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

Conducting Professional, Non-professional and Young Musicians: Is There a Difference?

by
Mark Heron

I have given many conducting masterclasses to directors of amateur or youth ensembles. The first response to the concepts I try to introduce is usually that “this is all very well, but it’s different when you conduct ‘kids and amateurs’”.

Personally, I don’t believe there should be a difference. When I work with non-professional or young musicians, I do not consciously adopt a different approach from when working with professionals. Regardless of who you are standing in front of, the job is simple: you start with what you have in the first rehearsal, and you improve it as much as you can over the course of the rehearsal period leading to the performance. The journey that you take those musicians on and the difference between rehearsal 1 and the concert is the true measure of how good a conductor you are.

The next typical response, once we have worked on and talked about a more sophisticated physical language of conducting, is that “this is all very well but it is ineffective with amateurs or young players”: “they just need a clear beat” is the mantra which is most often thrown back at me.

The problem is that what people often perceive as “a clear beat” is by its very nature unmusical and will be most unlikely to convey any kind of information as to articulation, sound quality, dynamics, phrasing, and the many other things that a conductor with an effective technique can

communicate through gesture. This can often lead to amusing, albeit well-intentioned, mixed messages. For example, the conductor yelling “PLAY QUIETER” to the musicians, or perhaps using a series of gestures borrowed from a Bruce Lee movie whilst instructing the players to play much more smoothly. To use a non-musical example, if someone approaches you with a welcoming demeanour, grinning from ear to ear, and shakes you by the hand, whilst at the same time saying in a threatening tone of voice that they really don’t like you, there is some confusion as to what the person is trying to communicate. Do you choose to believe the words or the body language? Perhaps neither...

To return to a musical context, the musicians, however inexperienced they might be, will sense a conflict between what they are seeing and hearing, and/or between what the musical text tells them and what the conductor seems to be asking for. Even if they are not able to articulate exactly what the problem is, they will perceive a mixed message.

I would argue that at whatever level a conductor is working, a well-developed language of physical gesture is essential if we hope to run effective rehearsals and give musically coherent performances. In fact, one could make a very strong case for saying that the less expert the musicians, the more important the conductor’s technique and physical language is. One could stand in front of the Berlin Philharmoniker and conduct terribly: the result would still be fantastic because those musicians have the expertise, knowledge, experience, and confidence to ignore the conductor’s physical gestures if they are not helpful. The same cannot be said for an amateur wind band or a school orchestra – they need our help, and we conductors are quite capable of making them play worse than they should!

Teaching, Coaching and Conducting

A big problem is that the lower the level of the group, the more they require to be “taught” or “coached” as opposed to “conducted”. This, in my opinion, is the most difficult aspect of conducting amateur and student ensembles. Is it possible to combine the role of teacher (“no, 3rd trumpets, the fingering for a G# is 2nd & 3rd valves”) with that of conductor, concerned with communicating through gesture exactly where a certain phrase goes, or just how an accent should be articulated?

My suggestion is to adopt a Jekyll & Hyde approach. It is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to conduct effectively whilst also teaching or instructing. Therefore, my advice is don’t try. With a professional orchestra, this is unlikely to be a problem. The conductor’s role in that situation is probably 97% conductor and 3% coach. With a group of young musicians who have only been playing for six months, it might be 20% conductor and 80% teacher. Regardless of where you are on that continuum, I think it is important to divide the two roles. Often it may be necessary to explain something verbally: to clap your hands while teaching the rhythm; to translate Italian terminology; to correct a fingering; decide a bowing etc. However, try to keep this separate in your mind from the conducting. When working with an inexperienced group, this may mean that a large part of the rehearsal consists of teaching, perhaps as if coaching a small chamber ensemble, and with a large degree of verbal instruction. However, once the teaching part is done, make a performance of the piece or movement you have been working on where you concentrate on conducting effectively and the musicians can concentrate on responding to your physical gestures.

There are a number of tactics you might adopt in helping to develop your own language of physical gesture, and your musician's appreciation of it.

Perhaps the most misunderstood thing about conducting is the need to be "clear". This is of course, vital, and everything we do should be as clear as possible. Please do not confuse this with the notion that "clear" means conducting all the beats (plus subdividing quite a lot of them), in a very jerky, angular way. At times, this may be necessary and appropriate, but most of the time it will not be. It probably also helps you to feel as if you are contributing, even if you are not actually helping. If the music is *legato*, angular gestures will serve only to chop up the musical line. If the music has its own "motor" (a drum beat, a walking bass line, an ostinato rhythm in the inner string parts, to name just a few examples) our job should be to encourage the musicians to listen to the "motor", not to tie them to our beat. If a particular section features a solo line, our job should be to accompany that sensitively, not to direct, dictate and stifle.

The Chamber Music Approach

Something we must teach our musicians to do is to play without total reliance on us. If we give them every beat, in a dictatorial way, we are forcing them to try to coordinate with us. In doing so, they will listen less to their colleagues and suppress their natural musical instincts. On the other hand, if we place more trust in the musicians, perhaps asking them to play entirely without our help, they will respond by listening to their colleagues and generally playing more naturally and with greater freedom.

To return to the example of a professional orchestra, I would estimate (with the benefit of experience, but entirely without scientific evidence) that a professional orchestral player playing a piece they know well will devote around 30%-40% of their brain power to playing their own line and 60%-70% to what everyone else is doing. This is the big difference between even the most capable amateurs and genuine professionals: even if the musician is expert on an individual level, what they lack in comparison with their professional counterparts is the ability to focus so much attention on what is going on around them. It seems obvious, then, that one of the most effective ways we can improve our ensembles is to train them to listen and interact with their colleagues as if playing in a large chamber ensemble. Yet so many of us fall into the trap of believing that we can help most by beating every beat in such a way that requires the players to watch instead of listen. Maybe we even should "watch me" at them...

So, why not spend a significant part of your rehearsal allowing the musicians to play without you conducting. They will listen better, you might be surprised at what they can do without you, and because you are not waving your arms around you will probably be more able to coach effectively because you will also be listening more. You will also become comfortable with the fact that we do not always need to be doing something, and often the best way to serve the music is to do almost nothing. The basic premise of any conducting must surely be that you improve what the musicians are capable of achieving without you (otherwise why are you there?). Only by letting them play without you will you find out what that level is.

In addition, a very effective tactic I learned from my colleague Baldur Brönnimann is to occasionally ask the players to sit somewhere completely different within the ensemble. Particularly with

orchestras, it can be extremely illuminating for someone who normally sits on the 4th desk of the 1st violins to go and play where the trombones sit, with an oboist next to them. A different perspective on how the group, and other individuals, sound can work wonders for listening skills. Of course, as we emerge from various lockdowns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us are experiencing this kind of scenario with socially distanced ensembles spread over vast distances. Good for listening skills!

With young musicians, a very good approach is to invite players in the group to come up and conduct a little bit, perhaps during some warm-up exercises. By publicly teaching one of their peers, you can reinforce the idea that the musicians should respond to all aspects of the gesture, not just the idea of when to play. You may well be surprised at how naturally and clearly an inexperienced 11-year-old can come up with a gesture that makes the musicians play quiet, loud, short, long, smooth, heavy, angry, sad, jolly etc.

Developing Yourself

Of course, it is also vital to have a fairly well-developed physical language yourself. So how can you practise? If you are reading this, you've discovered the ConductIT resource so that's a good start! Going on a conducting course might not be a bad idea, especially if you have had limited training. It has always mystified me that one is expected to study and practise for years on one's instrument, but we should apparently just be able to start conducting without any guidance. If that's the view your employer takes, demand help!

There are other ways though. If you find yourself conducting a youth orchestra, or a school choir, or a county wind band, then it is safe to say that you probably have both musical talent and the ability to inspire. That probably means you have played or sung for a wide range of conductors from the very fine to the very poor. Try to analyse what works and what doesn't. In my experience, most capable musicians will know if they are getting what they need from a conductor, or if they are not. What they may not be able to do is articulate exactly what the problem is, although they'll always be willing to try....! In your development as a conductor, it is important to make this leap and start to understand not just that it isn't working, but why.

An extension of this is to use video to analyse yourself. Film yourself in rehearsal then go away and watch it. When you get over the initial shock of watching yourself (trust me, this doesn't go away!) you will immediately see a dozen ways in which you can improve. Make a list and tackle them one by one in a structured way, just as you did when you were learning to play your instrument. Do not be afraid of sharing this approach with the members of your ensemble. You expect them to go away from a rehearsal, practise, improve, and come back better than they were last time. By showing them that you are serious about what you do and expect the same of yourself you will only gain their respect. The desire for self-improvement is a sign of strength, not weakness.

YouTube also provides us with a fertile learning experience. It is easy to see all sorts of conductors from the very best to the very worst in all sorts of situations. Ask yourself why the best are so good (probably it's because they are not getting in the way, and when they communicate something the intention is so clear that a six-month-old baby from Mars could understand it) and why the worst

are so bad (probably it's because they are getting in the way, and they try to communicate so many things in such an unclear way that their best friend would have no clue what they mean).

It is also important to practise our gestures. Sit down with the score and ask yourself what character you want to convey in each moment. Stand in front of a mirror and try to find a way of doing that. If you can do it at home, there is at least a chance you can recreate it in front of the musicians. If you find it hard to do this, try turning out the lights and/or having a glass of wine first to help lose those inhibitions.

Perhaps the best way to summarise all of this is that we need to learn when to let go, and when to take control. Until we have managed to let go in the first place, we cannot begin to know the moments at which we are needed. Use the early rehearsals to be deliberately vague in terms of "beats", you will then begin to appreciate the places where you need to help. This will of course vary from group to group. In addition, do not think that decisive gestures are not important. The point is that if there is one strong *sforzando* within a four-bar phrase then of course that gesture should be firm, clear and decisive. The problem comes when the other 15 beats round about it are so hard that nobody noticed your *sfz*.

I have been fortunate to study with the great Finnish conducting teacher, Jorma Panula. Of the many, many things I have heard him say that I constantly return to, the most important is his belief that conducting is actually an incredibly simple activity. The problem is that it takes 10 years of experience, practice and hard work before you work that out. Wise words indeed, so don't expect it to happen overnight.

