

## **Role of the conductor** Ludwig Tsoi

In this essay I will discuss the role of the conductor from a philosophical standpoint. I will present the two main approaches to the role, which I dubbed as the "democratic" conductor and as the "autocratic" conductor, and what each entails. I will finally make the argument that they are in fact two sides of the same coin and that the best conductors do possess both "spirits" within them.

On a more technical level, the conductor is generally responsible for three things: (1) the interpretation of the piece, (2) the agogic (which are the subtle, or not so subtle tempo alterations which may or may not happen during a composition) and (3) making sure that the orchestra is on the same page. For example it is very important to give a cue to instruments before they have a solo, or in music which is very complex. Often it is sufficient to look at each other and just breathing together ensures that the soloist will understand the microtiming of their entrance. Beating the tempo is not enough: one needs to be precise enough so that the musicians know what to do, or rather, can be sure when to enter.

Interestingly, a conductor is not directly responsible for the balance, because of his position, which gives him a skewed impression of the relative levels of the different sections: the strings - which are very close to him - generally appear as too loud compared to the woodwinds. However this impression is nullified in the concert hall, where the difference in distance between different groups is negligible. Usually an assistant conductor will sit in the hall and provide the main conductor with information about the balance.

Researching the role of the conductor I found a substantial split in what people (elite conductors themselves) consider their job to "be all about". Summarizing this philosophical split in a few words, there seems to be a type of conductor who sees himself/herself as a *primus inter pares*, merely a facilitator. This has as a repercussion a very intense rehearsal process, where the orchestra is ideally in the condition of being able to play the piece without the conductor himself. Once the concert arrives, the conductor is there to inspire, help and facilitate the musical process. I call this the "democratic conductor". A great example of this style of conducting is Sir Beecham. (in the source he humorously talks about his rehearsal process and how he rehearses, at 6:40), or the great Bruno Walter (37:02).

Conductors like Claudio Abbado or Nikolas Harnoncourt considered their job to be more in line with the democratic orchestra conductor. They would give freedom of initiative to the individual musicians to shape the music. In a documentary on the rehearsal process of the orchestra he conducted in Lucerne. An orchestra he handpicked from all the orchestras he conducted, his rehearsals was described as "chamber music rehearsals with over a 100 people" where rather than give instructions on HOW to play passages, he would guide the musicians in discovering new aspects of the scores, working on letting them adjust their performance to fit each other's interpretation, just like one does in a chamber music rehearsal (see source 2).

Similarly, Harnoncourt's main focus was in the rehearsal process, where he would work at length on articulation and phrasing, transmitting the principles of his interpretation to the musicians, in such a way that they would be able to embody them and replicate them on stage with minimal input from him.

On the other hand, there are others who consider their function that of "creating" the music through the orchestra. This seems to be a more old fashioned way of thinking, where the movement of the conductor would instigate the sound exactly-as-intended by the Maestro. There seems to be also a connotation of dictatorial authority, which seems to have been the standard in previous times (famously Arturo Toscanini shattered an expensive watch his orchestra donated him on the very first rehearsal after receiving it, in a fit of anger for a passage that was not to his liking).

While it is the more modern and fashionable attitude, type 1 conductors, the democratic type run into problems when implemented. Each musician's individual vision can't be completely different, often because of routine, different influences, or laziness.

This has as a consequence that the conductor's role in this instance needs to inspire the performers to be accomodating of the others' (this is perhaps the mediator-aspect of this style of conductor). Moreover, he needs to have enough time for his vision to sink in the collective consciousness. Finally, I suspect this approach could only work when the orchestra is of the highest caliber and composed of musicians who all have a coherent musical vision by themselves.

This was for instance the case of the Berlin Philharmonic led by the legendary German composer Wilhelm Furtwängler. The most exceptional story I have heard is recounted in one documentary, where the timpanist of the old Berlin Philharmonic recounts the event in which the orchestra was warming up on stage, which generally includes tuning, noodling around, practicing passages. At once the sound of the orchestra changed in quality, all of the sudden, while everyone was still warming up. He raised his head and noticed Mr. Furtwängler had entered the hall, in the back of the stalls. His mere presence and charisma had caused the orchestra musicians to change the sound, even while noodling.

In spite of this apparent split, it seems to me that all great conductors in history with W. Furtwängler, first of them, as well as those in the present, have had a very clear and personal sound and idea of how the music should be played. What changes is their personality: while people like Toscanini and Klemperer are of more disciplinarian disposition, some others have a more laissez-faire approach. Some make you aware of themselves as being the creator of the music, some others disappear, becoming the vessel for the music to happen on its own.

Moreover, if we see this split from the point of view of the process of musical creation, one cannot say that Abbado had any less of a strong image of what the music had to sound like than Karajan, nor that the musicians of their respective orchestras were any less responding to the indications and gestures of Furtwängler or Toscanini.

In conclusion, while a split in approach and rehearsing style does indeed exist, it doesn't alter the process of music making consisting of a sound image proceeding from the composer's mind through the conductors, and the musicians to the public.

Main sources:

1. Great conductors of the past <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkyKUOGnG-Y>

2. Claudio Abbado Rehearsals Lucerne Festival Orchestra

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P56JLnQrS98>

3. Furtwängler Documentary [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2D\\_vGdwsUo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2D_vGdwsUo)