# Developing Trust Through Music

## by
## James Gaffigan

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Gaffigan is in high demand working with leading orchestras and opera houses throughout North America, Europe and Asia. The 2020/21 season features debuts with the Paris Opera, Valencia Opera and Philharmonia Orchestra of London. He returns to the New York Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, St. Louis Symphony, National Symphony Orchestra in D.C. and Bayerische Staatsoper. He leads his final season as Chief Conductor in Lucerne that commences with a South American tour and culminates in an Asia tour with Rudolf Buchbinder as soloist.

*During the Covid-19 pandemic, Quarantine Classics (www.klassiskkarantene.no) and the Norwegian conducting program Dirigentløftet teamed up with leading conductors in sharing sessions to inspire young conductors and music students. This is one of the articles in the series.*

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

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## Part 1 - Trust

The dynamic within a symphony orchestra is a microcosm of the world we live in. It is made up of a diverse group of individuals playing different instruments. There is variation in age, experience, gender, ethnicity, political leanings, religion, and more. However, when mobilized in a rehearsal or performance, these very different people function as one organism. Musicians create sound "live" - in the moment - listening and blending. They simultaneously look at their music, their colleagues and the conductor; orchestral playing is chamber music on the grandest scale.

When it comes to producing a great performance, there is no formula, but there are important criteria to attend to:

• Preparation
• Technique
• Listening/reacting
• TRUST

Preparation could be from the individual work (in private) of an orchestral musician, singer or conductor. The ability to read music well and even sight-read at a very high level bring a specific product to the table. Preparation could also refer to subconscious experiences from the past that influence playing.

As an instrumentalist, technique is obviously the basic control over the intonation, rhythm, as well as musicality and understanding of style. For a conductor, it helps to have good technique physically - it's important to be clear when you need to be. But clarity doesn't always convey music. What's paramount is when and how to use gesture, and most importantly, when to stay out of the way.

Listening and reacting is one of the most important aspects of making music with other people. One can only accomplish so much alone in a practice room. This is especially true for conductors. We need the interaction with others to hone our craft. Ultimately, it's also how we react, adjust or help the situation that matters…not just how well we know the piece of music.

In my opinion, the undefinable 'magic' of revelatory performances comes from trust. Freedom is born from trust and freedom empowers musicians to play thrillingly on their edge. The trust I refer to is a multi-directional street between the orchestra and the conductor. It's about how we collectively read the room in rehearsal and performance and then generate something 'in the now'.

The things I consider when attempting to build trust between myself and the orchestra are:

• Who to help in what moment
• Who to leave alone in what moment.
• How to speak to a colleague in rehearsal in a productive way
• How to empower someone
• Who to give a quick glance to with the thoughts: "Have fun with this next phrase and I'll be there to catch you in the end" or "take us on a journey" or "give more sound" or "you are safe, go for it". In time, all of these ideas can be communicated with just the eyes or even a feeling in the gut.

Trust is a fascinating thing to me. It can happen after years of working with colleagues or right off the bat in a first meeting. What follows are some of my experiences building trust in a working environment at both the concert hall and the opera house.

# Part 2 - The Rehearsal Process

Musicians and singers tend to be sensitive individuals and they identify personally with their technique and musicianship. This is especially true of singers as they have no instrument to hide behind – they are the instrument. When a conductor addresses a musical issue like ensemble, sound or intonation it can be perceived as an attack by the musician; critique can bruise the ego. This is intensified in a group rehearsal when individuals are singled out from the whole.

I make an effort to try not to address anything directly personal in a rehearsal setting. My priorities are: the music, ensemble and harmony, not Joe Smith the second clarinet who always plays behind and under pitch. The rehearsal process is not about me or the musicians. What it is about is an arc from first to reading to performance – the journey if you will – and doing justice to the composer.

So, how does one address a specific wind player? I tend to refer to the instrument and the harmonic function, rather than the name of the player. For example, if there is an intonation within a major chord, I would proceed this way: "*Second clarinet, can you please make sure to keep the A nice and high, because you are the fifth of the chord here*." As opposed to: "*Joe, you are flat, as usual*." Another example would be: "*Second bassoon, you have the D, the root of the chord. Could you play a little more? And first bassoon, please the F# a little lower than you normally would because you are the third*." Instead of: "*Sara, you are playing too loud and sharp*."

This way, a conductor gives the musician knowledge and empowerment without attacking their confidence – confidence being vital to the final product. By addressing harmony (which one should be prepared to do) I remove the personal element and foster trust by relying on the musician to rectify it.

I used to have a teacher that would say "*Being in tune is like being pregnant…you either are or you're not.*" I understand what he meant, and it is pretty funny, but it's not that black and white. Intonation is a tricky thing in that it does not exist in a vacuum; no player is out of tune alone. If Joe, second bassoon, is too flat on the root of the chord, Sara will sound sharp on her F#. I have to decide what the reference point is: Basses? 2nd Bassoon? Tuba? Celli? Harmonically, I have to assess function: a 3rd, a 7th, the root, etc. It depends on the context and the harmony – intonation is more complex than right or wrong.

A common mistake amongst conductors is not letting the orchestra play through a long passage, movement or entire piece before launching into a lecture or telling the group how much they know about the work. Some conductors start rehearsing right after hearing the first two bars of music, or worse yet, give warnings before the music has even started. Let the musicians play! Give them a chance to get through some music before rehearsing and give yourself a chance to show what you want before talking.

The truth is, you might be pleasantly surprised by what they give you in a first reading. You might even discover something you never expected. As a rule, I give musicians the benefit of the doubt that they will fix mistakes the second time through, so I have to give them the freedom to make mistakes. If issues don't resolve themselves, then the pulpit is there to address what went array, whether that's a note, a dynamic, phrasing or ensemble. What I encourage throughout the process is listening. Awareness is the key to great orchestral playing – it's the fitting into the chord from earlier on a macro level.

Some of the things I encourage musicians to be aware of are:

- Who is playing the 8th notes?
- Who has the melody?
- Who continues my phrase after I'm finished?
- Am I too loud?
- Am I playing in the correct part of the bow like my colleagues and the section leader?

This may seem complex, but it typically entails directing attention to where it needs to go, for example, bringing a particular section's awareness to a solo wind player and barely moving to show that we are accompanying them and need to stay out of the way. I trust that by bringing things to their attention, they will react. I view myself as a conduit – staying out of their hair while they execute technical feats – but also there for guidance when needed. Negotiating when to lean in and when to give space comes with time and boils down to trial and error.

I remember once as a guest conductor with the Cleveland Orchestra, a particular modern piece had a very difficult passage for the first violins. I was conducting a complicated subdivision to help them stay together and after trying it three times with no improvement, the concertmaster whispered a suggestion to me. He told me to just conduct the bigger beats and trust them to fit everything in between. It worked without fail throughout the rest of the rehearsal process and in performances.

Another means of developing trust when conducting large string sections is to engage with the back of the section. This empowers the musicians in the back to lead – not just lead physically but with sound and energy as well. My belief is that the sound should come from the back. This avoids the dangerous tendency of players in the back of the section to hide, where they perceive themselves not to be seen or heard, especially in orchestras that don't rotate positions. I make it a point to share eye contact with the players in the back and often get thanked for it after a week of guest conducting.

When it comes to the nitty gritty of rehearsal, a couple of things to mention. One is to not be afraid to point out the obvious. The greatest orchestras actually appreciate being reminded of some of these things. Sometimes a string section will have one or two players starting from way above the string and I'll say, "I'm sorry, I know I'm stating the obvious, but let's start this passage from the string," rather than "4th stand second violins, how can you possibly be together with your colleagues if you start from so high off the string?!" What I'm addressing seems simple and obvious, but by speaking to the whole, I'm taking care of a specific issue in the ranks.

Tangentially, it's vital that a conductor admit when they make a mistake when leading a rehearsal. This is an honest way to win respect. If a conductor won't admit to a mistake or worse, blames someone else, they will most likely develop a bad reputation and lose the trust of the orchestra.

The conductor has to have an objective and a mission, and not get lost in the details. The priority should be communication, trust and displays of empathy.

# Part 3 - The Performance

When I first became interested in classical music, I had never experienced a live performance of it. My introduction to the art form was through recordings and playing bassoon in ensembles. My family couldn't afford tickets to venues in Manhattan and it wasn't until my final year of high school at my alma mater, LaGuardia High School of Music and Art, that I was able to secure student tickets to the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera. When I heard these first live performances, I was blown away by the precision and beauty of the sound – I felt like I was a part of something greater than the recording or the score. We, the audience, were witnessing something magical on stage. It was communication without speaking; people working together to create sounds that were incredible, shocking, terrifying, explosive and multilayered. I was moved and amazed.

Today I obviously understand a lot more about what is really going on, but the magic is still there for me. What I can decipher now, through experience, is if a piece is under-rehearsed, or if someone is having a bad day, or if the musicians are unhappy with the conductor or soloist. Over time, I've heard the full range of "good" and "bad". When I find the magic, which has only been during a small percentage of the thousands of performances I've seen, there's been one common element: trust.

There is a famous conductor with what I would call a mixed reputation. He is very busy and doesn't rehearse very much anymore. He's always late. Sometimes he doesn't even show up. This creates a great deal of frustration, yet somehow, he's capable of delivering magical performances. I think of it as living on the edge. The players have no choice but to be on the edge of their seat because they have no idea what's going to happen. This conductor gives them just enough information to take responsibility for themselves and then he takes risks – pushing and pulling – it creates a very special atmosphere. In the same breath however, I've seen some pretty disastrous performances from the same conductor. My philosophy is that this special container can be created with the right amount of preparation and risk taking. It's a delicate balance of control and trust and it's negotiated by the conductor. There is an ideal point in the process where there is just enough practice and just enough unknown.

Early on in my conducting career and throughout my twenties, I rehearsed like a surgeon. I had my plan; I fixed and controlled things. In my opinion, the rehearsals were very productive but some of the performances were lacking. In retrospect, I realize that I couldn't let go. In the moment when something we rehearsed for so long went awry, I got upset. I took it personally and it would actually hurt me. Eventually, I grew up, as we all do. I married, had children, went through a divorce – there were ups and downs in my life. I came to understand that everyone I was working with had their own problems or baggage.

I began to wonder how we could collectively create a space in a rehearsal room or concert hall that is free from judgment or negativity. A safe place where we could leave our baggage at the door. Every performance has to be unique, inclusive of the three-dimensional lives we lead. Every day is unique. Sometimes there is a heavy feeling in the air, sometimes there is a buzz of electricity. The performance should be a reflection of this reality and a release from it.

For me, when an orchestra fully “takes off” it resembles the feeling of letting go of a child’s bicycle and seeing them coast into the distance with confidence.

Approaching a performance as a conductor is about presence. I try to be in a place that is open and free, while also thinking ahead and looking ahead. It’s my responsibility to anticipate the needs of the orchestra. To present a specific example, there is a long, beautiful phrase in Daphnis and Chloe by Ravel that tends to get too loud, too soon. The objective when conducting it is to indicate direction, maintain legato and transparency as well as produce the sound of love all at the same time. How can we achieve that? In this regard, I feel that less is more. I work to reign it in. I stop beating – it’s not necessary. I use eye contact so the players can understand how special that music is and how much I appreciate the soft, controlled sound they are making. I hold the sound. If they get louder, the gestures get smaller. It feels like flight. And, if this framework is set up properly, when I really need a crescendo, a simple gesture or facial expression will create wonders.

What I’ve learned in performance is that there are some orchestral musicians who want eye contact in difficult times and there are some who do not. Take the opening of Bruckner Symphony 4, some horn players say, “Don’t even look in my direction” while others will say “Please smile and look me in the eyes before you cue me, I want the tempo from you.” This is definitely something one wants to flesh out before the performance. The musicians should feel safe and appreciated – they know when they are trusted.

With the conversations and rehearsals complete, the role of the conductor changes as they walk out to perform. Both the conductor and the musicians know the work they have done together. Once again, like being a parent, it’s a proud yet protective role I take on in performance. I’m proud to share our incredible art form with the public, but I’m also there to organize, and protect them from undue stress, or worse, shame. Inevitably, people will disagree with or have different interpretations of a piece of music, but most will realize when something magical happens in performance.

We all need to be reminded once in a while, why and how we fell in love with music. Think back to that open, and childlike curiosity we once had. It was nonjudgmental and kind. No assumptions, negativity, or scepticism. We as conductors need to have our minds and hearts open to the musicians and the public. Let’s be moved and help others to be moved by our craft. Now more than ever, we crave human contact and connection; we crave that “magic”. And that magic is predicated on trust, openness and communication.