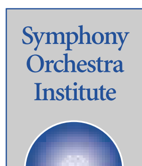
Harmony™
Forum of the Symphony Orchestra Institute
Number 12 • April 2001

Dominant and Tonic: Rethinking the Role of the Music Director

by

Robert Levine



To subscribe to Harmony or provide support to the Institute, contact:

Symphony Orchestra Institute
1618 Orrington Avenue, Suite 318
Evanston, IL 60201
Tel: 847.475.5001 Fax: 847.475.2460
e-mail: information@soi.org
www.soi.org

©2001 by the Symphony Orchestra Institute. All rights reserved.

Editor's Digest

Dominant and Tonic: Rethinking the Role of the Music Director

Author Robert Levine believes that in working to attain greater effectiveness, orchestra organizations must rethink the role of the music director.

Levine opens his essay with an exploration into the evolution of the conductor's role within the orchestra. He then traces the growth of that role into what we know today as "music director," and suggests that the concentration of chief artistic decision maker and dominant performer in one person engenders organizational ill health.

Consequences and a Suggestion

Arguing that orchestras do not need "sole proprietors," our author outlines what he views as the consequences, throughout orchestral organizations, of concentrated artistic authority. He then offers an alternative organizational model, that of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, placing particular emphasis on the way Berlin selects and tenures its players.

The essay concludes with a series of questions that Levine thinks all orchestras should consider if they are serious about working to become effective organizations within their communities.

As those who know him understand, Robert Levine does not mince words. This orchestra player enjoys challenging traditional thinking. When you have completed reading this essay, reconsider its title. You will discover that the author also cannot resist a good pun!

Robert Levine

Dominant and Tonic: Rethinking the Role of the Music Director

It is impossible to write critically about structural problems with the way power is wielded in our industry without having some readers wonder if the writer has a score to settle with those who actually wield that power.

During the course of a quarter century of working in orchestras, I have been, for most of that time, privileged to have worked for Music Directors whose musicianship and ability I hold in the highest respect. Not only have they taught me much about music and the art of ensemble playing, they have led my colleagues and me in some unforgettable performances. In addition, they have been surprisingly supportive of my efforts as an activist to make things better for orchestra musicians and have been quite open with me about their own frustrations with "the system."

This essay is not about the Music Directors for whom I've worked; it is not, in fact, about individual Music Directors at all. Those who hold Music Directorships today created neither the system nor the resulting problems.

A recent article in *Harmony* by Henry Fogel of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra touched decorously on a topic whose centrality to the study of our institutions cannot be overstated: the role of the Music Director.

Most orchestra musicians have spent almost all of their working lives, and much of their youth, playing in orchestras with Music Directors and have come to accept the concept of the Music Director as something laid down with the rocks and the oceans—an immutable reality. Many participants in our industry, especially volunteers, are attracted to orchestras precisely because they are "artistic" and different from other institutions they know. They are not only inclined to accept whatever oddities they find in our world, they actively embrace them as emblematic of the differences they seek. And, of course, those who report on our world have assumed the Music Director as the face of our business, if only because it's easier to report on one celebrity figure than to try to explain the complexities of an orchestra.

But unexamined assumptions are ticking time bombs. And the assumption that Music Directors are necessary—or alternately, that Music Directors must

perform all the functions that they do in the modern orchestra—is a very large assumption in a world where leadership roles in all fields are undergoing change at an unprecedented rate. The dangers of leaving this very large bomb to tick are correspondingly great.

Any examination of the role of the Music Director must begin with what all Music Directors have in common: they are all conductors.

The role of the conductor has evolved over centuries, but its genesis was the need for a central figure to coordinate the performances of ensembles too large (or performing music too complex) to be able to function as self-directing entities. For much of the history of ensemble music, that figure was a member of the ensemble, often the leader of the first violin section or the keyboard continuo player. As ensembles became larger and less homogeneous, and as opera became more prevalent, the role of coordinator became separated from that of instrumentalist (although it is worth noting that there are a number of modern-day soloists who also handle the conductor's role during concertos).

"Any examination of the role of the Music Director must begin with what all Music Directors have in common: they are all conductors."

Boiled down to its essence, the conductor's core function is that of traffic cop. (It is telling that the universal terms within orchestras for ensemble disasters are "car crash" and "train wreck," precisely what happens without traffic cops.) The purest examples one can find of this core function are opera conductors, whose job it is to coordinate the performances of an orchestra spread out in a dark pit with soloists and choristers on stage who can neither see nor hear the orchestra. The need for such coordination appears in popular music theater as well; even a work such as *Rent*, with a score and instrumentation owing nothing to classical music, needs a conductor.

In the modern orchestra, however, serving as a coordinator is not all the conductor does. Every conductor, even the lowliest assistant, rehearses the works he or she will conduct in performance. Yet rehearsing is a far different activity from conducting, and one that requires a very different set of skills. Rehearsing is an essential task for conductors only if one assumes that the conductor is both

- the person who should make the key interpretive decisions; and
- the person who is best able to resolve the many technical issues that arise during the preparation of a performance.

It is certainly logical that the conductor would make some of the interpretive decisions. Obviously, the person who is charged with communicating tempo to the ensemble is the most natural person to choose that tempo. But why should the conductor have the authority to decide phrasing or articulation? After all, a

traffic cop doesn't tell drivers how to drive their cars; he or she simply tells them when to stop or go in order to control the flow of traffic. Where do conductors derive the authority to tell musicians how to play, rather than just *when* to play?

Evolution of the Conductor's Role

One historical source for this control over individual musicians' execution was the fact that conductors were often the composers of the works being conducted, which gave them obvious moral authority to dictate how the details of the performance (many not notated in the score) would go.

> *"One historical source for this control over individual musicians' execution was the fact that conductors were often the composers of the works being conducted..."*

As the concert repertoire began to incorporate works composed by those no longer able to impart such wisdom directly to the performers (by virtue of being dead), the performance of a work, rather than a new work itself, became the attraction for the audience. Audiences naturally began to demand better—and perhaps more "interpreted"—performances than the rather rough-and-ready renderings that Mozart and Beethoven endured of their orchestral works.

When orchestras were faced with the problem of how to achieve greater coordination of ensemble, pitch, phrasing, articulation, and the like—because audiences were listening to the performance as much as to the work itself—they gravitated towards the most obviously "efficient" solution: to have one person make all the decisions. And that *is* the most efficient way to produce performances if the goal is the maximum number of different programs with the minimum amount of rehearsal. There is no way to tell what is sacrificed in the resulting musical assembly line because there are no good examples of conducted orchestras that try to solve the problem differently.

When conducting became a role separate from composing or playing an instrument, another dynamic came into play. Anyone who has spent time in orchestras comes to realize that the interaction between the conductor's gestures and the orchestra's playing is more complex than the orchestra's merely "following" the conductor. The orchestra's response to being conducted is not entirely calculated or even fully conscious. While the conductor is communicating primarily by gesture—and while there is a generally recognized vocabulary of such gestures—the orchestra is responding not only to the gestures, but also to its own playing, while the conductor is (or should be) responding to the orchestra's playing as well.

The great French conductor and teacher Pierre Monteux reportedly described conducting as like riding a horse, in that most of the time, the horse is fine without direction, but is completely helpless without it at certain critical moments. The rider's job—or the conductor's—is to know when to intervene and when to stay out of the way.

And while it is impossible to prove, there appears to be communication between conductor and orchestra that is both nonvisual and nonaural. Call it telepathy, or pheromones, or magic, but I have found no more convincing evidence of something beyond the five senses than the interaction of conductor and orchestra.

> *"Rather than an ensemble of fellow performers and colleagues, the orchestra becomes the instrument upon which the conductor plays."*

Given these historical roots, and the undeniable role of something inexplicable between conductor and orchestra in the creation of performance, it is not surprising that the authority of conductors has spread beyond simply avoiding train wrecks. In the modern era, conductors are not primarily technicians or coordinators. They are orchestras' chief performers or perhaps even sole performers. They stand high above their orchestras waving batons (a symbol of authority even in Mosaic times). They come on stage by themselves to thunderous applause. They are the focus of the audience's visual attention. By contrast, the orchestra is a faceless mass of fungible technicians, arranged so that the conductor is at the center of their on-stage universe. Rather than an ensemble of fellow performers and colleagues, the orchestra becomes the instrument upon which the conductor plays.

So the simple fact that the Music Director invariably functions as the orchestra's primary conductor imbues the position with considerable authority, as well as an air of mystery. But it does not explain why we have Music Directors at all, nor why their authority has few, if any, formal limits.

From Conductor to Music Director

The title "Music Director" originated in 19th-century Germany. But it is not clear from the historical record (which is rather thin regarding ensembles) just what authority the title was intended to convey. The origin of the modern functions of Music Director would seem to have roots in both secular and sacred music. The position that Bach held at St. Thomaskirche in Leipzig and the one that Haydn held at Esterhazy were typical of the period. Both jobs involved conducting, but only as part of a job description that included composing and hiring (and no doubt firing) musicians. The most important part of the job, in an era that valued new music above all other, was composing, not conducting or managing orchestra personnel. And, as noted above, few will question a conductor's authority to decide how a piece should sound when that person is also the composer of the piece.

In the absence of a more detailed historical record, we can only speculate as to how the jack-of-all-trades kappellmeister evolved into the omnipotent Music Director. One obvious possibility is that conductors were often the founders of orchestras. Without orchestras, composers could still compose, musicians could

still perform, and audiences could still enjoy. But, if one wanted to conduct, one needed an orchestra; so conductors often became orchestra founders. And founding an enterprise usually implies a degree of control—if not actual legal or moral ownership—that can be problematic over the long term for the enterprise and its other participants.

Regardless of the exact reasons for the position to have evolved into both the orchestra's chief performer and chief arbiter of artistic decisions, it makes for a very odd and unusual mix. Certainly there are other performance organizations that feature a chief performer, a quarterback on a football team, for example. But quarterbacks generally don't design plays and certainly don't hire and fire personnel. In other arts organizations, such as theaters or ballet companies, the chief artistic decision maker is rarely an active performer and almost never the dominant performer.

> *"The combination, in the position of Music Director, of two very different roles is both potent and problematic."*

The combination, in the position of Music Director, of two very different roles is both potent and problematic. Each role, by itself, would have logical boundaries. But what become the natural limits to the Music Director's authority when the two roles are combined? As chief performer, the Music Director is the core of the orchestra's public image and the focus of its marketing and fundraising efforts. As chief artistic decision maker, the Music Director will inevitably support the artistic needs of the chief performer. The combination of the two roles is why the psychological dynamic in most orchestras is so unhealthy. Rather than the Music Director providing leadership for the institution, the institution exists to provide the Music Director with a vehicle for artistic self-expression. In terms of organizational dynamics, the Music Director owns the orchestra.

So, of course, the Music Director makes all the personnel decisions within the orchestra, just as a violinist decides what brand of strings to use on his or her violin. Of course, the Music Director determines programming, and the staff and volunteers provide the resources to support that facet of the Music Director's artistic expression. Of course, the Music Director becomes the focus of the institution's fundraising and marketing. And, of course, there is chronic tension between the Music Director and the board president and the executive director. They suffer from the illusion that they are building an institution with a life of its own, rather than an instrument that, without the Music Director, has neither life nor meaning.

This may seem a harsh portrait of Music Directors. However, it is a description of a leadership model that engenders very unhealthy attitudes on the part of both leaders and those whom they lead. Few Music Directors always behave as if their institutions revolve solely around them; some have far healthier beliefs about their roles. But a flawed institutional structure is not redeemed by the fact that some leaders, and some institutions, run counter to type.

The notion of the Music Director as the focus of the institution and the only real prime mover is deeply rooted within virtually every orchestral institution now extant. Nothing else can explain Music Directors' pervasive influence on decision making throughout their institutions. No Music Director knows more about effective programming, or acoustics, or hiring and firing of musicians, or guest artists—or perhaps even rehearsing—than anyone else. But orchestras are their fiefdoms, by virtue of their titles, and that ownership, rather than their superior abilities in all those areas, gives them the right to decide.

Consequences of Unbounded Authority

Unfortunately, the last thing orchestras need today are sole proprietors. Music Directors may be the public faces of their institutions, may be paid more than anyone else, and may receive an unseemly amount of deference, but they are also on site less than musicians, staff, or volunteers. They rarely have, or develop, roots in the community. And as Toscanini once said to a departing principal player, "When the Pope dies, we elect a new Pope." Music Directors come and go, but the institution invariably survives (although generally not without major resources being devoted to "introducing" the new owner to the public.)

> *"As might be expected, a concept that is so well internalized, so little discussed, and so at odds with reality does real harm to the institution's ability to function well."*

As might be expected, a concept that is so well internalized, so little discussed, and so at odds with reality does real harm to the institution's ability to function well. A frequent complaint about orchestras from audience members, for example, is the apparent lack of involvement of the musicians in the performance. Why do orchestra musicians move so little and seem so passive, while chamber musicians move so much and seem so involved in their work? Chamber musicians are leading each other with their movements, of course, while orchestra musicians are being led by someone external to the ensemble. But more important is the musicians' internalized belief that the Music Director is the performer, not they. The audience was sold tickets for the Music Director's performance, not the orchestra's. One is pleased to see a pianist physically involved in his or her performance; to have the piano physically involved would be distracting. Doesn't the real drama of an orchestral performance lie in the ability of one man to control the masses in front of him with a little stick? Wouldn't the masses moving independently disrupt the drama of the puppetmaster pulling the puppets' strings?

The complaints about musician passivity prove the opposite. "The masses" moving is actually better entertainment, not worse. Regardless of whether or not audiences come to see the Music Director, they will enjoy the performance far more if the orchestra looks involved as well, or put another way, if the orchestra is *performing* as well. In a modern society, teamwork is far more attractive than

dictatorship. But the orchestra will look as committed as the conductor only if the orchestra *is* as committed as the conductor, and that commitment comes not solely from a sense of professionalism, but from a sense of ownership as well.

> *"Given the imbalance in knowledge and experience, the lack of defined boundaries, and the fallacies embedded in the underlying assumptions, it is little less than a miracle that this structure works anywhere and anytime."*

A less visible, but equally harmful, consequence of the ownership concept is apparent on the administrative side. Orchestral leadership (at least in North America) as tripartite is now a truism. But consider how profoundly unbalanced the "three-legged stool" really is. One leg is a volunteer, nominally the head of the organization, but one who rarely knows enough either about orchestra administration or about the nuts and bolts of artistic leadership to be able to competently evaluate the performance of his co-legs. One leg is a paid professional administrator, whose job it is to manage an institution whose entire raison d'être is artistic excellence, but who has no formal authority over any matters that might be deemed "artistic." And the third leg is a musician, untrained in management, a dilettante about every instrument but his or her own, and a part-time, limited-tenure employee to boot who has the authority to make all the artistic decisions that will determine the institution's success, short- and long-term. Given the imbalance in knowledge and experience, the lack of defined boundaries, and the fallacies embedded in the underlying assumptions, it is little less than a miracle that this structure works anywhere and anytime.

Autonomy and accountability are the twin faces of power. Autonomy is necessary for individuals to wield power; accountability is necessary in order to harness that individual autonomy for a larger purpose. But where is the accountability of the Music Director in this structure? And by whom is the Music Director held accountable if he or she is really the orchestra's "owner"? Many of the limits that are placed on the Music Director's authority have evolved in direct response to the fact that someone else inevitably is accountable for the consequences of the Music Director's decisions. They are checks and balances couched in ways that appear, disingenuously, to have nothing to do with artistic issues of the Music Director's artistic authority. It is striking how effective these checks and balances can be, not only in limiting the Music Director's power, but in ensuring that no coherent artistic policies either develop or succeed.

Music Directors have complete control over programming and guest artists, for example, until such control bumps into budgetary or marketing constraints, something that a clever executive director or board president can easily arrange. Of course, such a clever executive director or board president would never harbor

any ideas about programming or guest artists; that would infringe upon the Music Director's artistic authority. But given that Music Directors are usually not held accountable for the economic effects of bad programming decisions, how else is an executive director or board president to avoid the blame if the audience stays away in droves?

> *"So Music Directors are frustrated because the absolute power that they are told they have over artistic matters is hedged everywhere with 'practical' limits . . ."*

Music Directors have complete control over hiring and firing of orchestra musicians—until such control bumps up against the labor agreement. But labor agreements are about terms and conditions of employment, not artistic control. That obviously belongs to the Music Director. Any effect of the labor agreement on artistic issues must be purely coincidental and unintended. Even where labor agreements become most intrusive on artistic matters—such as in giving control over large parts of the audition process to committees of orchestra musicians—such intrusion is usually justified as an attempt to make auditions "more fair," not as a way of wresting artistic decisions away from the Music Director.

So Music Directors are frustrated because the absolute power that they are told they have over artistic matters is hedged everywhere with "practical" limits; limits, moreover, that they had no part in setting. At the same time, the other participants in the institution feel trapped in a constant rear-guard action to provide such limits in the face of the belief that the Music Director is accountable to no one for artistic decisions or their consequences. The result is a profound paradox; the unbounded authority of the Music Director really means that virtually every decision that he or she makes can be unmade (or even prevented from being made at all) by someone else. The unending, low-intensity conflict over just where lie the real boundaries, the real authority, and the real accountability is inevitable, predictable, and profoundly counterproductive.

A Different Way

But artistic decisions, most importantly about programming and orchestra personnel, must be made. Are there alternatives to the traditional unbounded authority of the Music Director?

There is, in fact, an interesting and well-known European model regarding who plays in the orchestra: the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. That orchestra shares with American orchestras a conventional employer-employee relationship (at least formally), with outside financial underwriting, and a management that reports to external governance. And the Berlin Philharmonic has always had a Music Director. But there are two differences in the relationship between the Music Director and the rest of the institution that are fascinating and that offer clues to a healthier model of artistic leadership.

The first is the best known: the members of the orchestra choose the Music Director by direct election. Of course, other major orchestras allow musicians a voice in the process of choosing Music Directors. The recent selection of Lorin Maazel by the New York Philharmonic was heralded in the press as a decision driven largely by the orchestra's musicians. But the final authority for the decision lay elsewhere and very likely was driven by concerns other than the wishes of the musicians.

The second difference in Berlin is less well publicized, but perhaps even more important in terms of the balance of power regarding artistic decisions: the role the orchestra plays in hiring its own members.

> *"It appears from anecdotal evidence that fully one-third of candidates for tenure . . . do not receive it and are let go."*

The Music Director of the Berlin Philharmonic has remarkably little to do with orchestral personnel decisions. True, he participates in auditions, but so does the entire orchestra. The entire orchestra attends auditions and votes (with the Music Director having the same vote as every orchestra member) on who to hire, even for section positions. Perhaps more important, the entire orchestra votes on which newly hired musicians receive tenure. The most telling consequence of that unique procedure is the high attrition rate. It appears from anecdotal evidence that fully one-third of candidates for tenure (who by definition were winners of an extremely arduous audition process simply to get into the orchestra) do not receive it and are let go.

Observers of the American orchestra scene know that the granting of tenure to a probationary musician (usually one in his or her first or second season with the orchestra) is virtually automatic. Why is Berlin so different?

It appears that not only do the musicians of the Berlin Philharmonic have an artistic vision for their orchestra—not necessarily about programming, or soloists, or even conductors, but about how the orchestra actually performs—but they are also prepared to make very tough decisions in order to fulfill those beliefs. And, of course, the members of the orchestra are in a far better position than any individual conductor, even the Music Director, to know whether or not a candidate for tenure really fits into the orchestra's way of making music.

I have had the privilege of seeing and hearing several of the world's great orchestras over the past few years. The Berlin Philharmonic is not the only orchestra in the top tier anymore. And it is hardly the only orchestra whose musicians take pride in their work, both individually and collectively. But I know of no American orchestra in which the musicians believe that the institution is *theirs* in the way that Berlin musicians do. In Berlin, that sense of ownership is palpable, both in how the orchestra plays and how they act when they play. In America, orchestra musicians on stage look like highly trained professionals trying their best to do their jobs while not calling attention to themselves. In

Berlin, the orchestra members look like 100 quartet musicians, all of whom, not just the conductor, *own* the performance and demonstrate such ownership by the physical intensity with which they participate. It is a compelling spectacle.

While much history and many factors go into that sense of ownership and involvement in Berlin, I believe that control over who plays in the orchestra—which is really control over the orchestra's artistic identity—is the key. It may be hard to imagine that degree of control over hiring (not to mention control over who becomes Music Director or executive director) being ceded to orchestra musicians by their employers in this country. But it is hard to imagine a better system in terms of generating real commitment and ownership by the musicians.

"While much history and many factors go into that sense of ownership and involvement in Berlin, I believe that control over who plays in the orchestra—which is really control over the orchestra's artistic identity—is the key."

Certainly the members of an orchestra have a greater stake in their orchestra's artistic identity than do Music Directors. It is they, and not Music Directors, who have to live with the way their colleagues make music over the course of their careers. The Berlin experience suggests that the musicians of an orchestra might not only have a more consistent vision over time of how their orchestra should perform, but might also be even more hard-nosed about achieving that vision than the average Music Director. And perhaps it is not completely fantastical to think that Music Directors might welcome less involvement with an issue that can so profoundly damage the working relationship between orchestra and Music Director.

One could imagine that the idea of creating more real power for a range of participants—with both autonomy and accountability—could be applied to other artistic decisions. It is accepted wisdom, for example, that orchestras that make recordings often do so because of the Music Director's desire to be immortalized on disk. Two American orchestras, those in Saint Louis and Philadelphia, have recently started their own recording companies, jointly controlled by the musicians and the management, and the recently concluded Internet Agreement between the AFM and 73 American orchestras provides for similar joint control over Internet distribution of recorded products. Initial reports indicate that concerns in addition to the Music Director's are driving decision making within these ventures.

It would also seem that better programming decisions might result if all the participants in those decisions share the responsibility for making them work artistically and economically. Music Directors might have more success in making their programming decisions "stick" if they also had some say in setting the budgeting constraints and marketing goals that will inevitably impact programming. Not only could such involvement allow Music Directors more

autonomy and real artistic control, the resulting accountability would greatly lessen the chronic finger-pointing between Music Director and staff that now occurs when programming decisions go sour.

Suspicious readers may wonder if this writer thinks the real solution is to strip the Music Director of the authority to make *any* meaningful artistic decisions. For a few unfortunate institutions, that might be the only answer. The skills needed to be an effective chief performer and an effective chief artistic decision maker are not always found in the same person. But even those orchestras fortunate to have Music Directors capable of filling both roles would benefit from a frank examination of the entire process of artistic decision making. Who should be making artistic decisions? Whose job performance is most affected by those decisions? Who is accountable for those decisions' effects on the institution?

The answers will largely determine the orchestra's long-term success, both for its community and for its participants.

Robert Levine is principal violist of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and current chairperson of the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians, a Player Conference of the American Federation of Musicians.