

THE FIFTH PRACTICE

Leading From Any Chair

BEN: A conductor can easily be seduced by the public's extraordinary attention to his unique offering and come to believe that he is personally superior. The near-mythical maestro Herbert von Karajan was reputed to have jumped into a taxi outside the opera house and shouted to the driver, "Hurry, hurry!" "Very good sir," said the driver, "Where to?" "It doesn't matter --" said von Karajan impatiently, "they need me everywhere!"

Orchestral players will forgive a great conductor -- one who has a far-reaching artistic vision -- many personal transgressions in facilitation of the all important performance, much the way a family will administer to the extraordinary needs of a woman giving birth. Yet in the music business, as in all walks of life, a leader who feels he is superior is likely to suppress the voices of the very people on whom he must rely to deliver his vision alive and kicking.

The conductor, a magical figure for the audience, enjoys a leadership mystique of significant magnitude. It may seem strange to the orchestral musician that the corporate world would be interested in hearing a conductor's views on leadership, or that the metaphor of the orchestra is so frequently used in the literature of leadership, because in fact, the profession of conductor is one of the last true bastions of totalitarianism in the civilized world!

There is a famous tale of Toscanini, the great Italian maestro, whose temper and blatantly autocratic ways -- as much as his transcendent musicianship -- were the

stuff of legend. It is said that once in the middle of a rehearsal, in a fit of anger, he fired a longstanding member of the double bass section, who now had to return home to tell his wife that he was out of a job. As the bass player packed up his instrument, he mentioned a few things that he had hitherto kept to himself, and as he left the hall for the final time, he shouted at Toscanini, "You are a no good son-of-a-bitch!" So oblivious was Toscanini to the notion that a player would dare to challenge his authority, that he roared back: "It is too late to apologize!"

We find much less of the kind of domination of the orchestra by the conductor in this day and age than was widespread, if not the norm, fifty years ago. But vanity and tyranny are not uncommon in the music world even in these enlightened times, and the picture of orchestral musicians as infantile and submissive, caught between willful conductors, insensitive management, and hyper-vigilant unions, is not as rare as one would hope. Perhaps that is part of the reason why a recent study of various professions revealed that orchestral players, while not the most disaffected in the survey, experience a job satisfaction level just below that of prison guards.

I had been conducting for nearly twenty years when it suddenly dawned on me that the conductor of an orchestra does not actually make a sound. His picture may appear on the front of the CD box in various dramatic poses, but his actual power derives from his ability to make other people powerful. I began to ask myself questions like "What makes a group lively and engaged?" instead of "How good am I?" So palpable was the difference in my approach to conducting as a result of this "silent conductor" insight, that players in the orchestra started asking me, "What happened to you?" Before that my main concern had been whether my interpretation was being appreciated by the audience, and also, if the truth were known, whether the critics liked it, because if they did it might lead to other opportunities and greater success. In order to realize my interpretation of the work

in question, it seemed all I had to do was to gain sway over the players, teach them my interpretation and make them fulfill my musical will. Now, in the light of my “discovery,” I began to shift my attention to how effective I was at enabling the musicians to play each phrase as beautifully as they were capable. This concern had rarely surfaced when my position appeared to give me absolute power and I had cast the players as mere instruments of my will.

But how, actually, could I know what the players were feeling about my effectiveness in releasing their power? Certainly I could tell a lot by looking into their eyes -- the eyes never lie, after all -- and to their posture, their whole demeanor, and I could ask myself, “are they engaged?” But at some point, I found I wanted more information, and more relationship. Our eyes meeting across a crowded room was simply not enough; I wanted to hear what they had to say. It was completely impractical to attempt to be on speaking terms with a hundred players at every rehearsal however, and anyway, there was no precedent for it. Traditionally, all verbal communication in an orchestral rehearsal is directed from the podium to the players and almost never the other way around. Any communication back to the conductor is through a few leading players, especially the concert master, and then almost invariably in the form of a question, usually preceded by a semi-diffident, often secretly mocking, “Maestro....”

"Virtually every communication from the musicians to a conductor in a rehearsal is phrased as a question, even when it is really a statement of fact or belief," wrote Seymour and Robert Levine in an article in *Harmony Magazine*. "One of us once heard the principal clarinetist of a major American orchestra ask the conductor whether he wanted the notes with dots over them ‘...short, or like the brass were playing them?’ (A dot over a note indicates that it is to be played short.) This rather complex statement, masquerading as a question, conveyed both the musicians’ lack of respect for the brass players in question, and scorn for the

conductor's failure to notice the problem. But to fit the myth of the omniscient conductor, the comment had to be phrased as a question, for how could a musician possibly inform an omniscient being? The myth dictates that a musician can only tap into that well of knowledge, not add to it."

One time, as we were rehearsing Mahler's Sixth Symphony, I made a seemingly routine apology to the players of the Philharmonia Orchestra of London. You see, I had shouted out after one passage "Cowbells, you didn't come in!" A few minutes later I realized that the cowbells weren't supposed to play at that moment, so I called out to the percussion section, "I'm so sorry, I was wrong about that entrance. I realize you don't play there." After the rehearsal, I was amazed that no less than three musicians came to me separately and in private to say that they couldn't remember the last time they had heard a conductor admit his own mistake. One player commented on how dispiriting it is for players when a conductor, as often happens, gets angry and blames the orchestra when he himself made the mistake, in the vain hope that nobody will have noticed. Many corporate heads and managers I have spoken to have since let me know that the orchestra is not the only hierarchical setting where this dynamic occurs.

With the intention of providing a conduit for orchestra members to be heard, I initiated a practice of putting a blank sheet of paper on every stand in each rehearsal, and also in each class. The players are invited to note down any observation or coaching for me that might enable me to empower them to play the music more beautifully. At first I braced myself for criticism, but surprisingly the responses on "the white sheets," as they have come to be called, virtually never appeared in that form.

Initially, out of habit, players confined their remarks to practical issues, such as the agreement between the parts and the score. Gradually, when they trusted that I

was genuinely interested in what they had to say, they began to support me, not by bolstering my authority, nor my ego, but by giving recognition to my role as an essential conduit for the full realization of the possibility of the music. Now that the “white sheet” practice is familiar and accepted with all the orchestras that I regularly conduct, the comments, which are usually signed to facilitate further discussion, are most often practical ones about my conducting or about the interpretation of the music.

Musicians do not hesitate to ask me, for instance, to conduct a certain passage in two rather than in four, so they can better fulfill the sense of the musical line.

Frequently I receive comments that are deeply insightful about the interpretation, comments that I almost always take on board and that affect the performance. An orchestra of a hundred musicians will invariably contain great artists, some with an intimate or specialized knowledge of the work being performed, others with insight about the tempo or structure or relationships within the piece, a subject about which no one has ever asked them to communicate.

Whenever I take on an idea from a member of the orchestra, I always try to make some eye-contact with them at the moment the passage is played, sometimes several times during the rehearsals and even at the concert. Magically, that moment becomes their moment. “You did my crescendo!” said a cellist with a mixture of disbelief, pride and delight after the concert, when she had written on her white sheet only that morning at the dress rehearsal that we weren't doing justice to one of Bruckner's majestic climaxes.

One of the most supremely gifted and accomplished artists I have known sat for decades as a modest member of the viola section of one of America's leading orchestras. Eugene Lehner had been the violist of the legendary Kolisch Quartet,

and had coached the distinguished Julliard Quartet, as well as innumerable other famous ensembles. Many of Boston's finest musicians considered Lehner to be a seminal, formative influence on their musical lives. How often I have consulted him on thorny points of interpretation -- to have the scales removed from my eyes by his incandescent insight into the music!

Yet, had any conductor visiting the Boston Symphony ever consulted him, or called on his profound knowledge and understanding of the particular piece they were performing together? Indeed, I believe such a notion is almost unthinkable. One day, when he was a guest coach at my Friday Interpretation class, I raised this issue, and for the benefit of the class I asked him, "How can you bear to play day after day in an orchestra led by conductors many of whom must know so much less than you?" In his habitual humility, he sidestepped the compliment, and then indicated that he did indeed have something to say on the subject:

One day, during my very first year playing with the orchestra, I remember an occasion when Koussevitsky was conducting a Bach piece and he seemed to be having some difficulty getting the results he wanted -- it simply wasn't going right. Fortunately, his friend, the great French pedagogue and conductor Nadia Boulanger, happened to be in town and sitting in on the rehearsal, so Koussevitsky took the opportunity to extricate himself from an awkward and embarrassing situation, by calling out to her, "Nadia, please, will you come up here and conduct? I want to go to the back of the hall to see how it sounds." Mlle. Boulanger stepped up, made a few comments to the musicians, and conducted the orchestra through the passage without a hitch. Ever since that time, in every rehearsal, I have been waiting for the conductor to say, "Lehner, you come up here and conduct, I want to go to the back of the hall to hear how it sounds." It is now forty-three years

since this happened, and it is less and less likely that I will be asked. However, in the meantime, I haven't had a single dull moment in a rehearsal, as I sit wondering what I would say to the orchestra should I suddenly be called upon to lead.

During a recent stint guest conducting the orchestra at the Royal College of Music in London, I told, as I often do, the story of Lehner, as a way of encouraging the greatest possible attentiveness and participation of all the players. Then, in the middle of a rehearsal, I suddenly turned to one of the violinists sitting in the fourth stand of the second violins, whose passion had been evident to me from the very first rehearsal, and said, "John, you come up here and conduct, I want to go to the back to hear how it sounds." That day on his white sheet he wrote that I had enabled him to realize a lifelong dream. Suddenly, the full extent of the resources of the orchestra presented itself to my view, and I leapt to offer some of the other musicians the same gift. One wrote, *"I have been so critical of conductors, and now I see that what you have to do is as demanding as playing an instrument."* Some others commented that this exercise shifted the whole experience of playing in an orchestra from a passive one to one in which, like Lehner, they took on an active participation.

* * *

How Much Greatness Are We Willing To Grant ?

The conductor decides who is playing in his orchestra. Even when he comes in fresh to guest conduct players who are already in their seats, he

determines who is there. When he sees instrumentalists who look listless, he can decide that they are bored and resigned, or he can greet in them the original spark that brought them into music, now dimmed to a splutter. He can say, "Of course! They have had to go against their passionate natures, and interrupt the long line of their commitment on account of the many competing demands of the music profession. They want to be recognized as the true artists they really are." He can see, sitting before him, the jaded and the disaffected -- or the tender and glorious lover of music.

A monumental question for leaders in any organization to consider is: how much greatness are we willing to grant people? Because it makes all the difference at every level who it is we decide we are leading. The activity of leadership is not limited to conductors, presidents, and CEO's, of course -- the player who energizes the orchestra by communicating his new-found appreciation for the tasks of the conductor, or a parent who fashions in her own mind that her children desire to contribute, is exercising leadership of the most profound kind.

* * *

Listening for passion and commitment is the practice of *the silent conductor* whether the players are sitting in the orchestra, on the management team, or on the nursery floor. How can this leader know how well he is fulfilling his intention? He can look in the eyes of the players, and prepare to ask himself, "Who am I being that they are not shining?" He can invite information and expression. He can speak to their passion. He can look for an opportunity to hand them the baton.

“Today was exceptional in that I learned leadership is not a responsibility - nobody has to lead. It’s a gift, shining silver, that reminds people huddled nearby why each shimmering moment matters. It’s in the eyes, the voice, this swelling song that warms up from the toes and tingles with endless possibilities. Things change when you care enough to grab whatever you love, and give it everything.”’-- Amanda Burr, student at the Walnut Hill School

Leaders Everywhere

BEN: On our 1999 tour to Cuba with the Youth Philharmonic Orchestra, we decided to begin a concert in Havana with two pieces to be performed in combination with the National Youth Orchestra of Cuba, a Cuban and an American sitting at each stand. The first piece to be played was written by the outstanding conductor of the Cuban orchestra. It was colorful and brilliant, and contained many complicated Cuban rhythms. I had decided not to prepare our orchestra in advance, because I thought it was a rare opportunity to start work on a piece under the direction of the composer himself.

Maestro Guido Lopez Gavillan began rehearsing his work, but it soon seemed evident that the complex Cuban rhythms were so unfamiliar to the American kids that the piece was beyond them. They simply couldn’t play it. The maestro became concerned, frustrated, and then resigned himself to failure. He declared from the podium, “I’m afraid this is not going to work. We have to cancel the performance.”

This outcome was completely unacceptable to me. It was one of the cornerstones of this trip that our young musicians be able to perform with their counterparts. Without thinking, I leapt to the stage and said to the young Cuban players through an interpreter, "Your job is to teach these rhythms to your stand partner." And to the American players I said, "just give yourselves over to the leaders sitting next to you. You will get the support you need." I asked the maestro to try again.

What happened next startled us all. The focus shifted away from the maestro, toward the stand partners. Already more expressive than most young players I had seen, the Cubans became fantastically energized, exuberantly conducting with their instruments, each leading along his American stand partner enthusiastically. The American kids, basking in the lavish attention, gave themselves over to the process and began to play the rhythms the way they were intended to be played. Maestro Gavillan, who appeared as surprised and as pleased as I was, nodded to me that everything would be fine.

Then it was my turn, and I rose to conduct the other piece that was to open the program: Bernstein's fiendishly difficult little masterpiece, his overture to *Candide*. This piece was so tricky to play that we had sent the parts down to Havana three months earlier to make sure that the Cuban orchestra would have the opportunity to prepare. As we were getting ready to rehearse, I asked their leader in passing whether they had enjoyed working on the overture. "But, we've never seen it," he said, obviously perplexed. It turned out that the music had been languishing in the Cuban post office for all that time.

I could feel the blood drain from my face. I felt panic overcoming me, realizing the impossibility of performing *this* piece under *these* conditions. Our youth orchestra had taken months to master the overture! Then, I looked at the players and saw many of them smiling. Of course! We had only to reverse the process

that had been so successful earlier in the rehearsal! The American kids now sprang to life, energetically leading their stand partners through the bar lines -- and it went off perfectly. Again, the attention shifted away from the conductor on the podium to the partnership in the pit. The energy level of each local “conductor” rose dramatically. No less remarkable was the willingness of the young Cuban players to be supported and led by their close companions -- and how much more effectively than by the distant figure on the podium.

* * *

Like Lehner’s tale, the story of these young people highlights another meaning of the phrase *silent conductor*. A leader does not need a podium; he can be sitting quietly on the edge of any chair, listening passionately and with commitment, fully prepared to take up the baton. In fact, to make reference to the rabbi's gift, the leader may be any one of us.

Mr. Zander,

This is my first white sheet. Sitting at the back of the cello section, when I have always sat at the front, was the hardest thing I've done in a long while. But over the nine days of our work together I began to discover what playing in an orchestra was really about. Your shine has inspired me to believe that I have the force of personality to power the section from wherever I sit and I believe that I led that concert from the 11th chair. Thank you for helping me know that. From this day I will be leading every section in which I sit – whichever seat.

- *Georgina cellist in the New Zealand National Youth Orchestra*

Here is a final story of an entirely committed and passionate man, a colleague of Eugene Lehner's, who led as a peer from the edge of his chair with so little fanfare that no one actually noticed him. They just heard the remarkable result.

The legendary Kolisch Quartet had the singular distinction of playing its entire repertoire from memory, including the impossibly complex modern works of Schoenberg, Webern, Bartok and Berg. Eugene Lehner was the violist for the quartet in the 1930's. Lehner's stories about their remarkable performances often included a hair-raising moment when one player or another had a memory slip. Although he relished the rapport that developed between them without the encumbrance of a music stand, he admits there was hardly a concert in which some mistake did not mar the performance. The alertness, presence, and attention required of the players in every performance is hard to fathom, but in one concert an event occurred that surpassed their ordinary brinkmanship.

In the middle of the slow movement of Beethoven's Opus 95 *String Quartet*, just before his big solo, Lehner suddenly had an inexplicable memory lapse, in a place where his memory had never failed him before. He literally blacked out. But the audience heard Opus 95 as it was meant to be played, the viola solo sounding in all its richness. Even the first violinist, Rudolph Kolisch and cellist Benar Heifetz, both with their eyes closed and deeply absorbed in the music, were unaware that Lehner had dropped out. The second violinist, Felix Khuner, was playing Lehner's melody, coming in without missing a beat at the viola's designated entrance, the notes perfectly in tune and voiced like a viola on an instrument tuned a fifth higher. Lehner

was completely stunned, and offstage after the performance asked Khuner how he could have possibly known to play. Khuner answered with a shrug: “I could see that your third finger was poised over the wrong string, so I knew you must have forgotten what came next.”

* * *

“Unhappy is the land that has no heroes,” sighs Andrea in Bertolt Brecht’s Life of Galileo. “No,” contradicts the astronomer, “unhappy is the land that needs heroes.”