Scott Wilson on Teaching Conducting

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So Scott, what type of students do you usually teach?

I teach group classes and individual lessons in the Junior Department at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Here I have the privilege of working with some of the finest upper secondary school-aged musicians in the UK. I also have a private studio in London. Private lessons are most often given to university-age students, but I also teach music professionals (both teachers and performers). In addition I teach a short course at the Guildhall for music professionals.

So a real mix. Do you have a set method of working with your students or do you change your approach according to the individual?

I think teaching conducting is very similar to what many other teachers of music experience when they're working on an individual basis. It's tailored entirely to the individual, but you do end up teaching many students through the same syllabus. Students often need so much work on their foundation, and have so many gaps in their knowledge, that what I find is that I tend to reach for the same pieces in order to deal with those same specific issues.

In general I don't think conducting is taught well. It *is* when you get to a very advanced level i.e. the postgraduate two-year courses that are highly focused. But even when students arrive at that level, frequently they haven't

done a very thorough foundation. Some are still working self-directed, or by instinct. (That being said, this process is both natural and necessary: trial and error is a huge part of learning.) Not many undergraduate music courses focus on conducting, although there are sometimes group lessons. But at a lower level (for example, advanced 15-18 year old musicians) there's virtually nothing. A foundation is what I'm trying to offer through my work. There really is huge value in training early, and that's why I have developed a thorough method for teaching a strong foundation. Speaking only about technique, I see my method as an equivalent to the role that scales and arpeggios play in teaching an instrument. Of course, alongside the technique, there are huge boxes which can be opened: leadership, communication, interpretation, style, historical context... the list is endless!

So what type of students do you get most frequently?

When students come to me, typically they have had no instruction, whether they're a mid-career instrumentalist, an established or in-training teacher, or a brilliant young violinist. This presents some real benefits! First of all, there is a good chance they have already been thrown in the deep end to conduct something. This is a perfect situation: a conductor needs to be able to learn on the job, to adapt quickly, to realise what is and isn't working. Although the fundamentals of conducting remain the same for everyone, my students have often observed conductors and worked out that if they use their body in this or that way it produces the result they want. They often have very good instincts. But, from a purely technical standpoint, they usually need to start at the very beginning. That is, 'right, how do you stand?' Once they've found their neutral position (standing in front of the orchestra in a way that is relaxed, open, and confident), they then must move into what I call the fundamental position (the point at which your role as a conductor becomes active: lifting your arms up, ready to begin). Now we're up and running! And then... oh dear! 'How do you do the upbeat?!'

So, why do I need to start students from zero? Because they haven't had time to think it through, or had anyone push them to think through these steps. When they do, they soon start to realise the value in having a technical training. When you've thought through how to stand on a podium, you might then think 'why is a downbeat like this? Why does there need to be a clear upbeat? What is the point of my gestures?' These are fundamental questions that almost no student has ever considered before. Bear in mind that, by standing on the podium you are exposing yourself to any potential

question from members of the orchestra. You must have at least thought about the reasons – your reasons – why you do what you do. For example, although it is unlikely you will be posed this question from an orchestra member, a great one is, 'why do you go to the left (rather than the right) on beat two of a bar in 4/4'. If you don't have some reasoning for doing this whilst you're leading others, surely you shouldn't stand in front of them and conduct! It really doesn't matter that it is the tradition to do this: you must compellingly understand *why* you go to the left.

Many times I've heard conductors say their work is half about the music and half about communicating with people.

Yes, that's an often-said thing. Half music, half dealing with people. It's probably the experience of anyone, or at least anyone in a leadership position, in any field. For me, I believe the dealing with people part can be trained and refined over time. (I know I am trying all the time to improve these qualities; probably everyone is.) But, this part of my students' education happens bit by bit, without particular planning. Moments in each lesson give me an opening to discuss such skills with a student. Sometimes something in the music itself prompts me to pose questions of a student. An easy example is when I see an exposed horn entry. I might ask the student, 'if this entry doesn't go well in rehearsal, how might you handle it?' You can immediately see that this opens the door to a potentially fascinating discussion, which I can nudge in the right direction, allowing the student to draw their own ideal conclusions. Of course, I often learn in these discussions too! Another example is when a moment in a lesson prompts me to discuss how I handled something well or – perhaps more usefully – poorly in a rehearsal. Openness and fallibility can be powerful tools for effective teaching.

In a sense, I provide the historical-contextual learning within lessons in this informal, unplanned way too. I'm drawing upon my knowledge and finding the moment where it can be placed within the student's learning in an effective way. I want them to go away having maximised every minute of the lesson with learning, rather than receiving an overload of information that cannot be grasped.

Similarly, the training of their leadership skills extends beyond the lesson. I enjoy recommending books from which I've gained insight and skills. That

being said, younger students often have so much to grapple with – they're still learning the fundamentals of their instrument, let alone the big world of conducting – that I hold off on too much of this with them. A graduation gift when they finish their period of study with me has often been a way to open this door. Some of the current classics like Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, Susan Cain's *Quiet*, or Sir Alex Ferguson's *Leading* can be a perfect send off for a student depending on their personality type, and the strengths and weaknesses of the student. It's very good for students to read *Quiet: The Power of Introverts*. Some students learn that just because someone isn't being loud, they might have something valuable to offer if given space. Or introverted conductors may be bolstered by better understanding themselves and their worth within a sometimes noisy world.

Do you think more people go into conducting via performance rather than academia or composing?

Well, very distinguished conductors have come out of Oxbridge. There are also a number of conductors that are composers. The instrumentalist furthest removed from conducting is the pianist – they almost never play in an orchestra. But there are many distinguished pianist-conductors. They're all facing different challenges, and they bring different strengths to the table. An academic brings a lot in terms of contextual and historical knowledge, and deep knowledge about the composers. However, they've got a lot of catching up to do in terms of what it takes to be on stage: anything from the grittiness required to be up in front of an audience (and fellow musicians!), through to stage presence and the ability to be a master of ceremonies.

Pianists have the wonderful full-bodied physicality of playing the piano, and they also have the great luxury of being in touch with the melody, harmony and bass line all the time. They are perhaps the only instrument that compellingly goes through the entire repertoire, so they tend to have magnificent knowledge of style. (Often an instrumentalist whose instrument has very few solo works – for example, the trumpet – has got a lot to get to grips with in terms of style.) Needless to say, many of the greatest musicians are répétiteurs. Geez, what a well-trodden path for conductors! Conductors are at such an advantage if they have had several years playing through the majority of repertoire in an opera house. If they are able to transform their musicianship into their hands, and if they have

the willingness to lead, to make decisions, and enter the vulnerable position of conductor, they're often the greatest.

How do you go about training young musicians with a varied skill-set in conducting?

Importantly, at the core of my teaching is a constant celebration of each student's greatest strengths. Beyond this, it is my firm belief that every musician benefits from conducting training. All musicians should receive training in conducting. I designed my two-year Musicianship Through Conducting course so that it could incorporate everyone, and train everyone at the same time. It is heavily practical, but there's also an open lecture-discussion each week. We move from Classical period repertoire through to today's music over two years. Discussing the music, the composers, and their context raises all kinds of questions in terms of technique and style. Furthermore, it is adaptable to different levels. It works brilliantly with advanced secondary school students, and can be deepened to provide a necessary foundation of knowledge at undergraduate level.

Students are typically doing well with learning their instruments, but their instrumental/vocal teacher usually does not have time to go much further beyond the pieces they're learning and the mountains of technical challenges that must be overcome by the end of formal study. There's so much pressure on the teachers. That's why every music student can benefit a great deal in a group conducting class. A conductor is required to have a knowledge of style for a broad range of music (typically from, at least, the Classical period to today). A Musicianship Through Conducting course is able to take account of the areas of learning that there just isn't time to teach in one-to-one instrumental/vocal lessons. Beyond that, lessons such as these provide space for large-scale reflection, and conversations about broad topics or trends affecting decades worth of development in music/style. There are chances to draw links between composers, to understand the music at a deeper level than can be experienced when relentlessly focusing on small details within one piece or on one instrument in normal instrumental/vocal lessons etc.

I must also say, I'm very happy that my course also brings important attention to Ballet and Opera repertoire. We focus on both of these for more than a term each within the two-year course.

I thought it was fantastic you included those.

Of course! If you attend virtually any undergraduate conservatoire course on the planet, there's no mention of ballet music whatsoever. And, if you're lucky, maybe you get asked to play in the orchestra for one or two operas. Think about how much core repertoire is never mentioned within our training as musicians! It is a regrettable downfall within the education of so many musicians that there is only a limited knowledge of the music of two of the greatest art forms. Many of the greatest composers wrote their masterworks for ballet and for opera!

Why is a conductor best placed to teach a course such as this?

Music students benefit from a class led by a conductor who can connect them with the stylistic questions that are raised by orchestral scores. From a technical standpoint, physical gestures change through time. For example, you can teach students gestures that are light and gently bouncy for the Classical period. Broadly speaking, as we move into the early Romantic era, students physically feel the changes in style and expression as their gestures become more expansive. These physical actions are mimicking the transformations in composition that you can see happening in the notation. Suddenly students are discussing what the music means, how this relates or doesn't relate to other composers' work, what makes this composer's style unique. Most of all, key questions of interpretation – and how to communicate those decisions to an orchestra – are being discussed, within a lesson framed in the physical, gestural language of conducting. Importantly, by experiencing the music physically, all students can then connect with this music – connect their musicianship with this music – whether they are a trumpeter, timpanist, singer, violinist or a pianist.

Perhaps I developed this course in part because I recognised that most musicians come out of upper secondary school or undergraduate training with huge gaps in their knowledge. Furthermore, the open lecture-discussion style of the lessons allows me to gently prod the students towards key additional issues and questions such as how to communicate, what constitutes good leadership, prioritising and decision-making within rehearsals. This is all within the context of a syllabus that teaches the physical act of conducting from zero to fundamental. In addition to giving a grounding of musicianship and interpretation training to all musicians, it's

a set up for advanced conducting, which is taught at postgraduate level. Needless to say, that is a hugely focused, amazingly refined period of study, taught by some very fine teachers, and with a focus to train people that are hopefully going to make a career out of it.

For mid-career educators/performers, it is still valuable for them to have conductor training. Of course, this element of my teaching is much less about leading a broad course in musicianship, and focuses on clear physical and communication fundamentals of conducting. Virtually every musician needs to conduct at some point, whether they direct a chamber ensemble rehearsal with colleagues or they teach in a school. Having a solid training in conducting means that you absolutely can conduct a school wind band rehearsal much more effectively: you can rely on your physical technique, understand how to communicate efficiently, and study the score more effectively.

In some ways you need to be a better communicator to work with younger students.

Well a significant part of what I've done in my career is work with youth orchestras. As you say, the necessity to communicate coherently and concisely with students who have limited knowledge is a great discipline for a conductor, absolutely.

Do you see quite early on if students are suited to a particular repertoire e.g. Opera or Early Music?

Some students already have a magnetism about them, and I can see straight away – 'you're a conductor'. Yet, my belief is that people can be trained in conducting, so I'm also on the lookout for the conscientious student that is trying to make their beating pattern more clear or expressive, or who has opinions regarding the interpretation of the score. I also see some that can communicate effectively, who engage their orchestra and really get the musicians playing for them, even if their technique is still a little weak. Equally, extremely capable students who are physically good and have excellent knowledge of the score, might need assistance developing their leadership or communication style. Everyone has something to work on, and I am conscious that it can be easy to be instantly drawn to the magnetic

personalities. Instead, my job is to encourage everyone's strengths and work on their weaknesses.

But it's interesting that you ask if I see what specialisms may suit individuals. The answer is a cautious 'yes'. I can be clearest when talking about pianists. Surely the ideal is to pursue the path of répétiteur in an opera house. It's an enviable advantage. Pianists can be gently nudged in that direction, if they are open to that lifestyle, repertoire, and to languages. For others, pursuing a specialism before post-graduate level would seem worryingly narrowing.

Sure, especially at that stage.

Yes.

And obviously, so many conductors don't specialise anyway.

That's right. How old does a conductor need to be to have enough self-knowledge and experience of the repertoire, to have conducted and researched enough until there's a point where they can say, 'I think I have a specialism'? How could it really be possible before your thirties? Certainly students who play recorder or sing in Early Music ensembles may struggle to jump straight into music from 1750 and beyond. But this raises an interesting point. Music from the Classical period onwards really is a different landscape. I think it's fair to say that conductors tend to focus on one or the other repertoire, perhaps given a crossover of one hundred years or so. Of course, all conductors who work in the Classical period and beyond are required to conduct Bach from time to time. But it's easy to feel less comfortable in the Baroque. So much changed during that time, not least the establishment of the orchestra itself.

That's interesting. I also suppose that as a teacher you don't ever want to write off a student and say 'conducting isn't for you'. Not at *that* age?

Well, not quite. As a teacher my responsibility is to never write off any student of any age: that's my job. But in terms of going towards a career in professional music-making, the pressure's on at the cusp between upper school and undergraduate. The second cusp is when a student is finishing undergraduate and then determining a path for the future. At both of these

moments there is a certain standard that needs to have been obtained. As such, providing a student with clarity at that moment – and the moments leading up to that point – is essential. However, anyone I'm teaching conducting to is already taking music very seriously. With these students I try to be clear about what their strengths and weaknesses are. And indeed, this involves reflection regarding my strengths and weaknesses as a musician and teacher. Again, my honesty with students is helpful to them, but also powerful in terms of the value I can then offer the students as a result of their deepened trust in me.

Are the pieces you've selected for your course good for teaching a particular skill, or is the piece as a whole what you want them to study?

When I'm teaching I typically have a short-term task on the go, which is often an extract that is picked to address a particular technical issue. We're training the physical technique of conducting, which I equate to the scales and arpeggios of an instrumentalist. Although any piece of music has many different aspects that are challenging, I'm usually focussing on one of them with a short excerpt (maybe five or ten bars). That assignment might go from one lesson to the next week and then we move on to another one. Incidentally, if I'm practising conducting myself, I find that I focus on one aspect of my technique over a five or ten bar patch; usually no more. So much can be gained by focusing in great detail on just a very short section.

In addition to their short studies, I always ensure that my students have a bigger project on the go – maybe a movement from a symphony. Usually I try to choose a piece where we will deal with several of the movements over time. Within a few months, or over the course of a year, we will have explored several movements from that piece. The benefit is obvious: now the student knows a piece they didn't previously know!

Importantly, as musicians we need to wrestle with these big pieces as early as possible. There's a whole other way of teaching (which I think most would consider out-dated now) where we put off the masterworks. The student or the teacher says 'no we're not yet ready for Brahms 1'. This is definitely not my opinion. The sooner you deal with Brahms 1 for the first time, the better! If you're eight years old and you're a brilliant young musician and someone gives you the score of Brahms 1 for the first time –

amazing. You might look at it again in ten years, then every five years, then every year and suddenly you're thinking about it all the time.

That said, from a technical perspective, there's no point in dealing with *Petrushka* before you've dealt with a Mozart symphony. I regularly use Mozart's Symphony No. 41 (and No. 39 is also very good for straightforward physical conducting). Nothing fancy, can you beat in two or four clearly? And then alternate *forte* then *piano*, *forte* then *piano*? Can you stop at the pause (bar 23)? And then resume with a very straightforward way of beating? Both of these Mozart symphonies are wonderful, and of course still present many interesting considerations for a conductor of any experience.

Right. So how much of Mozart 41 do you work on with the students?

In a sense, how long is a piece of string!? There are many things to deal with in the first two pages – up until a few bars after the pause. From there, it's a question of judgement. I'm focusing on the 90% all the time, as teaching the student the final 10% is a waste of time. What I mean is, it can take an hour to teach 90% of what a student needs to know, and then 100 or 200 hours to teach the final 10%! As a teacher my job is to move on at the point where the efficiency of learning exponentially drops. They will get to the other 10% on their own at some point – possibly in a few years.

And what do you mean by 'that last 10%'?

Well, it's possible to get a student to a level that is 9/10 relatively quickly; to get to 10/10 is a lifetime's work. With the Mozart, for example, I want to ensure they have good physical technique that is clear and consistent. Also I want the student to have discovered many of the questions that arise for the conductor when preparing the score or rehearsing. If their thought process, their contextual and stylistic knowledge, and their physical technique is 90% of the way there, usually we move straight on to the next piece and its new challenges. We're not aiming for perfection: it's not realistically obtainable.

Ah I see. So the amount of knowledge that would be needed to get the students to 10/10 would just take too long to teach.

That's exactly right, that's a really good way of putting it. My job is to expose them to new challenges and then to train them as efficiently as possible. I'm always thinking about efficiency. To continue with my Mozart 41 example; this is a great piece if you're teaching several students at once. There can be a debate straight away. Mozart wrote Allegro vivace, common time (in four), but the feeling is more in two. So which beating pattern should underpin the movement? I don't have a fixed view – who am I to say? – but I push each student to ensure that their decision is made based on compelling reasoning. In addition, I share with the students what I did the last time I conducted the symphony, and I share my reasoning. Furthermore, there are videos on YouTube of great maestros doing it in two, and great maestros doing it in four. What matters is the thought-out reasoning behind their decision-making. Then, of course, there's a decision of how much flexibility there is between going from four to two, or two to four etc.

But, beyond this, there are some fundamental issues that must be addressed in the first few bars. The beating has to be bigger for the first bar, than bar 2. The first bar is *forte*, the second bar is empty. Interestingly, many students stop beating in bar 2 and then start again in bar 3. The student must be encouraged to measure time in the second bar in order to ensure the violins are confident to come in with the quaver upbeat to bar three. The beat is small from the second beat of bar 2, and then it remains small for bar three where it's *piano*. This takes us through to the end of bar 4. And then there's a large upbeat and we're into *forte* again. At this point, the student hopefully understands the relationship between size of beat to dynamics.

To begin addressing the musicianship aspects, I might pose questions to the student or students. Can they articulate what it is that makes this piece Classical? Do they appreciate the eighteenth-century, upright, aristocratic feel of that first bar? As my great teacher said to me 'think about those tight corsets and everyone's uprightness at those aristocratic balls'. With the *piano* phrase [bar 3], what is the shape? How are you going to show your phrasing to the orchestra using physical movement whilst also being small in your beating? Can the student then conduct these bars to me in silence, with enough conviction that it compels me to feel the music the way they do?

Moving a few bars further on, some people do a slight ritardando into the pause and others don't. And with the pause itself, you have to decide

whether or not to bring it off with the left hand, or to go on directly into the next bar with the right arm. The number of interpretative questions that can be asked, that require the student to come up with compelling musical and technical solutions, really is endless. Given my constant awareness of efficiency, I am always seeking the ideal next question. It should be a question that allows several things to be dealt with at once. Frankly, there isn't time to ask multiple run-of-the-mill questions. Instead, each of my questions must stimulate the student in a way that allows them to find solutions to problems they encounter beyond the lesson.

Working in this detailed way on a short section of a movement will answer the vast majority – my ideal 90% – of the questions and musical and technical solutions that remain for the rest of the movement. You can see the level of detail we get into, but progress can be made very quickly in just the opening twenty bars or so. Importantly too, at all times I want the students to be wrestling with the decisions that conductors actually need to make.

Yes, so you start them off on that mode of thinking.

Absolutely. And that is important, so that they can develop deep confidence in their abilities over time. It also gives them a healthy view of what the job of a conductor is. Although I have huge respect for all my colleagues who play in orchestras, I am sometimes baffled by the things that some of them criticise, or celebrate, conductors for. What learning conducting as a student can teach you is what factors are within the conductor's control, and what are the parameters that define professionalism.

Knowing this gives a great framework for when you sit in an orchestra. Confidently knowing when 'I shouldn't put up with this from a conductor' or when 'I can see the conductor's not dealing with that problem because they are prioritising other problems first' is, I think, powerful knowledge for an orchestral musician. Personally, I can't believe what orchestral players are sometimes prepared to put up with from conductors. When I speak to other musicians – extremely competent, experienced ones – I occasionally hear them make allowances for the conductor because there is the perception that the conductor is facing a big challenge within a particular work. So often I find myself saying, 'no, this is a basic professional responsibility – you shouldn't accept that'. Importantly, we

must not forgive conductors who are not rising up to the level of basic professionalism! Equally, some of the criticisms that conductors receive can be unfair. Most often I find myself sympathising with the conductor when I sense that they are purposefully overlooking some problems within the orchestra in order to prioritise something else which, from their perspective, is more important at that moment. And they may or may not even come back to fixing those other problems. There's a clock on the wall, and certainly there's rarely the luxury of too much rehearsal time!

Are there any examples of those criticisms that come up a lot?

One thing that comes up a lot is technical incompetence. There is absolutely no doubt about that. The perspective of the orchestral musician should be that there's an extremely limited amount of repertoire that is physically difficult to conduct. Meaning, being able to adequately conduct the vast, vast majority of the repertoire *is* within the realms of required professionalism. And orchestral musicians are right to expect this standard as a basic minimum. Our set of scales and arpeggios are, essentially, beating patterns and gesture and the ability to show phrasing etc.; on top of this there is of course no limit to the depth of musicianship, the sense of style, or the grand aspects of coherently realising the form, which are needed to become a great conductor. Any good student coming out of one of those great postgraduate conducting courses can conduct the *Rite of Spring* from a physical perspective. It's not challenging, it's just time signatures and dynamics and phrasing. It's the musicianship that is endlessly tough. I'm sure that you could say the great maestros like Haitink, Gergiev etc. are endlessly wanting to be better musicians. All of us have an endless journey from that perspective. But the physical fundamentals of conducting are learnable and are a requirement of being in the profession.

So conversely, when do you think conductors are criticised unfairly?

Well, an example could be what I mentioned before about where the conductor places priority. There are many aspects at play. Anyone in a leadership position will always receive criticism, and that's OK. There are many reasons for it. There's a power imbalance, and if you're one of a group and you feel your voice isn't being heard, you might want to express opinions for a variety of reasons. The conductor, as part of their job, has to be able to respond positively to criticism.

So sometimes the orchestral players aren't aware of the big picture?

Cautiously I would say that that can occasionally be the case. However, I would rephrase it to say that it isn't a requirement for orchestral musicians to know the whole score, its form etc. It's very difficult for many of them to do so, as a full time orchestral player deals with so many pieces every week or month. There just isn't time! Of course, some players have studied some works in enormous detail, and others are experienced conductors themselves, well used to the decision-making process of being on the podium. For me, I would always like more time to have dealt with everything in order that there is more comfort for everyone prior to the performance. In every second of every part of a rehearsal my cogs are whirring and I'm thinking about how to use up the remaining twenty-five minutes, the remaining seventeen minutes, three minutes... It feels great to get to the end of a rehearsal and everything has been slotted in. All conductors have to ignore certain things, or leave some things to the concert.

... and of course in Opera and Ballet you're balancing the stage and pit.

Yeah, in the theatre there's also the question of serving the dancer or the singer. There are all kinds of challenges that the conductor must be aware of that are not a requirement of the instrumentalist. They must be aware of just how hard it is to stand up on stage and act, dance, move around, remember all the lines or steps, and sing things that are often (especially in more recent opera) really tough.

Do you use difficult pieces when teaching inexperienced conductors?

The opening of the fourth movement of Brahms 1 is a classic test piece for training post-graduate level conductors. There are many technical challenges all within a short space of time. And for this very reason, I like to get that piece out at Junior Guildhall in a group setting. In reality, most of the students will never conduct it (or it will be years before they do) but it's great to wrestle with it early. The students can hear the difference between when they conduct the first bar in quavers (as is perhaps the classical approach) or in crotchets. Furthermore, you really learn something about each student. It takes something magnetic to encourage the individuals of an orchestra to come in in that first bar, all because there's no crotchet rest

on beat one. The notation starts directly on beat two of a 4/4 bar. Some students give a 'one' even though there's no crotchet rest written, but this usually causes some of the orchestra members to come straight in. *Should* you show a one, or not? And, how might you show this whilst also letting the orchestra know that you're going to beat in quavers? The opening of this movement raises so many questions that must be solved physically. Needless to say, I learn an endless amount when teaching this movement. Watching others work through and solve problems is a great education!

It's fantastic that it's a two-way street. Are there any other pieces that you think are particularly great training (for yourself or your students)?

There's no end to what I can get out of conducting Classical period pieces, in particular Mozart. That being said, in my view, in an ideal world Mozart symphonies shouldn't be conducted. But they are terrific when used to train musicianship or technique, and great for thinking about how to encourage phrasing in a refined way to an orchestra. The music itself is so refined, and therefore requires such finesse in physical movement by the conductor. For this reason, I could take out any Mozart score to practice today and have endless challenges and things I'd like to think about and, no doubt, improve.

Certainly another piece with everything in the score (as much as it can be) is Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. Again, in an idealistic world this piece shouldn't have a conductor. In fact, recently I have come to the view that it more or less can't be done at it's best without one. There are exceptions to that though, because there are some (although very few) ensembles that have been performing the piece for decades. They know it so well that there isn't the hesitancy and toning down of extremes of dynamics and speeds etc. that tends to happen unless a conductor is there to lead.

I tend to think that it is *the* piece for training a conductor because there's something happening in almost every bar. Not only are there vast changes between each of the twenty-one short movements, there are constant changes, in every conceivable way, all of the time. Perhaps there's a particular colour of sound, a sudden change in tempo or dynamics, an expression... Prior to rehearsals, I found that you have to do a massive amount of academic research. You need to understand why Schoenberg decided on the spoken part, the instrumentations, the timbres; there are so

many questions posed by the score. It is also *the* gateway piece to modern composition. Schoenberg is looking back to Brahms and the great tradition that's gone before, and now he is setting off forward, beginning to develop a compositional language for the Twentieth Century. One thinks of Stravinsky... he said '*Pierrot* is the solar plexus as well as the mind of early twentieth-century music' (Stravinsky cited Walter-White 1979:41).

Furthermore, it is the piece I want to do yearly because it is so important to keep in touch with – a fundamental gateway backwards and forwards through time. It's all there, the sense of history and a sense of what the future is going to be.

I like to work with students in a way that allows them to experience facing the same challenges I face. Can they galvanise a small group of musicians and a vocalist towards a compelling vision for that piece? And do they have the leadership skills, knowledge and musicianship, stylistic knowledge and physical capacity to direct it? For me, if a conductor can answer yes to these questions, then they have reached a benchmark of ability in their skills. It's advanced, but very inspiring if you can put this piece (or, more likely, short movements from the piece) in front of a young student.

Mozart wasn't a surprise to me, but I didn't expect you to bring up Schoenberg.

Well even though it's an ensemble of just five players, it's a very technically and musically demanding piece. It's intellectually demanding too – it takes quite a lot of peeling back the layers until you feel like you're beginning to get inside it! Of course, without wanting to go down another rabbit hole, teaching only this piece would be a problem too. There is, of course, no chance to develop the grand, expansive gestures needed in large-scale symphonic repertoire.

If, hypothetically speaking, two students in their teens were passionate about pursuing conducting, but one student is extremely wealthy and the other has very little financial support, what advice would you give either of them?

The conducting student without money has the same challenges that any music student without money has, but one fortunate thing is that they have

the same thing that every musician has – the score. But, it's an unfortunate reality that money often does create opportunities for those who have it. One example is that it can affect the quality of the videos that young conductors are able to make when applying for music colleges and competitions. It is immensely helpful when videos are high quality. Students from wealthy backgrounds can pay a quality orchestra to play for them and have it all recorded with different cameras from various angles.

I think that's a really disturbing and worrying challenge that the industry faces. In any case, let's hope that the world shines brightly on those who work hard to gain knowledge and skills over a long period of time, and on those who have empathy and great consideration for their colleagues. They should be rewarded for that.

Before we finish I'd like to raise one more thing, which is absolutely essential for anyone teaching conducting at the moment. Many of my colleagues are thinking about trying to address the unacceptable balance of female conductors at the top of the profession. What I've noticed (especially teaching upper secondary school age students) is that you must set up the class or workshop so that every student can thrive, male or female. It's something that is obviously on every educator's mind, but it is particularly potent for someone training conducting. It includes thinking in great detail about the way the room, atmosphere and language of the class can enable every student to feel empowered and completely supported. We must not forget that conducting creates a very exposed situation for whoever is on the podium.

When you create the atmosphere where a student feels as though they can fail to an embarrassing degree, but yet still be supported, then you have an opportunity to publicly expose their weaknesses without them feeling attacked or ridiculed. You must have created the situation whereby the student can grab on to the feedback and learn from it in a way that is entirely positive. Another important consideration is that so often when students (male or female) refer to the conductor, they unconsciously use the words 'him' and 'he'. Regularly highlighting this raises everyone's antennae to the fact that there is an issue with how we have been trained to think of conductors as being male. The most important benefit is that those female students in the class begin to realise they *can* be conductors. Over time, the conducting classes at Junior Guildhall have gone from being

predominantly male to now being very slightly predominantly female. That's a very interesting and important change.

Bibliography

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