

21st CENTURY LEADERSHIP IN
THE CONDUCTOR – MUSICIAN RELATIONSHIP

Tamara Dworetz

Boston University
College of Fine Arts
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Recently, orchestras have developed increased consciousness for their racial makeup and social responsibility to the communities they serve. The San Francisco Symphony recently announced their “Emerging Black Composers Project,” the first “La Maestra Competition” for female conductors was held in Paris, and the new “The Composers Diversity Project” exposed repertoire choices of major and regional symphony orchestras.^{1 2 3} The conversation of orchestra auditions and whether or not they should be “blind,” has also risen again.⁴ Despite outward social progress initiatives and greater outspokenness by many musicians, the inner workings of orchestras are not advancing as quickly. Orchestras have a long history and culture of unhealthy or toxic behaviors, which have been tolerated especially when the behavior is from a conductor. For example, Italian maestro Arturo Toscanini was infamous for derogatory comments such as, “God tells me how the music should sound, but you stand in the way,” and he was said to domineer the musicians into performing well.⁵ But unacceptable behavior has continued to occur even to present day, perhaps just less obviously. Recently, maestros have been outed for years of sexual harassment and abuse, i.e., James Levine, Charles Dutoit, Placido Domingo and Daniel

¹ SarahJayn Kemp, “SFCM and SF Symphony Announce Emerging Black Composers Project,” *The Bay Bridged*, September 2, 2020, <http://thebaybridged.com/2020/09/02/sfcm-and-sf-symphony-announce-emerging-black-composers-project/>.

² “Homepage,” La Maestra Paris, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://lamaestra-paris.com>.

³ “Data Analysis of Orchestral Seasons,” The Composer Diversity Project, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.composerdiversity.com/orchestra-seasons>.

⁴ Zachary Woolfe and Joshua Barone, “Musicians on How to Bring Racial Equity to Auditions,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/10/arts/music/diversity-orchestra-auditions.html>.

⁵ “Discover Conducting,” British Broadcasting Company, accessed December 10, 2020, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/maestro/discover/>.

Gatti. In the case of James Levine, former Music Director of the Metropolitan Opera and Boston Symphony, many seem to think his lude conduct (no pun intended) was generally “known” by orchestra musicians, or at least, it was not a big surprise.

‘People always knew about it’ is a sentence one hears repeatedly in music circles concerning James Levine. ‘Everybody in the classical music business at least since the 1980s has talked about Levine as a sex abuser,’ Greg Sandow, a faculty member at New York's Juilliard School of Music, told the Associated Press in December. ‘The investigation should have been done decades ago.’⁶

The general perception in the orchestra world was that these conductors were untouchable in their power, that their great musicianship was more important than or some kind of excuse forgiving their problematic exploits. Even people outside orchestral circles have some perception of the power of the conductor. A layman might envision a “maestro” as an old, intimidating man with a strong accent, and Yaakov Atik, a leadership expert who has specifically researched the conductor-musician relationship, points out that “...the inherent tension in the superior-subordinate relationship (in this case between conductor and orchestral player) appears to be more pronounced than in other management settings.”⁷ Stating the obvious, this tension in the conductor-musician relationship exists because it has yet to be resolved.

For orchestras, the highest standard seems to simply be a lack of discrimination and sexual harassment. However, there is a spectrum from a toxic to thriving environment, and the role of the conductor and their on-and-off-the-podium relationship with musicians can still be unhealthy with the absence of systemic racism and sexual-harassment. In terms of orchestras’

⁶ Rick Fuller, “From Divine to Downfall: James Levine at 75,” *Deutsche Welle*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/from-divine-to-downfall-james-levine-at-75/a-44351458>.

⁷ Yaakov Atik, “The Conductor and the Orchestra: Interactive Aspects of the Leadership Process,” *Leadership & Organizational Development* 15, no. 1 (1994): 22.

morale and well-being as organizations, orchestral institutions have tended to react with what not to do, rather than envisioning what an ideal positive environment could look like between the conductor and the musicians. A thorough and clear visualization of healthy conductor leadership in the 21st century is needed.

With interviews from esteemed conductors and musicians in the United States as well as research from leadership experts outside the classical music field, a closer look at conductor-musician interactions is essential to the cultivation of a more flourishing partnership. As in any relationship, each character comes with their own story and baggage from their individual histories. Before a discussion of a 21st century conducting leadership ideal, it is first necessary to investigate barriers that might impede each character's contributions to an overall positive relationship.

Musician Barriers

Many studies have been conducted about the level of musician dissatisfaction in an orchestral career. One notable study from 1996 entitled "Life and Work in Symphony Orchestras" found that while musicians rank high for internal motivation, they rank low for general satisfaction.⁸ Barriers to musicians' sense of happiness in their position stem from both the workplace itself and from before they win their first orchestral job.

The precision and perfectionism requisite to mastering an instrument is extraordinary. Some musicians begin training as early as age three and are given "highly skilled tasks requiring the combination of extreme physical dexterity with highly sophisticated mental activities."⁹ The

⁸ Jutta Allmendinger, Richard J. Hackman, and Erin V. Lehman, "Life and Work in Symphony Orchestras," *The Musical Quarterly* 80 no. 2 (Summer 1996): 201, Oxford University Press.

⁹ Atik, "The Conductor and the Orchestra: Interactive Aspects of the Leadership Process," 22.

music gets progressively more difficult as the student advances, and “it takes years to fully master an instrument,” requiring “...putting [oneself] up for incredible scrutiny constantly.”¹⁰ This perfectionism is in part due to the instrumental education culture in which anything shy of absolute technical perfection is flawed.¹¹

When a musician wins their first job, their learned perfectionism can result in performance anxiety, as well as self-doubt and dualistic thinking. Musicians may “...view whatever they produce on their instruments as flawed in comparison with the ideal they have set for themselves, and” in few professions do people repeatedly confront their own imperfections and flaws.¹² This defeatist mentality and “... constant awareness of their personal limitations can lead to chronic internal conflict between the diminished self-esteem and musicians’ natural desires to think well of themselves.”¹³ Furthermore, some musicians, to protect themselves from their own self-doubt and short-comings, self-preserve by “erect[ing] ... a façade that protects them from engaging fully as a musician.”¹⁴

In addition to a musician’s internal struggle with the reality of their own imperfection, outside influences hinder a musician’s sense of happiness in an orchestral position. A pecking order of preferred occupations is a common mentality. “The talented [young] musician is often primed for a career as a soloist” or as a chamber musician.¹⁵ At the university or conservatory level, instrumental faculty come from various chamber, solo and orchestral backgrounds, and

¹⁰ Andrew Parker, Principal Oboe in Quad City Symphony Orchestra & Professor of Oboe at the University of Texas at Austin, in interview with the author, October 23, 2020.

¹¹ Seymour and Robert Levine, “Why They’re Not Smiling: Stress and Discontent in the Orchestra Workplace,” *Harmony: Forum of the Symphony Orchestra Institute*, no. 2 (April 1996): 16.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bramwell Tovey, Artistic Advisor of the Rhode Island Philharmonic & former Music Director of the Vancouver Symphony, in interview with the author, November 4, 2020.

¹⁵ Atik, “The Conductor and the Orchestra: Interactive Aspects of the Leadership Process,” 22.

often the former two out-balance the later. For example, at Peabody Conservatory only two of the six violin professors have extensive orchestral backgrounds.¹⁶ At the University of Michigan, only one of the four violin professors has a significant orchestral background.¹⁷ Professors with more chamber and solo experience may re-enforce to their students that the top goal is to earn those positions through focusing on solos and chamber repertoire rather than orchestral excerpts and techniques. If a student does not achieve a chamber music or solo career but instead wins an orchestral audition (especially for a section position), there may be a sense of let-down.

Regardless of a musician's pre-conceived frame of mind about performing in a symphony orchestra, instrumental education tends to be extremely self-focused; it can be a difficult attitude-adjustment once a musician wins a position. Training to be a professional classical musician requires hours and hours of individual practice. When their first orchestral position requires serving the audience, community and larger symphonic team, a musician's sense of self-importance may diminish. Marin Alsop, former Music Director of the Baltimore Symphony and current Chief Conductor of the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, referred to orchestral musicians as "...rank[ing] near the bottom in terms of dissatisfaction in their workplace because they have been groomed from a young age to be the center ..." and musicians with this educational self-centeredness, "... have to let go and sublimate their ego to the greater good."¹⁸

Once they win an orchestral position, musicians' experiences in the workplace can generate further barriers. Negative interactions with conductors are not uncommon and can be emotionally draining. When a musician performs expressively, a high degree of vulnerability is

¹⁶ Peabody Conservatory, "Faculty," Accessed November 25, 2020, <https://peabody.jhu.edu/faculty/>.

¹⁷ The University of Michigan, "Strings Department," Accessed December 13, 2020, <https://smt.d.umich.edu/departments/strings/>.

¹⁸ Marin Alsop, "Conversations in Creative Conducting," *The George Washington University School of Business* Youtube video, Posted August, 2013, <https://youtu.be/FNMXBkHFqNA>.

essential, as the instrument is “...an extension of the soul.”¹⁹ Conductors can publicly shame vulnerable musicians, whether intentionally or not, and this can damage that musician’s sense of confidence and expressivity. When conductors say “ ‘...no! it must be this way,’ that doesn’t allow for the lowering of those vulnerabilities...[T]he reason the bitter viola player is like that is because they have been burned multiple times being vulnerable.”²⁰ A lack of confidence in one’s own skill and negative feedback from an impatient, inflexible conductor is a significant barrier to enjoying a career in an orchestral setting.

Another reality that can be denigrating, especially for string-section musicians, is their lack of autonomy because of the institutional hierarchy of symphony orchestras. In an orchestra, the hierarchy is: conductor, concertmaster, principal players, associate and assistant principals, and finally section musicians. Conductors and musicians in leadership roles tell section musicians how to perform, which may be necessary for musical and interpretive cohesion, but can take a toll on musicians’ psyche and morale. These musicians may have to suppress their own expressive preferences and are not in a position to speak up, so this can lead to additional negative feelings.²¹ Lucia Lin, violinist in the Boston Symphony, explains, “Whenever there is a hierarchy, you’re going to have some jealousy, feeling like ‘I’m in this place and I’m not allowed to speak to anyone in that title.’”²² Furthermore, raising a question to the conductor, or pointing out something the conductor is missing, even with good intentions, is taboo.²³ One violist, who was principal of a large regional orchestra, went so far to say that musicians are “... in essence, rats in a maze, at the whim of the god with the baton.”²⁴ An additional burden is that string

¹⁹ Tovey, Interview.

²⁰ Paul Popiel, Director of Bands at Kansas University, in interview with the author, October 16, 2020.

²¹ Atik, “The Conductor and the Orchestra: Interactive Aspects of the Leadership Process,” 22.

²² Lucia Lin, violinist in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, in interview with the author, November 5, 2020.

²³ Seymour and Robert Levine, “Why They’re Not Smiling: Stress and Discontent in the Orchestra Workplace,” 19.

²⁴ Levine, “Why They’re Not Smiling: Stress and Discontent in the Orchestra Workplace” 20.

section musicians perform the exact same part as the fifteen or so other musicians, i.e. the second violin section. “The more people on your part with you, the harder it is to feel like your contribution is important, which is really the crux ... There’s a pretty inherent problem... if you’re not the first one, you’re just one of the other ones.”²⁵ For string section players especially, the immediate stresses of these burdens and barriers and long-term costs in terms of motivation can be significant.²⁶

Orchestral musicians are subject to feeling a high lack of control, relative to their position in the orchestra. This can result in learned helplessness, avoidance and feelings of infantilization.²⁷ Musicians who feel especially powerless may use unions and collective bargaining to gain some semblance of control, however this causes further barriers. As Marin Alsop explains, it can turn into an entrenched, *us versus them* and victim mentality which is pervasive in the orchestral industry.²⁸ In some instances, players are so desperate for some sliver of control that they do not even want to move from their chair if given the opportunity for a better one.²⁹ Furthermore, musicians who are extremely discontented in an orchestral career may feel stuck and unable to switch careers because “the possibility of losing the one skill that has structured their lives and given them much of their identity” is too daunting or depressing.³⁰ Conductors and orchestral organizations having greater empathy for what musicians may be going through would be a significant first step towards a future of increased contentedness in the orchestral workplace.

²⁵ Popiel, interview.

²⁶ Atik, “The Conductor and the Orchestra Interactive Aspects of the Leadership Process,” 22.

²⁷ Levine, “Why They’re Not Smiling: Stress and Discontent in the Orchestra Workplace” 21-22.

²⁸ Marin Alsop, former Music Director of the Baltimore Symphony, Chief Conductor of the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, in interview with the author, November 6, 2020.

²⁹ Michael Palmer, Former Assistant Conductor for the Atlanta Symphony and Robert Shaw, in interview with the author, October 31, 2020.

³⁰ Levine, “Why They’re Not Smiling: Stress and Discontent in the Orchestra Workplace” 16.

Conductor Barriers

There is an absence of research in management and leadership literature in the area of conductors, possibly because conducting is seen as so strongly directive that it would be hard to apply to other fields.³¹ However, based on informal interviews, an educated hypothesis can be made that many of the same barriers musicians deal with also hinder conductors.

Learning to be an effective conductor is also a demanding and prolonged process, and takes place in the same perfectionistic culture in which instrumentalists are trained. In fact, most conductors are originally instrumentalists or vocalists themselves. Much of conductor training is spent learning the basics of “conductor survival”: how to study complex scores, music history and theory, rehearsal techniques, posture and clarity of gesture and expression.

In terms of rehearsal technique, young conductors must first rid their speech and body language of general unintentional bad habits and nervous quirks, which unless corrected can be incredibly distracting to musicians: “Unintentional inadvertent blocks ...with communication, habits of speech, body language and attention ... looking someone in the eye or not, interrupting someone, giving someone a chance to explain themselves or hurrying them along...all the permutations you can think of.”³² As an example, one has to learn to be extremely concise and trusting of musicians’ intelligence because over-explaining can quickly irritate musicians.

Some conductors I like very well have also undone their best efforts by not communicating well and over-explaining. There is a quick threshold that appears –when you talk a lot, it’s like walking further and further out on a tree branch. Inevitably, the branch gets thinner...It means you’re taking a chance every time you try to explain something further, after half of the people already know why you’ve stopped, or what you’re trying to get. Some chunk of those who are left “got it” in your first two words. At this point, a diminishing proportion of people is actually edified. The rest of them are deciding whether they really believe

³¹ Atik, “The Conductor and the Orchestra Interactive Aspects of the Leadership Process,” 22.

³² Bharat Chandra, Principal Clarinet in the Sarasota Orchestra & Cabrillo Festival Orchestra, in interview with the author, October 17, 2020.

you're going to use the time well (to do their idea of the best thing for what's left)... Economy of communication – I think that's a major thing.³³

A major difficulty for young conductors is that their podium time is often minimal, at least in comparison to their hours studying. As Sir Simon Rattle, conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra explains, you can practice and study off-the-podium as much as you want, but, “Without doing it, you don't know how to do it.”³⁴ This means that true hours of practice only happen publicly, in front of the musicians, and this is an exposed and vulnerable place to be for someone learning a new craft, particularly when they are also supposed to be in charge. Protective mechanisms like inflated ego and dualistic-thinking often result from this difficult position. “Being right” can help conductors feel more secure in their vulnerable state as can dualistic or “black-and-white” thinking, i.e. a conductor might decide there is only one absolute correct way to interpret a piece of music, and all other interpretations are less than. When one is stressed and vulnerable, it can seem like a threat to their very existence.³⁵

Conducting teachers often pass down how they were taught and are dealing with a lack of rehearsal time or their own controlling natures. They can pressurize the situation further, fostering greater barriers for their students. Bharat Chandra is the principal clarinetist of both the Sarasota Orchestra and the Cabrillo Festival Orchestra and for years has acutely observed conductor training masterclasses from the perspective of a musician in the participating orchestra. Bharat has several insights from his experiences. The conducting teacher might say to the student, “ ‘you need to be commanding and concise, and don't look at them in the eyes when they're paying a solo.’ You can watch the rulebook go by... when you can sense that stuff, as a

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Simon Rattle, “The Making of a Maestro,” BBC Music Documentary, 58:09, Posted April 2015.
<https://subsaga.com/bbc/documentaries/music/2015/simon-rattle-the-making-of-a-maestro.html>.

³⁵ Parker, interview.

member of the orchestra, it's already getting in the way.”³⁶ In addition, conducting teachers often impart to the students the expectation that conductors have to be above the level of everyone else in the orchestra and while this is true in terms of the knowledge of the score, it does not always encourage a healthy mindset. Some teachers have even been known to communicate that every mistake in the orchestra is the conductor's fault. While this kind of comment is helpful for a young conductor who is oblivious or does not accept responsibility for their mistakes, it is certainly not a healthy blanket statement for all students. The controlling nature of some conducting teachers leads them to change students' interpretations to mirror their own, and there seems to be a lack of opportunity for conducting students to fail, denying them an important part of the learning process.³⁷ With this kind of pressurized and exposed learning experience, it would be miraculous if a young conductor graduated without any barriers of emotional protection.

When conductors are more comfortable with themselves as human beings and musicians, they may come into their own.³⁸ However, additional barriers can arise in a mature conductor's career. Conductors may develop hubris, lack of empathy and/or lose touch with the musicians in the orchestra. Adam Grant, a leadership expert, points to research showing that “...as people gain power, they feel large and in charge: less constrained and freer to express their natural tendencies... they pay less attention to how they're perceived by those below and next to them; they feel entitled to pursue self-serving goals and claim as much value as they can.”³⁹

³⁶ Chandra, interview.

³⁷ Zeke Fetrow, doctoral candidate at the Eastman Conservatory of Music, in discussion with the author, November 27, 2020.

³⁸ Chandra, interview.

³⁹ Adam Grant, *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, (Penguin Books: 2014), 33.

Juan Ramirez, a violinist in the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra for over 45 years, spoke of a conductor who embodied this kind of grandiose posturing. This conductor would lead rehearsals without a score, even though Juan claims the conductor did not have a photographic memory. Juan proclaimed, “what does that do for the orchestra!” This same conductor had such a dualistic and entitled mindset, he would say to the orchestra: ““If I tell you you’re sharp, you’ll be flat. If I tell you you’re flat, you’ll be sharp.””⁴⁰ A former principal brass player in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, spoke of how her conductor, James Levine, was all about controlling the musicians and consistently made musical suggestions to her in front of the entire orchestra. After “10 years of constant suggestions” this created a profound barrier to her confidence and sense of musicianship, causing her to “second-guess her innate talent and ability.”⁴¹

What Grant refers to as “takers,” conductors who have been in power for a long time might “... tend to see themselves as superior to and separate from others. Furthermore, if they depend too much on others, [they] believe, they’ll be vulnerable to being outdone.”⁴² The dualistic thinking of *right vs. wrong* and *me vs. them* can even result in arguments during rehearsals. “You hear stories all the time of crazy egos where people battle out musically on the stage, and that’s a sad disservice to what we do...”⁴³ At times, it is not that severe, but as Lin describes, “It’s like doctors who haven’t received training for bedside manner” and this can take a major toll on morale over time.⁴⁴ “As glamorous as the conducting vocation may appear to the outsider,” from early training through long careers, the reality of being a conductor is “...far

⁴⁰ Juan Ramirez, Atlanta Symphony violinist and youth orchestra conductor, in interview with the author, October, 13, 2020.

⁴¹ Anonymous, interview.

⁴² Grant, *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, 73.

⁴³ Chandra, interview.

⁴⁴ Lin, interview.

more fragile and mundane when seen from within.”⁴⁵ It is unrealistic that conductors will have zero protective mechanisms under the kind of pressure they are in from the start; without self-awareness, their insecurities can be thrust outwards at musicians without regard.

An Ideal for 21st Century Conductor Leadership

In writings from leadership experts outside the field of classical music as well as interviews with perceptive professional musicians and conductors, certain topics for modern leadership continued to arise. Although these topics or components are all interwoven, for the purpose of clarity, they have been separated and ordered below. The 21st century conductor possesses the following inner capacities and aptitudes for leadership: 1) high levels of empathy, 2) the ability to create a climate of trust, 3) the wherewithal to communicate about vision and teamwork, 4) the vulnerability and timing to express praise and gratitude, 5) a commitment to relationship-building, and 6) a deep, genuine humanity.

1) High Levels of Empathy

Leadership expert Daniel Goleman describes empathy as a function of social awareness: it is a skill at sensing other people’s emotions, understanding their perspective and taking an active interest in their concerns.⁴⁶ As previously discussed, conductors are often very self-focused because of the extraordinary difficulty of their job and their constant exposure on the podium. There might be little interest or capacity to have empathy and learn what others might be feeling or experiencing. Henry Mintzberg, Professor of Management Studies at The University of McGill wrote a piece on conductor leadership and believes that in order to lead

⁴⁵ Atik, “The Conductor and the Orchestra Interactive Aspects of the Leadership Process,” 25.

⁴⁶ Daniel Goleman, “Leadership That Gets Results,” *Harvard Business Review* (March-April 2000): 80.

fully, a conductor must know or at least have some interest in who they are leading. “Managing without an intimate understanding of what is being managed is an invitation to disharmony.”⁴⁷ Marin Alsop describes that “...in dealing with the musicians, it’s important to understand where they’re coming from.”⁴⁸ A conductor’s simple awareness of the previously-discussed barriers for musicians can go a long way.

Considering both the difficulty of performing a musical instrument and the vulnerability essential to artistry can help the conductor interact with musicians in a compassionate human way. Paul Popiel, Director of Bands at the University Kansas, explains how, “Regardless of the age, whether it’s a 5th grade trombone player or Joe Alessi, when you pick up an instrument and play for someone, you’re in a position of vulnerability.”⁴⁹

When you’re a kid you’re like...I don’t want my band director to know I don’t understand what he’s saying...I don’t know 3rd position. We try to hide what we don’t know. So do you, and so do I when we’re in a setting where we’re supposed to know, or people think we’re supposed to know. We’re vulnerable, and we hide that, and we don’t get the best out of each other that way. We have to allow and encourage the student to say, “I don’t know what you mean.” We have to prevent these things from getting between us, the players, and the music. We have to remember as a leader, conductor or teacher... that the players at any level are coming from a position of vulnerability.⁵⁰

Mintzberg coined the term “covert leadership,” which is relevant when discussing inner feelings of empathy.⁵¹ An example of covert leadership is demonstrated by Bramwell Tovey, former music director of the Vancouver Symphony, and current Principal Conductor of the BBC Concert Orchestra. In empathizing with the high level of stress musicians endure – mentally,

⁴⁷ Henry Mintzberg, “Covert Leadership: Notes on Managing Professionals,” *The Harvard Business Review* (November – December 1998): 11, <https://hbr.org/1998/11/covert-leadership-notes-on-managing-professionals>.

⁴⁸ Alsop, interview.

⁴⁹ Popiel, interview.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Mintzberg, “Covert Leadership: Notes on Managing Professionals,” 1.

emotionally and even physically -- Bramwell “tries to construct those more general aspects of being an orchestral musician and tries to make those as comfortable a part of the journey as possible...”⁵² This kind of leadership happens in Bramwell’s inner-world before he even steps on the podium. Another type of “covert leadership” is a guest conductor who shows initiative in learning about the orchestra before they begin rehearsals together. This guest conductor might “...come and listen to a concert the week they’re conducting,” says Lucia Lin.⁵³ This can give the conductor a better sense of the hall’s acoustics as well as the orchestra’s style of playing and unique qualities; “to have that kind of interest to hear what the orchestra sounds like, that shows investment and is appreciated.”⁵⁴

Empathetic conductors remember that the collective knowledge and experience of the orchestra probably far surpasses theirs, and this modesty can help in more difficult situations. This empathy can especially help in dealing with musician mistakes or unpreparedness, which can be especially delicate circumstances because of the musician’s vulnerability. Bharat Chandra described how Marin Alsop’s acts of empathy (one of which will be detailed in a later section of this paper) impacted him enormously: “The way she handled the best of what I did and the worst of what I did went a long way in influencing how I approached everything else.”⁵⁵

Another way to handle mistakes empathetically is off-the-podium. Although the subject of off-the-podium communication will be explored more thoroughly later in this paper, empathetic conductors remember how it feels to be shamed (conductors often have experience with this themselves from training) and take time to avoid creating a similar scenario. Paul Popiel tries “...really hard if it’s something that’s uncomfortable or exposes a vulnerability, to

⁵² Tovey, interview.

⁵³ Lin, interview.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Chandra, interview.

have that moment in private... then that player has a chance to nuke the problem before we get to it in front of the world.”⁵⁶

An empathetic conductor also realizes that a section string player performing in unison with about fifteen other people might not feel as valued as a principal player who has more autonomy. An empathetic conductor memorizes their music so they can look at the back of the section. This lets the musicians in the back know the conductor is aware of them and allows for “enjoying the passage together.”⁵⁷ Sometimes the musicians in the back won’t immediately realize the conductor’s eye contact, but if the conductor keeps looking, the musician eventually will look up, and often the musician is delighted.⁵⁸ Eye contact and sharing musical moments can go a long way in terms of musicians feeling seen and valued.

An empathetic conductor might also use humor as a way to help relieve general barriers and nervousness. As Bramwell explains, “By [using humor] you can almost up the playing field to a certain extent” and “...when you make that kind of working atmosphere it can be very supportive space.”⁵⁹ Results of conductor empathy can be a higher degree of good-will and morale with the orchestra and gives the impression that the conductor might be open to more than a one-sided approach.

2) The Ability to Create a Climate of Trust

Empathy is a pre-requisite for creating a positive and safe environment. A climate of trust means musicians can be vulnerable, take risks and not be shamed for mistakes or interpretations different than the conductor’s. Adam Grant describes this climate of psychological safety in

⁵⁶ Popiel, interview.

⁵⁷ Palmer, interview.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Tovey, interview.

which “everybody feels that they can contribute, that it’s okay to fall on your face many, many times,” and there is a general, “belief that you can take a risk without being penalized or punished.”⁶⁰

Creating a climate of trust is incredibly difficult. It takes time and consistent nurturing to help musicians transcend their insecurities and take down their inner walls.⁶¹ Conductors interested in creating a climate of psychological safety should avoid feeling a need to “drive the results,” which can happen because of pressure due to the lack of rehearsal time.⁶² It is easy for conductors to feel the sole responsibility of making the music better, rather than empowering and guiding the musicians. Instead of getting into the details and dictating how musicians should play in specific ways, conductors can trust the musicians by providing musical context for all feedback. For example, a conductor saying, “could it be more like this and not this in order to allow the flute to melody to be heard”, is quite different than saying, “no, not like that, like this!” The former comment takes a few more seconds but keeps the atmosphere positive, humane, and forward-moving.⁶³ Additionally, conductor comments with musical reasoning are less personal and more about the team, thereby keeping the atmosphere bouyant. “It’s a matter of always using that platform as a means to helping create an atmosphere where giving information [is]... around concepts, and people elevate themselves.”⁶⁴ The pay-off is that musicians are “...not worried about being shamed because [they] played it the A way rather than the B way”; instead, they consequently “play much better...[and] get their best things to happen.”⁶⁵ In this manner,

⁶⁰ Grant, *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, 85.

⁶¹ Popiel, interview.

⁶² Simon Sinek, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action,” *Ted* video, 18:35, Posted May 2010, <https://youtu.be/qp0HIF3SfI4>.

⁶³ Popiel, interview.

⁶⁴ Martins, interview.

⁶⁵ Popiel, interview.

conductors can be demanding and get what they want musically, but it won't feel personal to the musicians.⁶⁶

Playing straight through a piece of music at the beginning of the first rehearsal is another way to create a trusting environment. Rather than using the first rehearsal to show the musicians how the conductor wants it to go, playing through a piece without stopping helps establish a two-way communication. Playing a piece in full allows the musicians to get used to the conductor and the conductor to get used to the musicians. Bramwell explains, "A lot of really professional orchestras are self-cleaning orchestras [and] the worst thing you can do is stop when something is wrong. This is a chance to get to know each other. They get a sense for what you're looking for in the piece by the way you're conducting it."⁶⁷ Playing through the piece lets the musicians know that the conductor trusts the musicians' intelligence to fix mistakes. It also lets them know off-the-bat that the conductor is really listening to them.

In the middle of a rehearsal cycle, preserving a climate of trust might mean strategically ignoring mistakes and lackluster playing in order to keep a positive morale. For example, Andrew Parker, an oboist in the Quad City Symphony, got frustrated when his conductor ignored consistently below-par playing of a few musicians but would push the more excellent musicians towards even greater refinement. The conductor explained to Andrew how giving negative feedback to the select lower-level musicians wouldn't help the environment or climate of the rehearsal, and it was not worth ruining the positive morale and forward-moving direction of the orchestra.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Parker, interview.

⁶⁷ Tovey, interview.

⁶⁸ Parker, interview.

For Marin Alsop, as well, "...a lot of my decisions are driven by how it will affect the morale..." which is inextricably connected to empathy.⁶⁹ One specific situation in which Marin Alsop showed Bharat Chandra empathy was at The Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music (Cabrillo, for short) which is notorious for the incredible amount of difficult music the orchestra needs to prepare in a short time. Bharat overlooked a piece that he thought was easy, but his part turned out to be extremely difficult and exposed. Marin's response to what he himself called "bombing the part" was not to shame him in front of the orchestra. Rather, she spoke more generally: "well, we'll make sure to have a look at that." Rather than calling Bharat out individually, nodding her head in disapproval or some other condescending communication, she handled the situation with care and grace which maintained the climate of trust for the entire orchestra.⁷⁰

Musicians' knowing that they won't be shamed for making mistakes creates an atmosphere that is more conducive to human and musical relationships and communication. Ultimately, it is possible to create this atmosphere of psychological safety where vulnerability, musical communication and listening can happen at their best. "When the costumes are off, that's when you'll really learn to work for that person and vice versa..." and people can perform at their absolute best.⁷¹ Bharat sums up how rare and special this skill of creating a climate of trust is:

The conductor has to work within that framework to manage the situation and not damage anyone. Within orchestras, you might be sure one person is wrong with their pitch or their concept of what's important, and you might so badly want to see them called out, but that person has to also be able to hold their head up high and be able to be their best for the collective. A conductor intuitively being able to understand those boundaries, and to reach in, under the hood so to speak, and be

⁶⁹ Alsop, interview.

⁷⁰ Chandra, interview.

⁷¹ Ibid.

able to be a mechanic ... not just for the parts and the machine, but for the spirit of the teamwork - for what is needed. God! That is an incredible and rare talent to have.⁷²

3) Communicating a Vision & The Importance of Teamwork

Leadership expert Daniel Goleman cites, “the *clarity* people have about mission and values” and “the level of *commitment* to a common purpose,” as two of six factors that influence an organization’s working environment; however, orchestras often skip this step, and unlike businesses, orchestras often do not display a vision or mission statement on the homepage of their websites; sometimes it is hard to find at all, for instance with the Philadelphia Orchestra (philorch.org) and the New York Philharmonic (nyphil.org).⁷³ A vision statement can be a reminder to musicians about their service for others. For example, the Sarasota Orchestra’s mission statement is: “to engage, educate, and enrich our community through high-quality, live musical experiences.”⁷⁴ The focus on audience and community could potentially remind musicians of their greater purpose to serve an audience and help diminish barriers formed from their self-focused striving for perfection.

Conductors can support the organization’s mission statement or uphold their personal vision. A conductor who actively communicates their vision or the organization’s collective vision motivates people by making clear how their work fits into the larger vision for the organization. In this case, musicians would understand “what they do matters and why” and that their roles are crucial to achieving the group’s goals.⁷⁵ Paul Popiel often reminds musicians of

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “The Philadelphia Orchestra,” accessed December 13, 2020, www.philorch.org.

⁷⁴ Sarasota Orchestra, “About Us,” (2019), Accessed November 2020, <https://www.sarasotaorchestra.org/>.

⁷⁵ Goleman, “Leadership that Gets Results,” 83, 89.

the greater purpose of their music. He tries "... to translate [the music] into what we want the audience to feel here. It is joy, anxiety or elation..." In the rehearsal process, he tries to "help them remember that the point of this is to inspire some kind of feeling" for the audience.⁷⁶ When musicians are reminded of the greater purpose of their work, this helps break down self-centered barriers and can encourage musicians to find value that helps over-shadow their perfectionism.

It is important to note that depending on the orchestral organization, the Music Director may only be in residence sporadically, and this is tied directly to how strongly and often the conductor can communicate a vision to the orchestra. For instance, Marin was only in residence with the Baltimore Symphony about 12 weeks a year. Lucia Lin describes how having a guest conductor versus a resident conductor can greatly change the feeling of spirit de corps with the community: "If the conductor lives in the town, he/she has made more of an investment in the community. This can speak volumes for the orchestra's morale."⁷⁷

Teamwork goes hand-in-hand with a vision. A conductor can remind the musicians about being stronger as a collection or team than as individuals. In order for a conductor to be open to communicating about teamwork, he or she must "...reject the notion that interdependence is weak" and "...see interdependence as a source of strength, a way to harness the skills of multiple people for the greater good."⁷⁸ Andrew Parker recounts how his conductor Mark Russell Smith inspires teamwork: "He'll say things like: 'We're in this together. We're bringing art to an audience. It's a powerful special, sacred thing we're doing.' It feels empowering rather than chastising, and ... brings everybody back to the reasons we're doing it."⁷⁹ Bharat explains that one of his main motivations for performing well is the audience and the teamwork involved. His

⁷⁶ Popiel, interview.

⁷⁷ Lin, interview.

⁷⁸ Grant, *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, 73.

⁷⁹ Parker, interview.

technical mastery serves the greater purpose of the precious audience relationship. “You don’t want to violate that faith [which the audience has in the musicians] in any way... This is actually about living up to the potential if you can as an ensemble and team member... A conductor that can model and encourage this notion in the most sincere and defenseless way is, I think, the person on the fastest path and the fewest obstacles in that environment.”⁸⁰ Having a vision for musical excellence related to the community or audience helps musicians remember their purpose is in serving, and this can help an orchestra work together and be more united in their spirit.

4) The Vulnerability and Timing to Express Praise and Gratitude

A recurrent theme in interviews within this study was how a conductor’s expression of praise and gratitude to the musicians can be a powerful source of morale and affirmation. Praise, not dissimilar to humor, can help an orchestra relax their barriers. Yaakov interviewed a musician who explained: “... [O]rchestras need a lot of praise. That actually is one of the ways that conductors can really open up this orchestra....People are very dependent on it. It can change a concert if somebody says really positive things before and people get into such a good mood and really want to play.”⁸¹ Paul notes that conductors often skip over the step of showing gratitude to the orchestra: “We don’t talk about it very often; we don’t talk about the joy of making music together.” Yet he is “unabashedly open” about sharing with them his gratitude for their work together. Furthermore, Paul wonders about the bitter sixty-year-old second fiddle

⁸⁰ Chandra, interview.

⁸¹ Atik, “The Conductor and the Orchestra Interactive Aspects of the Leadership Process,” 26.

player: “if that person’s career was regularly filled with experiences of gratitude and joy if that would have helped.”⁸²

Praise by a conductor needs to be genuine and warranted in order to be taken in by musicians. Michael Palmer, Artistic Director of the Bellingham Festival of Music and former Assistant Conductor for the Atlanta Symphony and describes, it is essential to be “...genuine and [to] not communicat[e] from a role. It can’t be fawning as if you want something back from them” and “... don’t belabor it by pouring gallons of maple syrup.”⁸³ Marin acknowledges that not giving praise often enough is one of her deficiencies, but on the other hand, when she does give it out, the musicians know she means it. “Pointing out things that people do well and have done well is very meaningful.... musicians know [when conductors are] blowing smoke. When I say they’re doing great, they know I really mean it ... because I don’t say it every day and don’t say it without reason.”⁸⁴

5) A Commitment to Relationship-building

Great leadership means getting to know who one leads at an individual level, as a good manager in any occupation would. Simon Sinek describes the actions of good managers: “Throughout the day, managers will walk past me and ask me how am I doing, is there anything I need to do my job better.”⁸⁵ Furthermore, Yaakov claims that an element of charismatic and transformational leadership is “individualized attention.”⁸⁶ Great leadership is about concern for the human being and not just their out-put.⁸⁷

⁸² Popiel, interview.

⁸³ Palmer, interview.

⁸⁴ Alsop, interview.

⁸⁵ Simon Sinek, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action.”

⁸⁶ Atik, “The Conductor and the Orchestra Interactive Aspects of the Leadership Process,” 26.

⁸⁷ Simon Sinek, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action.”

In a musical situation, taking advantage of the time before rehearsal can be key to getting to know the musicians. In the fifteen minutes before rehearsals, Paul tries to visit every new player in the first month, in hopes they realize he wants them to know one another.⁸⁸ Another way to get to know players is in their “natural surroundings” outside the rehearsal room -- like while getting a cup of coffee – and through topics outside of music; “as a human being and conductor, it’s important to assure [musicians] that it’s quite normal to have dialogue about well-being ...”⁸⁹ As Tovey explains, conversations shouldn’t be forced or “invasive in the musician’s life” but genuinely enjoyed by “casually asking how [they are] getting on...” rather than as a part of his role to get to know them.⁹⁰

The benefits of these individual relationships are plentiful. It can help create a more relaxed environment. Bramwell said the conductor “is not in a position of knowledge” so casual conversations have “enabled [him] to relax and enjoy the colleague’s contribution without being nervous.”⁹¹ Players also enjoy the feedback. As Paul explains, “There’s not a lot of daily feedback that occurs in the rigmarole.”⁹² By listening to an individual talk about their own life, it can also allow a conductor to be heard for things they want to say musically. Paul continues, “Sometimes I’ll spend ten minutes with a musician and let him tell me about his new car, so I can continue the conversation ... That personal connection does allow us a window into talking about what we care more about, which is our thing, but taking more of that person in than just the music part of our lives pays pretty good dividends both personally and musically.”⁹³

⁸⁸ Popiel, interview.

⁸⁹ Tovey, interview.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Popiel, interview.

⁹³ Ibid.

They pay-off can also come in ways that are not so tangible. In a study with surgeons, it was found that “...to reduce the risk of patient mortality, the surgeons needed relationships with specific surgical team members.”⁹⁴ Musicians and conductors knowing each other in friendly ways outside of their musical lives can help the orchestra bond and work together more powerfully.

Some conductors may not feel comfortable with building individual relationships with musicians, but they do it in a different way. Marin does not, “engage in relationship-building with musicians”, instead she tries to “...treat everyone identically.” She describes relationships with musicians as “...a slippery slope” because of musicians’ perceptions. If there is a perceived friendship with one musician, that means there “is a perceived lack of friendship with someone else.” Marin Alsop maintains that she is friendly with musicians, but is never friends with them. Rather than making deeper connections at an individual level, she takes a few minutes from some rehearsals to share with the musicians about feedback from the audience or her own praise. She finds that by asking for the musicians’ help directly, they’re more willing to buy-in, and she tries to “build trust by consistency and transparency” with the entire orchestra, rather than through one-on-one relationship-building.⁹⁵

6) A Deep, Genuine Humanity

Deserving of its own category but more difficult to pin-point is “humanity.” Conductors and musicians who participated in this study speak of how powerful it is when the conductor openly puts musicians first. Describing this kind of servant leadership, Paul believes, “We’re here for the musicians. They’re not here for us. They’re paying us to lead them musically...I

⁹⁴ Grant, *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, 70.

⁹⁵ Alsop, interview.

think the key is that every player in the ensemble is important to me.”⁹⁶ Bharat Chandra described Marin Alsop’s humanity: “It was the kind of communication you can’t teach. It was humanity. It was gentleness...To speak well and thoughtfully during any of those moments is not easy, but when one does it, it can be life-changing for an individual and for the morale of the group.”⁹⁷ Andrew describes Mark Russell Smith’s humanity in terms of nurturing over time: he was “being a good gardener, plant[ing] the good seeds, weed[ing] the weeds, blossom[ing] when they blossom, all you can do is do the groundwork. He did it in a mindful, loving, disciplined and patient way....the environment and the people were more important than the speed of getting it better.”⁹⁸

The benefits of servant leadership are significant. When conductors put a group’s interests ahead of their own, they signal that their primary goal is to benefit the group, and as a result, conductors earn the respect of their collaborators.⁹⁹ Musically, Paul wants his musicians to believe “...their part in this huge whole [is] really important... it doesn’t matter if you’re principal or last chair in the biggest section, your part is important and I’m listening to you.”¹⁰⁰

This servant leadership mentality can directly make the music better. The conductor has to prepare in a way that includes not just musical interpretation and gestures, but also awareness of attention spent on different instrument sections, recognizing long rests and difficult entrances, and especially, eye contact. “In informal discussions, players often noted how the ...conductor gave them the feeling that he was personally watching them,” and this led to “a heightened

⁹⁶ Popiel, interview.

⁹⁷ Chandra, interview.

⁹⁸ Parker, interview.

⁹⁹ Grant, *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, 75.

¹⁰⁰ Popiel, interview.

alertness, concentration and ultimately to a better performance.”¹⁰¹ The servant leader understands that they will shine if their people are shining.¹⁰²

After suffering through the clarinet part during the first rehearsal at Cabrillo, Bharat practiced it that night “till my lips bled,” and the next day it was at “80% rather than 40%;” Marin came up to him after that second rehearsal and said, “I see what you did there, and I appreciate it.”¹⁰³ Bharat recalls the Marin Alsop’s humanity and how it impacted him:

She treated me with a combination of kindness and respect. But the respect was not just mere politeness, or not being interrupted, or whatever you might call “the minimum.” She treated me with respect in the sense that she acknowledged that I was capable of doing a great job on my 2nd clarinet part. And she didn’t do it only verbally, but she did it by how she handled the entire situation. It was, ‘This is what I expected of you,’ and at the moment that I failed, she communicated that there was a problem. But, it was in such a way that I had the chance for complete redemption, which finally came. And when she rewarded me for simply turning the corner....It wasn’t a feeling of ‘I have some degree of doubt in you now’ or ‘my portrait of you has been polluted’... It was the sense that the ship was fixed, things were on their way, and all was good! And, that is a feeling I imagine a lot of people need to have when they are so often vulnerable in front of others – in my case, performing an instrument that can squeak and make you sound like a middle school band player even after 20 years!¹⁰⁴

A final element for the ideal 21st Century conductor-leader is self-awareness, introspection and reflection. Daniel Goleman points to research that the most successful leaders have high emotional intelligence under which self-awareness is highlighted.¹⁰⁵ Under self-awareness he describes, 1) *Emotional self-awareness*: the ability to read and understand your emotions as well as recognize their impact on work performance, relationships and the like, 2) *Accurate self-assessment*: a realistic evaluation of your strengths and limitations; and, 3) *Self-*

¹⁰¹ Atik, “The Conductor and the Orchestra Interactive Aspects of the Leadership Process,” 26.

¹⁰² Grant, *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, 78.

¹⁰³ Chandra, interview.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Goleman, “Leadership that Gets Results,” 80.

confidence: a strong and positive sense of self-worth.¹⁰⁶ Marin, who has been extremely forward-thinking and outspoken in terms of leadership, explains that "...to be a conductor and great leader, the one thing you have to do is have a willingness to be self-aware, a willingness to understand your flaws, and also a sense of humor to understand your flaws."¹⁰⁷ As conductors advance in their careers, it is necessary to increase their reflection, because overtime, leaders can tend to lose sight of the people they are leading, and it is much easier to direct one's own discomfort at musicians.¹⁰⁸

In conclusion, an ideal 21st Century conductor demonstrates leadership that is far more dimensional and nuanced than ever before. Humanity and mutual respect are valued in addition to musical and gestural skill. Leadership means understanding that the people in your charge are the ones with the true power, and that the leader is only as strong as their team. As Yaakov acknowledges, James Burns was ahead of his time in his influential 1978 work, *Leadership*, in which he claimed that "individual leadership" is a contradiction because leadership is innately collective.¹⁰⁹

Collective leadership is like any great relationship; earnest listening is essential from both or all sides. In addition to the six components aforementioned, intent listening between the conductor and musicians and between the musicians themselves can create an environment of musical intimacy and tight-knit community, which is essential in the human condition. As Bharat articulates, "my happiest environment in the orchestra is when I can communicate what I prepared, with what I think and feel about the music and the composer's intention, and be heard,

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Alsop, interview.

¹⁰⁸ Simon Sinek, "How Great Leaders Inspire Action."

¹⁰⁹ Atik, "The Conductor and the Orchestra Interactive Aspects of the Leadership Process," 24.

be listened to, and be considered fairly.”¹¹⁰ When musicians and the conductor listen openly, beautiful musical and interpersonal exchanges can blossom. Paul Popiel describes how in the beginning of a rehearsal cycle a musician might look at him for extra security with an entrance. Eventually, though, the musician is secure with the entrance, but still might look up, and that is what Paul enjoys most.¹¹¹ Likewise, Bharat describes that an intimate relationship with a conductor is “... one in which I get to learn about them and what they value, where they’re vulnerable, where they might need encouragement, where they might need to be supported and where they might be open to experiencing something new in the moment.”¹¹²

To see and to be seen in a musical sense is worlds apart from surviving a toxic environment with a domineering conductor, and is certainly a more worthy goal than “lack of sexual harassment and discrimination.” Conductors who believe the people are as (or more) important as the music and who develop their ears in order to hear musicians at the level they intend to be heard, have the best chance of cultivating a healthy, positive environment for the orchestras they lead.

This intimacy reaches the audiences who are there to listen, and in a way, experience the musical intimacy. The layman who knows nothing about acting can tell when acting is subpar, mediocre or superb and if there is good on-stage chemistry, and the same is true for musical performances. Intimacy from the artists makes the audiences’ experience more alive and captivating. The musicians and conductor are, together, the leaders on the stage, and if in-touch with the audience, an additional relational dimension can occur. Bharat explains that when the musicians and conductor reach that “fragile synergy” on stage, it is likely to transmit to the

¹¹⁰ Chandra, interview.

¹¹¹ Popiel, interview.

¹¹² Chandra, interview.

audience, which is to him “the most precious component... those people are who you have the chance to give this miraculous experience to. They’re even paying for the opportunity! They’re there to listen, and they’re willing to go where you would help take them.”¹¹³

A musician correcting an out-of-tune note out of shame for not being perfect is far removed from correcting that note for the purpose of keeping the audience’s imaginative attention. Instrumental and conducting teachers reminding their students that the ultimate goal is not perfection for perfection’s sake, but rather for a human reason, or some variety of “otherness,” will help nurture a more open and non-judgmental culture. What if musicians’ identities were based not on their own perfection or career status, but on their level of passion, caring, open listening and sincerity in musical intimacy on stage as the gift they provide to their audiences and communities. Perhaps this is the thorough and clear visualization needed for the 21st century, and both musicians and conductors can lead the way forward together.

¹¹³ Chandra, interview.

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