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Myths and Magic: A Word from a Conductor

by

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Myths and Magic: A Word from a Conductor

Several essays which have appeared in the pages of *Harmony* have pointed fingers at conductors as sources of orchestral discontent. In this essay, a conductor points back.

Taavo Virkhaus' essay arrived in our mailbox as we were working with Marilyn Fischer and Isaiah Jackson on the essay which you have just read. We considered it a happy coincidence. Virkhaus is Music Director and Conductor of the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra in Alabama.

Debunking Some Myths

The essay begins with the suggestion that music making is a business which is actually based on myths and illusions. But Virkhaus believes that shining the light of reality on some of the myths can lead to a more constructive future. He reviews the process of selecting conductors and argues that it is good for orchestras to have guest conductors.

Acknowledging that the process is not easy, Virkhaus next details why he considers it important that conductors evaluate their own performances and shares his own experience of returning for several summers as "just a violinist" for the Shenandoah Valley Music Festival.

He defends conductors as, among other things, providers of efficiency and argues that professional musicians are "not children who want the easiest taskmaster in front of them." With the contention that good music is worth fighting for, Virkhaus concludes that making music in the future should be a cooperative effort between musicians and conductors.

Myths and Magic: A Word from a Conductor

In an essay published in the April 1996 issue of *Harmony*, Seymour and Robert Levine observed: “Myth-making is a primal attempt to grasp painfully complex realities by symbolizing and simplifying them. Yet, in simplifying the real world, myths distort and even lie.”¹

In the music-making business we have our share of myths, but we must also realize that we are in a business which, in many ways, is based on myths and illusions. So to try to bring the bright light of reality to our business can be somewhat counterproductive and definitely disillusioning. We are dealing, after all, with images impressed on a human brain by sound waves which by themselves do not create music. It takes a human brain to put it all together and that by itself is something of an illusion. Music, unlike the visual arts, must be received in the time it is produced. In the end, it is like a huge canvas that one is supposed to comprehend while driving past at a steady speed but only observing from a side window. Often you need to drive past the canvas many times before you start to understand the picture.

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On another level, we often call something a myth if we do not agree with its premise. I would call the idea that conductors in Europe advance according to a farm system a myth.² While it is true that conducting students in Germany are mostly pianists who start their careers as “co-repetitors” (coaches) in the opera houses, their careers advance more on patronage than through a farm system. Their chances of getting to conduct rely almost entirely on waiting for a conductor to cancel, so they can show how well they can conduct a performance without a rehearsal. They definitely learn all the operas inside out, but get precious little “baton time” with the orchestra.

Selecting Conductors

In the United States, the “super managers” get blamed for promoting the “jet age conductor” so that they can make more money. But to say that these managers dictate to American orchestra search committees whom to hire is a

disservice. However, the system of picking music directors in America may seem haphazard to young conductors who see 295 out of 300 applicants discarded without anyone observing their conducting. Compare this with musicians auditioning for major orchestras. For all of the 300 or so candidates, at least someone will hear each one play.

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With the advent of videotape and CDs, aspiring conductors at least have a chance to show what they look like, but a tape of a concert does not really show the conductor’s most important assets: interactions with the musicians (and the audience) and how he or she persuades the orchestra to make music. Some search committees send scouts to observe candidates with their own orchestras, but for the most part, lists of candidates are shortened by studying résumés. So to say that conductors pretend that they got the jobs by their “divine right to conduct”³ sounds almost cruel.

If our orchestras would like to have full-time conductors, they could make that a condition of employment. There are some orchestras (not the majors) which stipulate that the conductor must live in the community. This is not necessarily a good idea. It is good for an orchestra to have guest conductors and it is nice to know that your music director is in demand. The late Ralph Black of the American Symphony Orchestra League (ASOL) always said that orchestras should get the best music directors they can afford—no matter where they live or how many other orchestras they conduct. The majors understand this. To get a Carlo Maria Giulini or Carlos Kleiber for even seven weeks of residency makes a big difference in the music making.

This observation brings me to my next point. Conducting, on its highest level, really is magic and any analysis of why or how a master conductor gets his or her results is largely irrelevant. I have experienced that magic playing in orchestras under Monteux, Stokowski, and Munch and have observed it with Guido Cantelli, Carlos Kleiber, Giulini, and von Karajan.⁴ But there are a mere handful of magicians and there is much more music to be conducted in the world. So the merely mortal conductors have to do their best, sometimes in impossible circumstances.⁵

You will see in what I next describe that all conductors—both the magicians and the merely mortal—bear, rightly or wrongly, the responsibility for a host of factors which affect their orchestras. But there are steps we conductors can take to assess ourselves and our relationships with our musicians.

Evaluating Ourselves

An important aspect of a musician’s artistic growth is a proper evaluation of his or her own performance. But conductors rarely enjoy this luxury. To quote Gustav Meier, a well known conducting teacher: “Conductors can be the most isolated

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people in the world. Instrumentalists play chamber music and singers go back to their coaches all the time. With conductors, once you lift the baton, it’s finished. All you get is compliments, good reviews, congratulations, and then you’re fired. There’s not much in between.”⁶

Fired? Yes, fired. It doesn’t matter how nicely the announcement reads that the music director has “resigned” or “did not choose to extend the contract,” the conductor has less job security than almost anyone else in the orchestra.⁷ After the contract expires and is not renewed by the board, there is little the conductor can do without publicly harming his or her reputation and musical future. To fight the decision is futile and mostly counterproductive, and we have yet to hear of a case of a conductor suing for age discrimination. The reasons for firing a conductor are more often than not “nonmusical.” So one puts the best face on the situation and moves on. In many ways it is not necessarily unfair. The music director has the responsibility for all musical aspects of the ensemble, even those that are difficult to control. And he or she will bear the brunt of a bad year in ticket sales, a growing deficit, mistakes in management, and all the right and wrong social decisions made over the years. But as is the case for many CEOs in the business world, responsibility and good salaries bring job insecurity. Unlike the CEOs, however, the conductor usually lacks a golden parachute.

So it behooves a conductor to try to get an honest evaluation of his or her musical success. This, however, can be difficult. Listening to one’s own recordings (not the commercially “fixed” ones, but live performance tapes) can help. But recordings only help to determine whether you achieved what you were imagining as you led the performance. How efficiently you got the results and whether you charmed or bullied the orchestra to play that way will escape your notice.

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It would be great if conductors could pick up their often long-discarded instruments and play in another orchestra. But maintaining one’s “image” makes this generally impossible. However, I had the good fortune to do just that some years ago after studying with Richard Lert at an ASOL summer conductors’ institute and playing at the same time in the conductors’ training orchestra. For the next several summers, I returned as just a violinist with the orchestra, which also played concerts for the Shenandoah Valley Music Festival. It was a great education for me to observe the young conductors and all their disturbing mannerisms. And all the time I thought: do I do that in my own rehearsals?

I would also note that a musician’s social life in a summer festival atmosphere is vastly superior to that of a conductor. It was a revelation to rediscover how much musicians distrust conductors, both musically and socially. It is a rare

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conductor who can have an unencumbered and honest social relationship with a musician. Something is always left unsaid and many innocent remarks can become major issues.

Conductors Provide Efficiency

But like it or not, orchestras need conductors. If nothing else, conductors provide efficiency. The argument that the symphony orchestra is doomed as a business because growth in productivity is impossible since “a Haydn symphony written to be performed by 30 musicians and lasting one-half an hour will require

15 person-hours of human labor . . . no less than it did at the end of the 18th century”⁸ ignores completely rehearsal time. And that is where American orchestras have the edge in efficiency and productivity. Koussevitsky sometimes had a week of rehearsals just to prepare to accompany a soloist. Today, we prepare a soloist in an hour and a half, maximum.⁹ Pops concerts are often prepared in one rehearsal and some services have no rehearsals at all. This is not always a good situation, but our orchestras sight-read marvelously and are very efficient.

We also know that efficiency extends to good conductors. One of the reasons why there is no musical discourse between musicians and the conductor during rehearsals is precisely because of that efficiency and all parties accept this as fact. Many conductors, rather than feeling threatened, would welcome discussions about musical interpretations at a rehearsal, but there is no time available. Many orchestras also play more concerts than they physically and mentally should, but play we must, and that is the cost of efficiency.

Toward a More Constructive Future

Some claim that there are no bad orchestras, only bad conductors. Conductors are also described as the “natural enemy” of orchestral musicians. I agree with the first premise, however flippant it may sound: it places the responsibility in its proper place. The second statement—based on Marxist principles of class struggle and historical inevitability—belongs to the ash heap of history. Making music must be a cooperative effort. All parties need one another. A conductor without an orchestra is completely useless, but an orchestra needs a conductor and the musicians know it. So it is a matter of working out the relationship between the two forces.

One place where the forces diverge is over matters of pay. It is my perception that musicians think conductors make too much money. But market factors are at work here. Most musicians will acknowledge that there are some conductors—even if the number is small—with whom they enjoy making music. And the very fact that these “magicians” are a rarity affects the compensation levels which they can command. As I see it, one solution is for musicians to have greater

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input in the selection of music directors. Musicians are not children who want the easiest taskmaster in front of them, even if some board members perceive them in that light. Professional musicians want to play well, they want to be inspired, and they prefer not to waste their time at inefficient or incompetently led rehearsals.

So where do we go from here? Fortunately there are many success stories in the symphonic music world and all is not lost. Good music is worth fighting for and if we lose that fight symphonic music will not disappear. It will “move” somewhere else—to another continent (the Pacific Rim for instance) or to another time—and our time will be called the “musical Dark Ages” in the history of culture.

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Notes

- ¹ Levine, Seymour and Robert Levine. Why They’re Not Smiling. *Harmony* 2 (April 1996): 15-25.
- ² Freeman, Robert. On the Future of America’s Orchestras. *Harmony* 3 (October 1996): 12.
- ³ Levine, op. cit.
- ⁴ Arthur Nikisch would definitely “count” as a magician, according to my late father who studied with him in Leipzig from 1907 to 1909.
- ⁵ One of the most difficult is the “substitute” system used in some European orchestras, when the people who play the rehearsals may not be the ones who play the performance. For a humorous but very realistic view of this, I recommend the movie *Meeting Venus* (Warner Brothers. 1992. Available on videocassette).
- ⁶ Stearns, David Patrick. 1996. What Happens When a Conductor Hits a Mid-Life Crisis? *BBC Music Magazine*. July: 28.
- ⁷ For an update the reader is encouraged to read “So where have all the maestros gone?” by Norman Lebrecht which appeared in *BBC Music Magazine*. in July 1996.
- ⁸ Baumol, William J. Symphony Orchestra Economics: The Fundamental Challenge. *Harmony* 2 (April 1996): 53.
- ⁹ The late legend Sergiu Celibadache was unemployable as a guest conductor in the United States since he demanded too many rehearsals. He eventually conducted the Curtis Institute Orchestra because he could have almost unlimited rehearsal time.