

Some Thoughts on Score Study

by Mark Heron

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

The obvious bit

Knowing the score is one of the most important aspects of the conductor's role. Musicians are rarely stupid people, and even a relatively inexperienced amateur can tell when the conductor is bluffing. Therefore, it is vital that the conductor has as much in depth knowledge as possible of the document which offers the best insight into the composer's intention: the score.

Erich Leinsdorf, in his excellent text, *The Composer's Advocate*, reminds us that the score is not the music. One might think of the score in the same way as an architect's drawing – the building does not exist on paper, but it is the primary source from which it will be created. Neither is it the only thing you will need to come up with the end product.

It goes without saying that the conductor should begin the process of studying the score in detail well before the first rehearsal. Your players will not be particularly impressed if you are fully conversant with the score at the first rehearsal – they expect this - but they will certainly be critical if you are not.

Recordings: sense or sacrilege?

At this point it may be appropriate to address a very thorny issue: the role that recordings should or should not play in score study.

What one might term the 'traditional view' is that recordings should play no part in the process. The conductor should learn the score by reading it, or playing it on the piano, reverting to other source material as appropriate. To listen to recordings of the work is to take a shortcut through that time-consuming process, will leave the conductor with only a superficial knowledge of the work in question, and very possibly result in a re-interpretation of someone else's work. Or so the argument goes.

However, everybody does it! With the wealth of resources available online in the modern world, it would seem strange not to make use of them.

Certainly, the profession has changed dramatically from the days where a 'maestro' could build a successful career on a small and focused repertoire of maybe 20 or 30 major works. Those times are long gone. That conductors tend to have to know a lot of repertoire, and be able to learn new pieces quickly, in itself suggests the 'traditional view' is unrealistic in practice.

My own view is that one must take a pragmatic approach, and judiciously use recordings as an aid to the process provided that the dangers can be borne in mind. 5 tips in this regard:

1. If at all possible, listen to more than one recording. This will avoid being taken in by a conductor who has chosen a particularly extreme tempo, or perhaps taken some unusual interpretative decisions.
2. Listen to the recordings early on in the score study process and stop doing so before the run of rehearsals starts. This will allow your own interpretation to develop.
3. Have the courage of your convictions and if you take a different view of something than what you hear on recordings – no matter how exalted the conductor and orchestra – go for it. Your interpretation will usually be better than your regurgitation of someone else's interpretation.
4. Don't practise conducting the piece with the recording playing – it's not like that in real life!
5. Don't necessarily stick to the big names – they (and I mean orchestras as well as conductors) may be better able to pull off an idiosyncratic performance than you. It can also be very informative to watch and listen to an inexperienced conductor or less than expert orchestra struggling a little with the piece. You can gain a better sense of what is easy and what is difficult than listening to one of the world's great orchestras for whom everything is easy!

Method

So how to actually study the score? Given that we have discounted sticking on a recording and conducting along to it half a dozen times, how do you start?

There is a concept called *Seven trips through the Score* which is taught in various forms. It advocates a methodology based on going through the score, start to finish, seven times, focusing each time on a different aspect and increasing knowledge incrementally. The seven stages are:

1. Instrumentation and transpositions
2. Form analysis
3. Harmonic structure
4. Melodic line and its instrumentation
5. Phrasal analysis
6. Dynamics
7. Special effects in the score and manner of execution on the instruments

Whilst this approach may appear a little rigid and inflexible to some, and one could query the absence of matters such as tempo and articulation, it seems to me to be a good place to start from in evolving one's own method.

Some advocate a part-by-part approach – play or sing each in turn – the premise being that the conductor must know every part and how the lines interrelate with each other. Others insist the only real way to learn a score is to harmonically analyse each and every chord, using that as the basis on which decisions as to tempi, phrasing and dynamics are taken.

From a personal perspective, I think a lot about structure initially, and find that until I am comfortable with both form and the more detailed phrase structure, I find it difficult to put matters such as instrumentation, architecture of dynamics, and how long or short a fermata should be, into perspective.

I also think “big to small”: begin with a big picture overview of the whole thing, gradually adding more and more detail as I go. This is important for 2 reasons. Firstly, if I get called to go and jump in for a rehearsal or concert at really short notice and the repertoire includes something I don't know, I have a process that works when there is no time. The more time I have, or the more important a particular situation is to me, the more detail I can go into. Secondly, it helps me to avoid knowing the first part of a movement or piece really well and the rest of it not so well. I see so many young conductors fall into this trap and orchestras spot it immediately!

Ultimately, the correct method to use is the one which works best for you, and it goes without saying that as you gain experience your approach will change. I often take a score off the shelf that I last looked at 10 years ago and am horrified by some of the marking I find. That's ok – we should all develop and learn from our previous indiscretions.

Marking scores

Again, huge differences of opinion exist. For some conductors, any marking of the score is nothing short of sacrilege and a violation of the composer's wishes. Others cover the pages with such a mass of text, hieroglyphics, chord symbols and numbers that the notes seem to have become almost incidental. My approach is as follows:

1. Mark phrases lengths at the top of the page (possibly also above the string parts if it is a big orchestral score) or reinforce bar lines. I usually do this in red pencil. If it's a very conventional 4 or 8-bar structure I would probably only mark the occasions when it deviates from that.

Trombone I, II
 Trombone III basso
 Timpani in La-Mi-Si / A-E-H
 Adagio ♩ = 126
 Violini I
 Violini II
 Violeni
 Violoncelli
 Contrabbassi
 Allegro molto ♩ = 136
 5

2. For complex mixed meter scores, develop a system of symbols for different time signatures which you can mark up the score with. This is explored in detail in the Technique 4 chapter of ConductIT.
3. Mark important cues, dynamics, tempo changes, articulations, or other details I want to notice when I am conducting in blue. I try to keep this to a minimum, especially in classical repertoire, and probably make far fewer markings that I did when I was starting out. I never use highlighters. Here are a few examples:

3/4
 a 2
 p f dim.
 3/4
 p pp fs fs fs

4. In a concerto or solo work, I may use green for markings that relate specifically to the soloist.
5. All other markings will be in ordinary pencil, so that they don't jump off the page at me when conducting. These could include:
 - Metronome markings – although by no means an inflexible rule, at every major tempo change I will know the speed I plan to adopt.
 - Translations of unusual markings, for example German instructions in Mahler.
 - Translations of vocal text.
 - Harmonic analysis, when it is particularly important or unusual. I rarely analyse every chord. What I will often do is work out which instruments have which note of the chord, particularly if it looks like a good candidate for intonation problems. So, against a soft, held wind chord I would note who plays the tonic, third, fifth etc. This is particularly helpful if there are lots of transposing instruments.

- Bowings (sometimes several options).
 - Notes about errors or discrepancies between score and parts.
 - Bar numbers or Rehearsal marks, especially if there are differences between editions.
 - Timings. I will have the duration of each movement on the title page. If it's a long movement, for example a Bruckner adagio lasting more than 20 minutes, it can be good to have a few landmarks written in so that when deep in rehearsal you know how far away you are from the end.
6. Everything else I will do in separate notes. For example, I often sketch out the phrase structure with a few things to jog my memory and use that as a learning tool particularly with larger pieces. Although I would never conduct from it, I find it useful to be able to sit down with the 1st movement of a symphony sketched out on one sheet of paper.
 7. Kleiber grams
 8. NY Phil archives etc.

Whether you should or should not mark the individual parts is a whole topic all of its own, and not one that is directly relevant to this article. However, if it is acceptable and appropriate in the circumstances, doing so can be a very effective part of your score study. A similar approach, which I often adopt with student and non-professional groups, is to do a separate set of rehearsal notes to give to the players prior to the rehearsals, particularly if time is short.

