

Two Sides of a Familiar Coin

Reflections on two familiar and not exactly interchangeable words

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What's in a word? Quite a lot, actually, as an etymological inquiry can reveal – for words, like geological features, are coterminous with the history that produced them. Such an investigation often leads to the realization that words we've come to see as casually interchangeable may have very different connotations. This sort of discovery has the potential both to enrich our experience and to focus our thinking in productive ways. That is the purpose of this article.

The two words I have in mind are both verbs – the infinitives *to direct* and *to conduct* – along with their nominative corollaries: *director* and *conductor*. The equating of the two in the popular imagination is the cause of much mischief at the professional levels of music making. It is not unusual to see the head of a symphony orchestra identified as “Music Director and Conductor.” The vesting in a single person of the very different responsibilities implied by this compound title can amount to the imposition of an overwhelming burden, for which many otherwise talented musicians are simply unprepared (witness the sad spectacle of good musicians floundering because they are poor administrators, while able administrators flounder because they are poor musicians). Little wonder that so many well-intentioned (and in many respects well-trained) young music professionals fail so spectacularly.

I personally have four times – and with admittedly mixed success – held positions so described, and the position I currently fill is that of “Associate Professor of Music and Director of Orchestral Activities” at my university. Yet in conversation I would readily tell you that the musical activity I most enjoy is *conducting*, and I would mean that in a very precise sense – as in contrast to *directing*, which is hardly a musical activity at all.

One of my professorial assignments involves the teaching of graduate conducting students. At our inaugural session I have those students explore the two verbs identified above, for I believe it is impossible to make any real progress without first coming to terms with the essential dichotomy in the career we have chosen: the obligation both to *direct* and to *conduct*.

To direct

We will begin with the former, as that is the order in which the two duties are most often listed in formal titles. The *Oxford English Dictionary* supplies the following etymology, quoted in part:

f. L. *direct-* (*direct-*), ppl. stem of *dirigere* (*d-*) to straighten, set straight, direct, guide,
f. *d-* apart, asunder, distinctly (or *d-* down) + *regere* to put or keep straight, to rule.

A little reflection on the above leads naturally to related words: to *rectify* means to set right (to “correct”); a *Rector* is in charge of keeping order at a university or church; the *director* of a corporation sets that corporation’s policy and keeps the accountants honest (or pays the penalty); a *band director* teaches his charges to behave in an “upright” fashion and compels them to march in straight lines. It must be apparent from the short list above, that the verb “to direct” takes *people* as its object.

To say “I direct an orchestra” is perfectly sensible and accurate. For reasons we will shortly see, to say “I *conduct* an orchestra is either unthinking nonsense or a claim so lofty as to be very difficult to live up to. As I discovered when I had the honor of occupying the podium of a Bulgarian orchestra a few summers ago, a person in that position is known there as *Dirigent* – director. Any time I made the mistake of introducing myself as a “conductor,” people assumed that I worked for a passenger railroad and punched people’s tickets, and I had some explaining to do.

The skills necessary to be an effective director and an effective conductor are in fact two different sets of skills, equally difficult to quantify. Although these skills are not mutually exclusive, they do not necessarily reinforce each other either; and we all know people who are at ease in one of those areas and utterly incompetent in the other.

To be an effective music director, one first of all must surely be a psychologist – even though thorough training in psychology is hardly central to the curriculum that shaped most of us. The notion of a band director who hates kids is of course incomprehensible and a recipe for disaster. But a band director who fails to *understand* them is likewise doomed to failure.¹ This is not the place for an exhaustive dissertation on human psychology – which is beyond my expertise at any rate. A good place to start, however, would be with a few basic maxims:

- Other people are just as real as I am.
- They are also just as insecure as I am.
- They want to be loved and appreciated just as much as I do.
- Many of the things that give me pleasure also give them pleasure.
- Many of the things that gripe my gut also gripe theirs.
- No one likes to be taken for granted or have his time wasted.
- Motivational speeches are basically a pain in the neck (actions speak louder than words).

¹ As cautionary tales, the reader may wish to explore three short stories by Kurt Vonnegut, first published not long after World War II and recently brought back into print in a collection entitled *Bagombo Snuff Box* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1999). In these stories (“The No-Talent Kid,” “Ambitious Sophomore” and “The Boy Who Hated Girls”), hapless high school band director George M. Helmholtz’s ambivalent relationships with his students are weighed in Mr. Vonnegut’s own finely-calibrated balance of psychological scrutiny – and the director, duly imbued with his private passions but oblivious of his students, is found wanting.

As the director will be requiring good *discipline* of those he directs (the implication is that they will become *disciples*) it is essential that he be *self-disciplined*. No director whose personal life and work habits are a mess can fairly or realistically expect better of his students. No matter how able a musician he may be, a director who is perceived as arbitrary in matters of conduct and justice will come to be resented, despised and resisted. Directing is a huge and complicated task: the director had better be organized. The position also involves profound trust, and the director had better be trustworthy.

Successful directing involves a thorough commitment to the job – and the ensemble – *currently at hand*. A youth orchestra director who is using his appointment as a springboard to “bigger and better things” is probably going to both mete out and endure a lot of misery, no matter his artistic strengths. Our musical landscape is littered with the wreckage of programs that were allowed to atrophy and implode while their directors spent their time and energies pursuing the next big break. Shame on them.

It is extremely unlikely that a director who has not done his homework – that is, learned his scores – will command the respect of his ensemble. In fact, I can’t think of a single thing that causes me to lose respect for a self-proclaimed *maestro* more quickly and completely than to catch him unprepared. It is at this juncture that directing and conducting are perhaps most closely intertwined.

Finally, directing can be done effectually only from a *humanistic* position – a position that both acknowledges and embraces the beauty in human endeavors (including ensemble music-making) and wants to have a hand in making one of those endeavors possible. There is no other valid reason to enter such a profession, and no other way the ensemble director can survive and his charges flourish. A music director who just doesn’t much care for music is a contradiction in terms, and unsuited for the profession.

To conduct

The etymology of the infinitive *to conduct* is more obscure than that of *to direct*. Here’s the *OED* on the subject:

Of this, as of CONDUCT *n.*, two (or, at length, three) types have been in use: viz. *conduyt-en*, f. F. *conduit*, *-ite* (:L. *conduct-us*, *-a*), pa. pple. of *condui-re*:L. *condere*; often phonetically reduced to *condute*, and to *condite*, *condyte*, *condyth*, *condeth*; but finally, in 15-16th c., assimilated to the L. ppl. stem as *conduct*. The ultimate forms of these were so different, that they might be considered distinct words...

At the risk of oversimplifying, here is my own distillation of the convoluted etymology of *to conduct*. Two roots are in evidence: *con*, which, as is well-known in musical parlance, means “with” – as in *Allegro con brio* (but keep in mind that *with* – in English as well as in other languages – frequently means “by means of” instead of “accompanied by”) and *duct*, a pipe through which something flows (consider aqueducts, tear ducts, heating/cooling ducts and duct tape). Hence the citing of *conduit* in the *OED* entry above: a channel through which something flows.

In the case of the professional positions under consideration, the implications are both clear (we conduct *music* not *ensembles* – but see below) and staggering: we are the channels through which the great masters of the past are able to speak to audiences of the present. As arrogant as it may sound to claim that in some sense we “channel the spirit” of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert or Brahms, that is in fact what *conductor* implies.

Several observations follow quite naturally from this understanding of the word. Considering, for instance, the fact that a channel is not an end in itself but a means to one: what then is the place of *ego* in “conducting?” (But isn’t ego necessary in “directing?” How does one balance these seemingly contradictory demands?) Channels must be kept clear: reflect on shipping channels, and the huge (but willingly-borne) costs of keeping them “un-silted.” Quite a few things can block our musical channels and “channeling:” insufficient score study, poverty of imagination, lack of native curiosity, uncritical acceptance of whatever recordings we happen to have grown up with (as opposed to the arduous but surely satisfying task of finding out what Brahms actually *wrote*), a neglected and underdeveloped somatic vocabulary (that is, gestural technique – the part of our job most likely to be identified in the popular imagination as “conducting”). I will address these observations at some length below.

For Bruno Walter, the problem of ego as it relates to conducting is subsumed to the task of interpretation and resolved thus:

...(T)he ideal musical interpreter will be one who is wholly taken up with the work, wholly in line with it, but who, at the same time, conjures up the full force of his personality – and this includes, of necessity, his delight in his own talent for interpretation. He will have preserved the joy in music-making of his young days, and he will be right in pouring his innermost being into his interpretation since it has undergone a union with that of the composer.²

It would be difficult to improve or enlarge on Walter’s formula. At the same time, it is surely self-evident that no one can be “wholly taken up with the work, wholly in line with it,” who has not studied the work to the finest degree, taking every minutest detail of the score as evidence for understanding the music and “interpreting” it correctly. Ego is thus assigned a position that is in some respects servile, bound to the obligation of giving voice to something greater than itself. Walter himself resorted to the paradoxical term “selfless ego” in his effort to describe the appropriate state of mind.

On the other hand, an unbridled ego turned loose on a musical masterpiece is a disaster for the music. Gunther Schuller spends much of his *Compleat Conductor* arguing this point, bringing his objections to this acute focus:

The excessive personalizing of interpretation (with utter disregard for the score) has been allowed to fester under the mistaken notion that the conductor...is more important than the composer, that the composer and his works are there to serve the careers of conductors, when in fact it should be the other way around. Little recognition is given to the simple fact that, if it weren’t for composers and their

² Walter, Bruno, trans. Paul Hamburger: *Of Music and Music-Making*. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1961. p. 25.

creations, conductors...would have nothing to conduct.... The immense success – meaning rounds of applause and standing ovations – many conductors garner conducting a Brahms or Beethoven symphony would be clearly impossible if Brahms or Beethoven hadn't composed those symphonies in the first place.³

As aggravatingly wheedling as Schuller's tone occasionally becomes, anyone who presumes to *conduct* should take the time necessary to read his monumental tome and at least hear him out.

Sadly enough, Schuller's observations are often borne out by first-hand experience: it is not unusual to witness performances that can only be explained by profound conductorial ignorance and arrogance (the two often go hand-in-hand) while readings infused with deep comprehension and humility are heard only rarely. Max Rudolf used to lament that our profession is not yet a great one – because so few of its practitioners take it seriously. It seems to me that a great many podiums are occupied by people more suited by talent and temperament for careers as televangelists than for careers as conductors. (Put your hands on the television set!)

As I have singled out “insufficient score study” above; what, exactly, constitutes “sufficient” score study? Here I adopt the language of logicians, as when they identify a cause as “necessary but not sufficient.” Sufficiency in score study encompasses everything that is “necessary” and then some – it is study that takes in all the *necessary* elements *and synthesizes them*. The implications are profound: sufficient score study is that which puts the conductor's understanding of the music on a par with that of its creator. How can we hope to arrive at such an all-encompassing understanding of *any* composition – a modest *Gymnopedie* of Satie, say – to say nothing of the “Jupiter” Symphony of Mozart?

To recognize that the task is a daunting one is not to excuse us from making the effort. Our job begins with a close examination of all the evidence a score presents to us. A good way to start is to solfège – accurately, at sounding pitch – through every single part in the score from beginning to end, observing all dynamic markings and nuances, all articulation marks, all stylistic indications *and all rests*. This is likely to take hours, of course, for even a very slight composition (it will take *many* hours for compositions that already fill the better part of an hour). But it is quite surprising – for those who have never done it – how much one can learn this way. Then it is a good idea to mark in the score, the phrasing scheme that one has discovered in the course of singing the parts. For the conductor has to both understand and communicate the architecture of the music, and the fundamental level at which that architecture is expressed is the phrase. There are several systems for doing this, and the important thing is not so much to determine at the outset, which is the *best system*, as it is to adopt *a* system and apply it consistently (one can always switch systems at a later time if one feels the need).

I happen to think that making thorough phrase graphs is an indispensable part of score study: I do this for every composition I conduct. I start with 11x17” graph paper marked in .25” squares and write in measure numbers with ample space between lines

³ Schuller, Gunther: *The Compleat Conductor*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 22.

of measure numbers to insert important information (this assumes, of course, that the measures in your score are numbered; if the editor has not been kind enough to do this for you, you must do it for yourself!). That information can include the following: identification of the largest architectonic divisions (exposition, development, recapitulation, coda, etc.), secondary architectonic divisions (Theme I, transition, Theme II, closing, etc.) tertiary features (parallel and contrasting periods, subdivisions of the development section, differentiation of the second theme group, etc.), with all the minutia of phrase construction represented as arcs above the measure numbers, on however many organizational levels the music divulges, as well as key areas, meter changes, important harmonies and modulations, significant tonal features (modulations, pedal points, chromatic bass lines, circle-of-fifths motion, etc.). This is a very time-consuming process, but once he has gone through the exercise, the conductor more nearly “owns” that piece than he can imagine at the outset. Very often, in fact, he will discover that he has in the process *memorized* the composition!

A hypermetric reduction of the entire score is also recommended: this should include at least the top and bottom voices, and irregularities of phrasing – those architectural units of most immediate interest to the discerning ear – should be duly noted. And there are theoretical tools available to us as well – and they absolutely *must* be used. A complete harmonic analysis, for instance, is a necessity not an option. A Schenkerian or voice-leading analysis is also a very good idea.

Our studies are not yet finished. The conductor must also research the provenance of the music: when it was composed, where the composer was living at the time and what was going on in his life. Was the piece written to fulfill a commission, or out of the composer’s inner necessity? What sort of ensemble played it? Is that what the composer would have wished? (In Schubert’s case, *certainly not!*) What did the composer have to say about the piece to his friends and family? What does the music “mean,” beyond whatever it is that notes can “mean?” How were players expected to respond to particular aspects of musical notation at the time? (How was *portato* executed in Haydn’s time, for instance? Should one reconcile the triplets and dotted rhythms in Telemann? Under what circumstances do we apply *notes inégales*? How should Beethoven’s staccato dots be differentiated from his marcato strokes in performance?) It is absolutely essential to read at least *a* biography of the composer of any piece you’re conducting, with careful attention to those aspects of the composer’s life that most nearly apply to the composition at hand.

Why is all this historical data important? If you do not understand that Mozart’s E-flat major *Sinfonia Concertante* for violin, viola and orchestra was written not long after his mother’s death and during a devastating rift with his father, that Mozart’s mother had for several years been the only source of consolation for the young composer, that his father was a famous violin pedagogue and that the composer was an accomplished violist, you will not understand that Mozart must have entertained the fantasy of healing the breach with his father by means of a collaborative performance of this lovingly-composed work, or that the infinitely sad C-minor second movement is a memorial to his mother, and you thus cannot possibly conduct this work with the requisite feeling. You will find none of this information, by the way, in the score itself, no matter how closely you study it.

If the foregoing challenge seems unreasonable, perhaps the reader who finds it so should consider a career in which he can do less harm. I am absolutely convinced that we are unfit to conduct any piece of music unless and until we understand it completely. And the only way to do that, I suspect, is to spend as much time with it as it cost the composer to create it. That, by the way, is not a bad formula for the appreciation of any art. We stand some chance of deeply apprehending a painting by Johannes Vermeer only when we have stood in front of that canvas and studied it for as long as it took Vermeer to conceive and execute it.

At the end of a list of channel-blockers, above, I mentioned an insufficiently developed somatic vocabulary. This, of course, is what formal conducting studies primarily address. The principles, usually articulated and reinforced over at least two semesters of work with a teacher, can nevertheless be stated in a few words. There are basically two foundational points:

1. Conducting is a succession of preparations not a succession of pulses. This means that if your energies are primarily expended in “beating time,” you’re going about it the wrong way. By the time a “beat” is given, it’s too late for your ensemble to respond accurately: your gestures are then superfluous, and you can be sure that your players are ignoring you. If you take it upon yourself to provide a succession of preparations, however, you will command your players’ attention and put yourself in a position to conduct the music. Giving a succession of preparations means that each gesture you make sets up the next thing that the ensemble must do. In a sense, you’re one beat ahead of them at all times. You, however, must always be one beat ahead of your own preparatory gesture, so as to set yourself up to give the appropriate indication a beat in advance of what your ensemble is to execute.... Like the challenge we once met to learn to ride a bicycle, it all seems mind-bending at first, and is in fact a skill that can only be acquired and maintained by constant practice – a novel idea to many “conductors.”
2. Effective conducting is that which “looks like” the music. A good time to prepare for this is during score study. As you solfege your way through the first violin part, for instance, let your body – your arms, your face, your torso, your hands – respond creatively and naturally to the lines you are singing. Do this in the privacy of your study, where you needn’t be embarrassed by the occasional excess; then decide what you’re going to incorporate into your public display. Preparation for rehearsals thus becomes, in large part, an act of “pruning” – but this presupposes that there is an acquired repertoire of gestures to select from.

The most informed audience member is the one who comes to a concert to hear the music of Johannes Brahms – not to hear Maestro X conduct the music of Johannes Brahms. This is *exactly* the audience member whose ears and intelligence you should be addressing with your efforts. And the highest compliment such a listener can pay you is, “It was as though I was hearing the second movement for the first time” – when you know that listener has in fact heard that movement hundreds of times and was making an observation based in full awareness. May you hear that sort of compliment often – on account of having earned it!

The synthesis: when directing and conducting become one and the same

There remains one final word to say – about a “higher” meaning of *conducting*, as hinted at above. As *directors*, we rule from the podium. We correct our players’ wrong notes, faulty intonation, incoherent phrasing, poor attendance, recalcitrant attitudes.... In other words, we direct *people*. This is the work of a disciplinarian, and must be done with accuracy, fairness, self-assurance, good humor and a humane perspective. As *conductors*, we attempt to give voice to the great creators of the past, who have left masterpieces in encrypted form, awaiting “realization” by informed and sympathetic interpreters. In other words, we conduct *music*. This is the work of an artist who embodies the highest ideals of creative imagination and scholarly research and undertakes the necessary preparations with eagerness and joy.

There is a sense, however – a very lofty sense – in which we *conduct* our ensembles as well – a sense in which I may say, without lapsing into incoherence, that “I conduct an orchestra.” Remember my illustration above, having to do with travels and miscommunication in Bulgaria. Of course, in the European sense – which involves passenger trains – the conductor *does* conduct people: from one city to another. And it is not out of the question that, functioning at our very best, we might in some sense be said to convey the members of our ensembles to some “other place” – call it a “higher plane” or a “deeper experience.” Not unreasonably, the suitable word here would be “transport” – literally, “to carry across.” “Transport” – the noun – also has this meaning (again, the *OED*):

The state of being ‘carried out of oneself’, i.e. out of one’s normal mental condition; vehement emotion (now usu. of a pleasurable kind); mental exaltation, rapture, ecstasy.

Music is one of the few things that bring me “transport” in this sense, and it is most earnestly to be wished that our students should experience such transport themselves. Without exaggeration, it is true that every time I study a Haydn symphony as deeply as I described above, I remember all over again why it was that I fell in love with music in the first place. If I can then be a means of transportation for my students, so that they can share that aesthetic thrill, I am most happy to be so. Students who do have those kinds of experiences are usually not shy about sharing them with the conductor who had something to do with them. That, too, is a thrill that I recommend highly.

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