

Passionate Conducting



The regimen of rehearsal doesn't have to be routine.

by Frank Ticheli

Recently, I saw a doctor here in Los Angeles, and during my appointment we struck up a conversation about music. He seemed genuinely fascinated, even envious about my life as a musician. He went on to explain that he was originally a music major, but that over time, his college band director managed to drain all his enthusiasm. “He spent half of the rehearsal tuning us, and the other half browbeating us,” my doctor explained. “There was never much joy in rehearsals. I thought, if this is what it means to be a musician, I’m going to do something else.” So he became a doctor. Despite his evident success, however, he expressed genuine regret over his decision to abandon a career in music.

After leaving my appointment, I continued to think about my doctor’s experience and the lessons I believe it offers us, regardless of whether we teach elementary music; direct a school band, orchestra, or choir; or compose music.

It occurred to me that if one conductor could so easily crush my doctor’s original enthusiasm, perhaps my doctor lacked the required *inner passion* to succeed in music in the first place. But this possibility notwithstanding, his sad story did manage to get me thinking—a lot. How many other souls, I wondered, have been damaged by well-meaning mentors? And what can each of us do to make our rehearsals more inspiring?

When asked about his secrets for finding talented young conductors, Ernest Fleishmann, the sometimes prickly, onetime executive director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, claimed that he reminded himself of one simple thing: “The world doesn’t need any more boring conductors!” When pressed further, he assured his audience that he did not mean to suggest that he sought conductors merely for their flashy charisma with over-the-top choreography and glitzy stick gestures. For him, it was all about *passion* as an inner force expressed outwardly—a kind of inner fire that could inspire others in rehearsals and concerts.

Allow me to distinguish between passion and enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is fine. It says, *Yes! I love music. Isn't it amazing? Let's have fun!* Enthusiasm is important, and I believe in it, especially

when it comes to young musicians. They need to see adults unafraid to express their excitement about music and life. But *passion* is something that lies deeper within.

Leonard Bernstein had both. Certainly, he could be enthusiastic—for some, too enthusiastic—on the podium. With him, it was often a matter of grabbing a work by the throat. While I personally love the outward fire Mr. Bernstein showed, I am even more inspired by a lesser known Bernstein trait. Composer Lukas Foss described a rehearsal of his *Baroque Variations*, led by Bernstein:

He called me up at eleven at night and said, “Lukas, I don’t understand your music anymore. Can you come over here and explain it to me? . . . So I went over to Lenny’s place, took my score, and we worked together until two in the morning. . . . Now Lenny had a rehearsal the following morning, and he came in with some thirty pages of notes which he had written out about how he was going to rehearse it. He must not have gone to bed. He had actually taken the trouble to write down how he was going to rehearse the piece.

Lenny knew just how to rehearse it and he got amazing results from the players. I remember he turned to them at one point and said, “Did you hear what you just did? Do you realize you’re the first people who have ever made this sound?” Well, the New York Philharmonic took wings! What Lenny invested into other people’s music, his colleagues’ music, was extraordinary; there was a complete unselfishness in the way he did this.”¹

To me, *that* is passion. It’s the side of Bernstein we didn’t see growing up, but it is perhaps the most important component to his success—that, and his superhuman talent. If you haven’t watched him conduct, this video excerpt offers an example of his passion as he conducts the London Symphony Orchestra in *Symphony No. 5* by Shostakovich: www.tmea.org/smlink/bernstein.

Keep Them on Their Toes

Players stay more engaged when they can’t predict exactly what will happen in the next minute or hour of a rehearsal. This has always fascinated me. Composers and conductors alike must

walk a tightrope between predictability and surprise. Are there too many surprises? Too few?

Mozart was a master at this. His sonata forms followed convention, but only to a certain point. More often than not, he deviated from what we might call textbook sonata form just enough to tantalize—a new theme in the “wrong” place, an unexpected modulation in the recapitulation, a new harmonic progression—but without ever losing the listener.

For conductors, this balancing act is equally important, especially in rehearsals. Players gain confidence from a certain regimen—a sense that they are all part of a familiar ritual with an unchanging goal: to make good music. But routine alone will not hold players’ hearts and minds. When your students begin to predict what’s coming next, it may be time to throw them a curve ball. Rehearse a piece backward or from the inside out; suddenly pull out a new piece to sightread; rehearse a loud passage as softly as possible; play a *staccato* passage in *legato* fashion; or play only the attack points of a *legato* passage.

Thinking about rehearsal routines brings to mind what my doctor said about tuning. I’ve never understood those who devote lots of rehearsal time tuning an ensemble as though it were a separate part of the rehearsal. It gives the false impression that, after all that, we are finally in tune, when the reality is that tuning is something that should continue throughout a rehearsal. It is a constant act and the main responsibility lies with the player, not the conductor or the machine. I realize that most young players do not yet have the skills to handle this responsibility alone. And I am not suggesting that intonation problems will fix themselves over time if the conductor stays out of the way. It is, of course, unacceptable to play out of tune. But it’s also never too early for young players to learn that intonation is not something that someone or something fixes *for them*.

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The Devil in the Details

I love the Brooklyn Bridge, the Sydney Opera House, the Empire State Building. You can move in close to admire their details—the bricks, the beams, the mortar. But what makes these structures great is not the individual details; it is the way in which they are combined. In music, it’s the same. It’s the context of a crescendo or a point of tension, the reason a line is ascending, where and why it’s ascending that is interesting. As a composer, I appreciate conductors who don’t ignore the details, but who use them to enhance the bigger picture.

It’s really all about inspiration, and to that end, our heads and hearts must constantly keep each other in check. Show me a piece created purely from whatever compositional system drove it, and I’ll show you tedium. On the other hand, ignore technique, architecture, and well-conceived organic connections, and you

will likely create a shallow, short-lived work.

What does this have to do with conductors? I believe we sometimes need to sacrifice technical progress if our obsession with details is hindering inspiration. Said another way, don’t fix things just for the sake of fixing them.

I made this mistake in 1987 during my first college interview, when I was being considered for a position teaching composition and directing the wind ensemble. Despite my youthful apprehensions, the interview went fairly well—that is, until it came time to rehearse the wind ensemble. Just before I mounted the podium, a search committee member advised, “Please Frank, don’t just conduct the group; we want to see you rehearse in a very detailed and demanding way.”

I followed that advice, stopping a lot, demanding a lot, but not getting very far into the work. In a flash, I had lost the players. There was no rehearsal flow, no inspiration—no passion! I didn’t get that job, nor should I have, because I abandoned what I had originally planned to do—what we all should plan to do in rehearsals—keep the players inspired! Instead, I was pedantic, unyielding, *boring*. Where was Mr. Fleishmann when I needed him?

Don’t Conduct the Ensemble

Well, not the *entire* ensemble. Conducting the ensemble as a whole dehumanizes the players and conductor alike. I cannot stress this point strongly enough. We should spend most of our podium time communicating with individuals and small groups—making direct eye contact with each player at some point in every rehearsal. We don’t do this to be touchy-feely. We do it because the music itself, if it is good music, demands it of us.

This concept always reminds me of the development section of my *Amazing Grace*. Those who have the most trouble with it tend to be those who fail to conduct individuals. The development section is *all about* individual entrances. It begins with the horns, followed by the clarinets, then the flutes. Next come the oboe, the saxophones, then the trombones, and so on. I could easily draw a series of dotted lines on the score through the entire section, moving from one entering group to another. And that is just what conductors must do in that section: move from one group to another.

Even at climaxes where everyone is playing, we can and should focus on one small group here, one player there. Maybe there is a horn rip on beat two, a cymbal crash on beat four. Simply stop conducting the whole group. Best of all, you will find that by looking at individuals more often, they will begin to look back at you too.

Do More, Say Less

As conductors we are always doing three things: imagining the sounds we want to hear, listening to the sounds the ensemble is actually playing, and reacting to those sounds.

It’s that third activity of reacting, or more specifically, *how* we are reacting, that most fascinates me. Reacting without stopping the music is something conductors don’t do often enough. A smile, a frown, or nod or shake of the head, a sudden flat hand gesture when something is too loud, a thumbs up signal—the list is infinite—all can be achieved without stopping, and all can be more effective than actual words.

Of course, we can also speak real words to them without



photo by Chris Christodoulou

Go to www.tmea.org/smlink/dudamel1 to watch a video of Gustavo Dudamel conducting young musicians in a performance of Shostakovich's 10th Symphony, a performance that says everything much more powerfully than words can express. For an example of Dudamel's nonverbal communication style in a rehearsal, go to www.tmea.org/smlink/dudamel2 for video excerpts from his first rehearsal with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

stopping the music—that is, when players can hear us. For example, imagine that the flutes are just finishing a quiet passage, handing it over to the clarinets. Now is your chance to say, “Flutes, in measure 61, the C-natural is sharp. Could you mark that please?” Now imagine that same scene, this time with you stopping the music to make your point. Sure, it works this way too, but which approach is more efficient, more compelling? By occasionally making a point without stopping the music, you sharpen the rehearsal pace and galvanize the players.

Sometimes, however, we simply have to stop the music to make a point, but even then we can do so without words. Sing more. Talk less. There is a fascinating YouTube video of conductor Gustavo Dudamel in his very first rehearsal with the Los Angeles Philharmonic—fascinating not for what he says, but for what he doesn't say. He gestures, sings, and even grunts what he wants from the players rather than describing his requests in words, and they all seem to understand him perfectly.

When you do need to stop and use words, consider whether your words will motivate or simply instruct. It is easy to instruct, not so easy to inspire.

Don't just fix a trumpet chord to get it in tune; fix it to make it shout *Alleluia!*

Don't just fix a rhythmic error for accuracy; fix it to make the music dance.


Analogies can help musicians understand not only what to do, but also *why* they are doing it.

Instead of saying, “Play shorter here,” say, “Play shorter notes, like little droplets of rain falling, so that you sound more like the claves, who just played this rhythm before you.”

Instead of, “Add a crescendo here,” say, “I know there is no crescendo indicated, but listen to where the music is taking us; it's as though we are just beginning to see some light, some epiphany, and we are dying to tell somebody about it.”

Instead of, “Bring out the dissonance here,” say, “Bring out the dissonance as though you are sharing your very own sadness/pain/anger/confu-

sion” (whatever the dissonance seems to be expressing to you at the time).

There are certainly conductors out there who instruct but don't inspire, who fix things but don't make them sing and dance, who feel emotions but don't share them, and who have forgotten the true meaning of music. Indeed, we are all guilty of these transgressions on occasion, and for that reason, we have to constantly remind ourselves why we got into music in the first place. We must remember that, as musicians, we get to spend our lives creating a kind of beauty that words alone cannot touch. 

Reference

1. William Westbrook Burton: *Conversations about Bernstein*, Oxford University Press, 1995 (pp. 9–10) ISBN0-19-507947-7

Dr. Frank Ticheli is a professor of composition at the USC Thornton School of Music and composes for concert band, orchestra, and chorus.

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