

NOTES FROM THE PODIUM

Scott Wilson on Audience Engagement (Debussy / Ravel)

Telephone Interview on 28th March 2019

Published on 1st July 2019

You've said that conductors are central to the accessibility of classical/orchestral music. Do you think they are the ones that are ultimately responsible?

I've thought a lot about this. What I passionately believe is that the people best suited to communicating about our wonderful art form are the musicians themselves. You've got two other options: academics, and possibly people who have a degree in music but then go into broadcasting or journalism. My feeling is that neither of those two groups is best suited to it because it's the performers who have been on stage with the blood and guts of the music. It's a very certain type of person who knows music that well. That being said, this is a huge ask, because it's so difficult to become an instrumentalist in an orchestra. Suddenly, I'm saying you need a whole bunch of other skills too! You need communication skills, you need to be able to talk to audiences or to write about our complex subject in a compelling, yet straightforward way. It also requires being the face of an organisation, and this set of skills and the ability to empathise with an audience is one that is really not part of the musician's job description.

The next logical step is to look at which musicians might already be in a place to do this – and that's the conductors. Their name is on all the posters; they are part of the public face of the orchestra. Therefore, as opposed to asking cellist number six or the third clarinet, I believe it to be part of the modern Music Director's role. It's a very rare person, I recognise, that has this combination of skills. But the very fact that musicians have this

depth of knowledge about the performance side of music lends them to having an authenticity when talking about it. Unfortunately others can't have that to the same level. What does the audience want? They want to hear it from the people that do it. Musicians are the best suited to communicating about music, and the conductor in particular.

So when an orchestra isn't excelling in audience engagement, do you think the conductor is to blame?

Part of leadership is taking responsibility, and that is part of the reason conductors and chief executives are paid more. No matter whose fault it is in the pyramid structure of the organisation, ultimately the leadership are the ones to be held accountable. My belief is that nearly all orchestras are failing in the way they are engaging with audiences. Music Directors should be taking responsibility for this.

So which Music Directors from the past or present do you think were/are successful with audience engagement?

I'm inspired by many, many Music Directors from a musical point of view. But your question is a tough one. I find the industry very difficult. We need to do much, much better with audience engagement – that is now driving my entire outlook on my career.

So, not even the work of someone like Bernstein?

There's no question that Bernstein was doing really positive things, but if you look at his videos it is very much of that era. It does not transfer to this one – people speak differently and expect differently of a leader communicating with the masses.

We need to define the word 'accessible'. Conductors are very much accessible to the already converted audience. But a conductor who's famous within the industry is unknown to the vast majority of people. My perspective always comes back to the *potential* audience. The potential audience of London is eight million people. If you mention the word 'Beethoven' to someone on the street, overwhelmingly people are somewhere in between having never heard of him, or having heard the name because there was a film about a dog! Beethoven's Symphony No. 5

literally means nothing to almost all of society, but an orchestra apparently *appears* accessible when they play it.

We've got a whole industry that can't solve this problem – it's a big conversation. I've been thinking about it for a few years now and I have a new thought on it every day. I'm getting more and more refined with my ideas but I'm a long way from what's necessary for a paradigm shift. That being said, some days I feel like I have the answers... we'll have to see!

What do you think when people say, 'but you can stream all of this for free now, it's not expensive to go to most concerts, it's there for the taking if you want to listen' etc.?

Well, the compelling reason for going to a concert is that it is an *event*, and that includes things like the selection of beers that are available at the bar and the proximity of restaurants. The event must compete with seeing a pop star, going to the cinema or streaming Netflix at home. The average person expects an exhilarating experience, and the concert hall must compete in that realm. We should embrace that competition. We don't need to downsell it, or suggest it's good for your soul. We just need to reinvent the event itself. Importantly, what we mustn't take away from is the music itself: the music is incredible, and that shouldn't be forgotten, or meddled with.

In the current issue [Jan. 2019] Ben Palmer talks about film-with-orchestra projects, which are a big part of his diary. It attracts a totally different audience, often people who have never seen a live orchestra before. Do you think that's one of the best ways to attract new audiences?

Well, it should be underlined that conducting films with orchestra is a real craft for a conductor. We should admire those who specialise in film conducting because it requires fantastic levels of insight and knowledge. It's a genre in itself, and should be looked on really positively as a part of what orchestras do. But the evidence from my discussions with artistic administrators suggests that the audience that comes to the film concerts do not then come to other concerts. That is a profound breakdown. Orchestras should continue performing with film, but I don't see it as the gateway. They're trying to use it as a crutch. We shouldn't be saying 'here's a lollipop, here's film music' and then hope people will come along to the

Mahler symphonies. That isn't working. It's fantastic as part of a season and as a way of making some money, but there are substantial downsides.

First of all, a lot of film music is not composed with the same level of consideration for technical refinement (for string playing especially). I admire film composers, but what orchestras tend to play best is the canon of repertoire that has refined itself and which suits the instruments that it is written for. If string players play too much film music, frequently they are required to play in a way that is not technically good for them. They're playing along with film, which is loud and disruptive to great orchestral playing. We must admire the challenge of being an orchestral musician – too much film music is likely to be detrimental to an orchestra playing in its beautifully refined way.

My book opens with a passionate discussion about *Star Wars*. The chapter's called 'The Greatest Moment in Orchestral Music', but somewhat ironically. The final chapter (on Mahler 2) is 'Keep going. This only gets better!' I'm serious that the opening music from *Star Wars* is one of the great moments in music, but I like to think that I'm building a genuine bridge from that towards music that is not so far away. I then talk about Shostakovich, Walton, and Ravel, all of which you can hear in the John Williams. The whole time I'm emphasising the fact that a new audience can understand this music without any specialist training. That's a really positive way to use film music to build audiences.

What other initiatives do you think work well?

Well, the reason why I've written the book is because I felt it was the first step: writing something palpable that conveys passion, excitement and (I hope) a huge depth of insight, but in a way that's straightforward.

Yes, I've not read anything that breaks down the music in the same way that you do it. Is it aimed a specific age group/level of education?

It's aimed at everyone – that is not my normal approach. I usually believe things need to be focussed and on point, but this is written about why music is so exciting. Personally I think professional musicians could get a kick out of it as well as people who are just excited about the chance to know a little bit more about the orchestra. There's no age group. An underlying

intention of the book is that every single word is to be positive and a celebration of music. You won't find criticism of colleagues or composers in there – you'll find every single word unabashedly positive and celebratory.

Teachers have told me they will often use biographical information as a buy in with students. That works with something like Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* [also featuring in this issue]: you can explain how Berlioz obsessed over the actress Harriet Smithson, and they can then launch into the musical detail from there. What do you think of that approach?

Biographical information is a good way of framing a programme note – I've done a bit of that in the book. It wouldn't have been so hard to write a bit of history on each piece and then just say 'enjoy the music'. It certainly works for teachers in an hour-long lesson, or if the conductor says a few things to the audience.

I see. I have your chapter on Ravel's Piano Concerto in G in front of me. Why did you choose that as a case study?

Well, it comes down to the book's structure. The time spent structuring the book so I could answer the profound questions is astronomical, even compared to the time writing it! The questions I ask include 'what makes the performance thrilling?' Ravel's Piano Concerto in G is a vehicle for talking about how we make it thrilling. One of the reasons is the way in which individual musicians in the orchestra pull against the conductor, or assert their own musicianship within the framework of the conductor's beat. When, in another chapter, I talk about Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10, I answer that question by saying it's when every player engages and pulls together. The third time I address this question I say it is because of the conviction of the composer. This questions pans out over the chapters on Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 and Brahms Symphony No. 1 too, and show the reason why pieces like this have remained in the repertoire. Every dot on those pages holds such weight.

I went for the second movement of Ravel's Piano Concerto because I wanted to ask the question 'what is a melody?' It also provides a great opportunity to talk about something that's misunderstood, I think, a lot of the time by non-musicians: 'is the music the notation, or the performer's interpretation?' It's not quite either. When I go into detail in this chapter,

I'm using this piece specifically to answer questions that may not be understood by the inexperienced listener. For example I write:

Do you hear the grace with which the soloist plays the next melodic note? It is ever so slightly hesitant. Probably the pianist performs this gentle rhythmic delay somewhat unconsciously: a decision made in the moment. For me, the note becomes bound to those that follow, as if these notes are decorating the initial note. Soon after – at 0'25" – you can hear the pianist emphasising the bass line. These notes – the low-pitched notes of the left hand waltz – descend over the next fifty seconds until at 1'16" we reach the lowest pitch so far. Can you hear the pianist highlighting the specialness of this moment by adjusting both the rhythmic positioning and the volume of this note?^[1]

So when you listen to the opening of that movement it's very easy for a non-specialist (once they're shown) to be able to hear that there's a bass part going in a kind of waltz figure and then the upper part, which is a melody.

I like the paragraph that reads:

...at 2'59" the melody morphs into a trill: the rapid alternating of two adjacent pitches. This is an invitation for the string section to play, quietly and from the distance. Then – mesmerisingly – the pianist awakens out of a private space, looks up and smiles to the flautist.

That is exactly what I saw the pianist doing in the performance footage I was watching of the piece. It was great that you gave a practical and engaging description of a key moment in the performance.

That is a great explanation of why it must be the musicians who drive any paradigm shift. We have a way of engaging the audiences because we know what it really feels like on stage. In that moment when the pianist looks up and inevitably looks at the flautist, the excitement of bringing the music to life is palpable. When audiences listen it's possible for them to feel it too. I talk about that communication between the soloist and the flute too because I want people to know what it feels like from a musician's perspective. The soloist has this connection with the flute, fifteen metres away, and the conductor is also involved. I'm using everything I can to show the magic that is the orchestra. It is one of the greatest achievements of humanity.

Yes. That is something that you don't read in books written by academics – the orchestra is such an incredible model of teamwork. That's what people often love about football – the commentators are so excited and discuss it at length afterwards. In a way it would be great if you could do that with a concert, it would really teach people a lot.

That's a wonderful point you just made there. Football, without any self-consciousness, absolutely promotes itself and believes in its art. That's why the commentators get so excited during the game, and afterwards when they discuss it on *Match of the Day*. They don't feel embarrassment for showing their passion. They love it, they know a lot about it and they draw people in. I think it's a wonderful model for orchestral music or any other art form that is struggling. We should believe to that level, our art form has stood the test of several hundred years, it is clearly of immense value. Yet we're embarrassed talking about it!

The other more related genre that came to mind when reading your draft was that it was almost read like the Director's commentary on a DVD. Do you think that could also work with music?

Well one of the real challenges of music is that it exists in real time, in one space, on one occasion. A director's commentary online with a clickable link to the audio would be very clunky. As a result I only use specific time guide posts, just a few times per chapter in the book.

What I think we need to do is open the door a crack so that they can walk through it. Give them all the skills they need to listen without feeling that they don't know what they're doing. They *do* know what they're doing, everyone feels the tension in diatonic music. The conductor's job is steering the momentum of the piece, with regard to those increases and decreases of tension. They need to ensure that journey is made as successfully as possible. The audience is already equipped to feel it even if they're not aware, because it is exactly the same tension that appears in a pop song or film score. Everything is tension until you get to the tonic chord. We never need to know what it is to feel a tonic chord because we're exposed to this music from birth.

You also chose to write about Debussy's *La Mer*. Do you think it's easier to talk accessibly about music with a visual element (i.e. music that paints a picture)?

Well, I don't think it does have a visual element. The title '*La Mer*' (or '*The Sea*') helps; programme music, pieces with titles, and even arias from operas, all give the listener something crucial to hold onto as a starting point. I don't think the piece is visual, I think it's much more about sensation – but sensation can create images in the listener. The listener might make pictures out of what they hear, but of course the music itself is sound. I can probably predict your next question, 'so why do you use so much imagery in your book, particularly when talking about *La Mer*?' Well, I'm saying 'here's the sensation I feel when I listen to the music (or study the score or perform it) – hopefully this is a gateway for you to feel something'.

I'm trying to lay everything on the table and reassure listeners that whatever they feel is correct. Usually what new listeners believe is that they are removed from this art form and that it is exclusive. But whatever they *feel* is right. When I'm studying the score, I am not necessarily only trying to hear the music, I'm also trying to feel it. I get a visceral sensation when studying this movement, I feel it in my body. Then maybe that feeling is connected to an emotion. Then I move towards gesture (although I'm nowhere near conducting gestures at this point). What I really want is a palpable sensation of what this score is saying.

Yes, this paragraph in particular is very descriptive.

And then a larger wave! The cymbal pours over the orchestra's sound and the string section rushes to the summit. Then the timpani, cymbals, and tam-tam throw colours of sound out across the orchestra for eight beats: the waves are crashing together. The orchestra pulls back and we hear three chords, echoing those from the middle of the movement. The final chord surges and recedes as the cymbal gushes forth, soaking the listener in beautiful sound.

Yes. I wrote 'the cymbal pours over the orchestra's sound and the string section rushes to the summit'. That is absolutely how I feel it. The cymbal really does pour over the orchestra... 'then the timpani, cymbals and tam tams throw colours of sound out across the orchestra'. Well I think that's

hard to refute, that is what happens. When it says, ‘the waves crashing together’ – at the moment I wrote that paragraph that was what I was feeling. When conducting this piece I do not see waves, I don’t see anything – but when I prepare *La Mer* I feel every nuance of seaside possibility. On one day I’ll open the score and it’s all about being bathed in sunlight, other days I feel I’m being thrown around by water. When it comes to conducting it, I’m so immersed in the piece, its sound world, its expression, that it’s hopefully just flowing out.

Then I go on – ‘the orchestra pulls back and we hear three chords, echoing those from the middle of the movement. The final chord surges and recedes as the cymbal gushes forth, soaking the listener in beautiful sound’. I’m using very rich language here, but the music is rich – it certainly isn’t that the final chord ‘goes up and goes down’. No – it surges and it recedes, and then the cymbal gushes forward. It isn’t just a little crescendo on a cymbal that’s been hung up on a stand, it is gushing over the orchestra and soaking the listener in beautiful sound. Even though I’m creating images here, I’m talking about what it means on one particular occasion to me as a listener. I’m trying to get the reader to go that deep into the listening. That’s why I’m using words like surges, recedes, gushes, soaking – this isn’t light grey-coloured emotion, it is bright shining lights of emotion! I called this chapter ‘Spectacular Sounds’. It talks about the question ‘what is music?’ In this chapter it’s celebration of beautiful sound.

As a conductor it is essential to understand our relationship with the audience. Riccardo Muti says, ‘the conductor is responsible – full stop’. That’s his great quote that I always take with me. Who is the conductor responsible to? Well, obviously to the composer and the orchestra, but also the audience. We must have an understanding of how the audience perceives the music. This doesn’t mean knowing what sensations they are feeling – that is each individual audience member’s unique experience. But we must present the score in a way that the language *can* make sense to the listener, that the syntax of the language is understandable. An example is changing tempos very slightly so that an offbeat is perceived clearly by the audience. If the conductor doesn’t place the offbeat so that it is heard as a syncopation to the beat, then the audience can’t perceive the syntax correctly.

Obviously we’ve been talking for a while about ways in which orchestral music can be presented more accessibly. But what about the suggestion that the image of the ‘aloof conductor’ sells tickets?

I would turn that completely on its head. Who are they selling to? Let's say 1.5% of the population attend an orchestral concert each year. So when people talk about what sells in orchestral music – I want to say 'what are you talking about?' Virtually nothing sells and some things sell a little bit more than nothing! We're clearly not talking about what really attracts a significant number of people to attend concerts. All we need is a *significant* minority of people coming along, and that would be a paradigm shift. There has been a total culture change in what we expect out of leaders, and I believe the Music Directors of the future have a requirement: the ability to effectively communicate with audiences in an inspiring and positive way about music which they celebrate and they believe in. I just don't buy it that the industry as it is now sells tickets. Even the most famous conductors are not known to the general public.

It's really important to know your craft inside out, but the distinguishing skill in this day and age is the ability to communicate that knowledge. I passionately stand for the exact opposite of the 'aloof conductor'. You must know your technique and be a fine musician, but I am interested in looking way beyond that.

That's right. Of course, there's also the issue that a large number of well-known conductors are Oxbridge/conservatoire educated, or come from a completely different culture. Obviously there's nothing wrong with that, but it's a very different life to the average Brit who has never had any contact with orchestral music.

Yes, we have to confront this head on. The quote that opens the book really sums up my approach:

Indeed, my journey to this music – from an Aussie kid who played sports every night and never once attended a cultural event, to a professional musician living in one of the greatest arts cities in the world – is unconventional. But that is exactly it. If I can do it, anyone can. I promise you, if you walk through this door, it will be an endlessly enriching journey.

It really is trying to say that I managed to do it, and I'm a redneck Aussie! So you can do it too. Many people within the industry grew up knowing Brahms symphonies and Wagner operas and can't imagine what it's like to find them long, dull, boring, completely abstract and maybe also totally

self-involved. We as an industry need to understand that it is an okay, realistic starting point for many, many people to feel this way. We *must* understand these people, they are the paradigm-shifting future audience for our art form!

So really, that makes you a perfect person to write a book like this!

Exactly, I think it's what we need. Mark Wigglesworth's book *The Silent Musician* is very, very good. He explains that it is not inherent that this music and orchestras will continue to exist, and I completely agree. If we don't sell tickets to concerts, they won't exist. The percentage of arts funding that goes to classical music is enormous. If that gets removed we have a huge problem. We have to be able to show the immense value of the music. In significant part, this comes down to our conductors.

The conductor is also responsible for setting the tone of the organisation (the musicians, the admin staff and everyone involved). They need to set the tone of positivity, excitement, celebration of the music, and inspiring this outward looking vision for the orchestra. If we can put the wheels in motion we can really look forward as an industry towards having a greater audience. A great example here is Apple computer. Steve Jobs built it but then the board got rid of him. It nearly floundered, so Jobs was brought back and drove a vision that went through the entire company. Bill Gates and Richard Branson are business leaders, but they also set a tone. They didn't do all the work and they certainly didn't have all the skills (Branson's very open about not having great financial tracking skills), but they set a tone of what's important to the organisation and they drove that vision forward. Conductors are in the position to do that. Plenty of people will talk to you about score study and technique – I have a particular interest in analysis. But this leadership skillset isn't talked about enough, it's really important.

Do you think some pieces are rather difficult to talk about accessibly?

I believe that I can write and speak about virtually any quality piece of music. Some may be a little bit more challenging, but broadly speaking I think you can talk inspiringly and positively about any piece of music. If someone asks me to talk about an obscure early work of Mozart's, or a huge grand symphony of Mahler's it is possible. The fact that they've maintained

their presence in the repertoire means there's already so much to be excited about.

Perhaps there is a difficulty speaking in this vein about the very aurally difficult works – like Stockhausen and the composers that continued in that tradition – but we're talking about very few.

I feel like that about the pieces that conductors choose to talk about. Sometimes they aren't what I would chose, but once I've started the research and thought about the route in for the students/subscribers, I always become interested.

I'm so with you, and that's exactly the model I'm talking about. As a result I don't buy in to what I think many orchestras think is necessary – to do conventional programming. Let's say Beethoven Symphony No. 5 is considered conventional and Berg's Violin Concerto is veering into the unconventional – the vast majority of people haven't heard of either piece anyway! They're still talking about conventional or unconventional to the 1.5%. So I don't buy into that way of thinking – all of these pieces are incredibly exciting and interesting. And all of them are new to the new potential audience for orchestral music!

You said earlier that Music Directors are responsible for the flavour of the orchestra and what is put out to the public. What about the composers they commission? If an orchestra/opera house/ballet company commission a piece that is perceived as very inaccessible, can the conductor be held as responsible as the composer?

Commissioning is a massive commitment of Arts Council, Government grant, or other funding. As a result the conductor, who publicly represents the organisation, must be able to justify its value to the funding body and also to the public that the orchestra serves. Unfortunately sometimes you're required to conduct pieces that you don't love. It's in everyone's interest to avoid it, but it can happen. At that point the professionalism is in preparing the piece with absolute conviction, giving a great performance and speaking with conviction about the work. Good communicators and outstanding conductors who are operating at the level we're talking about should be able to talk about positives within the experience. Sincerity is one of the defining characteristics of being a conductor and a musician. There is something

sincere to talk about in every piece, and you can direct the conversation towards a topic that you can talk sincerely about. If you don't happen to think it was one of the greatest works ever composed, you can also express that respectfully.

Yes. It's been very interesting to talk to you about how you've structured your book and your research. It's slightly different to the way conductors/academics usually pick their case studies. It's common to work on a PhD thesis structure for eighteen months, people don't realise how long it takes for the dust to settle.

Of course, there's a relationship to composition here. Once composers have the structure for a piece, the composition just comes, you can just write. This was the same for me. The structure was hugely demanding and required a great deal of time and effort. The writing was also taxing and time-consuming, but was able to flow out of the structure.

I've learnt a lot about the music that interests you as a listener from those pieces chosen in your book. What pieces interest you most as a conductor?

I'm sorry to say, I'm not so interested in the question of what pieces are interesting for me to conduct. I am interested in what music is great and I'm interested in what scores excite me. I do my job as conductor to serve those scores. I definitely don't choose or become interested in a piece because of some conducting. The technical act of conducting is a means to an end. Instead, I am driven by the great fortune I have to be able to work within this amazing art form. Orchestras truly are one of the greatest achievements of humans.

Well, I've not heard that before!

Bibliography

Wigglesworth, M. *The Silent Musician* (Faber & Faber, 2018)

[1] This quote refers to the Maurice Ravel: Piano Concerto in G – 2nd movement – recording by The Cleveland Orchestra, Krystian Zimerman (piano), Pierre Boulez (conductor).