

# Some thoughts on score study

by  
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## The obvious bit

Knowing the score is one of the most important aspects of the conductor's role. Musicians are usually not stupid, 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.

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.

Therefore, 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 study process. The conductor should learn the score by reading it, and/or playing it on the piano, reverting to other source material as appropriate. To listen to recordings of the work is to take a short cut through that time consuming process leaving the conductor with only a superficial knowledge, and very possibly resulting in a re-interpretation of someone else's work. Or so the argument goes.

The more 'modern view' is that with the wealth of resources available online it would seem strange not to make use of them.

Certainly, the profession has changed dramatically from the days when 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 - conductors now tend to have to know a lot of repertoire and be able to learn new pieces quickly. This suggests the 'traditional view' is unrealistic in practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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

1. If at all possible, listen to more than one recording. This will help you to avoid being taken in by a conductor who has chosen a particularly extreme tempo, or perhaps taken some unusual interpretative decisions, or even decided they know better than the composer and indulged in a little bit of 're-composition'. Musical decisions that work for a well-known, highly respected but slightly idiosyncratic conductor may not be so
2. Listen to the recordings early on in the score study process and if possible, stop doing so before the run of rehearsals starts. This should 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.
4. Be very careful about practising conducting the piece with the recording playing – it's not like that in real life! There is a very real danger that doing this too much results in you following the sound, rather than leading it. Crucially, it doesn't help you with working out how to give a preparatory gesture in the correct tempo – the recording always goes at the same tempo. A very well-respected colleague of mine refers to this as "YouTube Conducting"!

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 helpful to see/hear an inexperienced conductor or less than expert orchestra struggling a little with the piece. This can give you a better sense of what is easy and what is difficult than listening to the Berlin Philharmonic for whom everything is easy!
  
6. Be wary of uncritically copying the decisions of your conducting idols. A great example of this is Claudio Abbado and the phenomenal performances he gave with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, all captured beautifully on video. Should you study these recordings if you happen to be preparing one of the works? Absolutely. However, you need to also remember the circumstances in which they were made. The musicians were of the highest international calibre, they were hand-picked by Abbado (whom they idolised), they were invited to spend time in a beautiful city with fantastic working conditions in one of the best acoustics on the planet, and they had absolutely tons of rehearsal time. This is not normal life! By all means be inspired by the wonderful playing and conducting, but don't assume that if you do all the same things Abbado did, the results will be the same.

## Method

So how to actually study the score? Given that we have discounted finding a recording you like on YouTube 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, and one could query the absence of matters such as tempo and articulation, the idea of going through the score several times with a different focus each time, is a helpful concept.

Perhaps the most common trap is to focus on too much detail all at once. This can mean that you end up knowing the first third of the piece really well, the middle third reasonably, and the final third only superficially. It's also important to have a method which you can apply to all situations, regardless of how much time you have to study. In an ideal world, this will be weeks and months, but sometimes the phone rings and you are asked to go and stand in for a rehearsal tomorrow morning. To make the best of that sort of opportunity it is important to have a process which also works when you have very little time.

Both problems can be avoided with a "big to small" approach. Start with the most important things for the whole piece, then gradually increase the level of detail you go into. According to Simon Halsey, Sir Simon Rattle starts by reading through a new score extremely quickly. Turning the pages almost immediately, taking in very little information but getting a very quick overview of the whole thing.

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.

I certainly think initially about structure 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. Therefore phrasal analysis would certainly come higher up than no.5 for me. I would also have a slightly different set of priorities for a brand-new contemporary work than a Haydn symphony, and different again for Wagner or Bruckner where harmonic structure is so crucial.

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.

## Marking the score

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 a veritable rainbow of highlighting, that the notes seem to have become almost incidental.

My approach is as follows:

1. Mark phrases lengths with a number at the top of the page where the phrase starts (possibly also above the string parts if it is a big orchestral score) or by reinforcing bar lines. I usually do this in red pencil.
2. For complex mixed meter scores, develop a system of symbols for different time signatures which enables you to read them quickly. You can find a detailed explanation of this in the *Technique 4* chapter on the ConductIT website.
3. Mark important cues, dynamics, speeding-up or slowing-down, or other details in blue. I try to keep this to a minimum, especially in classical repertoire. These should only be things I want to stand out when I am conducting. I never use a highlighter.
4. All other markings will be in ordinary pencil. These could include:
  - (a) metronome markings – although by no means an inflexible rule, at every major tempo change I will know the speed I plan to adopt. I will often make a little note of what various conductors do: “CA 88” “SR 96” “MJ 92” referring to Claudio Abbado, Simon Rattle or Maris Jansons.
  - (b) translations of unusual markings or vocal text
  - (c) occasionally some harmonic analysis
  - (d) where there are lots of transposing instruments, I will often analyse what I suspect may be “problem chords” in terms of intonation. I put a little “1” against the instruments that play the tonic, “3” for the thirds, “5” for the fifths and so on
  - (e) bowings (sometimes several options)
  - (f) mistakes which appear in the parts that are not in the score, sometimes significant differences between editions

5. Everything else I will do in separate notes. For example, I often sketch out the phrase structure 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 1<sup>st</sup> movement of a symphony sketched out on one sheet of paper.
6. Whether or not you should 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. It is certainly helpful to occasionally look at the parts to remind yourself how little information the players sometimes have.
7. Carlos Kleiber used to make his rehearsals more efficient by writing little notes to individual players (orchestral players called them Kleibergrams”) and leaving them on the music stand before the rehearsal. This can be an effective way of saving time if it is a comment for a specific individual.

You can see some examples from the author’s scores in the appendix to this article. The New York Philharmonic archives contain hundreds of Leonard Bernstein’s scores. <https://archives.nyphil.org/>

## Other source material

Whilst the score is the primary source, there are many other places to look for information. A selection of these would include:

1. Books, journals, articles and other published material about the composer, the work in question, or the circumstances surrounding its creation. Of course, this can range from a bewildering mass of material in the case of Beethoven or Mozart to a few paragraphs on the internet or in a cd sleeve for a more recent composer whose work is not established.
2. Recordings of both the work in question, and other works by the composer – particularly those composed at around the same time.
3. In the case of contemporary music, the composers themselves. Most will be delighted to know you are performing their work and will be happy to share programme notes, rehearsal suggestions and other background information.

4. Where relevant, the literature, art, theatre or other art form which inspired or influenced the work in question.
5. Texts and other materials focusing on conducting. For example, the series of books by Norman del Mar, "Conducting Beethoven", "Conducting Elgar" etc. Whilst one may disagree with some of the interpretive suggestions, the fact that these books are written from the point of view of the conductor on the podium rather than the academic in the classroom make them extremely valuable. Even if you are not conducting orchestras, I would recommend sitting down with one of these books and a score.
6. The ConductIT website contains a series of *Journeys Through the Score* where advice from eminent conductors is given along with illustrated video examples.

## And Finally....

I have often heard it said by extremely successful conductors that the more experienced they become and the more often they revisit a piece they have conducted before; the more time they feel they need to devote to score study!

## Appendix – score marking examples

The image shows a page of a musical score for a symphony orchestra, starting at measure 23. The score includes parts for Flute (I, II), Oboe (I, II), Clarinet (I, II) (La), Bassoon (I, II), Cor (Re), Cor (Mi), Trumpet (I, II), Timpani, Violin (I, II), Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The score is marked with various dynamics, including 'ff' (fortissimo) and 'f' (forte). There are two vertical red lines indicating phrasing, one at measure 23 and another at measure 29. A blue wavy line is drawn under the first red line, and a blue 'I' is written above the second red line. A red '6' is written in the Trumpet part, and a red '4' is written in the Timpani part. The score is on a yellow background.

Red measure lines for phrasing, 6-measure phrase marked, dynamics, 1<sup>st</sup> violin cue, and slight holding back of tempo in blue



*Senza*

236  
Viol. princ. *p* arco *dim.*

Viol. I *pp* arco *dim.*

Viol. II *pp* *dim.* arco *div.*

Va. *pp* *pp dim.*

Vc. arco *pp* arco *dim.*

Cb. *pp* *dim.*

246  
Viol. princ. *f*

Viol. I *mf*

Viol. II *mf*

Va. *mf*

Vc. *mf*

Cb. *mf*

252  
Viol. princ.

Viol. I *mf*

Viol. II *mf*

Va. *mf*

Vc. *mf*

Cb. *mf*

\*) *ossia:*

\*\*) For fingering see Critical Commentary. / Zum Fingersatz siehe Critical Commentary.

Red measure lines for phrasing, dynamic and dynamic change marked in blue, *dim*, emphasised in blue, solo part in green, comment to play *senza vibrato* in pencil

138

139 140 141

icc.

1.

2.

3.

Cl.

1.

2.

3.

Cl.

Cl.

an. 1.

2.

1.

2.

Sax.

Sax.

1.

2.

3.

In. 1.

2.

3.

4.

1.

2.

3.

bn.

2.

3.

Euph.

Tuba

Timp. (Tr.) l.v.

1.

2.

3.

perc. 2.

3.

GLOCK.

VI

VII

VI

to Tam-Tam (metal beaters)

Meter changes marked with red and blue symbols. See ConductIT chapter *Technique 4* for more detail on this1

Allegro. ⊕

4-Intro ⊕ | 4 + 4 |  $\frac{S}{i p i}$  |  $\frac{S}{i i i}$  | 4 4 4

cl start on VC 4 2 P. →

ⓐ 4 + 4 | but ff+ in vln+stacc | TMP. | 4 + 3 | \* 8 |  $\frac{S}{i p i}$  | ⓑ 4 + 4 + 2

vc f + vc +

Ⓒ p wind. chromatic | 2 | F ff |  $\frac{S}{i i}$  | 4 | in vln+vl angular ds with sf on 3 in ww | 6 |  $\frac{S}{i i i}$  | 6 |  $\frac{S}{i i i}$  | 2 | 4 | sf p f + p. + osbinabo base

Development

Ⓒ 2 | 6 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 4

fp rst. st. cl fl ob cl

Ⓓ Recap

4 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 4 | 6 | 4

vc fl vln p | wind d. |  $\frac{S}{i i i}$  | + vln |  $\frac{S}{i i i}$  | 4 4 |  $\frac{S}{i p i}$  | vln vln vl | 4 | 6 | ?

vc.

wind d.

$\frac{S}{i i i}$

+ vln

4 4

$\frac{S}{i p i}$

vln vln vl

4

Chamber.

6 | ? | p.

oss.

Dirigierpartitur und Stimmen geben den Urtext der Neuen Beethoven-Gesamtausgabe wieder.  
 Einzelabdruck aus BEETHOVEN WERKE, Abteilung IX, Band 7:  
 Musik zu Egmont und andere Schauspielmusiken, München 1998

\* 8 — as before

4 4 2 | 6 2 | 4 | 6 | 6

sf p i

as before

as by but bebi vln

as by

Coda

2 sp lung

4 4 4 4 4

lung p sbj

fl p fluted.

tbl.

8

transp. 2 2 ob. 2 2

Allegro con brio

bach beg

Phrase structure sketch as an *aide memoire* to memorisation. It makes sense to the author even if it doesn't to you!

*104*  
*Machony*

Pinnock in 2.

Andante

Flauto

Oboi

Clarineti  
in Sib / B

Fagotti

Corni  
in Mib / Es

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

Metronome references.