

Rehearsing

by
Bjarte Engeset

Conductor Bjarte Engeset gained his Diploma, at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki in 1989, where he studied with professor Jorma Panula. In 1991 he was chosen as a member of the Tanglewood Music Center Seminar of conductors where the teachers included Seiji Ozawa, Gustav Meier, Simon Rattle, Marek Janowski and others. Engeset has been in demand to perform concerts, tours and CD recordings with leading orchestras worldwide and has been pivotal in the scientific research and editorial work within Norway's ongoing "Music Heritage" Project, especially the orchestra music of Edvard Grieg, Johan Svendsen, Ludvig Irgens-Jensen and Geirr Tveitt.

This essay is based on Bjarte Engeset's opening lecture at "The Conductor's Week" in 2018. The views and opinions expressed in this text are those of the author.

Rehearsing

I have been thinking that all of us 120 conductors participating here in "The Conductor's Week" can change Norway*. In the course of six months, we will have over 2000 rehearsals, and thereby at least 6000 rehearsal hours. For each hour of a rehearsal, we might make 150 statements, meaning we will make around one million statements in the coming six months. What would happen if we were to change WHAT we communicate in these rehearsals? The impact could be enormous.

What happens if we only present constructive ideas as to what the musicians can do?

It is too common that we point out what is wrong and bad. Instead, I think we can present unique ideas, which are well articulated. If we are to change our habits, we will have to consciously rephrase what we intend to say. This is a project for me every time I conduct a rehearsal, and I constantly have to remind myself.

Let us be specific from the start: Dynamics is a demanding topic when it comes to rehearsal technique. The common thing is to point out the negative "Too loud" – let us call this level 1. A less negative way of putting it is "Softer" – let us call that level 2. Please notice that in level 2, the phrase "Too loud" is still implied. Level 3 will be to say "Piano" (quiet/soft), maybe

combined with characterizing words, such as whispering, tense, delicate, quietly, tender, intense, weightless, make space for the solo, transparent, beautiful, and so on. These are qualitative statements. They connect dynamics to character, colour and other musical elements. If the ensemble plays with shattered dynamics and sound, this kind of wording will have a unifying effect. It is gratifying to insist in creative ways, in order to unify the ensemble. With level 1 and 2, a problem will only be slightly adjusted – it will not unify the ensemble.

Working with sound quality is also an important part of every rehearsal. We therefore need to be able to describe sound in a constructive manner. It is rarely enough to say “not that rough”. With an inspirational statement about color of sound, it will not be necessary to have such a negative wording. This is especially important when addressing musicians who are supposed to keep in the background, as they will prefer inspirational motivation to a “SHH”.

As a young conductor, I thought that the basic rhythmical discipline had to be first on the agenda, before doing anything else. Important as that kind of work obviously is, I have now understood that proceeding directly to working on musical character, can often solve rhythmical problems as well. It is especially rewarding to work with the main motifs of the piece early in the process, as they tend to make a clear mark on the piece. It is good to make it clear how to play the motif, even though the execution of these motifs naturally should vary. Making good characterizations, through qualitative formulation –and Conductor singing - can also help precision.

An area where conductors tend to use negative wording, is articulation and tone length. How often have we not heard: “Too long!”, or “Shorter!”? But, shouting “Shorter!” will often only foster different ways of playing – those who play long notes start playing a bit shorter, while those who play completely short notes might start to play extremely short. Why not use wording without grading (“shorter”), but with for instance “short and dry” or “light and elegant”. Then the musicians will unify in one expression.

It is my experience that, when I invite with “phrase actively”, the musicians usually find a way to phrase collectively, without further interference from me than what I might show with my hands and eyes. Phrasing is often intuitive, but it is also possible to build it on a thorough understanding of relations between something as theoretical as note topography, tension/relaxation, rhetoric, hierarchy of metrical structures and hierarchy of sections in a longer phrase. In phrasing, the unexpected and the non-schematic can also be inspiring. I find it sad when musicians are passive when it comes to phrasing, with the thought “it does not say so in the score”. Maybe it is also our responsibility, when musicians deliver these “neutral” versions. Is it possible that we have discouraged phrasing initiative by statements like “It does not say crescendo here”. Naturally, less dynamic phrasing can be good in certain settings, but a great many styles demand that the music has a message - that it becomes a language.

Working with intonation can sometimes cause unpleasantness: Something is *wrong* - something is *rotten*. It is possible to make it exciting and fun instead. Tension and fear rarely improve the intonation. I think intonation is very interesting. It might take some courage for the conductor to practice it during rehearsal. What if it doesn't get better? I think that one can sometimes move on and return to it later. Chord knowledge and intonation theory is naturally valuable in this situation. You will need a good methodic, and balance is often an important

factor. I do not have time to elaborate on this right now, but it is good to find suitable moments for intonation work during a rehearsal – preferably, when it is not too cold in the room, and when the musicians are not too tired.

I think we can often formulate two-three-four ideas each time we give verbal input to the orchestra. We want to avoid the monotony of, for instance, always just communicating one single message. It is usually motivating to try out a new idea instantly, but not always necessary. During recordings, longer “lists of input” in between the takes can be good. It is not wise to record something you know needs to be changed anyway. Alternate playing longer and shorter parts, and change between different kinds of work (By the way, we need to find a better word for the prosaic “let’s play through” when we play longer parts). In the rehearsals, it is valuable to have a sense of what is challenging, as well as of what one should wait to go into. Focus on main ideas concerning character, style and the story of the particular piece. I think it is important that everyone is involved often enough. That we see everyone, even though the communication naturally quite often goes through the section leaders. It is essential that we understand what the ensemble needs, and there are probably fundamental differences between professional ensembles and other kinds of groups here. During the rehearsal, we can also contemplate “What can get this group to improve rapidly?”

Naturally, it can often be useful to present the reasons why the playing is not quite together. This is possible without being accusing. It is always useful to understand what really happens when something is not working. However, this does not change the principle of primarily communicating what can be done.

The result of this principle is that the musicians leave the rehearsal feeling that they are “good enough”, as individual musicians, groups and ensembles. They have had musical experiences, heard and experienced musical improvement, participated in bringing interesting musical characters to life, and the rehearsal has focused on the power of music.

On behalf of the music and the togetherness, it is our right to use strength in order to make sure great musicianship is the focus of the rehearsals. Open and inviting, but with great persistence as well. We can view ourselves as a medium of the music. It is good to show that maximum quality is expected during the rehearsal. This expectation will be present for a concert anyway. I increasingly think that we should play as if it is the last performance we will have. Not to be morbid and focused on death, but to enjoy life even more.

People

We work with music and with people. We make thorough preparations “on our own” in order to learn the music as well as possible, but also so that we prepare musical ideas. It is a strength to have many different ideas prepared. Nevertheless, there can also be several different alternatives, which we have not quite decided on yet. Not everything can be planned in detail by the desk. We get new ideas when we listen to the playing, and our intuition can give answers in the moment, during both rehearsal and concert.

Our attitude towards human beings influences our way of leading rehearsals. If we have interest and faith in the creative abilities of the people we work with, then I think we can go very far. A friendly and respectful attitude, as opposed to critique and threat, is more likely to inspire dedication. One of the most important things I learned during my five years as conductor of *The Royal Norwegian Navy Band* is to understand the great resources of every player, and that they want me to constantly remind them to aim for their highest level.

As a conducting teacher, I frequently ask myself why I personally do or do not feel a wish to make music with a certain conductor. The answer is of course subjective. If a conductor is showing everything too obviously, which I have now and then experienced as a musician, I often just “turn off”. When the roles conductor/conducted are the main focus, it does not feel right either. Especially when ego, position and career seem more important than the music. It is also very difficult when I feel the conductor is “in the way”. However, this can often be more a technical conducting issue, than a matter of negative attitude from the conductor.

I find it very interesting to build musical relations over time. I have met and been inspired by people like Maurice Abravanel and Simon Rattle – maestros who have been dedicated to building quality over time. When we have long-term engagements, I think it is a chance to develop the strength, individuality, initiative and identity of the ensemble. To develop the ensemble as an independent organism with confidence and inner strength. Conducting an ensemble with identity and strong will is definitely different from conducting an ensemble without those qualities, and it is much more rewarding! My experience is that these are the situations where we conductors can really contribute with something essential. We have to understand what would happen if we were not there, and what can be our contribution. It is difficult to be the conductor when an ensemble does not breathe together or show each other musical will. They cannot just stare at where our “beat” will land, but should rather consider the conductor’s upbeat as an invitation to common breath and common musical movement. We have to make sure we inspire interaction without being “in the way”. Having conversations with musicians about the conductor’s role is good and rewarding for everyone. We can strengthen the communication between the musicians and, from our insight in the score, help the musicians understand who to connect with in the specific situations. A bass player once asked Claudio Abbado whether the notes in a particular passage should be short or long. The answer, in Abbado’s Italian English was surprising; “You play with Susan” (the flautist).

It is, without doubt, good when we conductors make the ensemble safe, and create a safe and sound environment. However, we can also create an atmosphere where one has to be prepared for anything to happen, so that we do not end up with routine performances where everything is done and decided. Both “playful and fun” music, as well as “life and death” music, demands this. It is interesting that some musicians tend to prefer safe order, while others prefer risks and excitement. Nevertheless, it is good to understand this variation in attitudes, which probably exist in every ensemble.

We are all different kinds of people, which is both a challenge and a resource when playing together. The music naturally demands flexibility in temperament, but I believe that difference in energy levels sometimes is the cause of discord in music-making. We might for example have different perceptions of what it means to play “in tempo”. If we can unify the energy level by presenting an exciting and precise suggestion of musical character, it will often lead

everyone in the same direction and towards a unified sound.

For many ensembles, it can be useful to play without a conductor. Then it is interesting for us conductors to ask ourselves: "What can we contribute with?" We sit/stand in the most central position of the ensemble, where we can listen to everyone and hear how the balance and the sound colours really are. We can inspire and gather the focus of the musicians, and encourage different forms of contact in an always changing musical role-play, depending on the score. Additionally, we can help the ensemble unify in form, phrasing and in the overall "story" – all in service of the music. We often work with a piece of music that will survive us, and which might have qualities and value far beyond what we discover. This knowledge is a great help for me when dealing with pressure and concert nerves.

Many things can become the focus of an ensemble rehearsal, including things that can interfere with musicianship even though they are important in themselves. Examples are problems with the score, bowing, committee work, the hall/acoustics, colleagues, repertoire, the director or the outfit. We conductors can gather everyone around musical focus. It is my belief that we, in the name of music, have the right to create a good rehearsal ethic and to stop that, which prevents the musical work of togetherness. In this situation, humor and suggestions as to the direction of the work often work better than criticism. "Low shoulders", honesty, and "playfulness" is often the key when trying to shift the focus onto music. When focusing on the musical elements, the conductor simultaneously implies that musicians' technical challenges are considered "homework".

During rehearsals, I sometimes move less when I need to find out and analyze what the musicians do without my interference. It is important to me to find out what I should and should not contribute with. When there is a "motor" in the music (rhythmic ostinato, repeated figures etc.), it can be especially useful to let the "motor" run freely and let everyone focus on listening and playing chamber music. When children's groups make music together, I think it is particularly important to invest enough energy into making the rhythmical part stable. This can be done by, for instance, giving the percussionists sufficient attention and impulses. When this section works well, for instance in a school band, it will be easier to work with dynamics, phrasing and so on.

I think that our conducting technique can also have this headline: Communicating musical ideas. The movements can be varied every time we encounter the same theme or bar. In rehearsal situations, this can inspire, adjust and balance in always new and different ways. I have been taught to always show something rather than saying it. Professor Jorma Panula claimed that we had no right to say something we had not already shown. He wanted us to not say much, and to phrase richly and precisely without words. From this perspective, our movements and the conducting technique should be equally rich and flexibly varied as the music – almost like mime theatre. We have to be able to express everything we know and imagine with movements, and only that. The movements will then be motivated by the essential and by the musicality. We move in order to support the many and varying characters of the music.

I have now presented my own subjective opinions, based on the experience I have with the kind of ensembles that I meet regularly. There are so many ways to be a conductor. That is why I do not say that a conductor shall or should, but that a conductor can. However, I still

think that some of these ideas can be applied in most types of ensembles. The surplus energy that some really high-level ensembles have, also due to a high technical level, makes it possible for them to really relate to what the conductor is doing. However, I do think that this attentiveness can be created in every group, especially in concerts, if the repertoire is well adjusted and if the musicians are used to being attentive to the conductor and to the other players.

No matter what kind of ensemble it is, the players will usually react positively to working in an atmosphere where constructive input is key. This promotes self-confidence, courage, freedom and room for creativity. I am confident that we can leave such rehearsals feeling more energized than we were when they started.

Will you participate in changing Norway*, at least for six months? Until Christmas? What would happen if those millions of statements were good ideas and impulses? I think the impact could be as if every musician got “seven-mile boots”.**

Deal?

**Please replace “Norway” with any country of preference to make sense of this sentence wherever you are situated.*

***A concept from a Norwegian fairy tale. Magic boots that make you walk seven miles in each footstep.*

