THE ROLE OF THE CONDUCTOR

In the bad old days of symphony orchestras, conductors were more like dictators. Not only did they treat the orchestra as if they were all petulant school children, they even treated individual musicians in the same demeaning manner. It was humiliating and demoralizing. Rather than instilling respect, all it did was cause resentment and disdain. As most of us have learned, you can't force someone to respect you. You have to earn it. This wasn't something conductors back then understood very well, or at least chose not to acknowledge it.

The music they made was indicative of this torrential relationship. Although it was executed correctly, more or less, that had more to do with the skill of the musicians, rather than the conductor. The missing ingredient was mutual trust. The conductor clearly did not trust the musicians and they, in turn, did not trust the conductor. Rather than the relationship being based on cooperation, it was adversarial. The performance suffered. Most listeners could not pick up on this as it isn't that perceptible, but it wasn't as good as it could have been.

Eventually, with a new generation of conductors, presumably aware of the problem, they worked toward building more trust with and respect for the orchestra. The conductor had to be able to trust that the musicians would follow his lead, and they had to trust the conductor to be knowledgeable enough to meaningfully lead them. A quick giveaway as to a conductor's ability to do that is their gestures. If they flail about and gesture wildly, it's safe to say they're compensating for either a lack of familiarity with the score, or a possible lack of fundamental conducting skills. Or maybe it's more showmanship than anything else.

When most conductors eventually picked up on this, the relationship between conductor and orchestra was much improved, and the performances were perceptibly better. Still, there are some conductors, who have been taught in the old ways, who still haven't learned the trust thing. They can be easily spotted. They're the ones thrashing about on stage as though

they're solely responsible for the music that is being played. You may also get a clue watching the expressions on the musician's faces. If no one is smiling, even a little, no one is having any fun.

When both the conductor and the orchestra like the music they're playing, it will always sound better. You can see that on their faces and in their gestures. When they're playing something they've played countless times, there isn't that same excitement in their performance. Unfortunately, most symphony orchestras have a repertoire that centers around the pre-twentieth century classics because they feel that's what their subscribers want. Since it's their subscribers who cover the lion's share of the revenue, they acquiesce to them.

But there's another aspect of most of the music that came since the beginning of the twentieth century. It's not only more complex, it's more precise. For instance, there's a lot less interpretation of tempo than was the case with the classics. There's less general terms, like *Andante*, and more precise metronome markings, calling out tempos in numbers of beats per minute. With the classics, the interpretation of tempo can vary widely because there's usually no metronome mark. For instance, *Andante* has a tempo range of between 76 to 108 beats per minute. That's actually quite a wide spread and very perceptible.

If you've listened to various conductors and orchestras playing the same classical work, you can often hear that difference. Conductors like to have their performance of a piece be distinctive, especially a recorded performance. It's their Beethoven's Ninth, as opposed to someone else's Beethoven's Ninth. Of course, in reality, that's nonsense. There's only one Beethoven's Ninth. But without more precise callouts, especially for tempo, it's open to that kind of interpretation. That's one of the reasons the old school conductors like the old world classics.

Newer music typically has more precise callouts for tempo, as well as articulations and techniques. The notation is also

indicative of this with many of the traditional markings replaced with newer versions, or even markings created by the composers to illustrate their intentions. What happens in these cases is the relationship of the conductor to the orchestra becomes even more important. The mutual trust that is inherent in their relationship takes on a different aspect. They must work together to understand and correctly execute the composer's intention. A dead composer can't argue with you, so you take liberties. A living composer can provide guidance as to interpretation and realization.

It isn't the conductor leading the orchestra as much as it's the conductor helping the orchestra navigate the score. The time when this mutual understanding of the music first occurs is during rehearsals. At that point, everyone can step through the music and agree on how to execute the various callouts and, generally, how the piece will unfold. In essence, a mutual trust is established based on the shared experience of becoming familiar with the piece.

In the standard repertoire of classics, that usually doesn't happen. That's because these works are widely known and have been played countless times. There's a frame of reference everyone's familiar with. With a new piece, the performance they will realize may be among the first, if not the premiere of the work. No prior performance was recorded or otherwise documented, therefore there's no usable frame of reference. In many ways, that's exciting and can be very stimulating for the conductor and musicians. I believe the younger players will most likely feel that way, rather than the older players, who may not be as adventurous.

Some composers, like Stravinsky, recorded many of his works, mostly to establish a conducting reference for others to follow, with regards to interpretation. He was always quite adamant about conductors taking too much license with his works, and felt they should simply play the music as it is written. Everything you

needed to know to play the piece was in the score, he would say. What I've seen in many of the scores of new pieces by today's composers is a detailed explanation, especially when there's callouts unique to that particular score. There's even basic guides included to how it should be performed.

This typically appears as a preface to the actual notated portion of the score. By doing this, composers are not just leaving things up to the conductor and musicians to interpret as they see fit, but are providing basic information for the performance of the piece. That was usually never done with the classics. In absence of this kind of information, conductors used their own judgment, when it came to interpretation.

So the role of the conductor has evolved from one of almost musical dictator, to one of trusted leader, now to one of collaborator. It's transformed from the conductor being the primary authority, to now being another member of the orchestra. In a performance, everyone has a role to play. With the conductor now being more on equal footing with the players, the performance can only get better. The audience benefits the most from this. That enthusiasm shown by the conductor and orchestra in performing today's music can be contagious, and help to bring greater acceptance of today's music by today's listeners.