* remains. The music director is a visible leader on stage, in the rehearsal room, and in public. It can be a wearying responsibility. Covert leadership, that is to say decisive leadership that is organic, unostentatious, and unobtrusive in style, and founded upon musical integrity, is likely to prove the philosophical model in the new century.