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***Shepherds or Sheep –  
The Role of Relationship in  
Conducting***

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# Shepherds or Sheep –

## The Role of Relationship in Conducting

One cannot but wonder about the role of relationship in conducting. Everything we do as a conductor is related to someone in some way; we are in relationship whether we like it or not.

This paper will seek to explore some of those relationship structures and endeavour to propose methods for our personal relationship development in our role as a conductor. We will be lead through our investigation by the sign posts of quotations that have in many cases become truisms both in this profession and in the world at large.

**“The band is the mirror of the conductor” W. Francis McBeth**

This famous quote from McBeth goes much further than the conductor’s musical understanding. It goes to the heart of relationship and relationship building. Firstly, let us consider the connection that should exist between the conductor and the ensemble members.

As teachers, we know we have stewardship of the young people in our care. This is a stewardship which goes beyond the dots and dashes on the page. It impacts on the child’s development across every part of them as a person and we must have an awareness of how we influence each and everyone who comes in contact with us in that way.

The need to be able to not only lead them in understanding and skill development is coupled with the requirement of being able to transform them from a group of capable young soloists into an effective and affective

ensemble. Each member of the ensemble then must be able to commit to each other too. It's not just a commitment to get notes right but a commitment to practise and prepare and make oneself available for rehearsal and performance.

We are required to teach them the ability to submit themselves to our musical direction, to be able to accept the leadership of the conductor by way of the subjugation of personal ideals and goals to focus on the greater good in corporate music making. This is not to be done in a dictatorial manner but in a mentoring style and approach.

Much can be said about the connectedness that is required for fine music making but here I am much more concerned for the students' personal development. We are not in our positions just to get the highest rating in a contest! We are here to develop in young people the finest qualities of morality and citizenship we can. I will ask you later if you have a philosophy that underpins your practice as a conductor. My philosophical position as a teacher was to produce fine young citizens, who happened to speak through music.

How do we do that? Do we evangelise our ideals to them through pontificating and preaching? No, we show them the finest traits of humanity in the way we treat them and the others they see in relationship to us.

You might think that is madness. "We have little enough time to prepare them for performance without worrying about 'moralising' attitudes and being careful in our actions"; I can hear many say. Be assured, you have no right to not take those matters into account.

A family friend, a devout Christian woman, once told me she lived by the dictum that she was often, "the only Bible

that many people may ever read”. That attitude permeated the way she lived her life – moral, devout, considerate and loving.

It suggests that we might take account of the way we live our lives in front of our band.

Can it be done?

I think so!

See what Peter Boonshaft has to say about this in his book, ***Teaching Music with Passion***. Boonshaft discusses what it means to be powerful, and the power we wield as a leader and role model is significant. He quotes a poem given to him by one of his third clarinet players. It reads:

“I catch your eye and hold it, hold it for an eternity.

Your eyes scream with excitement, anger, pride,  
satisfaction, exhilaration.

Your eyes speak of love, concern, understanding.

Your eyes cry with a strong desire, a desperate  
yearning, to help us reach our full potentials, our  
goals

You care – I can see it in your eyes.”

Boonshaft has told us that we can and should be role models and I argue that the role model we should be must embrace the qualities of morality, devotion, consideration and loving kindness I noted about my family friend above. Such thoughts lead naturally to a deliberation on the

position we take when we present our views to our students.

**“No one can put you down without your complete cooperation” Eleanor Roosevelt**

I often think I should place an advertisement in the daily paper that says, “to all those I taught 25 years ago – I apologise!”

The Roosevelt quote noted above is a truism without peer. It succinctly locates each of us in our attitudes toward criticism and circumstance. What it doesn't locate though is that the young heart and soul, that is so very susceptible to criticism and ridicule, is also often the one least able to defend itself. It is the heart and soul that will believe in its worthlessness more quickly than its value. It leads to the “abused becoming the abuser”, which, though it is a modern day cliché is one that describes this situation, often a story beyond comprehension.

Am I suggesting that you are “abusers”?

Not at all!

I doubt that there are any here who would want to cause emotional pain and concern to their students. I am equally sure though, that there are those here who would not appreciate the negative impact their flippant and sarcastic comments may have on those young hearts and souls in their charge.

“Get over it” is a rebuff heard almost habitually these days yet it is something that the teenager particularly finds virtually impossible to do. “Get over it,” suggests that there is something in the aggrieved that needs to be dealt with

rather than something in the offender that must be reviewed or rebuked.

Yes, there are times when the student needs to be censured for poor preparation or disrespectful attitude or even a rude manner. What is required from you then is an awareness of the situation you are both in, the dynamic of the room/environment and an understanding of how that person takes in instruction, discipline and reprimand.

I am in no way the champion of a “touchy-feely” discipline style here (my former students can attest to that) but I am suggesting that there is more than one way to skin a cat! Our capacity to instruct in skill development takes into account all manner of learning styles. So our instruction in the matters of interpersonal relationship and appropriate behaviour must take into account the variety of temperament types that inhabit our ensembles.

A consideration of the various temperament types would not go astray here and ***Please Understand Me*** by Keirse and Bates would be a valuable addition to your library. Alsobrook’s simple advice in his book ***Pathways*** provides us with insight into what we know to be true but which we often forget or consciously neglect. Under the heading *Focus on your students’ strengths, not their weaknesses*, Alsobrook drops in a thought from Stephen Schwartz:

*“How high does the sycamore grow? If you cut it down you will never know!”*

I have often thought I should type that in as my screen saver message!

So why should we have to contend with such possibilities in our teaching environments? Our students aren’t angels, we all know that, but we can best deal with their attitudes

by addressing our own. We must confront what we sound and act like and not just what we know as conductors, that is, our skill and music knowledge base.

### **“Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks” Jesus**

At one time I would have thought that the concept of a philosophy underpinning my teaching and conducting practice would be madness. No time for that academic nonsense and no time to prepare a “position” in which to ‘locate’ my practice!

What I have found though is that a philosophical position gives reason and substance to what I am doing. It’s like establishing a rationale for a lesson or rehearsal. Asking myself why would I do this or that in rehearsal, establishing my rationale for doing so, gives me direction as I answer the question, “why would I want to teach”? It brings a sense of peace to what I do. Not some mystic enchantment but more a sense of being sure of why I do what I do and therefore, with that surety comes a sense of peace.

To be able to underpin and substantiate why we are involved with young musicians is pivotal to our emotional and psychological success as a conductor, especially in education. My students quake at the sound of the word “substantiate” but if we cannot substantiate why we do things then the only thing we should ever conduct is lightning!

It is not sufficient to have knowledge or to control skill. They are unequivocally important but, without the enrichment of knowing why we participate in the musical development and growth of others through conducting, means we would best serve our ensemble members by

leaving the profession. Not only should we be enriched by why we are engaged in this activity but we should also nourish ourselves with issues such as:

- The goodness of art in general
- Immersion in activities that give sustenance to our complete selves, not just our bodies or minds
- Engage in activity that brings benefit to others
- Locate something significant in our lives, body mind and spirit, to sustain us.

To me a philosophical position in respect of our work is like faith. When the hard times come there is something to carry you through. Those of you with a faith will understand what I mean. Those with a philosophy of why they teach might better understand and appreciate faith too!

Those with neither, I enjoin to find one or the other. It is vital that we underpin ourselves with much that is positive and which gives us a peaceful assurance that we are heading in the right direction. If not, then you will endure the consequence of the heading noted above for out of the overflow of your heart, your mouth will speak.

### **The composer's advocate Leinsdorf**

In another place I noted that, "I wonder whether we are at times, possibly much of the time, 'cargo cult' conductors." Are we sitting waiting for success to come to us because we have prepared ourselves as others do?

We often prepare our rehearsals and our performances around what we have heard and seen and not based on what we should "know" and "understand". It is not the place to investigate that further except to say that we cannot expect to find fulfilment in a work if we don't invest



ourselves in finding out about it and its creator as fully as we are able.

This is another and most significant relationship we must establish as a conductor. In fact, this may well be the denouement for us in our understanding of whether we are shepherd or sheep in the ensemble herd! Do we lead here or are we lead? Do we have an intimacy with the work or are we just aural voyeurs?

Let me get 'up close and personal' for a moment. Consider how you might approach preparing and performing one of my works. Answer these simple questions:

- Where do I come from?
- What makes it different from where you come from?
- Does that influence how I sound in my compositions?
- Does that influence how you interpret my work?
- Do you know why I write and why I wrote that particular work?
- Can you define the influences on me musically and otherwise?
- Can you explain how I interpret accents, dynamics, musical descriptors?
- What aural signposts are evident that defines the work as Hultgren's?
- Why are they there?

The list could go on for a very long time and the answers could be as varied as the questions on the list and the understandings evident in all of you. What delineates issues here is how much you have a relationship with me, the composer that goes beyond, yet informs the notes on the score page and therefore the notes on the students page.

Conductor Mallory Thompson said: “The dictum that states that as an artist, you cannot escape who you are is celebrated through the uniqueness in the creators’ thoughts as well as the uniqueness of their voices.” Do you know my thoughts or just my notes placed on a staff?

In the same place (***Composers on Composing for Band***) she talks of the conductor being the absolute advocate for the composer when she states that: “Whenever I perform the music of Karel Husa, for example, I imagine that he is standing beside me.” She is talking here of a close personal relationship, not just assumptions garnered from the printed page.

Relationship and intimacy like this, between you and the composer, is at the core of your performance activity with the ensemble. Yet such connectedness is built upon your connectedness to them and your responsiveness to their needs and aspirations. Yes, it’s about the music but more so, it’s about humanness.

**“Lead with your ears, follow with your mouth and let anger struggle along behind” James**

To follow from this connectedness and intimacy, I am going to revisit the qualities I noted in my friend above. I said she was moral, devout, considerate and loving. What can those attributes tell us about the way we are in relationship with our ensemble and the people who make up its membership?

**Morality** – In this day and age, what a concept!

I am not going to launch into some ‘moral majority’ paid political announcement here but just present you with some simple thoughts and questions.

Do you tell them the truth? For example, don't tell the group it's a good sound they are making when it's demonstrably not! Positive reinforcement that is predicated on a falsehood is immoral!

Is it a consistent line you preach? Are you asking them all to do the same things? Do you demand equally from them all or do you play favourites, even jokingly?

Do you set standards in language and actions?

**Devout** – No, not church but devout in that you are sincere, devoted and committed.

You ask them to practise and have their parts ready but do you do so too?

I would not like to remember the vast number of times I have watched conductors work with a group where it was obvious to me, someone who was not privy to the weekly grind, that the conductor had no solid idea of what was in the score. It was evident they had no sense of what needed to be in the rehearsal or what should be assigned for individual practice. That is evidence of a lack of commitment on the conductor's part, isn't it!

Are you on time?

Are you genuinely interested in the members of the group or just in the rating you will receive at contest?

**Considerate** – with an appreciation of the needs and aspirations of all concerned in the ensemble's life; you, them, their parents and the broader school and community interest.

We asked above, why do we do what we do. We need to also ascertain why they are involved too!

Can you tell me why Billy plays the trumpet and why Mary tolerates your demands on her, given her lack of competence?

Do you know why the principal of the school has the attitude toward band that he does and have you considered how you might mitigate that problem via your consideration of his views?

Is there a reason that you prepare budgets and no one seems to care?

Is there a motive behind the parents questioning the principal about all the extra rehearsals and events and not speaking with you personally?

Are we aware of the impact our decisions have on the lives of others who may well be involved as aficionados and not as the mindless, totally focused music nuts we are or were!

**Loving** – not like loving a pet or a partner.

How many words do the Greeks have for love – three or four and yet we are limited in our representation of this most personal of expressions to one word and then an attempt at explanation! The Oxford dictionary gives 9 nouns alone as it attempts to decipher for us what love is.

Here, what I refer to is the love that we would describe as philanthropic love – the love for fellow human beings.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you love your students?
- Do you care for their well being?
- Do you endeavour to prepare for their development in all facets of music education?
- Are you providing adequate instruction in life skills as both a role model and as a mentor?
- Do you meld together the role of teacher and adult mentor with awareness of your overall impact on their young hearts, minds and souls?

There is no doubt it can be difficult to 'love' our students but when you consider what 'loving' them from this perspective means, you become aware that it encapsulates consideration, deep affection, genuine and intense concern, compassion, satisfaction in their success, joy in achievement and more. If you can genuinely acknowledge that your endeavour is to care for your young charges as fully in line with my last four proposals as possible then you will begin to live by the adage that headed this section, "Lead with your ears, follow with your mouth and let anger struggle along behind".

### **The band is the mirror of the conductor - still!**

This paper began by stating that one cannot but wonder about the role of relationship in conducting because everything we do as a conductor is related to someone in some way; we are in relationship whether we like it or not. It concludes by reminding us that relationship is paramount in the role of conductor. It defines our connection to the ensemble and the score and through the score to the heart and soul of the composer.

It reveals us for what we are and it tells us again that the ensemble reflects us as much as it reflects the music and the musicians involved in the endeavour.

## READING SUGGESTIONS

Beyond the fine books I cite in this clinic, I have completed a list of books I have found to be inspirational, uplifting and nourishing. Please forgive my lack of complete publication details as some are in the hands of friends at present and I cannot check the complete information, as I would normally do.

Wilson Frank R 1986 Tone Deaf and all Thumbs? : An Invitation to Music Making  
New York Vintage Books

Yancey Philip What's so Amazing about Grace Grand Rapids Zondervan

Moore Thomas Care of the Soul Rydalmerie Hodder and Stoughton

Moore Thomas 1996 The Re-enchantment of Everyday Life Rydalmerie Hodder and Stoughton

Fraedrich E 1997 The Art of Elementary Band Directing Ft Lauderdale Meredith Music

Nachmanovitch S 1990 Free Play: The Power of Improvisation in Life and the Arts  
New York G. P. Putnam Books

Alsobrook J 2002 Pathways - A guide for energizing and enriching band, orchestra, and choral programs Chicago GIA

Keirse D and Bates M 1984 Please Understand Me: Character and Temperament Types Del Mar Gnosology Books Ltd

Casey JL Ed Teaching Techniques and Insights for Instrumental Music Educators  
Chicago GIA

Blum D 1977 Casals and the Art of Interpretation Berkley University of California Press

Cook N (1998) Music - A Very Short Introduction Oxford University Press Oxford

Peterson Eugene 2003 The Message Colorado Springs NavPress

Boonshaft P Teaching Music with Passion - Conducting, Rehearsing and Inspiring Ft Lauderdale Meredith Music

Camphouse M Ed Composers on Composing for Band Chicago GIA

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