

# Conducting Amateur Ensembles

by

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Conducting an amateur ensemble is both a wonderful and demanding experience. Throughout your career as a conductor, you are likely to work with a number of ensembles at different levels. You may encounter everything from beginner groups and student orchestras, to ensembles that operate at a professional level. Regardless of age group and ability, most musicians will be working towards the same goal, which is to sound as good as possible. It is your job as a conductor to ensure that every single member of the ensemble achieves this goal. No matter which ensemble you work with, it is especially important to remember that you work with *people*. These are people who will need your experience and your skills to make the rehearsal process and the concerts a success for everyone involved.

In this article, we are going to examine some of the challenges one might face when working with various groups of musicians and how it differs from working with professionals. Maybe the differences are small if any, but as a general rule, amateurs usually require more rehearsal time than a seasoned professional ensemble. It could even be fair to say that the rehearsal process is sometimes more important than the performance itself.

We will address the following topics in this article:

- The musician
- The conductor
- The music
- Rehearsals and methods
- Goals
- Values, society and networking

## The Musician

Initially, people may choose to join a choir, band or orchestra to learn how to sing or play an instrument, develop their instrumental skills or simply to have fun by making music together with other people. The choice to stick with the activity is likely related to the experience of mastering the instrument and the satisfaction one gets from participating in a communal act of

music-making. In short, it can raise the quality of life. The conductor's job is to facilitate this process.

Taking the time to acquaint yourself with each member of the ensemble will help you to develop musical interaction between you and each individual. Knowing everyone on a personal level, taking into account their personal circumstances, can strengthen this relationship and your interaction with them. You need to ensure everyone is included and feels important in the group; remembering that every musician is unique and may learn things at different speeds and in different ways. Knowledge of the fundamentals of psychology can also be helpful. Observing how people interact and affect one another is a good start.

The musicians you work with in amateur ensembles are usually not fully trained. They are all still learning and have most likely set their own goals for the activity. For example, children are at the beginning of their musical journey and their early encounters with music and music performance will be of great significance. How they experience this and what they learn will be a crucial factor in whether they decide to continue playing or not. Furthermore, despite already having gone through an extensive learning process, most adults are lifelong learners that want to maintain their skills and continue their development.

Most amateur musicians live busy lives and have to contend with jobs or schooling. Spending time in a musical ensemble becomes an active choice one makes regularly. Some of the young players may strive to be the professional musicians of the future, but many do it just for fun. In an amateur ensemble, there must be room for all of them and they all require different approaches to get motivated, to practice, and stay in the ensemble. Everyone needs to feel secure, be recognised, feel self-efficacy, develop, and participate to work at their best regardless of age and level. This is true even for professionals.

This illustration by Birgitte Grong and Annmari Wangin shows important aspects of participating in ensemble activity. The musicians must first of all experience that playing and singing **music** is the core activity in every rehearsal. They should get to experience mastery and acquire **knowledge** through music-making and be encouraged to try to reach the highest level of **quality** within their level. They should also **participate** in the group in different ways and feel they are an important part of the **fellowship** or community. Through experience with these five aspects, they may develop a sense of **pride**. Self-efficacy and pride often go hand in hand. If the musicians feel proud of their own and the ensemble's accomplishments, it is more likely that they will stay in the ensemble.

Different musicians of varying ages and ability levels will need you to communicate in different ways in

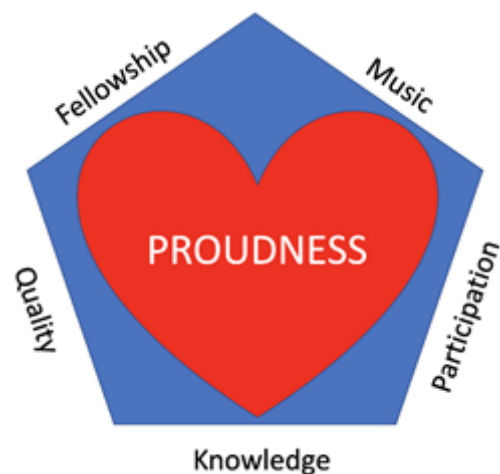
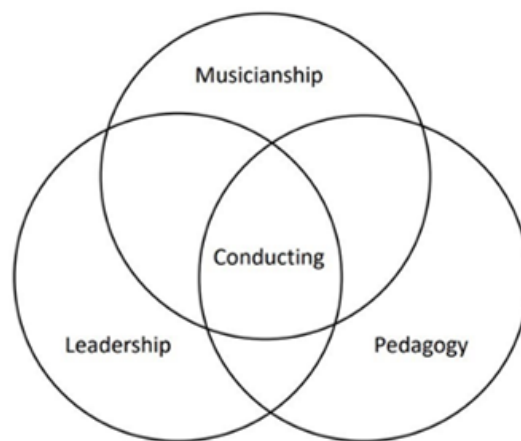


Illustration by Birgitte Grong and Annmari Wangin

order for them to understand and learn. Which words, metaphors, methods, and activities you choose are crucial for the musicians' self-efficacy.

## The Conductor

Conductors need a wide-ranging skillset to cope with the variety of tasks they will encounter in this role. These tasks may differ depending on the level of experience of the people you are working with. Jansson, Bygdéus and Haugland Balsnes describe the conductor's core skills to be:



Nordic choral conductor education: Overview and research agenda, Dag Jansson, Pia Bygdéus & Anne Haugland Balsnes. From Nordic Research in Music Education. Yearbook Vol.19 2018.

Are there any big differences when it comes to directing an amateur or professional ensemble? Probably, but maybe fewer than we think. One fundamental difference will be the need to impart some basic principles of playing, or even technical advice when conducting an ensemble of inexperienced performers. In an amateur organisation, you may also be expected to plan social activities, or at least be met with the expectation to participate in non-musical activities. Whilst there may be some discussion to be had about what exactly the conductor's role within such an organisation should be, engaging socially with the group is rarely disadvantageous.

Your personal motivation and sincerity as a leader is an important factor in how you are perceived by the musicians in front of you. If your actions do not fit with the aims and goals of the ensemble, you are in the wrong place. You need to have an urge to make music, no matter the age group or level of the ensemble. Be aware of your strengths and weaknesses and use these in conjunction with the capabilities you find in your ensemble.

As a professional, you are responsible for the musical quality of your ensemble. It is important to challenge yourself to develop your musical and pedagogical skills. As well as the importance of

well-developed musical competence, your social engagement will make a difference in how successful you are. Your ability to get people working together and encouraging them to contribute their best is paramount. By using the right tools and methods, the goal of musical quality can be reached, and the members of the ensemble will be encouraged to contribute to organising and developing the ensemble, both socially and musically. For example, when working with children, their parents may very well act as volunteers. While many of them may have limited musical skills or experience, they can still contribute. When working with adults, the musicians themselves are usually in charge of organising the group. As you get to know the musicians, you might find people with skills that are useful in accomplishing tasks that are important for the ensemble.

Be prepared, be yourself and remember that you are an important person in the musicians' lives. Planning and preparation are crucial. You need to know what you do and why. What do you expect to accomplish and what do you expect your ensemble to learn? Your expectations affect the results you get. Have faith in your musicians and what they are capable of together as an ensemble. Teach with passion!

*“Listen louder than you play or sing – rehearsals are for teaching the art of listening.”  
-Frederick Fennell*

Networking with other conductors is important regardless of the setting you work in. You can benefit greatly from meeting others in a similar situation and make valuable long-lasting contacts. Networking allows you access to knowledge you might not be able to find on your own. It's an avenue to exchange ideas, and your newfound colleagues can be an excellent source for new perspectives to help you in your role.

## The Music

The selection of repertoire is perhaps the most important task in your planning (McCauley, 2016, p.31). Professional ensembles choose their repertoire with the aim to create an exciting program during the year for the audience, based on the ensemble's profile. However, the selection of repertoire for amateur musicians will be based on a number of different conditions. The repertoire is an important tool. Through the repertoire, you are supposed to teach the musicians what they need to learn, make great concerts and interesting rehearsals whilst making room to create meaningful musical experiences that will motivate the musicians to continue to play and sing for the rest of their life. Searching for the perfect pieces can be very time-consuming, but you should remind yourself that it is well worth the hours spent.

You may need to find pieces that suit the different engagements throughout the year, pieces that are suitable for the level and setup of your ensemble, and pieces that give every single player the chance to improve. It is important to make sure that the pieces selected fall into different categories: pieces that the musicians can easily manage and enjoy quickly, and pieces that challenge them. Music in the first category will encourage a focus on music-making and allow the musicians to play a lot more to reinforce their skill and stamina. In the second category, musicians will probably need a lot of repetitions, so different pieces with similar challenges might be useful.

Choose your repertoire wisely and remember to consider the requirements and challenges of the entire season. Try to find interesting and manageable parts for all the instruments and musicians. You may have to adjust some parts for certain musicians to ensure they have a challenge that meets their ability level. The progression of the repertoire is especially important when working with inexperienced musicians. It is easier to learn when the new skills are built on skills that have already been acquired. The brain works best by recognising patterns and building upon knowledge it already has stored. By remembering this, one can help develop the musicians further.

Generally speaking, we often prefer to program music we already know. It is important to challenge yourself and your ensemble with a new repertoire. There is a strong connection between how well we know and manage to play the music, and how much we like it. Quite often, the more we know and master the music, the more we like it. For example, most band members have not experienced authentic band music before they started playing in a band. You have a lot of power in which music you choose and how you present it. You can help nurture the young musicians' approach towards new pieces with curiosity and have a major impact in developing their musical tastes. As a conductor, you are responsible for introducing inexperienced musicians to new repertoire as well as understanding that "it is our responsibility to rehearse all music as the best piece ever written" (McCauley, 2016, p.40).

As amateur musicians develop and gain experience, they may become more engaged and might be capable of being a part of choosing the repertoire. It can be a useful exercise to include them in the process. However, you cannot expect them to know exactly what will be suitable for them and so might need guidance. One way to do this is to make a list of suitable repertoire they can pick from. It is also worth bearing in mind that a set of music from an ensemble's library often has missing parts or score. It is therefore important to check this before suggesting a piece as an option.

Make sure you schedule enough time to practice the repertoire before concerts and events. Amateurs need time to learn new pieces and finding repertoire that can be used again is often a good idea. Additionally, this means that it is important to pick music which you are happy performing several times. Programming for concerts should happen as early as possible and any changes should only be made if you have to. Use only material that your ensemble is capable of mastering and that you will be happy to present. Another important consideration is

your level as a conductor. Do you have the study time for this program? Do you feel you are capable of conducting this repertoire?

Do not forget to also consider the instrumentation. Do you have the right number of musicians for not only the performance but rehearsals as well? Does this music help your ensemble to play to their strengths or does it place too much pressure on less experienced musicians? On some occasions, you may have to make amendments to individual parts.

## Rehearsals and Methods

Unlike professional musicians, amateurs are not paid and spend their valuable leisure time at rehearsals. As such, they need to feel the benefits of attending each week. It is up to the conductor to create interesting and engaging rehearsals that enthuse the musicians. The participants of amateur ensembles are often at different stages of development and can encompass a wide-ranging age demographic. This means that they will learn things at different speeds and may reach their goals in a number of different ways. In ensembles for beginners, the musicians start at the same level at first, but it does not take long before some are further ahead than others. One challenge for you as the conductor is to make the rehearsals equally interesting for everyone. Everyone should get the opportunity to develop and master their skills. This can be difficult when the members' skillsets are different, but you should aim to strike a balance between making it easy enough for some and offering harder challenges to others. One solution is to tailor your expectations to the individual by giving members different but attainable tasks and adjusting your methodology to best suit the person you are working with.

The rehearsals will be exciting for everyone if you are able to vary your musical approach and activities. The ensemble members need both repetition and variation to be able to learn new skills. Philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer John Dewey coined the well-known phrase "Learning by doing and reflection" (Imsen, 2011, p.19). McCauley has a similar telling: "Telling is not teaching" (2016, p. 69). This means that the musicians must be active participants in the learning process to be able to fully understand and learn something new. Dewey also states that we do not learn from just experience, we learn from reflecting on experience (Imsen, 2011, p.19). When applied to musicians it is imperative that you create clear and flexible rehearsal plans with flexible strategies to help the members achieve success. At the same time, you should be able to react to what you hear, improvise, and be able to change your approach if not everything goes according to plan.

The number of rehearsals ensembles have throughout the week can be anywhere between one and five. In Norway, the bands that have more than one weekly rehearsal often operate at a higher level and are more likely to retain their membership over time (Norwegian Band Federation, 2020). This, in combination with private practice, can foster an environment in which development is easy. If rehearsals are not part of a school curriculum or, in the case of adult ensembles, a member occupies a high-intensity job it may mean that it is difficult to hold

rehearsals that are fully attended. Despite this, it is your job to ensure the rehearsal is still of high quality for all attending. A good goal for a lot of conductors can be to make the group play or sing more and talk less. We often talk more than needed. They are all there to sing or play. Give positive feedback and continue with the next task. To practice is to do the right thing again and again.

When standing on the podium, you should use the opportunity in building both music and people. The way you behave, lead, and talk to the musicians can be the key to keeping them in your ensemble.

*“Loss of temper is not an essential part of the art of rehearsals, though there are a few people who think it is. I profoundly disagree with them. If a conductor can’t control himself, he has no right to control anyone else.”*

*- Sir Adrian Boult (Boult: 1968)*

There is a greater chance that your musicians will strive to attend if the rehearsals are a good process to be a part of. By building a safe and positive atmosphere in how you instruct and communicate with your musicians, you can motivate everybody to have energy, motivation and a lifelong commitment to music activity. Guide your musicians with positive constructive ideas that will give them good musical results instead of just telling them what is wrong (Engeset, 2018). Including your musicians in how to reach the next step by not only telling but also asking can be a democratic and reflective way of reaching small goals during the rehearsal.

## Goals

Besides having specific goals during each rehearsal, the ensemble needs events such as performances or even competitions to look forward to. Opportunities to showcase the efforts of the musicians in the ensemble as well as sharing their experience is important. Sharing a musical experience with others is often part of the reason why people decide to engage with an ensemble in the first place. Professionals often have several concerts every week, yet many amateur ensembles may have weeks or months of rehearsal between each performance. According to a member survey conducted by the Norwegian Band Federation (NMF) in 2020, busy ensembles (ones that have the expectation of more than one rehearsal a week and a busy concert schedule) often succeed both in terms of musical attainment, and member recruitment and retention.

Whether or not participating in competitions is a good or bad thing can be a polarising issue. If your intention is to use competitions as a tool for development, the experience can be a positive one. Focusing on the process instead of the result can be an effective method of training as well as a great motivator.



You must ensure that your ensemble is well prepared and ready to perform at its highest possible level. You should also be aware of what kind of audience you are performing to. While family and friends are often just happy to support and can be forgiving, other audiences may be more critical. Public events are an excellent opportunity to build on the ensemble's reputation, increase membership, and secure local sponsors.

It is often easy to get lost in the rehearsal process and lose sight of what has been achieved up until that point. The musicians may need your help in pointing that out to them; you should remind people of the progress they have already made and help them to reflect on this.

## Values, Society, and Networking

How you act is important in every aspect of the conductor's role, even when you are not on the podium. This means having self-awareness and understanding your own values and goals.

There are a variety of different types of amateur ensembles, each with different goals, values and cultures. Building a new culture or making a case for changing an existing one takes time. It is easy to think that culture is a natural or ingrained element in an organisation. This is not necessarily true. If you want an inclusive and friendly work environment, you must continually work to maintain this environment.

Amateur ensembles can be an important part of the local community in a town or city. By attending different occasions and special happenings such as a city jubilee, and by focusing on values such as inclusion and socialising, your ensemble can make a great impact on the community. As a conductor, you can choose, to an extent, how much you engage with the work your ensemble does in these interactions. Whilst your job is to conduct, you will certainly be met with challenges outside of the rehearsal room. It is important that you are aware of these expectations and what is required within the community.

## Conclusion

As a conductor, you should always aim to make music with the people in front of you! It is important for all conductors to develop a large set of tools that they can use to get the most from their ensemble. The role of the conductor could well be one that is more involved than a conductor in a professional environment. Nevertheless, the main goal in every ensemble is the same: make it sound as good as possible. In an amateur setting, as there are much more rehearsals than concerts, shouldn't the process be considered more important than the concert or performance itself?



Focusing on all the different roles required in a conductor is important for one to succeed with amateur ensembles. You need to understand the pedagogy, have the musical knowledge, conducting technique, be able to plan and organise, positively encourage the musicians, and improve the musical standard of your ensemble. Setting small goals to achieve big ones together with the ensemble will help you motivate the musicians and ensure that your rehearsals are engaging. Choosing appropriate music pieces also affects the learning process, progression and learning outcome. How you are able to facilitate the musicians' contributions can have a large impact on the success of the ensemble and its role within the wider community.

Constantly looking for ways to develop your toolbox will make it possible for you to continue to give the musicians interesting rehearsals and help them make music become a big part of their life. Making people love being at the rehearsals because of the social atmosphere and good music education should be the main goal in your work regardless of ability level. What can be better than musicians loving to perform together and feeling safe in the knowledge that they are achieving their best? In this way, we can lift both the musicians and music to new and higher levels.

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*The views and opinions expressed in this text are those of the authors.*



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