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Gunther Schuller on the Role of the Conductor

Harmony readers have become familiar with an ongoing discussion of the role of the orchestra conductor, with particular emphasis on the organizational and psychological issues connected with that role.

Very few people have given more thought to the responsibilities, power, and pitfalls of this role than Gunther Schuller, author of the 1997 book, *The Compleat Conductor*, published by Oxford University Press. In his book, Schuller contributes many personal insights to the enduring dialogue about this central orchestral position. His thinking is grounded in a lifetime of experience.

As a hornist (often the principal) in a number of the world's major orchestras, Schuller played under such conducting luminaries as Toscanini, Szell, and Walter, among others. In addition, he is an internationally esteemed composer, arranger, musical scholar, author, and educator, as well as a seasoned conductor. He sees conducting as "the most demanding, musically all-embracing, and complex of the various disciplines that constitute the field of music performance." (3)

On balance, Schuller is more concerned with the conductor's leadership responsibility to the composer than to the orchestra. When he began to conduct, he was surprised to find that the music he'd been playing for years was often at odds with what the composer himself had clearly spelled out in the score. Many conductors, he claims, have been faithless reinterpreters of the scores the great composers created for them.

Given his central concern, much of *The Compleat Conductor* is devoted to the precision with which Schuller believes scores should be read and interpreted and provides detailed instructions with respect to conducting eight major works in the orchestral repertoire. But, in his more general musings, the author voices some keen insights into orchestral group behavior and touches on a number of attitudes and practices that run counter to orchestral teamwork and heightened human relationships. Here are some of Schuller's observations.

Early in *The Compleat Conductor*, Schuller discusses the conflict between orchestra players and the conductor as to the interpretation of the composer's score and between performers' interpretive liberties and the need to be faithful to the composer's intent.

Those relatively few [musicians] who have actually studied a score carefully and know not only what's in it but how it should be performed, generally are not in a position to critique the conductor. . . . Musicians complaints rarely rise above the personal level, as for instance when a conductor's wrong tempo (too slow or too fast) makes it technically difficult to play a given passage; it is never a complaint based on the fact that the conductor's tempo was intrinsically wrong, in direct contradiction of the information contained in the score.

Various arguments have been presented over the years on behalf of the performer's right to "interpret" the music as he or she best feels or understands it. In these claims all the arguments of the "inadequacy of musical notation," "the impossibility of absolute objectivity in interpretation," and "the impossibility of ruling out the impact of the performer's individual predilections, capacities and limitations," are trotted out as if they were somehow incontestable scientific facts. In truth, they are usually just opinions that are shaped into certain formulations to attain a certain polemical goal. Very often arguments on both sides—on behalf of performers' liberties or on behalf of faithfulness to the composer's score—are carried only so far as to serve that arguer's purpose. The debate rarely takes place on a level playing field. (39)

Some pages later, Schuller suggests that conductors need conviction, but that their ideas should be conveyed by persuasion, not domination. He compares conductors for whom he has played as being especially benign or particularly autocratic and, similarly, he points out that orchestras can develop a collective attitude to which conductors must adapt.

. . . It is clear that a certain degree of *conviction*, based, one would hope, on comprehensive knowledge and talent, is a necessary part of a conductor's equipment. . . . It is necessary in order to impose a particular point of view, a particular "interpretation," upon an orchestra, in itself made up of a collection of distinct individuals and artistic egos. I use the word "conviction" deliberately, because I would like to distinguish between conviction and ego. In fact, I would like to make a further distinction between the human ego and the human egotist. A conductor's convictions and a healthy ego . . . can be and should be conveyed by persuasion, not by domination. The ability to persuade musicians in turn should derive from a respect for the conductor based on his talent, his knowledge, and his behavior towards them, especially in rehearsals.

Such a condition is obviously a far cry from the situation which pertained half a century ago, when conductors' temper tantrums, their power to hire and fire virtually at will, their generally dictatorial attitudes dominated the field. I played as a hornist in those years with most of those tyrants—Toscanini, Stokowski, Reiner, Szell, Leinsdorf, Rodzinski, Dorati, Barzin, Morel—and can testify first hand to the feelings of fear

and insecurity (professional and financial) with which we musicians lived almost every day. I also played with many fine, even great conductors—like Monteaux, Mitropoulos, Goossens, Perlea, Busch, Rudolf, Kempe, Beecham—whose behavior and attitude toward musicians can only be described as benign, gentle, and courteous, who did not have to shout at and terrorize us to get the most wonderful musical results. But what is interesting is that among the conductors of both types there is no clear correlation between their personalities or behavior and the quality of their talent: in both groups there were greater and lesser conductors, some who had inflated, domineering egos and others whom I would describe as having (in Bruno Walter’s phrase) “selfless egos.”

A conductor’s attitude—whether benign or autocratic—is, of course, counterbalanced by an orchestra’s collective attitude, which may likewise run the gamut from docility to hostility and belligerence. Many orchestra musicians regard *all* conductors as their “natural enemy,” and in many famous orchestras the musicians’ egos may be as highly developed and aggressive as the conductor’s. It is a fact that virtually every conductor, even if famous or generally respected or popular, encounters at one time or another an orchestra with which he comes to grief, in which the working relationship with the orchestra, for often inexplicable reasons, simply turns sour. It is one of the great mysteries of the conducting profession—as well as one of its realities—that a conductor may be deeply loved by one orchestra and despised by another. (50-51)

Finally, Schuller describes the “double standard” in orchestral performance that exists for conductors versus players, and takes issue with the expectation that players must follow the whims of conductors, however far they may wander from the composer’s text.

. . . It is rarely brought out that there is a kind of injustice in a situation which allows conductors virtually any kind of liberty of interpretation, while orchestral musicians are expected to perform with absolute precision and accuracy, allowing for no deviations from the text—except for those imposed on them by the conductor. The irony here is that musicians are expected to perform “perfectly” even within the relatively (or totally) distorted interpretations in which so many conductors indulge. More than that, musicians are not only expected to be technically precise and accurate in their performing, but play with great expression, warmth, interpretive insight, particularly, of course, in solo passages, whilst being locked into a rendition—too fast, too slow, too loud, too soft, too something—which does not correspond to the score to begin with. It is amazing to me that this double standard—one for conductors and singers, by the way, another for orchestral musicians—is an accepted norm, is maintained throughout the musical world, tacitly

justified, and rarely questioned—sad to say, even by musicians themselves.

I can testify to the virulence and widespread acceptance of this double standard in orchestral performance most personally. For, in my earlier career of over twenty years as a horn player in a number of major American orchestras, in most instances as principal horn, I was expected to perform flawlessly, both technically and expressively, often enough within conductors' interpretations that were severely at odds with the information in the respective scores. Any number of musicians of the 1930s through the 1960s were in no position to protest these wayward interpretations in which we were so often imprisoned, because one could get fired by the conductor during a rehearsal, at the end of a concert, not at the end of a season with recourse to appeals, defense by orchestra committees, arbitration, and so on. It was simply understood—and is still largely accepted to this day—that a musician was (is) to perform more or less flawlessly in respect to rhythm, tempo, attack (and release) of notes, dynamics, ensemble blending as ordained by the conductor, whether his interpretation corresponded to the information in the score or not. In addition, as already mentioned, we were (are) expected to play with great feeling, with interpretive flexibility—not beyond the limits, set by the conductor, of course—and to contribute somehow meaningfully to *his* interpretation. And how we sweated and worried, tortured ourselves to achieve these often artistically dubious results. I now marvel at the skill and chameleon-like adaptability with which the best musicians—then and now—walk this precarious musical tightrope.

If a rendition deviating from the text is allowable for conductors, why is it not also permissible for orchestral musicians? Why can't a musician play in wrong tempos, insert *rubatos*, ignore dynamics, make crescendos too early, arbitrarily accelerate the tempo during crescendos, when conductors seem to assert such privileges unquestioningly, automatically? Not that musicians are entirely free of such musical misconduct. Most are similarly inclined to take unwanted liberties with the music when left to their own devices (as in chamber music). But nonetheless a different, much tougher standard pertains for them when they are in an orchestral situation, where they are forced to adhere precisely to the conductor's interpretations and whims, no matter how aberrant. (54-55)

The Compleat Conductor

Gunther Schuller

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