

# A Conductor's Lament

*Thoughts on the decline of classical music and the conducting profession*

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## Foreword

The following thoughts were written out of deep sadness and concern that I have been carrying with me for a long time. Sadness about the state of the music profession and conducting in particular. Sadness about the way the most precious art of music is being used by the classical music industry and mostly about the manner in which so many musicians choose to practice their profession. And concern that music has reached the point of no return and that this once great art has lost forever its important and irreplaceable function in our society.

When I was a student, music aroused in me only feelings of optimism. At that stage, one is not inclined to think about one's future career. The challenges of finding a job, earning money and the sordid intrigues this involves, are all hidden behind the scores of great composers. Attending concerts, listening to recordings, speaking with one's teachers and colleagues about music and, above all, the daily occupation with musical masterpieces, make for a unique and beautiful experience of becoming part of the music world – a true privilege. I clearly recall the feeling of gratitude that filled me when I was accepted to study conducting at a prestigious music university.

The same feeling of gratitude followed me in my first conducting engagement. After all, how many people get to practice the thing which means the world to them as a profession? Though it was in a small music institute, as my career developed, I was working with orchestras that shortly before I could only have dreamt of. Nevertheless, with time, my former enthusiasm was marred by disappointment. The music of the great composers could only inspire me in my private encounters with it and the daily realization of it as a conductor was causing me more and more frustration. Soon I came to the conclusion that the classical music industry today is unworthy of the great art it was founded upon.

I am now convinced that the great tradition of music performance which was once a fast component of our society has become an old memory, neglected by the public and professional musicians alike. The artistic and ethical standards in music have deteriorated to the point that conscious musicians hardly have a chance to honestly express themselves through music. Music has become a business ruled by inept and corrupt institutions, ignorant critics and opportunistic or at best disinterested musicians.

The following pages are an attempt to describe and understand what happened to the profession of conducting and with it to music itself. If it contains harsh words and judgments, it is because the general acquiescence and conformism in the classical music profession have to be confronted with clear words. A critique of the state of affairs in classical music is rarely heard by musicians, so let this exception be an honest one.

I have often asked myself how is it that prominent musicians so rarely criticize the music business. I know that many will agree with the arguments below, yet they are silent about it. The reason for this lies in a conflict of interest built into the structure of the classical music industry and its control over individual careers. A musician striving to make a career today has

no choice but to surrender himself to the rules of the classical music industry. First, he as to adopt a certain level of conformism and then, having arrived at the top, he cannot risk undermining the foundation on which his career was built. This practical, but also psychological fact ensures the slow progression of classical music towards meaninglessness.

It is for this reason that I am forced to write anonymously. Putting my name on this paper would mean too much of a risk, as criticism of this sort is absolutely unacceptable and unwanted in the circles in which I make a living. I apologize for this, and hope that the reader will understand, and that this fact won't provoke offhand dismissal.

Arguing that a deterioration has taken place is of course nothing else than saying that things used to be better. This idea today is often rejected as conservative nostalgia, or dismissed as a product of personal frustration. Having already confessed to frustration, I believe that this argument should not play a role for the reader. Valid criticism is often a product of frustration over the state of things. Concerning conservatism, we should keep in mind that even while some minor improvements are taking place, it is possible for things to worsen overall. In any case, even if we have no way to decide if something is indeed worsening, a sorry state of affairs is reason enough to point it out.

## The golden age

Around the middle of the twentieth century, the rift between composers and the rest of the music world (musicians, critics and the public) was firmly established, and a slot was opened for a new leading role in classical music. The place once occupied by the likes of Beethoven, Wagner and Stravinsky was now up for grabs. Classical music needed a new face, for outside as well as for inside purposes.

It is true that even the nineteenth century saw celebrated performers taking some attention away from composers. The model of the instrument virtuoso took the main stage already around 1820 and was epitomized by Paganini and Liszt (both of whom were also composers). With the appearance of Hans Von Bulow, who diverted some attention away from the composition itself with his capricious interpretations, the modern conductor was born.

Nonetheless, in the first half of the twentieth century, the era of Strauss, Puccini, Bartok and Stravinsky, the great composers stood at the top of the musical hierarchy. Their work influenced everything that happened in music. The modern orchestra, for example, was developed to accommodate for compositional developments from the period of Berlioz to that of Strauss. This aspect cannot be stressed enough, and examining the developments in classical music in the twentieth century is crucial if we are to understand the fate of the music profession today.

Into the gap left by the great composers, the almighty star-conductor was born. It was the likes of Toscanini, Beecham, and Szell who became the focus of attention. Their faces adorned the LP's, books and articles were written about them, and they came to wield enormous power in the music world.

And yet, the guiding standards of conducting were still for the most part rooted in the old composers' tradition. Some of the great conductors of this era were themselves composers and often started their career when the great composers were still active. The rigid interpretational approach of Klemperer, for example, is an example of a conductor working unyieldingly in the service of the composer and his intentions. It is without a doubt the result of his experience as a composer, as well as his close relationship with Mahler, Schonberg and Hindemith.

This era is rightfully considered to be the golden age of conducting (though surely not the golden age of music!). The commercial developments I shall delve into below were only emerging at the time, and the old culture and musical integrity of the great conductors and orchestras had enough momentum to forestall the total debasement that was to befall the profession shortly thereafter.

## Karajan and the music business

Herbert von Karajan, surely one of the most brilliant conductors in the postwar era, who was a descendant of the old German kapellmeister tradition, is nonetheless one of the main protagonists behind the utter decay of classical music we see today. He has fashioned a dual legacy: on the one hand, a trove of great performances and recordings, and on the other hand, a commercial musical culture that sidelines the music itself and that has since degenerated into a grotesque spectacle of posturing and self-promotion. Karajan's conception of the orchestra was that of a unified *Klangkörper* whose sole function is to bring to life the sound ideal of a central genius (Karajan himself). His obsession with his own image, with marketing, as well as his endless efforts to conquer more power, are the blueprint for almost every ill and fault in the classical music world today.

The famous "music empire" that Karajan built around him is such a source of fascination and admiration, that most people are unaware of its destructive effects. Karajan made recordings and videos that were the first self-conscious efforts to influence the public in the manner of a modern advertising agency. In his drive for power, he transformed music institutions and musical culture throughout Europe. His success in exporting classical music to other continents and the marketing methods he employed were enormously influential.

It is very difficult to discern to what extent Karajan understood the full impact of his efforts and success. Was he at all concerned with the ethical implications of the changes he wrought? In any case, we are concerned with the impact of his career on subsequent generations: under Karajan's dominion, classical music came to be about money.

We may point out that this commercial development came relatively late. That is, classical music avoided total commodification for quite a while in comparison to other industries. Various aspects of the capitalization of music were established in the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it remained largely in the realm of aristocratic consumption, and thus was not made into a

business in the modern sense. (Amazingly enough, remnants of this tradition can still be found today if one sifts through the dirt. Many German music institutes, with their continual dependence on state funding, are an example of this.) Karajan, undoubtedly influenced by the economic and marketing developments around him, applied the techniques of mass distribution to an art that had previously been associated with the privileged classes. The most tragic aspect of his legacy is that, with his charisma and musical talent, he managed to secure the willingness of the rest of the music world to go along with him in the utter commercialization of music.

We must now address a general methodological question before we proceed. One may adopt the point of view that in the course of history one can only judge the outcome of a process in hindsight. According to this, when Karajan acted and the music world followed, nobody could appreciate the wide implications of his legacy. This sympathetic point of view absolves the agents of any responsibility for the disaster they inadvertently brought about. This point of view should be rejected. Adopting it leads to an uncritical attitude, which the music world cannot afford if it is to preserve any of its value. Yet, I do believe that in Karajan's case, there is room for empathy if only because his work was marked by artistic integrity that is rarely found today. It must be acknowledged, however, that he initiated wide-ranging structural changes, which his successors blindly accepted and even developed further. They contributed to the moral and artistic decline in classical music without even questioning it along the way.

Artists have a moral responsibility towards their art, especially if they are performing artists. In art, as in life, a development must be judged when it occurs, and we must ask ourselves if we agree to it. When our baseline of moral principles is being destroyed, musicians must be vigilant and resist. This, unfortunately, has not happened in the age of commercial classical music.

## Karajan's contemporaries

Let us pause for a moment to discuss what has been lost. The conductors who worked during Karajan's career were deeply rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century conducting tradition. Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer knew Mahler personally. Karl Böhm und Clemens Krauss held close friendships with Richard Strauss until his death. Hans Knappertsbusch had a connection to Wagner through Felix Mottl. George Solti and Erich Leinsdorf both worked as assistants to Toscanini, who was personally acquainted with Verdi and Puccini.

Throughout the first 20 or 30 years of the "Karajan revolution", many of these old-school conductors were still very active. Although the relations between music and the consuming world were changing, these conductors were still preserving the old conducting tradition they knew – a tradition so different than the one we see today. When listening to their work, one is astounded by the wealth of aesthetic concepts brought into play. In order to appreciate the greatness of these conductors, it is important not to be distracted by their particular stylistic choices. I will thus avoid passing judgment on anything not intrinsically connected with these musicians' conception of their artistic and professional duty, that is, I will focus on their idea of

what conducting is about. To drive the point home, we may use the example of Toscanini and Klemperer: although their musical outcome is vastly different, their beliefs concerning the conductor's role and their overall approach to making music were the same – and that is what we are concerned with here.

## The two pillars of conducting

### *Aspects of sound*

Every conductor standing before an orchestra will make it sound different, whether purposefully or not. Orchestras may have a curtain sound they try to preserve (one hears of the “Vienna Philharmonic sound” or the “Cleveland Orchestra sound”), but the different physicality of every person inevitably changes the sound of an orchestra.

The orchestral sound (*Das Klangergebnis*) is the most direct tool that conductors have at their disposal. It is the first thing that the musician is confronted with when working with the conductor. The latter has two ways to influence the sound: The *corporeal aspect*, and what I would like to call the *technical-musical aspect*. An analysis of both is now required.

#### *1. The corporeal aspect*

All the great conductors are fully aware of the manner in which their bodily movements influence the orchestra's sound. An organic performance demands that the conductor's movements are attuned and reactive to the orchestra at every moment.

Great conductors are able to realize their own acoustic concept with almost any orchestra mostly by way of their bodily movements. Comparing the results of conductors working with different orchestras (especially when they are not the chief conductor) illustrates this phenomenon very clearly. With some of the old-school conductors, even through the technically poor recordings they have left us, we can clearly distinguish their personal sound and their success in achieving it with any orchestra.

Hans Knappertsbusch's sound, for example, can hardly be confused with that of any other conductor. In Vienna, Bayreuth, Berlin or Bremen, his technique of “slowly swimming” into the orchestra created a way of playing that strikes us with its originality even today. Knappertsbusch is also an interesting example in that his refusal to spend a lot of time on rehearsing was only feasible due to his ability to express so much with his movement and personality. As a side note, I would add that Knappertsbusch's way of conducting was only made possible at a time before the obsession with technical perfection had reached the level of blind fetishism that we see today. In other words, his disinterest in shallow technical exactitude allowed for his musical freedom and originality.

Just like the great instrumentalists, all great conductors are aware of their technique. The vastly different technical styles of the great conductors are a testament to their musical

originality. Consider the stark contrast in technique between Szell and Celibidache, Cluytens and Pretre, Mengelberg and Walter, not to mention Furtwängler and anyone else. Contrary to that, the technique of most conductors today seems to be lifted from the manner of Carlos Kleiber and Claudio Abbado. One is astounded by the proliferation of their imitators – even among the highest-ranking conductors. The disappearance of the honest personal statement in music is reflected in the homogenization of conducting technique.

## *2. The technical-musical aspect*

More than any other aspect of conducting, the realization of musical will in rehearsals and the careful construction of a style of orchestral playing is where great conductors leave their mark. It is this aspect of conducting that is most neglected today, and it is one of the main reasons for the sorry state of the profession.

When comparing orchestras today with those of the golden age, one is struck by the uniformity of sound compared to the striking variety of the past. (Concerning the apparent exception of the “authentic” school, we shall see what it amounts to below.) Confronted with the recordings of a Brahms symphony by Abbado, Rattle, Haitink, Jansons, or Nelsons, one can hardly distinguish between them. They will all have roughly the same tempo, use the same phrasing and most importantly, their orchestras (Berlin, Boston, Munich) will sound very much alike.

This uniformity is commonly attributed to the globalization of music, which manifests itself mainly in the recording industry. As the argument goes, with the globalization of the economy, food, fashion and other areas of consumption have become international. The same, it is claimed, has happened to the music industry, and thus the orchestral sound found its lingua franca.

Although there is certainly some truth to it, this theory fails to identify the deeper causes of this dull state of affairs. It is rather the conscious neglect of the long term technical-stylistic work with orchestras that enabled this utter homogenization. The responsibility for this neglect lies with conductors of the post-Karajan era. Of all the factors behind the degeneration of musical culture, their part in the decline of the rehearsal work has the least to do with the outside influence of globalization, marketing, and money.

To understand the scope of the problem one has to go back to a time when things were different. The golden age of conducting saw a great number of conductors who insisted on the highest level of artistic integrity and painstakingly crafted a unique vision. This manifested itself in the way they navigated their careers, and more importantly in their approach to rehearsals. The hummingbird-conductor of today, flying from orchestra to orchestra, did not yet exist. A chief conductor who spends only ten weeks per year with their orchestra is business as usual today, but was unthinkable for the older generation. Even Karajan, the consummate cosmopolitan, did not go around guest-conducting, but nurtured lifelong connections to a few orchestras.

The question is not merely of the duration of rehearsals, but of *how* the conductor works with the orchestra. This is where the old generation of conductors really stands apart from that of today. Conductors like Toscanini, Szell and Reiner, Furtwängler, Stokowski and Celibidache worked with orchestras for years, shaping their sound and all aspects of performance. The fruit of their work is still evident for us to hear in their recordings.

Anyone would be immediately struck by the stark difference between Toscanini's orchestra sounds and all other contemporary orchestras. The amazing clarity, the dry and intense sound of the strings, the unity of phrasing and the burning passion and excitement, are a direct reflection of the conductor's fiery personality. The rehearsal recordings from the NBC orchestra sessions reveal Toscanini's uncompromising character and will. To take another example, George Szell's work in Cleveland is to this day considered unparalleled in its meticulousness. Szell left no stone unturned. He was involved in every bowing, every intonation, every harmonic resolution. The phrasing is carried out with a unity and precision that can be shocking to the sensitive listener. I am sad to say I have never encountered anything that even approaches this level of attention to detail today.

The Karajan Sound concept has surely become more problematic with time. Nevertheless, in order to achieve this ideal, Karajan had to demand the highest level of discipline of himself and of the orchestra. His endless rehearsing on every small detail were well known at the time, and his ability to then "let it happen" in the concert itself was admired by his own orchestra. He is often criticized today on stylistic grounds, although frequently ignored is the fact that an aesthetic vision can only be criticized if it exists in the first place. His orchestral results are so striking, that his work ethic and artistic integrity should redeem him in the context of any aesthetic criticism. Karajan's case is a tragic one. He is a prime agent behind the slow death of classical music, and at the same time he set an example for us who strive to practice music in a principled and dedicated way.

Sergio Celibidache is an interesting case, being the last giant to carry the old conductor's tradition. His work in Munich towards the end of his life, often shadowed by his problematic character, achieved some of the most ambitious sound results ever recorded. Always demanding a huge number of rehearsals and untiring in his methods, he trained his orchestra to new heights of musical sensitivity. Celibidache's emphasis on producing sound based on an analytical and philosophical interpretation of the score expressed itself in an incredibly balanced orchestral sound, where unheard-of sound mixtures shed light on the composition in a way one can only aspire to approach today. The working conditions he demanded and obtained (which were nearly unthinkable even at the time) sadly contributed even further to the estrangement of his ideas and methods in the eyes of the rest of the music world later in his career. That he was alone in demanding them says much about the state of the conducting profession even then.

Interesting for us is that all these conductors – and this holds true for almost any conductor of this era, from Reiner through Fricsay to Klemperer – achieved a uniquely different sound result. One couldn't dream about confusing Szell's musical result with Karajan's, regardless of



the orchestra they worked with. Moreover, the uncompromising will of these great musicians forged many great orchestras, which themselves came to possess a distinct sound. The disappearance of uniquely-sounding orchestras are the direct result of not having conductors working with them as they had before. Moreover, a unique sound is not achieved merely through the desire to be different from all the others. It is developed as a result of the conductor having something real and personal to express and willing to demand it from the musicians. It is these aspects of conducting that withered away in the post-Karajan age.

### *Character and grandeur*

Another pillar of conducting has to do with the personality and grandeur of the conductors themselves. The music world today seems to hardly concern itself with the fact that the people leading it ought to be artists of strong moral character and artistic grandeur. Whereas the Karajan era was still very much dominated by conductors of a whole different caliber, today we are accustomed to expect very meager artistic and intellectual depth from conductors. This fact is very important to stress, because the influence conductors have on their orchestra is very much determined by their own character in all of its facets. A Beethoven symphony demands not merely “purely musical” skill from its interpreter, but no less importantly the highest moral and aesthetical standards, a wide erudition, a deep familiarity with the other arts and their relation to music, a comprehensive worldview, and the ability and will to bring all these into play in music making. Across the board, these seemingly “extraneous” (but actually deeply intrinsic) aspects of our art have undergone a precipitous decline in recent decades, bringing us to the sad state of affairs we are in today.

The character of a great conductor is immediately reflected in the orchestra. Through all the means of expression a conductor has (verbal and nonverbal), a sensitive musician feels immediately if he is facing a person of grandeur or not. The personality of conductors like Toscanini, De Sabata, Bernstein, and Celibidache were driven and shaped by outstanding intellectual integrity and vast knowledge in many disciplines, which moreover expressed itself directly through their work at every turn. Their preoccupation with literature, philosophy, aesthetics, painting, poesy and yes, in many cases also politics, was integral to their artistic persona. It is tempting to write off today’s superficiality among performing artists by saying that the world has seen a deterioration across all disciplines. Literature, philosophy, painting, poetry and political theory, however, all still exist. It is the growing gulf between music and the other arts and sciences which has taken its toll on the profession.

Musicians (not to mention other artists) expressing their thoughts about their art in writing used to be commonplace. This phenomenon is rare today, and this speaks volumes on the level of musicians in our time. Furtwängler’s writing on music, for example, reveal an artist who was always concerned with the aesthetical-philosophical implications of music-making. His relationship with Heinrich Schenker, from whom Furtwängler learned much about form and composition, is another example of his never-ending ambition to delve deeply into the music he

was performing. Furtwängler's approach to music carries with it no less than his entire Weltanschauung (and his was in a sense, a very Romantic one), and this is felt in all of his interpretations. His often widely-varying performances of the same piece are another testament to his ceaselessly probing personality and his complete artistry.

Leonard Bernstein, a contemporary of Karajan's, is one of the best examples of a complete artist in that sense. A Renaissance musician, his significance as both composer and conductor is unquestionable. Bernstein put great effort into his lectures on music, which inspired a generation of musicians and audiences. His famous Norton Harvard Lectures are particularly fascinating in the way they highlight the connections between music and other disciplines. Bernstein's knowledge of philosophy, literature and anthropology all come into play in these lectures, which bear out his credo that musicians must familiarize themselves with other fields.

The many books, autobiographies, interviews, and letters of the great conductors like Walter, Busch, Toscanini, Ansermet and Weingartner give us a glimpse into their intellectual world and artistic perspective, which was never restricted to music. Perhaps even more importantly, many of the conductors of this generation were also composers or at least held close and lifelong relationships with great composers.

That a great composer has to be a person of wide-ranging intellectual inclinations, I hope, is obvious enough. Clearly, the intimate artistic relations that conductors used to share with the great composers of their time demanded that they were men of similar intellectual and spiritual stature. Performing a masterwork demands an understanding of all of its aspects (or at the very least, the understanding that this understanding is needed). An interpretation of *Tristan und Isolde* for example, requires that the conductor be able to draw the textual-dramaturgical connection to the music at every moment. This, in turn, demands a strong command of the German language and understanding of Wagner's idiosyncratic use of it. It also demands familiarity with the various literary and philosophical influences on Wagner at the time. And it requires that the conductor know how to situate *Tristan* within the larger context of Wagner's oeuvre, and the evolution of his style. These are only a few examples of a huge complex of demands on the conductor who wishes to do justice to a musical masterpiece. Fulfilling them all is impossible, but the willingness to do so and a lifelong drive towards that end distinguish a real artist from a charlatan.

The character and grandeur of conductors plays no less of a role in the shaping of an orchestra's working culture, and more generally, the moral and cultural standards of the music industry at large. Maybe more than any other type of musician, conductors are in a position of influence and great responsibility. In his relationships with management, artistic directors, agencies, the technical staff, and most importantly, the public, a conductor influences the conception of music making for all involved. The enormous musical objectivity of a conductor like Klemperer (and by objectivity we mean *Sachlichkeit* – not in the style of interpretation but in his interest of putting the music itself above marketing, industry politics, and most importantly, himself) sets an example that can hardly be ignored by the concertgoer. Even the

most unreflective listener will instinctively feel this attitude and its result: the music rises above the “music business”.

In that respect, the loss we have seen in recent decades cannot be stressed enough, and I shall return to this matter later. I believe, however, that it is the grandeur of the old generation that forestalled this kind of deterioration – even against all the corrosive influence around the commercialization of music that was well underway at the time. With the passing of this generation of genuine artists, grandeur itself disappeared from musical culture, resulting in a complete change in the place of music in society. The conductors who replaced them not only hollowed out the musical culture from within (by lowering the standards of musicianship) but also from without (by lowering the expectations of the concert-going public).

## The intermediate generation and its failure

Karajan’s career lasted over 60 years. When it began, Richard Strauss was still conducting. Furtwängler and Knappertsbusch were in the middle of their careers. Karajan himself cited Toscanini, Kabata and De Sabata as having a huge influence on him. When he died, a new generation of conductors was in the process of taking charge of the industry he had helped transform.

This new generation, who had the privilege of witnessing the golden age conductors when they were young, were less interested in what Karajan (not to mention his forebears) were expressing musically. It was Karajan’s commanding role in the music business and his lionized persona that guided their careers more than anything else. Together with the changing industry around them, these conductors solidified the new approach to the profession – leaving behind the traditional role and responsibilities associated with the conducting profession. The result? Musical giants like Klemperer, Mitropoulos and Walter were replaced by the boilerplate conductors that dominate our industry today.

## The so-called “improvement” in orchestral playing

One of the most striking things we learn from conversations with today’s orchestra musicians is their opinion regarding the low degree of influence conductors have on their playing. Unfortunately, their impression is largely correct – and not merely due to ignorance about the conducting profession (see the chapter on the orchestra).

It is virtually undisputed today that the technical level of today’s orchestras is far superior to that of orchestras in the postwar years. On a superficial level, it would seem that the technical perfection we used to associate with Reiner and Szell is now commonplace among the world’s orchestras. But this is simply because the individual technique of the average instrumentalist today is better than it used to be seventy years ago. When Liszt composed his Piano Sonata, one could count on one hand the number of pianists who had the technique to even approach it, whereas every pianist today is expected to be able to master it. The same is true for all

instruments. As a result, the proportion of orchestras today that can technically command a Brahms symphony is greater than it was seventy years ago. The most celebrated orchestras today (Berliner, Concertgebouw, Boston etc.), seem to be able to reach the extraordinary technical level of Reiner's Chicago, or Szell's Cleveland orchestra, and with much less effort.

However, "orchestral technique" is not the sum of the technical level of its players. The orchestra and the conductor have to engage in an effort to develop it, using the technical tools the players have at their disposal. This is exactly the place where the big deterioration has taken place. The tragic paradox is that the advance in instrumental playing was accompanied by a decline in the level of real orchestral music-making. This individual technical skill has become something of an excuse for orchestras and conductors to hardly engage in forging an organic orchestral technique, leading to shallow music performances becoming the norm.

When the only criterion for a good performance is the orchestra sounding "clean", no wonder all orchestras are considered better than those of past eras. Barring some exceptions, the post-Karajan conductors have taken advantage of this technical improvement by excusing themselves of artistic responsibility.

Some of the most celebrated conductors of recent decades were able to conduct the world's top orchestras for years without having to resort to any musical statements (except in a few rare and fleeting moments arising from natural musicality). As the orchestra musicians say by way of a compliment, their conductors simply "let the players play". For the musicians, the critics and the public, the conductor's charisma is the product. Such conductors use nothing more than their natural charisma and showmanship to feign a deep musical understanding.

Orchestras tend to be very flattered by this. The "great" conductor doesn't have to say anything – he can immediately show it; and the orchestra is so "great" that it just gets it. This is where the most flagrant arrogance in music takes place. Both conductor and orchestra indulge in a façade of self-importance and hypocrisy. Having to witness this display during a performance of a Bruckner or a Schubert symphony is the worst insult for a music lover.

For the sake of comparison, great pianists spend months contemplating and practicing a piece until it is thoroughly understood, and this translates into a comprehensive and meaningful interpretation. Of course, orchestras and conductors do not have the luxury of months of rehearsals. But orchestral music demands no less than piano music, and so the conductor must make no less of an effort in confronting it. This requires the deepest engagement in preparation, which then finds its expression in fastidious rehearsal work. With the great conductors of the past, every aspect of the music received attention and no musical question remained unanswered. That so few conductors are willing to make this effort today, and worse, that hardly any orchestra demands it of them, is evident every day in almost any orchestra's rehearsals.

Speaking with musicians who worked with Abbado one often hears: "the rehearsals were devoid of content, he had no idea about what he wanted to say. But then came the concert, and the inspiration was just there." One cannot deny the important element of spontaneous inspiration in concert, and these musicians were surely sincere in saying they felt what they did.

I would like to argue, however, that this inspiration was only apparent due to the superficial standards of musical engagement with conductors – leaving nothing but the afflatus of the concert moment to fill this musical void. In his final career years, Abbado worked in an environment in which it was already taken for granted that the conductor's role is merely to “inspire” musicians in concert. Great orchestras that he conducted in Berlin, Vienna and London did not think they required any rehearsal input – only live inspiration. Is it a wonder that during his long career, Celibidache had to repeatedly fight for his high rehearsal standards until the Munich Philharmonic finally gave him a home? Some take issue with his musical results, but we cannot deny that they are a feat of depth and detail that only painstaking orchestral work can accomplish – work that in our era seems completely out of place.

The problem starts long before one even comes to consider elements of interpretation like style, phrasing, etc. The laxity of standards today has extended to the point of not even demanding basic familiarity with the orchestral score. I once had the dubious pleasure of watching Abbado rehearse a piece by Bach. Even a total amateur would immediately notice that he was unfamiliar with the score, had little to say about it, and was merely allowing the players and soloist to play as they will. Compare this to a video of Karl Richter conducting a *Brandenburgisches Konzert* from the harpsichord. The difference between a “mere conductor” and a musician was never clearer.

One can sum up the problem as a clash between two different attitudes towards the material in music making. It used to be common sense that the musician performs the piece from within the material – the most obvious example being the composers of past eras performing their own music. Today, however, it seems natural to treat it solely from the outside. The consequence of this problem will become clearer later, when I discuss how the preparation work of conductors has changed completely in the last sixty years.

## The recording and commercialization

Capitulating to the ego-driven aspects of Karajan's influence, the intermediate generation of conductors was often much more interested in the business sides of music, than in the act of making music itself. The social and economic developments around them gave them an opportunity to fulfil their interest better than ever. The recording legacy of this generation presents us with innumerable examples for the miserable state in which art is being completely abducted by money and a musical outcome can only function as a commodity.

The recording frenzy of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in the corporate music industry, destroying any standards of quality along the way. As the prestige of conductors became identified with their recording contract, orchestras began pursuing them for this reason more than their professional and musical qualities. Giuseppe Sinopoli's contract with Deutsche Grammophon, which enabled him to assume musical leadership over some of the best

orchestras in the world, is a famous example for what has become a widespread phenomenon in the music world.

The obvious positive aspects of musical recordings (bringing music to people homes, etc.) are not to be underestimated. It is, however, the degradation of our art by the economic powers presiding over the recording industry that I am concerned with here. We must acknowledge that the recording industry allowed a new musical elite to take over classical music. This elite does not share the artistic and moral standards of their predecessors, and their blind pursuit of money and power created a musical culture that makes it nearly impossible for professionals to concentrate on the music itself. In fact, many of the main players in this new elite are not musicians at all – they are producers, agents and managers. Conductors, however, hold a special place in this elite as potential upholders of artistic standards and integrity. As they gave up this role in order to secure a position of privilege and power in the new music industry, they contributed the most to this tragedy.

## Today

If the post-Karajan generation stood with one foot in the tradition of the old generation (or rather, they witnessed it, which makes their betrayal even worse) their successors today seem to have lost any understanding of what the profession is about. Young conductors today are not only given the bad example of their predecessors (the number of charlatans in 1980-2000 already far exceeding that of the old generation), they are presented with a profession suffering from extremely low musical and ethical standards. Making a career as a conductor today has little to do with musical ability and interest. The abysmal level of executives in musical institutions, the usurpation of the profession by agencies and public relations consultants, and the low standards of music education today are some of the factors behind this debasement of our art.

Shortly after finishing my studies I had the opportunity to attend a singer-orchestra rehearsal of a Wagner opera in one of the world's greatest opera houses. The rehearsing conductor came fresh from his big breakthrough, having made a name for himself with orchestras and opera houses all over the world. To my astonishment, as the rehearsal went on, the conductor left less and less of a doubt about his unfamiliarity with the score. His tempo transitions were shaky at best, his rehearsal had no sensitivity to form, and when he stopped to correct the singers, and began singing to them by way of instruction, his singing made it clear that he did not bother to learn the singers' parts. It was an almost unbearable occasion.

Even bigger was my astonishment when I saw that this renowned "Wagner orchestra", as well as the world-class singers of the production (most of whom were already famous for the exact role they were rehearsing) and the conductor's assistants, all gave no sign whatsoever of being disturbed by the conductor's obliviousness. As I later found out, there was nothing exceptional about this rehearsal.

## The conductor's bubble of power

Of the many dismal impressions this occasion left on me, one struck me most of all. The conductor had the greatest responsibility of all the participants. His unfamiliarity with the score and superficial work that resulted from it, however, did not yield any sign of discomfort from the orchestra musicians, soloists, or assistants. How is that possible?

As I will discuss further below, it is unrealistic to expect orchestra musicians to have a full grasp of what the conductor is doing. Singers too must concentrate on their role, and thus are not in a position to easily evaluate a conductor's work. And the fact that many of them lack serious musical training doesn't help matters. Yet, here the conducting work was on such a low level, that something else had to be at play.

I later found that this conductor, like all conductors today, was protected by what one might call the conductor's bubble of power: an institutional assurance of one's reputation in the industry, determined by the various interests invested in a conductor's career. A conductor gets to stand in front of an orchestra only after a series of events involving his agency, the orchestra's management, the PR agency pushing his or her career, etc. From the moment the contract is signed, all parties involved have a financial incentive to ensure that the performance be seen as a success. In the case of "star" conductors, the whole industry is involved. These conductors are the face of the industry – a flashy entry point for the consuming public. The bubble of power not only unites all those who are invested in a conductor, it is also a warning sign to everyone else not to doubt the absolute authority of the genius conductor.

If, say, a singer is invited to take part in such a production. In her first encounter with the conductor she sees she is dealing with a charlatan. But what can she do? These days – nothing, but conform and do the job. Any musician knows that a conflict with a conductor of this stature would be disastrous for her career. The bubble of power will protect the conductor's career, and everyone else must go along with it. How often have I had to watch great singers being musically overrun by incapable conductors? No wonder that with time they hardly even bother to pay attention to their conductors in the first place.

If the case of the singers is understandable, even more curious is that of institutions like orchestras and opera houses. In today's hyper-commercialized music industry, the survival of these institutions depends on their reputation and public image. Thus, bad conductors are repeatedly invited by orchestras based on reputation alone – and their bubble of power protects them from any consequences, even when the performance is a complete sham. The result is a wholesale erosion of musical standards, to which musicians gradually become used to and accept as if it were the art itself. Musical quality is thus replaced by a veneer of quality in the form of industry reputation and social cachet.

To demonstrate how the bubble of power functions even within powerful institutions like orchestras and opera houses, consider the following example. A few years ago, a rising conductor with hardly any opera experience at all was invited to conduct at one of the world's great opera

houses. After the second orchestra rehearsal, where his inability to conduct the piece and his rude behavior led to an unbearable work atmosphere, the conductor himself announced to the opera house that he has no intention to go on with the production. Although to almost all involved it was clear that his continued involvement would be disastrous for the opera house, the management bent over backwards to appease him. The orchestra was told that the opera house and orchestra would suffer greatly from a public conflict with this rising star and his powerful agency, and was asked to apologize to the conductor. This agency, also representing many singers, was of course involved in numerous working relations with the opera house. The conductor returned a day later, and drove the production into an inevitably poor musical result, the stamp of which can be heard to this day in every revival of the piece in that opera house. What matters in this episode, however, is that the opera house maintained its great reputation by preventing a conflict with an esteemed maestro.

## The modern conductor's inner world

### *Preparation: recordings and the score*

Coming into personal contact with conductors often allows for a glimpse into their conception of the conducting profession. One of the most striking things we see nowadays is the shallow and ignorant attitude towards the most rudimentary aspect of the profession: musical preparation.

While the expectations from instrumentalists in their preparation for rehearsals and concerts has maintained some of its traditional characteristics, those of conductors have changed through and through in the last decades. Some of the “old standards” I mention below are so basic that it seems ridiculous to even have to discuss them, but given the state of our profession, I believe that we should.

Among the maladies occurring in the music world with the invention and popularization of recordings, one of the worst ones was its influence on the way conductors learn and prepare the score. In his admittedly overly-pedantic book on conducting *The Composer's Advocate*, Erich Leinsdorf complains about having encountered – even as early as 1930 – a fellow conductor learning a score from an LP recording. If in Leinsdorf's time this “idea” was still novel, today it is the unquestioned norm.

Now, in order to actually define what preparing a score means, I will have to be a little pedantic. A preparation of a score could be generally seen as a two-stage process. The first stage is, naturally, learning the actual text – the instrumentation, musical and dynamic instructions, and (dare I say it) the notes. The second stage is crafting one's interpretation of the score. The two stages are, of course, not differentiated chronologically, but always interweaved.

In that sense, the conductor's preparation is very similar to that of every instrumentalist. A pianist will learn the notes he has to play, and with time (during practice) will develop a conscious interpretation. But here's the rub. A pianist unconditionally *must* go through the first



stage of learning (not to mention memorizing) the text itself, down to every last detail. One cannot play a Beethoven sonata simply by having a vague notion of the piece. Every note must be committed to memory. In contrast, conductors can conduct a piece from start to finish without having really studied the score. To conduct a piece (whether it is *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* or *La Mer*), the conductor needs nothing more than to command the rhythmic aspects of the score. A real musical result will not be achieved with that alone, but if the conductor's arms are waved on cue and with confidence, the orchestra will play and most of the audience will go home satisfied. This may sound ridiculous, but it is true. What is truly ridiculous nowadays, however, is that conductors actually conduct without having studied their scores – in rehearsals and concerts – with their orchestras and public not noticing or caring the least about it.

Say a conductor must prepare to conduct Richard Strauss's *Salome*. To know the score means – at the very least – having learned to perceive it in one's inner ear. In the case of *Salome* this is an extremely difficult task due to the piece's tonal complexity. I have met a handful of extraordinary musicians who could learn *Salome* without playing it on the piano, but they are not representative of most musicians. Even with a piano, however, the score of *Salome*, with its nearly atonal harmonies and contrapuntal style requires months to get into one's inner ear. In any case, whether accomplished on a piano or not, learning this score is an extremely long and laborious process.

One, however, could also "learn" *Salome* without having it in one's inner ear. Being a relatively complex piece rhythmically, this will be harder than with a Mozart symphony, but ultimately it is the orchestra musicians and singers who must execute these diverse musical difficulties, while the conductor keeps time for them. (Having more than once taken up modern music concerts at the last moment without having the time to properly internalize the score in my inner ear, I can attest that this trick unfortunately "works", that is, nobody noticed that I scarcely had an idea as to which notes were being played but only knew the rhythm. Any relation between this act and making music was of course coincidental.) Richard Strauss was also kind enough to add metronome markings, so a conductor studying the score of *Salome* in this manner could even learn to wave his hands in roughly the right tempo.

In our age of abundance in recordings, a conductor who is unable to absorb *Salome* into his inner ear, can at least learn to follow the main melodic lines. And if it is possible with Strauss, it is all the more possible and easy to accomplish with Mozart. In fact, this has become the *modus operandi* of so many conductors today, that studying scores in the literal sense is slowly becoming a thing of the past. Moreover, this new "approach" is not even called into question anymore. It is accepted as a way of "learning music" just as any other. As a result, it has become possible to embark on a successful conducting career without having acquired even the most basic musical skills. Worst of all, young people of real talent are reared in this negligent atmosphere and thus do not fulfill their musical potential.

On a practical level, this problem manifests itself daily in the most gut-wrenching manner, when conductors are unable to recognize the most blatant textual errors (wrong notes). I have

witnessed conductors of international repute making it repeatedly obvious that they hadn't the slightest clue as to what should be played, with the orchestra showing little concern for that fact. The ignorance of these maestros is compensated by the improved conditions of orchestra parts (new corrected editions and old parts that went through many careful hands) and the musical diligence of some orchestra musicians and assistants.

Embarrassingly enough, we ought to address the question that underlies this whole issue: why should a conductor even know the score? Why should he have it in his inner ear? First, an authentic connection between an orchestra player and the conductor depends on sharing consciousness of the material – the text. The notes being played are the most essential ingredient of musical expression for the players, who must therefore know their part. The conductor must establish a common ground with the player, and this can only be done by sharing a knowledge of the text being tackled. Even if orchestra musicians and singers today have lost awareness of this essential element (having become accustomed to musically illiterate conductors) it nevertheless exists at every moment, and they cannot escape its constant influence in rehearsal and performance. A conductor who lacks this common ground with the players through knowing the score cannot communicate musically with the orchestra, yielding a performance without content.

The second reason has to do with the obligation of the conductor to build his interpretation thorough understanding of the text. Imagine an actor playing a role in a Shakespeare play without knowing a word of English. He may be able to parrot his part but not understand its meaning, let alone that of the entire text. A conductor following the melodic line or rhythm without knowing the actual score in all its details is doing the same. Just as the actor voices the play, the conductor moves to the music, but there is but a superficial connection between his movements and the meaning of the music.

Nonetheless, preparing to conduct by listening to recordings alone is often thought to be possible thanks to the natural musicality of some conductors. According to this assumption, a conductor can instinctively interpret the music after he “has it in his ears” (not his inner ear). This reduction of music to what one can merely “pick up” as a listener is highly degrading to the art of composing. Anyone who tries to understand the rationale behind every note in a Beethoven symphony would appreciate the importance of knowing exactly what these are if one is to perform it. A real familiarity with the score (as well as the uncompromising will to continually probe it) is therefore an obligation an honest musician cannot neglect.

This brings me to the second stage of score preparation, namely, the development of one's interpretation of the score. If, thanks to recordings, the “learning” of the text has been made possible for every charlatan, the interpretation process suffers these days from a no less debasing phenomenon: the lack of originality and musical honesty. As described above, the previous generation of conductors already took major steps in standardizing and homogenizing interpretation and performance. This process has gained even more momentum since, and we have now arrived at a state of total stagnation in musical ideas.

Every musician requires many years to develop his own sense of style, his sound, and his musical stamp. With conductors, one could argue, the time needed is even longer, not having their own instrument to practice with whenever they like. The fact that every musician takes his first steps with a teacher makes imitation a necessary part of his development. Thereby, one begins to absorb the elements of style. But every mature musician will attest to the fact that one becomes a sovereign artist when one stops imitating and forges a new voice.

If in the past musicians searching for their own artistic identity had traditions to fight against, in today's recording age, it has become even harder to do so. Every young musician knows the moment in which, after weeks of dealing with a new piece, he is tempted to listen to a recording of it. This is only natural, and with the right dosage could also be regarded as part of the learning process. Every talented musician also knows the moment when he feels that listening to recordings might become an impediment. The interpretation ultimately has to come from within him, and every outside influence may hamper his creativity.

However, this risk has escaped the minds of conductors today. Recordings are now being used so nonchalantly and without awareness of their influence, that most conductors do not even hide the fact that recordings are often the main inspiration for their interpretation. Many of them, being asked how they learn a score, won't even hesitate naming recordings as a main tool. Alas, a musician who doesn't share this notion of originality cannot be helped. It is his own artistic conscience that must show him the right way, and when it doesn't, he is lost and bereft of artistic integrity.

It is important to stress that this problem is not confined to conductors. Musicians of integrity and originality are now few and far between. When an opera singer resorts to imitation, the outcome is so trite and forced that it is almost unbearable to an experienced listener. The voice being such an idiosyncratic instrument makes vocal imitation much more blatant than with instrumentalists. Conductors, however, control interpretations involving dozens of musicians. When they are mere imitators, the entire orchestra is interred in a musical sarcophagus.

### *Music and career*

In general, one could divide the classical music world into two categories. The first, the humbler one, consists of the small orchestras and opera houses. These are usually found in the provinces and small towns. In Germany, for example, the small opera houses make about eighty percent of the total. As can be expected, these houses are generally quite mediocre. Discovering young talented singers, musicians and conductors at the beginning of their career is their biggest occasional stroke of luck. These talents, however, are usually lost very quickly to the big opera houses, as their offers can scarcely be refused. This and the small house mentality are what promise the continuation of mediocrity these cities are so happy to live with. For the young talented artists, these places are merely a launching pad for their career. They know no loyalty, which is hardly surprising. Small opera houses in Germany treat their young musicians as badly

as the law permits. Singers, in particular, suffer from horrible working conditions and are happy to find better jobs in the cities, where they enjoy more prestige and better pay.

These days, entering the second category – that of world of top-level orchestras and opera houses – presents young artists with a fact that will have a huge impact on their career and artistry. The power structure of the classical music industry demands that they spend at least half of their time on what we might call career maintenance. The ubiquitous loss of artistic standards means that this maintenance has little to do with art, consisting instead of networking and flattery, or what musicians like to call “politics”. Since instrument players and singers must at least possess a modicum of “technique” in the sense discernible to almost any listener, whereas a complete charlatan can pass as a conductor, the situation is much worse with the latter. The conducting profession, which requires the highest degree of dedication and artistic integrity, has thus been reduced to “politics”.

A conductor who insists on artistic integrity can only feel total alienation in this cynical environment. In order to be able to work, however, he must succumb to this façade of a culture, in which networking is more important than learning a score, flattery more important than technique, hypocrisy a legitimate means to achieving musical ends, and being a good socialite the most important quality of all. How else can the conductor charm the wealthy benefactors who fund his career?

As my career developed, I found myself quickly having to betray my naïve notions of integrity. The higher my fellow musicians climbed up the hierarchy, the less honest they were. As I brushed shoulders with them, I witnessed an interesting psychological phenomenon. The social structure of the profession breeds its own ethic, and before long, an insular social bubble is created with a moral code that is quite different from that of the outside world. In this insular world, lying has a special status, since it has an artistic justification. Leading figures in music institutes may lie straight to your face with no scruples whatsoever, simply because they think they have a vantage point – a unique access to the whole artistic picture. This mentality, which seems so natural at the heights of power, trickles down and permeates all musical institutions, creating a culture of dishonesty, in which any “naïve” attempt at honesty is shunned. And from verbal dishonesty the road to musical dishonesty is short.

This phenomenon is well known to musicians today. To make a career, you have to be an accomplice – and how lonely then is the honest artist. As a result, many of them quit altogether, being unable to adjust to this world and sacrifice their integrity. The music world is then left for the characterless.

Conductors, as I mentioned before, thanks to their place in the musical hierarchy, carry a greater moral responsibility than any other musician. Nothing is more damaging to the profession today than conductors who accede to these poor moral standards. The younger generation of conductors today spends a huge amount of time on activities that contribute to their career but nothing whatsoever to their artistic development, or that of anyone else. Most of these activities takes place on social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). One is amazed by the

abundance of shameless self-promotion among young conductors today. The conductor is now a public relations specialist.

Additionally, every conductor has to have an agent to do anything in the business. This entails hours of planning around networking options, knowing who is who, and what is the next publicity move for one's career. Strategic meetings with your agent are at least as important as a rehearsal, and meeting with a new artistic director much more important than learning a new piece. Going to a premiere you don't care about just to "show your face" is par for the course.

The impact of this problem on time management is enormous. Conducting is perhaps the most time-consuming profession in music, yet today half of one's time is wasted on activities that have nothing to do with music. Conductors, who typically start their career later than other musicians, need time to develop. And it is the young conductor who must now waste the most time on building his career, when he could be spending it on learning how to be a conductor.

No less damaging is the anxiety and pressure surrounding the need to maintain one's career in this manner. But the young conductor has no choice. He must put his Beethoven scores aside, and tend to more pressing matters: networking, publicity, and finagling his way up the hierarchy. If he is a conscientious person, some qualms are bound to surface sooner or later.

The gravest problem is the inevitable influence that these extra-musical activities have on one's artistic personality. A conductor who works in an environment of mendacity such as the modern opera house or orchestra and acquiesces to this culture "behind the scenes", inevitably becomes a dishonest musician on stage. This lack of integrity manifests itself in the utter mediocrity we are forced to witness during performances today. There cannot be a separation between the act of making music and the long preparation for it – including the psychological and social arrangements that make a performance possible. A dishonest process will thus result in dishonest music – or to be more precise, no music at all. The result is that the greatest masterpieces are being overrun by characterless conductors.

### *Knowledge*

Another component of our profession that has been fatally neglected is the basic knowledge of music. The musical erudition that conductors were expected to have sixty years ago has shrunk to a musically useless set of tools conductors carry with them from one orchestra to the other, which they employ for occasional humor and diversion during rehearsal. The orchestras, who rarely encounter competent conductors, seem content with appointing an unending series of conductors who have practiced their hand-waving and quips, until the trend changes and the next "hot" conductor comes along. Amazingly, the term *Handwerker* (craftsman) to denote those conductors who insist on real work with their orchestras is used today in a disparaging way.

Conductors now spend much of their rehearsal time making shallow remarks about the alleged character of the music, entertain the orchestra with hackneyed jokes and fake gestures,

while the most elementary aspects of orchestra playing are being ignored. Conductors that are concerned with intonation, balance, articulation, orchestra colors and bowings are so rare today, that a young musician who desires to learn the art has almost nobody to learn from. The big orchestras live under the illusion that they can just take care of all these “technical” issues themselves. Conductors who insist on spending time on these details are still sometimes welcomed, but not often, and are certainly not seen as a necessity. The severity of this problem can be seen if we take, for example, the issue of orchestral balance. Only the conductor is in a position (literally) to ascertain the balance. And in designing and perfecting the balance, all other technical aspects come into play – intonation, bowing, articulation and dynamics. As a result of conductors abandoning such basic musical responsibilities, the orchestra’s musical potential cannot be fulfilled.

As in the technical, so in the theoretical aspects of music, the decline in artistry seems to know no end. A profound sensitivity to musical form, harmony, counterpoint and instrumentation are unmistakable pillars of the work of great conductors. Their utter absence in today’s conducting scene is evident to any serious observer. It is then unsurprising to see the explicit lack of interest conductors show in conversations about music. The ludicrous tricks so many conductors have devised for “learning” a score (markings based on nothing more than bar counting, yielding scores full of many-colored highlighting, not to mention the ubiquitous use of recordings) reveal the disinterest in the basic elements of composition. All these would, of course, require years of careful study – and that might come at the expense of networking and schmoozing. Who has time to deal with music when we must constantly tend to our careers?

### *Template-based music performance*

With the increasing lack of musical knowledge, conductors had to find a replacement – something on which they could base their “interpretation”. The solution was found in what I would like to call music-making by templates. This musical malady has its roots in the influence of the so-called “historically informed” performance tradition, associated mainly with Nikolaus Harnoncourt, John Elliot Gardiner, Phillipe Herreweghe and Roger Norrington. This is not the place to pass judgment on the artistic achievements of this school of music interpretation. It is, however, of extreme importance for us to note that their interpretational paradigm is largely based on information that is extrinsic to the score. Decisions regarding articulation and orchestra size, the avoidance of vibrato, the forcing of tempo relations, and of course the use of period instruments – all are decisions based on sources external to the score. The results achieved by these methods sound quite different from musicians working with intrinsic musical knowledge, creating the illusion that the performance is a result of deep artistic consideration and sound judgment. It is no wonder that the way of achieving them aroused interest with musicians in an era of deteriorating musicianship.

The over-reliance on extrinsic interpretational sources have become a malady not merely with historically-informed conductors, but with conducting at large. A conductor basing his

interpretation primarily on external sources (such as contemporary literature) makes musical decisions a-priori with little regard to organic aural feedback – in other words, actually listening to the orchestral results under the specific conditions at hand. For example, deciding categorically that Mozart should be played with little or no vibrato leaves no place for a sensitive ear to decide how much vibrato is actually needed in the specific room, on the specific instruments and most importantly, with the specific musicians who are taking part in the performance. Similarly, forcing a tempo relation (a much-loved praxis) merely because it is “stylistically informed” can often lead to absurd tempo choices. Playing a Mozart symphony with a laundry list of instruments based on the fact that an orchestra in 1786 had a certain number of players is meaningless in isolation. It can become meaningful only when taking into consideration the actual sound of the orchestra in a certain space. The problem with all these examples is that the attention of the musician and his search for meaning in the music, lies no more in what is *in the music*. Instead of meaning, one deals with cosmetics.

The real problem arises when extrinsic concepts replace an interpretation style based on one’s intrinsic understanding of a score. It is not a coincidence that one often finds that those conductors who fetishize extrinsic stylistically precepts are also those who lack ability in the musical aspects a conductor really has to deal with, like intonation, balance, phrasing, feeling of form, harmony, etc.

The extrinsic templates function as an ersatz interpretation. Like an interpretation, they determine the musical result to a great extent, but unlike a real interpretation, they ignore almost everything the score has to offer. It is one of many examples of resorting to a preoccupation with the most facile elements of art, only to avoid its deepest essential core. Template music-making is thus a manifestation of the superficiality of today’s music industry. One of the recent tragedies in music is that the “historically informed” performers succeeded in convincing the “normal” orchestras and conductors that the music of J.S Bach must only be played under certain imposed conditions, as if the trained musician has no means to decide on instruments, bowing, and vibrato other than a priori rules. This development alone, namely the complete abandonment of Bach’s music by modern orchestras, should make us question the fetishization of “historically informed” performance.

## The orchestra

Contrary to what most orchestra musicians would like to think, they can never be in a position to fully evaluate their conductor. The reasons for this are diverse, and being one of the biggest problems in the profession, it is more than worthwhile to try and explain them. I will try to distinguish between aspects of the problem that are in the nature of the profession, i.e., have always existed, and aspects that are typical for our time.

It is only natural that in a huge organism like the orchestra each musician will tend to concentrate mainly on his own task, often having little sensitivity towards the tasks of his fellow

musicians. A third trombone is not expected to know anything about the fingerings of the violin player and one could go so far and argue that only in very good orchestras the players show a tendency to care about how their own playing affects the playing of others.

The conductor, being responsible for the whole outcome, does not have this leisure, and must be aware of all that is happening at any moment in the orchestra. This difference in responsibility is the root of the biggest tension between conductor and orchestra, and one that cannot be resolved. This fact underlies the inability of so many orchestra musicians to notice if it is an artist or a charlatan standing before them. It seems to me that in our time this problem has become worse than ever – or at least much worse than it ought to be.

## The music education and culture of today's musicians

Coming to evaluate higher education in music today, one is struck by how narrow it is. In Germany, for example, one can go through violin studies playing Beethoven's violin sonatas and concerto, without having studied any of his piano sonatas, symphonies, *Fidelio*, etc. The level of music theory and music history lessons is so low, that an accomplished player hardly receives the tools to deal with simple orchestra scores, and worse still, the tools to understand the masterpieces of the standard repertoire in their historical and cultural context. How often does one meet young violinists who can play a Mendelsohn concerto "brilliantly", having not even taken a glance at the full score, not knowing any other of Mendelsohn's masterpieces, not to mention anything about his place in music history.

Here lies the root of the problem. The universities rarely confront their students with the complexity of music and its moral and cultural meaning, and thus deny them a real understanding of music itself. The narrow-mindedness towards the music the students encounter at this stage sets the tone for their careers. The clarinet student who has no interest in the violin repertoire, has no interest in the life of the great composers and in the form and style of their works, will not discover it upon entering the orchestra.

In addition to that, higher music education in Germany does not include other disciplines. Even a basic familiarity with history, philosophy, and language is deprived of music students, and so the musician not only lacks the sensitivity towards the complexity of music, but also the relationship between music and other human activity.

Together with the so-called development in the technical aspects of instrument playing, (and I write 'so called' because I deny that such a development is truly possible without spiritual development in music) the profession has suffered a disastrous regression in musicianship. A violin player these days can typically master the scales in *Tristan und Isolde* faster than his predecessor fifty years ago, but does he have a deeper understanding of the opera itself? Or worse, does he even care?

We are now at the point where a conductor often faces a group of musicians who lack the tools to grasp the complexity of a musical score, and thus can seldom appreciate the challenges



of performing it. In the eyes of many orchestra players today, the purpose of rehearsals is mainly to enable a group of musicians to play the score as they read it. In other words, “to each his own and the rest will come” – preferably with the least amount of interference from the conductor. The preoccupation with the music, with its style, its meaning and symbolism, is all but neglected.

This has direct influence on the ability of the orchestra to properly evaluate a conductor. How often have I been forced to watch an orchestra of renown playing enthusiastically for a conductor, not noticing that he hasn’t the slightest familiarity with the music they were playing, of the style, of their instruments, of the balance, not to mention the lack of any musical statement. That most conductors arrive unprepared rarely seems to concern orchestra musicians. This state of affairs is so unbelievable that I had to witness it countless times before I came to accept that this is the norm.

## The power relations between orchestras and conductors

It has often been said that the era of the dictator-conductor is over. One would be hard-pressed to find in today’s music world someone who would openly express a negative opinion about this development. With time, orchestras won more control over their activity, including the decision of who gets to conduct them and who is hired as chief-conductor.

Using the sterile argument that they take part in a democratic act, orchestras have been using this development to gain more artistic control, increasingly rejecting conductors who insist on getting involved in musical and administrative decisions of any kind. This makes the work more convenient while giving it a democratic guise.

Suspending for a moment the ethical question of the conductor’s personal behavior, it is important to stress that an orchestra cannot function ideally without a “musical dictator.” The internal power structure of merely the orchestra itself (excluding the conductor) does not allow for resolute decision making. With no one capable of making musical decisions that stem from a unified vision, we are inevitably led to a lack of any vision whatsoever – to a mediocrity. A Beethoven score, for example, confronts us with never-ending questions one has to answer in order to achieve any integrity in performance. Even if every individual musician does his best with his own part, there cannot be a consistent perspective without an overseer, that is without a musical “dictator.” The orchestra musician understands that instinctively and yet, a direct antagonism between him and the conductor exists from the nature of the situation. For the musician, the conductor is a necessary evil. Therefore, in his eyes, conductors should deal only with “necessities.”

One has to admit, that in the days when Toscanini, Szell, Reiner and Karajan could do anything they wanted, some of the social outcomes would be unacceptable today. Nobody can seriously argue that an orchestra should work in a state of terror. But the counterreaction which

has taken place with the disappearance of the dictator-conductors has gone so far that the relationship between orchestra and conductor has become a farce.

The most obvious and harmful example of this is the practice (now taken for granted) of orchestras choosing their own chief-conductor. The argument in favor of this follows the general acceptance of an electoral system in a democratic society. This is nothing but a genetic fallacy. Even if one agrees that democracy is a good system of government, it hardly makes it so for every other social structure. As I argued before, in orchestral practice, where the highest goal is artistic quality, a democracy prevents that in the first place.

An orchestra that chooses its own chief-conductor assumes that the musicians can understand the whole scope of problems, duties and challenges of the conducting profession. As I have shown, this is impossible, and even the boldest orchestra musician will not argue to the contrary. Therefore, the musicians are not in the position to make such a decision in a circumspect way.

One often tends to argue that the relations between an orchestra and a conductor are largely based on chemistry and that only the musicians can judge and appreciate that facet. But chemistry is not a static phenomenon. It changes every day, every performance, every rehearsal. How often does one hear orchestra musicians admit that they falsely evaluated the chemistry with a conductor? Even more importantly, the chemistry sought after by the orchestra musician will not always be the chemistry leading to the best artistic results. The tendency and the desire of so many musicians today to see themselves on equal footing with their conductor ignores the fact that they want to be equal only when it suits them. The musician and the conductor are not on a par. The conductor does not hold the instrument and the players do not hold the stick. They also don't go to board meetings, don't engage in arguments with other musicians during rehearsal (hopefully), and don't prepare the full score. Therefore, it is important to understand that the musicians will necessarily relate only to a part of the question. On this matter, I would also like to object to the notion of chemistry as an abstract thing which can only be felt. With this premise, one quickly loses the ability to judge anything. Even if it is something you can only feel, there at least ought to be clear criteria distinguishing certain cases of "chemistry" as irrelevant. If the board of an orchestra finds out that the conductor is a murderer who can't read music, and the orchestra feels "chemistry" with him, there is not much left to say.

## The balance in the relationship

One of the biggest problems arising from orchestras having power to choose their chief-conductor is the inversion of the power dynamic between them. When the orchestra has hiring power over the conductor, he will tend to retreat from a position of artistic authority, and thus to shirk his central duty as a performing musician. Take the example of a conductor who must conduct an orchestra that is considering him for a chief-conductor position. Whether he is a person of great character or spineless, insofar as the word of the orchestra counts towards hiring, an artistically honest outcome is unlikely.

As a result of this “democratic” hiring process, the orchestra members feel empowered. They say: “if this one wants to be our chief-conductor, he has to prove himself both as an artist and as a person.” Unfortunately, the former criterion almost invariably gets neglected in favor of the latter. In their position of power, the musicians opt for the conductor who is expected to provide the most pleasant and convenient experience at work. This implies almost exclusive attention to the conductor’s character and personality. The attention is thus already drawn away from music, and the artistic bar is automatically lowered.

If art is lucky and the conductor is one of powerful character and integrity, his efforts will almost always be in vain. Honesty can only be met by honesty. The conductor may well try to reach his goal. His condition, however, makes this impossible, as he is forced to prove himself to the orchestra and not the composer. Almost invariably today, the conductor will be spineless from the outset and all his energy will be directed towards appeasing the orchestra. He will try to avoid any conflict, especially around musical questions. For if he is to be hired, the orchestra has to love him – and conflict will not achieve that.

Imagine that a wind player goes against the conductor’s opinion about how his part should be played. The musical duty of the conductor is to change it. The player, however, may well be insulted by this, leading to a personal conflict with the conductor. Ten minutes later, say one of the musicians acts in an inappropriate manner. Again, the conductor must take a stand against it. But if he does, the player will in all likelihood turn against him, not to mention other musicians may feel threatened and draw consequences, that is, opt for a “nicer” conductor. In any case, the careerist conductor will not take this chance. These and many other similar thoughts will go through the head of the conductor, to the exclusion of the music itself. These are just particular common scenarios that exemplify what has become the relationship between orchestra and conductor.

With time, this problem has manifested itself in every encounter between conductors and orchestras, with the chief-conductor hiring process being an extreme example. As a rule, guest conductors are also invited back only with the permission of the orchestra.

Of course, psychology plays a huge part in the conductor’s work with the orchestra. In order to get the best out of the musicians one must be able to sense their feelings, opinions and character. However, the need of conductors to appease their orchestras has given rise to such a servile attitude that one can hardly take the profession seriously anymore.

Today, it has become normal practice after a guest appearance to cast a vote among the orchestra players in order to decide if the conductor deserves to appear before them again. In my work at a world-renowned music institute, I have witnessed numerous guest conductors doing everything in their power to appease the orchestra so that they could secure their coveted future engagement. This manifested itself in numerous ways that can only make one cringe – from dishing feigned compliments to shortening rehearsals. Worst of all, conductors do not insist on their will even when it was clearly different from that of the orchestra. The most obvious example of this is when the conductor gives an upbeat, yet the orchestra plays a different

tempo out of habit. Few are the conductors today who actually stop and demand their tempo. The orchestra-conductor power relation shows itself in this millisecond more than a thousand words could describe.

A few years ago, a colleague of mine was given the opportunity to conduct one of the world's top orchestras. The very short rehearsal time included three hours for a symphony well known to the orchestra. When the chief conductor – himself one of the top names in the profession – was asked by my colleague for advice, the latter was told not to use all the rehearsal time and let the orchestra leave early. The chief conductor added that he always tries to do so, having learned from experience that the orchestra went home happier and played better for him at the concert. We can assume that this conductor was in no way able to judge if the orchestra played better. He was right, however, in stating that the orchestra went home happier.

## The structure of the music world

Of all the highly discouraging psychological barriers a young conductor encounters in the profession, the feeling of facing an almighty unchangeable industry, marred by boldfaced lack of integrity, corruption and immorality, is probably the most depressing of all. Conforming to the rules of this degraded culture seems to be the only way to survive in this career. I will now go over some of the main features of this social structure, which make the life of a conscious conductor almost unbearable. Of course, it is not only conductors who find themselves forced to capitulate, but all musicians. Conductors, however, having relatively more power than other musicians, often find themselves in a position to be enforcers of this structure, rather than being merely on the receiving end of its strictures.

## Ethics

Of all the recent scandals, the James Levine affair is the most blatant example of how hypocrisy and immorality permeate classical music. (I will not address the discussion around the facts of this case, and will focus only on the reactions of some of the institutions Levine worked with, as well as the general reaction among musicians.) Rumors about Levine's conduct were known to every musician working in the classical music industry for many years. I myself, after only few months of work at a small music institute, on a different continent and in every way quite remote from the Met, was already exposed to these rumors, as if by the way from a fellow worker. I have never met a musician who is generally informed about the business who was not aware of these rumors, so when the story blew up, most people were hardly surprised. Such abusive practices were just accepted as one of the many wrongs that are commonplace in this dirty music business. And it is this pervasive immorality and amorality that I wish to highlight here. A young musician who is initiated into this blithely indifferent musical society will usually accept such abuse of power as normal and inevitable.

Even more alarming, however, was the reaction of the powerful music institutions with which Levine worked for years – especially the Met and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In light of his conduct being common knowledge, the claim to ignorance of both institutions was the most shameless lying in recent memory. And the subsequent investigations supposedly carried out into the allegations revealed that our industry had achieved new depths of depravity. Of course, very few people expressed any concern that the most important opera house and orchestra in the United States presided over such despicable behavior and turned a blind eye to it. In the Levine case, as in others that followed shortly after, not one important musician criticized the Met or the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In fact, other conductors pounced on the opportunity to replace Levine (as well as Charles Dutoit and Daniele Gatti after their respective scandals) in no time. The only conclusion one can draw from these scandals is that everything goes in classical music.

The willingness to speak out against any immoral conduct of individuals or institutions, as it invariably puts one's career at risk, is practically nonexistent. Every person working in the industry could testify that corruption and abuse takes place on a daily basis. And yet, musicians who uphold their moral integrity despite the costs are nearly extinct.

## Agencies

Hardly surprising is that in this corrupt structure, music agencies (whose existence is commonly regarded as a necessary evil) have attained unprecedented power. As the working conditions of conductors changed immensely in the last sixty years, a growing need for the management of their appointments and related dealings has arisen – hence the proliferation of agencies. If in the past a conductor was usually associated with a single orchestra or opera house, the conducting career today is based primarily on guest-conducting. In the non-musical world this is known as the “gig economy”, and as it turns out our industry is not exempt from this development. This has both economic and artistic roots. In simple terms, one may characterize this mode of conducting work as less effort for more money. While a long-term conductor has to deal with every small organizational problem concerning his orchestra, a guest conductor is hardly concerned with anything apart from the short-term musical result. Thus, conductors tend to seek out as many guest-conducting opportunities as they can, resulting with the deterioration of musical standards we are all familiar with.

A conductor who spends half his time as a guest has no time to negotiate his own working conditions and appointment details. This is where agencies, a sort of career parasite, come into the picture. An agent is not an artist in any way and any illusion that agents possess an interest in the quality of a music performance cannot be seriously entertained. The sole interest of agencies is profit. It is therefore not surprising that agencies tend to support financial upgrades even at the cost of artistic and moral standards. Their methods of turning profit at the expense

of art are so diverse that a whole book can be written about them. I will not elaborate on them here, but shall limit myself to the role of agencies in the downfall of the conducting profession.

### *The itinerant conductor*

One of the most damaging phenomena in our profession is that of the travelling conductor, who skips from orchestra to orchestra, with almost no interest in building real relationships with any one of them. For an agency to earn more, a conductor must work as often as possible. This drives agencies to pull all the strings they can to enable the conductor to maximize appointments. The proliferation of traveling conductors today is directly related to the low level of preparation and musical depth. Many young conductors, upon entering big agencies, are immediately sent out to as many orchestras as possible to “gain experience”. Of course, for the agency this means more profit. The result of this trial by fire is that many young conductors experience burnout very quickly. Agents, who are almost invariably musically ignorant, care very little about the actual musical development of young conductors. Their only goal is to have as many conductors working for them at any given moment, no matter how, where, and when. That more experienced conductors today are willingly to cooperate with this conduct of agencies is even more disgraceful to them than it is to the agencies. Traveling conductors, almost without exception, do not become great conductors.

### *Working in the shadows*

Since most of the relations between music institutes and agencies takes place behind the scenes, it is only natural that it is rife with corruption and criminal behavior. Like many other immoral environments in the music world, everybody seems to turn a blind eye to these occurrences. It is a well-known fact among musicians that some prominent agencies even engage in criminal financial dealings with institutes and clients. In fact, many ambitious artists will do all in their power to get into the roster of these corrupt agencies, as they can often guarantee more work. Being a dirty agency today is more or less equated to being a good and efficient one.

### *The monopoly of agencies*

A known problem in the music world today is the monopoly of the agencies representing the “big artists”. Agencies like Askonas Holt, IMG, Harrison Parrot, Intermusica and Opus3 use different methods of domination. The most notorious one is the “artists package”, according to which an orchestra gets to work with a star conductor while forced to engage lesser-known artists whom the same agency is in the process of promoting. As the agencies’ rosters become larger and their resources expand, music institutes are forced to deal with this cartel of a handful of agencies – a de facto monopoly managing the entire music industry. The highest goal of young conductors today is being signed by one of these big agencies. Being signed virtually guarantees career success, regardless of the talent and skill of the clients.

## The commercialization of the music institutes

It has been a while since the industry has resigned to the idea that total commercialization is the only way classical music can survive in our era. The consequences this process has on the artists' relations with their audiences are increasingly felt today in the reactions (or lack thereof) elicited in the concert hall, and in the place of classical music in society. That this commercialization is deemed a necessity is doubted by almost no one. Instead, every new idea that arises is judged by its commercial potential. Ironically enough, those few musicians who make a point of criticizing the classical music industry do it usually in a commercialized manner (The ridiculous example of Teodor Currentzis is a perfect one.)

At its core, this commercialization is based on the false idea that classical music cannot afford to be seen as "elitist" (a superficial way to regard high artistic standards and serious engagement). The guiding principle for every institute and PR agency, is that in light of the changes in modern society, classical music can only survive if it sheds the elitism associated with it and adopts popular marketing methods. The unending infantile revelations this ideology has bestowed upon us are a continual insult to music lovers and honest musicians. The low level of programing (based on the assumption that the public cannot stomach "serious" music); the vulgar advertising gimmicks, with musicians posing like football players and models; advertisements for orchestras in popular venues showcasing the conductor (with the composer in small print, as nobody cares what music is being played); and, of course, the promotional bombardment on social media. These are but some of the shameless methods this industry resorts to in its desperate attempts to market itself without wasting precious resources on the actual art it claims to represent.

This disastrous practice not only cheapened classical music but destroyed its place in society as a benchmark of serious engagement with art and culture. Contrary to the impression the classical music institution today tries to create, the intrinsic qualities of the music being bastardized is indeed superior to many other culture phenomena today. Promoting a Bruckner symphony performance by the same means used today for sports, pop culture, and fashion, is not only shameful towards the music, but degrading to the performing musicians. The most lethal outcome of this strategy is the absolute distortion classical music has gone through in the eyes of the public.

These ongoing developments have led to classical music losing its valuable position in public life. Instead of cherishing the music masterpieces that have been pillars of Western culture since their creation, their significance is now distorted and reduced to mere diversion and spectacle. If the conductor is promoted like a fashion model while the composer is downgraded to fine print, the concert experience has already been cast as a trivial exhibition even before the performance began. This example, like many others, demonstrates that the musicians themselves, not to mention those working behind the scenes (agents, management, PR) have all but lost the understanding of how important music really is. If the music is not taken seriously,

it cannot be understood, and its real essence and power is then lost on us. Witnessing the state of classical music and its commercialization today, one cannot avoid the sad conclusion that the face of this hyper-commercialized industry is also the face of the musicians themselves.

This problem has long term implications and not only for the public. It is not only that the concertgoers are given false expectations that in no way do justice to the music being used, the musicians on stage feed off this state of mind – as they can sense it, whether consciously or not. Musicians do not live in a vacuum. Just like the public, they see how their orchestra is being promoted, they notice the quality of the programming, and most importantly, they communicate directly with the public in concert. A sensitive musician can feel how his art is being felt by the public. The debasing of classical music through commercialization is now exercising its power on the musicians themselves.

It is one of the most depressing facts today that many conductors are at the forefront of this degeneration and are willing accomplices to it. Instead of protecting the music, they, the most powerful musicians, are the first to sell their artistic integrity. Conductors today are chosen and promoted mainly for their marketing talents and their image. The ridiculous and fleeting fashion trends upon which careers are built attest to the profession losing its artistic value, leaving music by the wayside.