21 The future of conducting

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When Hans Keller set about debunking musical professions he considered "phoney," his "hit list" was predictable: opera producers, music critics, musicologists, and of course, violists and conductors.[1] These professions were new to his generation as independent full-time activities; they were consequences of a historical process in Western Europe sociologists once termed "rationalization." During the second half of the nineteenth century, professions became more bureaucratized along lines of ever more narrowly defined specialties. These in turn demanded the creation of targeted processes of training and certification. Expertise, particularly in medicine and science, but in the arts as well became more competitive on a massive international scale justifying discrete divisions and narrow fields.

Music critics once did something else as professionals. They were composers (Schumann, Berlioz, Tchaikovsky, Debussy, and Virgil Thomson), teachers (Richard Wallaschek, Robert Hirschfeld, Eduard Hanslick, and Paul Henry Lang) or writers (consider Max Kalbeck, Ludwig Speidel, and, in the extreme George Bernard Shaw and Ezra Pound). Musicology became an autonomous academic field relatively late, and only in the generation of Guido Adler and Hermann Kretszchmar did music history emerge as a distinct branch of scholarship. In Keller's world (he trained in Vienna as a violinist and was forced to flee to England in 1938) great violists were actually violinists; no one set out to become a violist. Opera producers, in the contemporary sense, were entirely unknown.

Conducting as a profession

When Keller came of age, very few conductors only conducted and viewed conducting as their sole activity as a musician. Arthur Nikisch was the first major conductor to establish himself exclusively (unlike Hans von Bülow, who was a famous pianist and even composed) at a young age as a famous conductor. Nikisch more than anyone else shaped the image of the modern conductor, including an international career, a cult of personality, particularly in his primary venue, Leipzig, replete with a reputation for looks, charm, and charisma. Yet even Nikisch started out as a composer and violinist of promise and accomplishment. In the generation after Nikisch, Serge

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Koussevitzky had been a sensational bass virtuoso; Wilhelm Furtwängler, Paul Kletzki, and Otto Klemperer composed in earnest. Arturo Toscanini once played the cello, and trained for that task. Eugene Ormandy was a violinist, as was Charles Munch. George Szell, like Bruno Walter, harbored ambitions to become a composer and continued to play the piano magnificently in public. Sir Georg Solti maintained a discrete public presence as a pianist, as has James Levine. Ernest Ansermet was a mathematician and wrote tracts about music, as did Hermann Scherchen, including the subject of conducting. They both were distinguished public intellectuals. Fritz Reiner trained as a pianist even though he quickly focused, Nikisch-style, exclusively on his career as a conductor. But he may have been the proverbial exception that proves the rule.

Keller's critique of conducting as a profession was characteristic of many of the key figures from a musical and cultural world obliterated by the rise to power of the Nazis and the ensuing war. Franz Schmidt, Arnold Schoenberg, and Igor Stravinsky hated conductors, Schmidt because he suffered under one (Mahler) and the other two because they harbored ambitions to become one. For them the only legitimate route to conducting was composition, which explains in part Anton von Webern's ambitions and frustrations with respect to conducting. Keller absorbed an attitude best articulated by Schoenberg; the emergence of a radical musical modernism seemed to coincide with the unfortunate evolution of conducting as a separate profession. Consider the notorious confrontation Schoenberg recounted with a conductor whose response to the Op. 9 Chamber Symphony was that the score was incomprehensible. Schoenberg mused, "Why did he have to pick on me in this sudden burst of wanting to understand."[2]

Keller's critique of conducting as a profession assumes that conducting does indeed require a distinct technique. But it must emerge as a subsidiary of some other solid musical achievement and training, either in performance or composition. For Keller, the modern profession of conducting is a consequence of the unreasonable highlighting of the centrality and glamour of the role. This happened in the era of Toscanini and Furtwängler. The glorification of the conductor flourished coincidentally with the first truly successful commercial recordings; it reached its peak with the nearly parodistic cult of Karajan and Bernstein sixty years later, in the 1980s. Larger-than-life expectations came to surround conducting and were underscored by its elevated public status as a distinct profession. This in turn destroyed the orchestra by turning orchestral playing into "an unmusical profession."

The source of that disaster was that the conductor had been anointed in the public imagination as the overriding source of a great performance. Professional conductors assumed the trappings of Nikisch-style "charisma," as well as the power and responsibility for leading a first-class orchestra in

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a context in which all concerned – conductor, orchestra and the public – assumed that the conductor had to be "at every given moment, more musical, more intelligent, more knowledgeable than every single player he conducts."[3] On these terms the professional conductor is bound to fail. Therefore "he has no artistic right to overrule" players who frequently know more, and are often indeed more musical, if not more experienced. Indeed no conductor, no matter how well trained, can fulfill the expectations Keller associated with conducting – not even Lorin Maazel and Pierre Boulez, who are perhaps the most musically skilled conductors working today. The modern professional conductor ends up either faking or criticizing musicians unreasonably, creating a disastrous morale. The cultivation of conducting as a profession has legitimated mannerisms and institutionalized habits of authority that exacerbate the natural tensions between orchestra musicians and maestros.

The conductor as musician

Keller's point, that conductors needed to do something else successfully and publicly in addition to conducting, remains valid. The artistic relationship between a conductor and a professional orchestra can survive only if the conductor is perceived by the musicians in the orchestra as contributing to music beyond the podium. The obvious collateral activities are composing (e.g. Mahler, Bernstein, and André Previn) and instrumental performance (e.g. Daniel Barenboim, Christoph Eschenbach, and in the past, Eugène Ysaÿe). As shown by the "early" music movement, there is now a third option, scholarship in the field of music, particularly if related to performance practices (e.g. William Christie). All conductors, even the instrumentalists and scholars, must have tried composition and be able to think like a composer. If composition and fundamental instrumental competence remain minimum prerequisites, then a high level of command of the history of music has become a third necessary attribute. Only with an active musical identity independent of conducting can the conductor, over time, command respect and lead with sufficient authority without having always to know better than the players on stage. A conductor's musical growth and distinguished musical personality must not be entirely dependent on orchestral musicians functioning as the conductor's subordinates.

The musical work that is not conducting should preferably be an activity orchestral musicians neither wish to nor can emulate, but consider useful to the conductor's role. One reason so many pianists become successful as conductors is that so few of the players in an orchestra ever claim to be as good a pianist. The same holds true for composition. The enterprise the

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conductor does apart from conducting must be outstanding. If it turns out to have been in the past, as in the case of Charles Munch's little-known career as a fine violinist (he had been concertmaster of the Leipzig Gewandhaus) it should have been visibly competitive. However, as the often disappointing conducting careers of former principal players in orchestras have shown, it is not enough to have been once as good as one of the players in front of you. Players in the orchestra help a conductor and engage in rehearsal if they sense a distinct contribution they themselves cannot make; they will give what they can in exchange for what a conductor uniquely provides. They do so not because the conductor is, in Keller's words "more musical and more intelligent," but because he or she has something special to offer.

The conductor must have the technical skill to conduct in order to communicate his or her distinct contribution. That is not always the case. Conducting demands the acquisition of technique that requires time and training to develop. Aaron Copland, like so many other composers and dozens of great solo instrumentalists, remained a mediocre conductor despite his great achievements. But once one attains the requisite technique, one should not live out one's professional life just as a conductor. The relevance of this idea could not be greater than in the current situation in which the symphony orchestra and classical musical culture, from concert life to recording, composition, and broadcasting find themselves.

A key practical consequence of the self-image of conducting as an autonomous self-sufficient profession is misleading advice derivative of particular images of "professional" behavior. Does one arrive as a guest conductor with one's own parts for works of the standard repertory except in exceptional circumstances? The answer is no.[4] In each city, orchestra, and venue the acoustic conditions and playing habits are different. Listen first, and do not presume to anticipate the outcome. The orchestra one encounters has its own experience making all the variety of sounds and articulations and balances any conductor might seek; the players may know how to adjust, particularly to an acoustic with which they are far more familiar. What the conductor needs to know, after listening, is how to ask for and make changes as a result of what he or she hears. Articulation and balances can be achieved using several different means. Furtwängler frequently stopped in rehearsal, even with his own orchestra in his own hall, and mused silently about what the orchestra or a soloist in the orchestra had just done before deciding whether he thought he needed to adjust it or not.

One needs to respect what the players are prepared to provide in response to one's physical technique as a conductor. Then one can define changes in sound, using different bowings or fingerings, for example. In the "fast" metronome markings in Beethoven, old bowings and fingerings will not work. But the players must participate in finding their means to achieve

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the articulations the conductor seeks. When the string sound in cantabile is not *semplice* enough and the playing is in high positions, a suggestion of a simpler fingering suffices; one does not need to say precisely which fingering works best. There is no universally valid way to achieve a particular effect, appropriate to all spaces and places. Vibrato is a perfect case in point; general rules collapse under the weight of differentials in the quality and type of instruments and the varying traditions of string playing. The same point applies to bow use. Orchestras that rely on the left hand for color and shading quickly adjust to suggestions focused on bow speed and placement. Marking the parts can be counterproductive and reduce a cadre of well-trained players with pride in their professionalism into passive-aggressive skeptics.

Perhaps as a result of access to a staggering diversity of recordings and a sophistication regarding interpretation and texts, musicians no longer accept the rhetoric and ideology of "the one and only correct way" to perform a work. Gunther Schuller still assumes an anachronistic adherence to a Toscanini-era modernist prejudice that there is objectively a "right" way to perform a work. A conductor needs today to be respected as a musician beyond conducting because a mood of collaboration in rehearsal toward fashioning an interpretation must be generated. One cannot rely any longer on an outdated and reductive notion of truth-telling, or its dubious descendants visible among today's conductors: narcissism and authoritarian mannerisms. As the case of Schuller reveals, when someone of his prodigious talent and exceptional accomplishment outside of conducting (as horn player, composer, writer, scholar, editor, arranger, teacher, administrator, and advocate) steps on a podium, the orchestra will go much farther than expected to accommodate him. They will tolerate nasty and harsh outbursts and even limited technical prowess in terms of baton technique, because they respect his musicianship, interpretative choices, and accomplishment.

Since the need for real conducting technique combined with a collateral musical activity is today reinforced by a cultural context that legitimates interpretative pluralism, it is sad that so many truly great musicians (ranging from Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau to Mstislav Rostropovich) have had only limited success as conductors. They never came to grips with the technique conducting requires. Gary Bertini tells of his experience with Arthur Rubinstein and the Jerusalem Symphony in Israel during the 1970s. Before a scheduled sound check, Rubinstein (then in his mid-eighties) confessed to always having wanted to try his hand at conducting. It was arranged that he would be given one hour to conduct his favorite piece. He chose Brahms's Symphony No. 3. He began and things quickly fell apart; he tried again with no luck. Rubinstein went to the piano and played the opening as he wanted it to sound. He returned to the podium and again a train wreck occurred,

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at which point Rubinstein put the baton down and smiled, saying "Now I finally understand."[5] Conducting looks deceptively easy.

New standards

The professional image of conductor as absolute dictator and authoritarian presence stemmed from the reputation of Mahler. The conductor as tyrant was, according to some critics, a model also deliberately cultivated by Toscanini. In Mahler's case, his legendary temper and dictatorial manner derived from an intensity and fanaticism that reflected the fact that he, like several of his near contemporaries, including Nikisch, Bülow, and Toscanini, were path-breaking representatives of new standards of public performance. They possessed an aesthetic ambition novel to most nineteenth-century orchestras. The ensemble Mahler inherited in Vienna in 1897 from Hans Richter (no less) was truly without discipline in the modern sense. One reason the tradition of the professional conductor as dictator had become out of date by the time Keller wrote is the remarkable progress in the professionalism of orchestral playing. We forget how astonished critics were at the level of precision and refinement when Hans von Bülow traveled to Vienna with his Meiningen Court Orchestra in the 1880s. The generation of Mahler and Toscanini dramatically improved discipline, particularly in the opera house, and pioneered new standards of public performance.

A widespread increase in higher standards of performance has been made permanent and universal by recording. Today's orchestras, even in the provinces of Europe and North America, are filled with exceptional players and musicians, who play accurately and with subtlety. Their skills are enviable even by comparison with late-nineteenth-century standards in major cities. The tone set by Toscanini with the NBC Orchestra, emulated by Rodzinski (who is said once to have brought a revolver to a rehearsal), Szell, and Reiner, became increasingly out of step with the character, education, training, and capacities of the players they themselves recruited. That generation of conductors established standards of performance with means no longer compatible with sustaining those standards. The conductor of the present and future will face technical prowess and a level of general musical skill in an orchestra far higher than ever previously existed. This is why individuals, even rank amateurs, without any talent or technique, seem to deliver respectable performances when they conduct. At no other time in history could orchestras of quality sustain the careers of so many undisciplined but theatrically alluring personalities on the podium.

As Keller predicted, there remains the chronic issue of morale. The problem of orchestral discipline remains unsolved. At least the famous dictators

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of the past were great. The new aspirants to the cult of personality or the dictatorial manner (and there are some) are less compelling. Morale has deteriorated as orchestras increasingly face the so-called professional conductor who cannot command the respect of the players. Ironically, the economics of today's orchestras and opera houses demand more technique and not less. More has to be accomplished in, by any reasonable historical comparison, severely restricted rehearsal time. Sergiu Celibidache's attitude notwithstanding, standard rehearsal allotments usually suffice with modern orchestras for most programs.

Given the remarkably high individual standard of competence among instrumentalists, it has become increasingly frustrating for string players to be in a section of an orchestra; the newest members in the back of a section play far better than their predecessors. Even wind players, who generally derive more personal satisfaction from orchestral work, often resent having to bend their will and adjust phrasing to the judgment of a conductor, should the conductor have a judgment and the capacity to control it. There is an acquired reluctance to play at one's best unless either forced or inspired to, in most if not all orchestras, since there is a conflict between the inherent artistry of the individual player and the routine lack of individuality demanded by orchestral playing. From the perspective of modern orchestras, the quality of performances has become too tied to conductors whose skills, preparation, and personality are so often suspect, and for good reason. The exceptions in terms of morale are those orchestras that are self-governing and autonomous; the London Symphony Orchestra, and the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics, for example, select who conducts them. These ensembles take a pride in setting their own exacting minimum standards of performance, no matter who is on the podium.

The morale problem inherent in modern orchestras poses a special challenge to the contemporary conductor. Conductors who refuse to lead by dictatorial imposition or the display of superior knowledge at all times often discover that in some orchestras, poor intonation or wrong notes will not be corrected unless the conductor publicly points them out, even though the players know they have occurred. Orchestras can unwittingly deteriorate into acting like high-school students faced with a substitute teacher. If the conductor does not object, either he does not care or does not hear what is wrong. Why then fix it, even if it means a poorer performance? The contribution the conductor must make is to lead colleagues to work together to invest themselves in communicating as best they can through musical performance; this in turn requires appropriate psychological strategies. An atmosphere of technical collaboration must be cultivated in rehearsal, including the encouragement of questions and the querying of details. In a recent recording session, for example, a few players thought, as they should

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have, that perhaps a passage in a Strauss opera where C naturals were pitted against C sharps revealed an error in the parts. It created the opportunity to explain the unusual but striking compositional idea. The assertion of authority would have been more efficient, but far less effective. Intonation in winds and brass must be monitored by players on stage, who know one another's habits, not from the podium. A conductor can tune a single chord, but sustaining intonation over the course of a single work is a matter of habit controlled internally. Players must adjust to one another. A music director can solve the problem over time, but a guest must rely on the players after offering an opinion about what is wrong, given the voicing and scoring. Even with perfect pitch, intonation is relative. The violinist Roman Totenberg used to complain that perfect pitch was frequently a hindrance. He had to adjust because his pitch sense was invariably slightly higher or lower than the orchestras with which he played. Being flat or sharp is frequently a matter of perspective, even when being out of tune is undeniable.

Conductors should not be alone on the look-out for misprints and other errors as they rehearse. They should reward the active engagement of the members of the orchestra. The modern conductor must create an atmosphere in rehearsal in which section members feel able to raise questions, perhaps about bowing, articulation, or even notes, even proffering an opinion of how something might be improved. The conductor also has to be quick to recognize and disarm illegitimate intransigence or habitual rebelliousness. Orchestras know their own personnel and admire the conductor who handles the predictable arrogance or incompetence with finesse. Without a sense of common purpose and common responsibility a great performance is impossible. The modern marketing of the conductor, the mannerisms and style of self-promotion, and the undue public and journalistic fascination have made it hard to generate the requisite atmosphere of collaboration.

What has to change given the high quality of instrumental playing now in evidence is indeed the way conducting is practiced and conductors are trained. In this sense Keller's critique is helpful. Crucial as well is the reorganization of orchestras, creating opportunities for small ensemble performances for all players within the season, and allowing rotation in seating, solo and teaching opportunities, and player participation in programming. Likewise the perception of symphony concerts must change so that the players are not constantly reminded of their relative anonymity and disenfranchisement. The musicians on whom all orchestral performances depend should not be encouraged to withdraw from the deep professional identification with their work with which they began their careers. One key reason for an endemic spirit of resentment and resistance among first-class players in ensembles that could sound ten times as good as they routinely do is indeed the way conducting is practiced and viewed as a profession. The final

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reading of a work will in the end always be the conductor's responsibility. Therefore, the conductor has to bring to the podium something that holds the attention of the players, some value added. That special contribution to interpretation and performance quality will not come from the experience of conducting alone, no matter how much one does it. The manner in which conductors now have their careers advanced by more conducting of the same repertoire is misguided. The public, and ultimately conductors themselves, have allowed themselves to be deluded as to the role and autonomy of conducting in music and performance. Conducting must remain, as it originally was, part of a composite career in music.

The contemporary predicament

The challenges facing the contemporary conductor are unprecedented. First, classical concert music has drifted to the periphery of contemporary culture. Its cultural and political significance has atrophied. Orchestras and the tradition of composition for the orchestra were, in the nineteenth century, central aspects of national identity; at a minimum, they were socially and politically significant to civic life, even in America, where classical music has always suffered from its origins as European and not quintessentially American. During the Cold War, orchestras and orchestral composition were priorities in Communist regimes, as hallmarks of the successful democratization of high culture to the masses and internationally visible symbols of state prestige. That unique system of support has disappeared. By the late twentieth century, audiences seemed visibly older and were declining all over Europe and North America. Concerts appeared no longer to attract young people. A universal decline (with the exception perhaps of the Far East) in general musical education and amateurism has been observed, ironically coincident with the notable increase in the production of highly skilled professional instrumentalists. But for whom will they play?

Second, as classical music's larger role in culture was diminished, in favor of a vibrant and commercially viable array of popular cultural forms, the demand for and interest in an ongoing tradition of new music for the orchestra have also diminished. Blame has been placed on the mid-twentieth century, in which a radical modernism in music seemed to dominate. But it is not clear that modernism was ever so powerful. The fact is that today, there are no careers to be made through composition of concert music to the extent that was possible in Copland's generation. There are exceptions in every nation (e.g. John Adams and Philip Glass in the United States) but as the music-publishing industry will attest, new music for orchestras, of any kind, has become a fringe enterprise. The introduction of new music

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no longer rivals the attention and importance given new works in New York in 1893, Munich in 1910, or Paris and Vienna in 1913. In these years and places the premieres of Dvořák's "New World" Symphony, Mahler's Symphony No. 8, and works by Stravinsky and Alban Berg were controversial and highly significant public events. With the decline in the importance of new music, a link between present and past that has always been decisive to the conductor's task as interpreter has been severed. No conductor prior to the mid-1960s made a career as an interpreter of music from the past without a profound commitment to contemporary music. For Toscanini it was Puccini. For Reiner it was Strauss, Bartók and Weiner. For Koussevitzky and Stokowski, it was Stravinsky, Berg, Copland, and practically everyone else. For Walter it was Mahler and Pfitzner. For Munch and Monteux it was their French contemporaries. For Mravinsky it was Shostakovitch. The engagement with a contemporary aesthetic has been a key defining influence on the way the history of music was presented by conductors in performance. Nikisch's capacity to redeem the reputation of the then new Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 5 was influenced by direct encounters with new music and its authors (Wagner and Bruckner). These experiences shaped Nikisch's view of Beethoven, just as Wagner's compositional habits defined, for many generations, the manner in which Beethoven was idealized in performance. For those conductors who compose (Maazel, Previn, and Esa-Pekka Salonen), the relative irrelevance of new classical music is daunting. If the concert repertory is no longer going to expand through the addition of new works at the rate it once did in the years between 1820 and 1920, what can replace the role played by new music in sustaining a vital musical imagination in the interpretation of the music of the past?

Third, the economics of symphonic music have become dire; subsidy and patronage for orchestras and symphony concerts are more needed than ever before. In the post-World War I era, radio broadcasting capitalized on the increased market of educated individuals: classical music still retained its prestige as a widespread symbol of culture. Recording was the next boom industry and it helped carry the day well into the 1960s. In the early twenty-first century, broadcasting and the recording of symphonic music are economically moribund. They will not revive. The relative costs have far outweighed the capacity to earn a profit in either concerts or recordings. Just as classical and symphonic music have lost their centrality and cultural and political importance, their need for state support and philanthropy have increased. Yet the capacity and inclination to respond, in both North America and all of Europe, are understandably diminished. We are still in the grip of a reaction against the welfare state and notions of government subsidy, particularly of culture; the marketplace reigns supreme, with its criterion of competitive commercial viability. Furthermore only a so-called "elite" seems really

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concerned. In democracies, it is the majority that influences government spending. In the private sector, those with new money, insofar as they seek public recognition through cultural philanthropy, are more interested in the visual arts from painting to the movies; their tastes rarely tend to classical music. There are no parallels to the robber-baron generation that formed the major orchestras as civic contributions in American cities. Meanwhile, Europe has little if any tradition of private philanthropy; there is no evident surrogate to compensate for declining state support in the face of the rising costs of maintaining orchestras. Austria can justify subsidy of concert life in Vienna and Salzburg because classical music, packaged like Mozart candies, is a central part of the Austrian tourist industry. But elsewhere, who cares about a costly cultural institution with little if any audience or broad significance?

Fourth, technology and the attendant changes in the conduct of modern life in North America and Europe have conspired to render the crisis of the modern orchestra severe. With the advent of the compact disc, a relatively stable and indestructible format for recording exists. There will be ongoing improvements in sound recording, but they will not revive the economics of recording for orchestras. Any individual who can afford to attend concerts can buy a myriad of recordings as permanent possessions. No matter how often they are used, they won't scratch, melt, bend, or require fastidious care to help them survive. The CD format has permitted the vast expansion of the recorded library. Every conceivable work of music is recorded, albeit often by obscure ensembles and poorly. The massive archive of recorded sound – from the backlists of record companies from the 1950s, on to the radio archives of Europe, East and West, including Russia – is now available in CD format. One can buy literally dozens and dozens of versions of all the works in the standard repertory, conducted by old-timers and new faces. Major orchestras still record, using subsidies and fulfilling contract obligations with their players, although the rate of new recording has declined to a trickle. Reissues flourish. One can get on CD everything Reiner and Toscanini released, and everything they did not, including live broadcasts and pirate recordings.

All this can be listened to at home with fantastic high fidelity. Who wants to hear some unknown conductor, particularly not with one of the leading orchestras of the world, perform Beethoven, when, in the comfort of one's home, one can listen to Toscanini, even Oskar Fried, Mengelberg, and Mravinsky or Roger Norrington and Carlos Kleiber (if not also his father Erich)? The existence of the extensive library of recorded performances, combined with the atrophy in the role of new music, has wreaked havoc on how conductors today approach the standard repertory. Too many interpretative choices are made in reaction to recordings. The quest for originality

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of the late Giuseppe Sinopoli (1946–2001) was artificial and distorted, in large measure because a seemingly complete range of interpretative solutions had already been documented and he lacked a new source for himself. The public has fallen under the sway of nostalgia, helped by critics and record labels; we are told that the era of great conducting has passed, just as the great era of violinists, pianists, sopranos and everything else. Recordings have created a deceptively dangerous source for new conductors, as a potential short-circuit of the task of framing an interpretation for performance.

For the potential audience, the seat at home is more comfortable and one can even pause to get a snack. But classical radio is dying because even this allure of home listening is itself a declining habit. For all the richness of what can be bought on CD, no one is buying any more because no one wants to listen. It is estimated that in the United States, there are not more than a hundred thousand individuals who buy more than one classical CD a year, and that statistic covers albums featuring famous opera stars singing Christmas carols.[6] The average time spent listening to classical radio is fifteen minutes per day. The marketing research shows that the audience seeks something it already knows. No one sits by the CD player, or the radio, and listens to an hour-long work, much less a concert or opera recording. With the extension of more rapid and adequate Internet access, individuals will be able to access and download high-fidelity audio and video directly, including live performances from anywhere in the world: we will be able to attend and document concerts from a remote location. Yet with all these possibilities, do we not still have something to offer through the tradition of public concerts, that might make more of our contemporaries inclined to attend and listen to live symphonic music?

Creating a concert community

The sad fact, however, is that the social impetus behind concert attendance has disappeared. The audience for concerts before 1914, and still, albeit to a lesser degree, before 1950, was a coherent social grouping. Audience members knew one another. The concert was a place to be seen and to greet if not converse with one's peers. With the advent of suburbia, the enviable democratization of education, and the fluidity of demography, there is far more anonymity in concert audiences. The social elite whose predecessors were loyal to the symphony concerts would now rather be seen and meet in galleries, museums, and Hollywood events. The result is that ticket buyers to concerts do not expect to meet someone or to socialize except with the one person that may go with them. The concert now seems like an isolating event. One won't know who one's neighbor will be, and few will be friendly.

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Nothing about the concert asks the individual to become acquainted with other audience members. The audience is silent and passive. For someone flirting with the idea of going to a concert, the prospect is daunting since the atmosphere is intimidating. The unsophisticated attendees are stared at if they clap at the wrong time, make noise, or speak when the music is playing. Kurt Masur stared down a New York audience for making too much noise, but he missed the point. He failed to realize that the concert ritual we have inherited cannot be preserved as a sterile, quasi-religious event that forces the listener into submission. In the late eighteenth century, audiences applauded in the middle, as in a jazz concert. We need to find ways of making the concert more inviting in a manner that brings audience members to life and offers them a new platform of shared experience.

The orchestra concert must, in most cities, seek to fashion, in the best sense, a community of common commitment, bereft of snobbery. Classical music, particularly the orchestral concert, has been victimized by its defenders. Reading music and skilled amateurism are rare among concertgoers. They have been replaced by record collecting as the means by which an individual becomes expert. Classical music today seems to demand more prior knowledge and training than it really does. Otherwise educated and curious individuals who have finished college, but never encountered orchestral music, have become scared off and say "But I don't know anything about classical music." A parallel absence of expertise does not prevent them from going to movies, the theatre, or museums and galleries. The naive but intelligent listener is not welcomed by symphony orchestras. Yet the untrained art-watcher or movie-lover have been embraced by comparable institutions and industries in the visual arts. No doubt instrumental music is not as accessible as those art forms with words and images, and requires either training or some mediation. Finding that mode of mediation is a major challenge in itself. One crucial disappointment has been the role played by scholars and teachers of music in the university. Instead of strengthening the tradition of music appreciation in undergraduate teaching, the experts in the American academy have taken the opposite direction. The place once occupied by basic music classes has been supplanted by courses on film and art history.

The most convenient solutions have been resounding failures, including so-called crossover concerts, popularizing the repertoire, or trying to spice up the concert with entertainment gimmicks. The worst of the ineffective attempts to enliven the concert have been those that explicitly "dumb down" the experience, particularly talking to the audience in either an offhand or humorous manner by conductors who actually have very little to say beyond platitudes. The problem of how to make a nineteenth-century ritual, in spaces either built a century ago or designed in imitation of them,

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alluring to a contemporary audience remains unsolved. However, a crucial clue to the solution is the fact that classical music faces the largest and best-educated potential audience in its history, with the most leisure time, most disposable income and the longest lifespan. They also, despite the widespread illiteracy in music, have the easiest access to learning the repertoire, new and old, through listening and reading about it. To exploit this potential, old tricks will not work. Since classical music and the symphony orchestra have receded in relative importance and economic significance, the efforts at marketing the new face and good looks of the next "star" have become ineffective. These are the harsh realities the modern conductor faces, not only at every concert, but particularly when he or she becomes a music director of an orchestra. There are no careers to be made the way Karajan and Bernstein did, because the infrastructure and context have changed so profoundly since the immediate post-World War II decades when their fame was established. Yet there are literally thousands of orchestras – professional, semi-professional and community orchestras – around the world, and many aspiring conductors. How can they address the current predicament?

Rethinking concerts

There are no glib answers. Yet there are helpful basic principles that can lead the conductors to develop responses to the challenges. At every concert the conductor must have a defined reason for conducting the music chosen for that particular audience: the demands of the specific time and place must be addressed. The conductor must forge a construct of meaning that confronts the reality that every concert is a civic and political event. The word politics is used here in its ancient Greek meaning of the "polis." People have gathered at a concert for a reason. That reason may seem mere habit, unarticulated tradition, or as in some cases, the belief that concerts and listening to live music are a refuge from everyday politics, a distraction, or an opportunity to experience art defined as a higher realm than the mundane. In each case the conductor must figure out how to respond. One cannot conduct thoughtlessly, as if in some abstract universal time and space, with an imaginary ideal audience in mind. The definitions of entertainment and boredom are not normative or stable; they are different in different places. The era of the travelling, jetsetting music director, who spends eight weeks a year in a city and has no profound link to the community, are numbered if not gone. Sir Simon Rattle set an example of how this problem can be solved during his tenure in Birmingham, as Leonard Slatkin (b. 1944) did in St. Louis. However will Sir Simon, now elevated to superstar status, grasp the needs of a unified Berlin, in a new Germany, in a shifting European

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Community, to reinvent the role of the Berlin Philharmonic? The model of Karajan no longer works, as it did not for Claudio Abbado. Will Slatkin forge a new place for an orchestra in America's capital city? Few orchestras have so much untapped opportunity.

Whatever the results, the music director of the future must create and develop a civic and cultural purpose for the orchestra's home audience. Likewise the guest conductor has to ask the question, "Why this repertoire at this time to this audience?" well before formulating the musical interpretation. These "extra-musical" questions (if there is genuinely such a category) help determine the "musical" decisions. If one is invited to conduct in a place with a sense of its own traditions, particularly with respect to repertoire and performance practice, then a decision to counter them may be in order. Nothing can be more satisfying than rehearsing a first-class American orchestra, who came of age trusting the so-called "authentic" manner of performing Bach that evolved between 1960 and 1980, in the arrangements of Bach by Mahler and Stokowski. The rubato, *portamento*, vibrato, languorous tempos, and gradual dynamic shifts are foreign to the players and shocking to the audience. One must resist a reductive nationalism that claims that Czech orchestras play Dvořák and Janáček best, Hungarian Bartók, Polish Szymanowski, Viennese Bruckner, and American Copland. Alternatively, accept a guest invitation if the program justifies the individual conductor's presence as representative of a culture or tradition. The meaning of the concert and certainly the meaning of the orchestra as a whole in its community are profoundly influenced by non-musical and local factors that conductors must study, contemplate and engage. Conductors must become public intellectuals even more than Bülow, Toscanini, Mahler, Mengelberg, Furtwängler, and Bernstein were, for better or worse. The declining fortunes of symphonic music demand that conductors engage the issues in the world in which the symphonic music tradition seeks a place, much like those few conductors of the past who faced the challenge of fascism and dictatorship, either as collaborators or opponents.

In order to accomplish this, the conductor must know something more than music, narrowly defined. And in the field of music, the minimum knowledge of music history and repertoire, including techniques of research, must be far greater than in the past. Furthermore, it is important to remember that there never has been a great conductor who did not possess a sophisticated knowledge of literature, painting, and history. Too often the training of professional musicians and the atmosphere of competition renders the ambition of becoming generally articulate and literate irrelevant, but it is not. Great music-making derives its source not only from musical texts, but from constructed meaning that depends on the so-called extra-musical. The conductor of the future must be an intellectual in the

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best sense. Furthermore the remnants of the corrupted simplification of the concept of music, derived from absolutist aesthetics, must be put to rest. It has become widely held that music is somehow abstract, with purely self-referential meaning. This idea stems from Eduard Hanslick's 1854 tract *On the Beautiful in Music*, with its legendary notion of music as "tonally moving forms."[7] Hanslick did not maintain a consistent position and might have been horrified at subsequent elaborations of his idea. Music is never entirely detached from meaning understood in terms of words and images. The conductor of the future must recognize that music must be an indispensable form of life and human expression, with connections to life, either intentional on the composer's part or forged in the act listening. These connections are not merely self-referential, but relate to intimacy, psychology, biography, memory, and then to all aspects of thought, including other art forms. There is, in the end, some narrative the conductor must create through interpretation. That construct is determined not only by a reading of the score but the context of performance. The performance of Szymanowski in Poland by the same conductor will be something different for musical and extra-musical reasons from one in England. Likewise, performing Charles Ives outside of America must necessarily influence interpretative decisions, if for no other reason than that one cannot communicate Ives with non-American audiences the same way one does in America; yet Ives can be enthusiastically received in novel ways, and played differently.

Concert programming must change. Concerts should be curated the way museums curate exhibitions. No museum hangs a Da Vinci next to a Mondrian with a new work by a young artist to the side.[8] The assumption needs to be abandoned that any three works go together. The conductor has to have an explanation of a concert program design that is more than "I want" or "I like." The audience needs to sense an illuminating and enlightening logic. This has been termed "thematic" programming. The theme however cannot be subjective taste per se, unless a concert is personalized like a shirt and explicitly billed "Maestro X's favorites." Finding a valid underlying theme applies even to single-work concerts. The ideal concert season presents the audience with groupings, ongoing explorations of several approaches and ideas, concurrently and perhaps over a number of years.

Themes can be historical. One can develop concerts around the history of music, starting with biography: the composer and the historical context of his or her work. There are several approaches within the history of music, from influence and reaction, to context. Beyond music history there are formal issues in music that generate themes. These can be quasi-historical or purely formalistic. The most potent thematic rubrics are those that connect music with art, literature, politics, history, philosophy, and religion. This strategy also provides opportunities to forge alliances and collaboration with

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other cultural institutions in a city or region, from museums and libraries to community centers, schools, and universities. Themes that have powerful musical components sufficient to define many concerts include parallels to the history of art, connections to particular writers, responses to historical events and figures, relationships between music and ideas, and images of national identity. The list is endless and is in part determined by the specific location. Thematic rubrics are not always transportable. They have to fit local circumstances. Some thematic structures travel well but always require adjustment to local musical culture and habits.

Thematic programs, however, must fulfill three indispensable criteria. First, thematic programs have to be designed primarily by the conductor, not by a special brand of "artistic" personnel or programming staff; performance cannot be separated from the selection of repertoire. This is why the intellectual training of the conductor, particularly in history, is so crucial. Second, programs cannot be didactic in a simplistic manner. Third, the theme has to be comprehensible, clearly legitimate, and not intrusive. Effective thematic programs tend to have underlying historical justification. The theme has to offer the audience an evident linkage that does not determine how or for what to listen. There have been notorious thematic programs designed by individuals who wish to teach an audience that there are connections between works on the program. This is offensive. As in a good exhibition, the program must be constructed so that quite divergent responses are possible, including the possibility that the individual can ignore the overriding theme. As Thomas Bernhard's great monologue novel *Old Masters* makes clear, the Tintoretto painting, *Man with the White Beard*, which the protagonist returned to gaze at nearly every day for over thirty years, was hung by the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna in a room defined by historical and regional criteria. The classification did not intrude in the individual's capacity to think for himself. So it should be at a concert.

There is after all, no neutral program. The standard potpourri system is arguing a weak case. Its argument is that music should not be organized like other art forms, and that subjective taste of the performer and presumed audience is sufficient. The mixed concert that offers a new or recent work, usually brief, a concerto with a soloist and a major work to close is a recent convention. The programs of a century ago were quite different, if for no other reason than that they included much more contemporary music.

What has driven programming in recent years is the growing masterpiece mania. As audiences have become less reliable if not less numerous, the conventional wisdom, bolstered by market research, has been that repertoire sells. The repertoire that sells is well known and famous. Since audiences are said to dislike contemporary music, a work in Romantic style written

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by a composer long dead whose name is not familiar (e.g. Josef Suk) is rejected because the audience will think it is a new work. If one wants an audience, we are told, give them Beethoven, Mozart, Mahler, Chopin, and a few chestnuts by composers whose other work is never played, like Bartók, Dukas, or Elgar. Even critics and veteran music-lovers have come to the bizarre conclusion that everything played has to be compared to some few greats. If one plays Hans Rott's symphony, someone is going to say it isn't Mahler, just as someone who encounters a symphony by Chadwick or Myaskovsky will respond that it isn't Brahms or Shostakovich.

Only in music is such nonsense tolerated. We see, buy, and hang art without accusing it of not being the *Mona Lisa*. We read and reread books without damning them for not being *Mrs. Dalloway*. And we certainly see movies without comparing them to a few movie classics. We all go enthusiastically to see painters from the past we have not considered before and read authors of the past whose reputations have come and gone. If we treated art the way we treat the history of symphonic literature from Haydn to the present, 90 percent of the collection hanging in museums would be relegated to storage, leaving three rooms open in the Louvre and the Hermitage, and bookstores would be empty.

Conductors are sitting on a treasure trove of music, most of it composed during the last hundred and fifty years, that lies unperformed or underperformed. This includes orchestral music, concertos, oratorios, choral music, and opera. Some of it is by famous names and some not. Curiously enough, every composer, not only Mahler or Wagner (and including quite obscure ones), seems to have if not a society then a band of dedicated advocates determined to propagate that composer's music. Most of this music from the past was once highly regarded and is quite stunning and more than deserving of performance, several times. Some of it loses its allure even after a few concerts, but the list of works, including concertos, that sustain interest over time, is massive. The problem is that soloists are reluctant to learn works for just one concert. Elmar Olivera had no success programming the Joachim "Hungarian" Violin Concerto despite two successful concert performances, including one in London and a recording. Yet the work is beautiful and thrilling. The same can be said for the violin concertos of Othmar Schoeck, Nikos Skalkottas, and Roberto Gerhard.

Once one abandons repeating the same works, it becomes clear that simple thematic rubrics invite the inclusion of less-performed wonderful works. And for those who never seem to tire of the same few works, nothing is so refreshing as performing them in a new context, surrounded with their own contemporaries, or works that influenced that favorite piece. The most dramatic consequence of opening up the full range of historical repertoire is that it offers the conductor a legitimate and fresh perspective towards

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the challenges of interpretation. The neglected repertoire holds keys to new insights on the limited list of masterpieces.

Combining under-represented repertoire from the past with a logic for programming concerts can restore a sense of purpose to live concerts. Something happens in such concerts that cannot be captured on records. A dynamic of interest and collective engagement, marked by curiosity and surprise, is generated within the audience. A welcome context is created for performing specially commissioned new music and recently composed works. Above all, the place of the symphony concert is redefined along the lines of a vibrant museum. The history of music can be systematically, controversially, and provocatively represented, with a serious, even scholarly critical and explanatory apparatus, replete with an educational function. A replacement for the "playbill" program and traditional program notes is long overdue. The civic importance of the orchestra as an institution should no longer be justified merely as a species of entertainment, but as a living museum, a cultural and educational enterprise that extends into the field of contemporary art. The sad fact is that the constant repetition of the same repertory, relieved by the occasional premiere, is not only false conventional wisdom, it has helped render the concert and the orchestra marginal even in terms of these goals. To lead the orchestra and realize its promise, the conductor of the future, apart from having impressive technical and musical achievements, must possess the necessary general education and the will to reconnect our vital tradition of musical expression to the culture, society, and politics of our time.

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