

Communicating and Accentuating the Aesthetic and Expressive Dimension in Choral Conducting

Abstract

This article considers the issues that are involved in effective choral conducting from an aesthetic dimension. Drawing upon research, theories and practice, it provides some insight into the nature of communication and the significance of gesture on vocal outcome as well as qualities of leadership concomitant with such musical activity. The article also reports on a research study that investigated the professional development of students and teachers in the area of choral conducting, focusing on their attitudes, skill acquisition and the importance attached to reflection on practice. The findings reveal that consideration of what counts as effective conducting gesture and communication skill can promote better conducting and, consequently, better, more expressive singing. In addition, the positive impact of self and peer reflection on progress (both face-to-face and within a virtual learning environment) was also acknowledged. Certain suggestions for promoting effective musical leadership in the area of choral conducting are provided, in order to ground theoretical perspectives in practice.

Keywords

aesthetic; choral conducting; expressive singing; leadership and communication

Introduction

The cognitive scientist Steven Pinker in his book *How the Mind Works*, refers to music as an ‘enigma’ (1997: 528). In trying to investigate the meaning of life, he acknowledges that the arts are not biologically necessary and suggests that the more we try to explain the functions of music, the more we ‘pass the enigma along’. As musicologists, we can examine the tensions and resolutions in melodies and harmonies, the vivid concoction of auditory stimulation; as sociologists we can seek to explain the role of music in societies and cultures and, as psychologists, try to explain the effect it has on us. Those who are leaders of musical activity are given the responsibility of making music meaningful in some way or other – technically, emotionally and socially. However, it might also be salutary for us to be reminded of music’s enigmatic nature – and it may be that we do not always need to explain meanings verbally or instructively. This article addresses some of the issues surrounding conductors’ communication of that enigma, with particular reference to the aesthetic and expressive dimension of choral music.

Three critical ingredients of effective, communicative musical leadership, particularly in relation to choral conducting, established by Durrant (2003) are: (i) a philosophical underpinning of the role; (ii) musical and technical skills; (iii) inter-personal skills. It is the inter-personal skills that will be explored in more detail here, but in relation to the musical outcomes, learning styles and behaviours, as well as an over-arching awareness of the role of the conductor as leader of musical events. Through analysis and discussion of the implications of some research studies together with reference to experience in the

field, aspects of communication and leadership in conducting will be guided by (i) gesture; (ii) verbal and non-verbal interactions; (iii) the music.

One of the more elusive phenomena in creating an effective and successful musical event concerns communication. Not the relaying of information, but rather imparting the subtle nuances of the character of a piece is integral to the communication system of those leading, directing and conducting music. Those who call themselves conductors (and that should be all who lead music making from the front in whatever context) have consciously taken on board a role that has connotations of musical leadership. This leadership is traditionally concerned with creating a performance according to the vision and musical insight of the one person who has taken on the mantle of leading, shaping and directing that event. Let us not forget that the word ‘conductor’ has a Latin derivation *conducare* – to lead (*ducare*) together (*con*). That person, then, will have particular and identifiable leadership characteristics.

Perceptions of the conductor’s role

A traditional notion of the conductor is of a dictator, benevolent or otherwise, usually male, leading the musical activity with assured leadership. He (and it often is) has all the vision, knowledge of the score and the wherewithal to coerce the players, singers or those in his charge to follow his interpretation and demands on the re-creative endeavour (Durrant, 2003). This traditional model of operation is accompanied usually by verbal instruction, sometimes admonition, perhaps praise, propelled by the physical gesture associated with the acknowledged frame of conducting patterns. Often this is carried out

with facial and other forms of expressive gesture to enlighten the performers in the expressive and aesthetic requirements of the composer and conductor. Potentially, it is the conductor who holds the key to music's enigma.

These traditional notions of leading musical activity are often adopted in school, church and community contexts. The expectations of the role, from both conductors themselves as well as from those they conduct, often mirror the traditional model. There is a perpetuating myth, as exposed by Lebrecht (1991), that the conductor has the appropriate knowledge, skill and character to command respect. The singers and players blindly follow, obeying each instruction without question – there being an expectation of that particular pattern of interactions. In an ensemble context it is clearly necessary for there to be a vision of the musical product; the process along the way involves a series of goals and sub-goals moving towards achieving that vision – towards the 'bull's-eye' (Thurman & Welch, 2000). Culturally and philosophically we have to have leadership in an ensemble music making context. In the same way in any organisation, political, commercial or educational, we choose people with key attributes to lead us, inspire and motivate us, who command our loyalty and respect and admiration. Sometimes it works and sometimes not.

Conductors are able to command attention through a combination of musical skills, self-belief and personality. Matheopoulos (1982) and Lebrecht (1991), in order to demystify the conductor, explored the characteristics of well-known conductors, particularly their musicianship and leadership skills. This was carried out largely through interviews of

conductors themselves and also singers and players who had been conducted by them. In each case, there was a self-belief in the ability to execute the role. Leonard Bernstein was once asked by an aspiring young conductor if he thought he was good enough to become a professional conductor. Bernstein's reply was that if he didn't know that himself, he was not. This in itself confirms one of the attributes in the model of the effective choral conductor (Durrant, 2003), namely that a conductor will have 'an understanding of the conductor's role' – an inner knowing, if you like, of the self-possession of a leadership aptitude and responsibility that goes with the job. Yet, Simon Rattle, the current conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, in a film about their tour of Asia, mentioned his regular feelings of doubt about his own musical leadership – fearing that he might be 'found out'. This section has recognised issues of self-efficacy and the conductor, while the next focuses on the behaviours that are appropriate in effectively communicating musical ideas in educational contexts.

Communication

While we can accept that communication must be integral to the conducting process and leadership role, exploration of the key issues concerning the nature of conductor behaviour might well provide insight into effective communication in a musical and educational context. In other words, how can those leading musical activity in schools and similar educational contexts become more efficient and effective? Does the teacher leading singing with young children need to act as a dictator? Does the conductor of a youth band need to rule with a rod of iron in order to achieve accurate playing? Does the conductor of an adult community chorus need to shout at them? While these may appear

to represent extreme conditions and behaviours, in one respect these scenarios might be recognised as ‘accepted’ behaviours of conductors in particular contexts. Singers and players tacitly accept that this is the way conductors may or even ought to behave. However, in other educational contexts, we expect our teachers to behave in a less dictatorial manner and know that, in order to promote effective learning, we need to understand the ways in which learning occurs.

Communication is about interaction, exchange of ideas and consultation between people. Effective communication is key to leadership in all sorts of situations. Apfelstadt (1997) suggests that leadership is integral to the creation of an environment where quality singing can take place and makes a connection with communication. She proposes three categories of leadership characteristics: (i) ‘musical’; (ii) ‘extra-musical’; (iii) ‘gestalt’. Here leadership skills are not only concerned with musical outcomes, but also concerned with combining the development of those with such attributes as confidence, initiative and enthusiasm for the task. Those conducting and leading our musical activities need, therefore, to be effective communicators. Musical outcomes, individual and collective development, together with building confidence and ultimately gaining mastery and self-esteem, are inextricably linked to conductors’ behaviours (Watkins, 1986; Donovan, 1994; Durrant, 2000; 2005).

Communication and musical meaning

It seems odd to be writing about communication, particularly musical communication that relies on all sorts of non-verbal means, from the conducting gesture to facial

expressions. Something inevitably will be missing – that other real-time dimension of experiencing some of the impact of effective and ineffective ways of communicating in the flesh - which can enhance understanding and impact on learning. In the same way that writing about the meaning of music itself cannot actually portray its meaning – otherwise we would not need the music, so writing about physical gesture and the elements of communicating musical ideas and expressions cannot give a full portrayal of musical communication. It seems a pity that we have to rely on the written word so much to give credence to our research in academia. Talking on music in the 2006 BBC Reith lecture, Daniel Barenboim said:

“I firmly believe that it is really impossible to speak really deeply about music. All we can do then is speak about our own reaction to the music ... I will therefore attempt the impossible and maybe try and draw some connection between the inexpressible content of music and, maybe, the inexpressible content of life”.

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2006/lecture1.shtml> retrieved 28/04/06)

If music is to represent the inexpressible, then our non-verbal messages as a conductor have the potential to communicate more than verbal instruction can in terms of emotional import and expressive interpretations. Even with linguistic text, music is the most absolute symbolic art form, according to Langer (1957), whose expressivity goes beyond the expressive potential of words. Poetry and drama rely on words to express their meanings; dance has gesture as its prime means of expression and is probably the nearest symbolic art form to music. Music has no literal meaning which can be explained sufficiently by verbal communication or instruction, but it does have meaning (Meyer, 1956), ‘meaningfulness’ and ‘feelingfulness’ (Swanwick, 1979). It is therefore deeply

symbolic. Musical gesture symbolically suggested and notated in the score (by the composer) therefore calls for an aesthetic gestural living form to bring it to its aural manifestation (by the conductor and performers). This is generated by gestures, expressions and forms of communication from the conductor that leads the performers to an understanding of the musical import through reflection, musical and vocal skill, aural awareness, technical accuracy and aesthetic realization. The whole person is involved in the aesthetic communication. However, music and physical gestures are two very different symbolic modes, each used for artistic expression. How one is translated into the other is a complex action, processed cognitively and emotionally.

In terms of non-verbal communication, Mehrabian (1972) suggested that 55 percent of communication is transmitted by facial expression, arm-hand gestures and postural arrangements of the body, while 45 percent is transmitted vocally. Of that 45 percent, Mehrabian maintains that only seven percent is perceived and produced 'in conscious awareness', 38 percent being perceived and produced 'outside conscious awareness' as part of the non-verbal context of spoken communication. The substance of communication, even verbally, is associated with variations in vocal pitch, volume, timbre and timing and pacing of speech rather than just the literal meaning of words. In turn, the vast array of communications drives and shapes our feelings and interpretations of feelings into meanings (Durrant, 2003). The implication for verbal instruction, therefore, as a prime means of communicating musical meaning, is significant. The conductor and teacher would do well to consider the appropriateness of other means of communicating – through conducting gesture, facial expression, vocal timbre and the

like, many of which are processed and received outside conscious awareness. According to Thurman, ‘the parts of human beings that process outside conscious awareness have enormous processing capacity and those parts are significantly developed by birth’ (in Thurman & Welch, 2000: 162). And these non-verbal communications between humans are interpreted for ‘emotional significance’ and ‘interrelational significance’ (ibid) outside conscious awareness.

It is therefore incumbent on the conductor to adopt a ‘human compatible’, as opposed to ‘human antagonistic’ style of behaviour in music making processes in order to get the best out of the participants. This includes providing safe, free from threat learning and singing environments as well as encouraging cooperative rather than competitive actions from participants. Hart (1983) has developed a theory of learning that is brain-centred and states – ‘creating a brain-compatible ambiance calls for deliberately identifying and stripping away sources of threat’ (op. cit. 133). Many traditional modes of conducting behaviour are associated with ‘telling off’, belittling people and thus creating a threatening situation where effective learning is unlikely to take place (Hart, 1983; Durrant, 2003).

Gesture

While threatening situations are often verbal, there are also non-verbal means – inappropriate gestures and facial expressions that can prevent learning and a growth of confidence and, ultimately, promote low self-esteem. The quality and nature of communication through gesture is fundamental in the choral conducting and musical

learning context and contributes to the development of effective musical leadership.

Given a normally equipped human being, gesture is used extensively to communicate.

There are recognisable gestural signs that have specified meaning in particular cultures or countries (Morris *et al*, 1979). Generally in our everyday lives we point to give direction, or for emphasis or in anger, we wave to greet or exit, we shape in order to enhance our description of something. We can open and extend our arms as a sign of welcome, or we can cross or fold them as a sign of non-committal or 'fed-up-ness'. There are distinct, specific and also covert meanings in gestures. The teacher standing in the front of a class with folded arms, together with a particular expression is giving a subliminal message to the students. A conductor beginning a choir rehearsal with arms extended, coupled with a warm smile, gives a message of welcome to the singers, as if to embrace them and invite them to sing.

Ford (2001) illustrates and reviews how gesture has been codified for rhetorical delivery, how certain gestures were associated with corresponding emotions or points in argument, establishing almost a biological basis for a universal gestural language. We use gesture outside conscious awareness as part of the human condition of communicating our thoughts, ideas and behaviours. He further categorises types of gestures according to McNeill (1992), who suggests that gestures are closely linked to speech, but yet fundamentally different in their form of presentation of meaning. This concept relates to the Vygotskyian model of interlocking linguistic and non-verbal thought – 'the synthesis of image and word'. Gesture, then, is close to thought. One significant consideration for the conductor is the cooperative meanings of the image – the gesture - and the verbal

instruction. The craft of conducting is to ensure the interpreted meanings of both coincide, otherwise the conducted will receive confusing subliminal messages.

Gesture and Dance

Gesture is integral to dance and, in many cultures, movement and gesture have specified meaning. In the Pacific islands of Kiribati¹, for example, traditional dance is a significant part of the preservation of the historical and cultural life of its people, whose very existence is threatened by rising sea levels. Even the catholic mass is ‘translated’ into dances, in order to encourage better understanding of it, so that it makes sense to them (Whincup & Whincup, 2001). Not only do there appear to be representative gestures and movements in the dances of Kiribati, but the dances are controlled and precise with deeper spiritual, historical and cultural meaning. The dances are conducted, although the conductor does not himself dance, but as one conductor reflected:

A well trained conductor ... should have possessed that kind of spiritual/emotional inspiration to influence members of his group... I notice that the dancers always respond to me and automatically understand my signals even when I shout as a result of that emotional excitement (op_cit: 109).

The minutiae of each gesture and movement are significant, as reported by a participant:

... the arm, head and eye movements should always follow the rhythm of the song and illustrate the meaning of the word. For example, the arm stretched sideways with the forearm moving up and down, it illustrates the bird that flies up in the air. The arm

¹ These are a group of low-lying atolls on the equator and international dateline, sadly being threatened by rising sea levels.

horizontal, move forward or inward in a fast up or down movement illustrates the movement of the fish (op._cit:114).

Gesture and Meaning

Within the conducting framework, there are gestures that have indicative meaning – those that more obviously are signals. A cut-off or stop is usually unambiguous in normal conducting situations. Even signals to perform a phrase quietly are rarely misunderstood. These signals, or indicative gestures, are recognisable in that they correspond to similar signals in other non-musical contexts. A sign to halt from a policeman on traffic duty might be similar to the conductor's cut-off and is recognised easily, given due attention by those using the road or those performing. A sign to request quiet is often indicated as the first finger against the lips, or in conducting, a similar kind of retracting movement with the hand towards the mouth. Beating time and giving entries are, to some extent, literal or indicative gestures (Durrant, 2003). We recognise the movement of the beat and instinctively operate within that given pulse. This type of gesture is appropriate in certain pieces of music that need, for example, 'controlling' in terms of tempo security within a complex range of metres. (There are internationally accepted conducting patterns to indicate the musical metre, which can be found in any text book on conducting methods.)

Visual association of the conducting pattern with the inner pulse and musical outcomes of the performer is a connection that is processed neurally and kinaesthetically. Other gestures are of the more connotative kind – those that may not be indicative of tempo or entry, but rather of the expressive character of the music. These gestures connect with the quality of sound, the expressive musical line and the elusive and non-discursive element

of musical interpretation. This is concerned with imaginative and creative interplay between the symbolic modes of gesture and music (Hatten, 2004).

Various research studies in the area of conducting gesture have been carried out. Gumm (1993) outlines the purpose of gesture in communication; some gestures are for specific musical tasks, while others may communicate other unintended non-verbal messages. He points out the importance of conducting gesture in creating an appropriate learning environment. Fuelberth (2003) explored the effect of conducting gesture on singers' perceptions of inappropriate vocal tension. This highlights the impact, overt and covert, that conducting gesture can have, not only on vocal and musical outcome, but also on the vocal mechanism itself in terms of healthy voice use and vocal tension. Bengé (1996) reported that the conducting skills of expressive conductors can communicate a vast array of information, thus recognising the power and potential of the conducting gesture together with other forms of non-verbal communication. More recently, Mathers (2008) examined how various theories of expressive movement and non-verbal communication can impact upon conducting behaviour at all levels of experience to produce more expressive conducting gestures. Again, this confirms the potential impact of gesture on vocal outcome, attitude and environment.

Research study

In order to investigate further the relationship between communication and conducting gesture, a research study with school and student music teachers was carried out during

continuing professional development courses in choral conducting² over three years (2006-2008). These teachers self-perceived themselves as less-than-confident in their conducting skills (Durrant, 2006; Durrant & Varvarigou, 2008). Each course took place over four separate days over a period of five months with intervening time for practice and reflection. The study was essentially concerned with perceptions and reflections of their progress in relation to putting the strategies addressed into practice in their professional situations.

Using both observation (participant and non-participant) and questionnaires as the main method of collecting data, it became noticeable that in the early stages of training in workshop situations, the conductors (school and student music teachers) assumed that conducting is essentially about beating time and much less about managing the aesthetic and expressive character of the music. In the first course of the study (during the spring and summer 2006), questionnaires (n=21) were given at four points during the course (six hours x four separate days over a period of three months), in order to track participants' progress and attitudes towards choral conducting.

A qualitative design was considered the most appropriate for this evaluative, on-going research, as the intention was for the course participants to reflect on their practice and for the tutors to monitor the development of each participant over time. The methods used were extensive observations through video snap-shots of the workshop seminars, distribution of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with some randomly

² This is on-going, both as part of the postgraduate music education programme and professional development courses at the Institute of Education, University of London.

selected participants. These were issued and completed at the beginning of each workshop session in order to allow participants to reflect on their own progress, as well as make reference to comments that may have been received from the singers they conduct in their own situations in between sessions.

Further data was collected in the two subsequent courses with different students in 2007 and 2008, using essentially the same method with small modifications to the questionnaires and more sophisticated and developed technology. The outcomes of these investigations are more fully reported in Durrant & Varvarigou (2008). Questionnaires have their limitation in artistic contexts as the method necessitates that ‘inner subjective realities are submitted to an external objective form’ (Aldridge, 1990: 178). Observations can therefore elicit more insight into people’s aesthetic responses and emotions to particular musical or other events and provide a triangulation of evidence. In these subsequent years, participants were encouraged to reflect on their own progress through video-recordings taken of their conducting sessions that were uploaded onto the *Blackboard* Virtual Learning Environment (Bb). Through Bb, they were also able to reflect on their own conducting as well as chat about their progress and development through the course: they were encouraged to develop their own narratives. The production of audio-visual material was considered an unobtrusive method of collecting data (Denscombe, 2003; Durrant & Varvarigou, 2008).

At the beginning of the courses, it was evident that the majority of participants thought that developing conducting skills meant knowing how to beat time – that this was the

essential technique required. Fewer participants at this stage realised the significance of communication and leadership skills (op. cit:76). Concentrating on developing expressive and more efficient and effective gestures, in preference to an over-reliance on verbal instruction during the practical sessions of the course, participants were asked in subsequent sessions to reflect upon their conducting and the responses from their singers they conducted in the periods between the teaching sessions. These written comments included:

“[singers were] more focused on my conducting gestures”

“[my] choir are much more attentive to gestures”

“they are much more responsive to me – maybe because I am more aware of the conductor/choir relationship”

“they are watching my gestures more carefully. Seem to be more responsive”.

Not only the conductors themselves, but singers and onlookers noticed differences – with reported comments in the questionnaires including:

“the singers have noticed. They are more attentive and responsive to my gestures”

“they are happier to sing paying better attention”

“two people came to me and said they found my conducting more expressive and they thought the choir responsive”.

The move away from their concern over the ‘technical’ towards the ‘musical’ and ‘aesthetic’ became apparent during the course, with a growing general recognition that

leading through the finer points of gesture, as well as the nature and style of verbal and non-verbal communication, could make a difference to the vocal outcome and attitude of the singers (Benge, 1996). As two student conductors commented:

“Small changes in conductors’ gestures can evoke large difference in singing by groups, but why does this happen? How?”

“After viewing the video of me conducting, I have come to realise how the slightest movements made by a conductor can have a major effect on the outcome of the vocal quality from the choir.”

The members of the class were encouraged to comment and feedback to the conductors (both face-to-face and on-line) on how their conducting style and gesture impacted on their engagement with the music both vocally and aesthetically. Such feedback validated the development of ‘kinaesthetic’ awareness of conducting. In essence, some of the comments outlined a growing awareness of the need to provide strategies for effective and expressive conducting, rather than being overly concerned with the technical aspects of beating time. Some more detailed reflections and comments from conducting students writing on-line included:

“The holistic view of the voice, emotion and communication has had an impact on my teaching beyond choral work...”

“My eye contact with the choir and facial expressions were positive and helped to establish a rapport with the singers as well as convey emotions in the music. Nevertheless, there were several flaws with my gestures. Initially, I was beating time with not only my arms, but my entire body and head, resulting in ambiguous beating overall. Due to unnecessary movement of my arms and fingers, singers were not looking to my fingertips as the focal point for the beat.”

“Over the years I have got into some really bad conducting habits which I thought were good practice. Now I realise that I can probably improve the children’s singing just by improving my conducting gestures.”

“Having watched the video I feel like I move way too much and so in the next session I will focus on doing less. By making my gestures more specific I hope to be able to indicate phrasing and dynamics to the singers.”

“... I can see immediately from the beginning of my video that I need to improve my eye contact with the singers. During the introduction to the piece my eyes are firmly fixed on the music which hinders the connection between us as musicians and will render my “understanding of and insight into the expressive content and dimensions” useless as the singers will be unable to benefit from a person with whom they remain unconnected. Through the piece my eyes lift more frequently and my gaze becomes more focused and enthusiastic, but I am aware that I need to develop the confidence to begin with an authoritative, directed and inclusive level of eye contact with the choir in order to improve as a conductor.”

The responses of the majority of participants highlighted the need to develop further their communication through expressive gesture and conducting technique together with efficient use of time in rehearsals. The positive impact of self and peer reflection on progress was also acknowledged.

Conducting: the technical and expressive

While maintaining ensemble is clearly dependent on singing and playing together in time, there are other equally important roles that the conductor needs to take on board.

Conducting gesture is not just beating time; there are, nevertheless, pieces of music where this will be paramount, particularly when the rhythmic momentum is integral to the musical meaning. It is essential that the conductor drives the music of, for example,

the first movement of Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* or the section in Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb* – 'Let Nimrod the mighty hunter', where the metre irregularly moves through 7/8 – 6/8 – 9/8 – 5/8 – 11/8, as well as numerous other examples of music with a particular dynamic rhythmic character. However, a gentle folk song, such as *Shenendoah* or *Down by the Sally Gardens*, requires expressive gesture that reflect the musical phrases rather than a pulsating beat. These songs express longing rather than excitement and so the aesthetic gesture of longing needs to be part of the kinaesthetic interpretation – the movement of the conducting gesture (McCoy, 1994). Feeling with movement is the essence, naturally, of 'kinaesthesia'. How we translate 'longing' (a human emotional state) into a gesture (a symbolic mode) is problematic. How singers then interpret gesture (one symbolic mode) into music (another symbolic mode) through vocal expression is indicative of the complex 'designed and crafted patterns of the visual, auditory, somatosensory-kinesthetic'³ (Thurman et al, 2000: 167). The combination of these artistic symbolic modes generates aesthetic and emotional response in humans (ibid).

As exemplified in the research study discussed previously, there is a tendency for conductors, particularly those of amateur and children's choral groups, to think that they have to do everything for their singers in terms of conducting cues, mouthing words, exaggerating beat patterns and often exaggerating facial expressions (Decker & Kirk, 1988; Terry, 1991; Durrant, 2003). This is often counter-productive and makes the singers over-reliant on the conductor; excessive mouthing of the words focuses singers' attention on the conductor's mouth rather than on the conductor's gesture. Perhaps such

³ The visual arts – painting, sculpture, architecture; the auditory – music poetry, spoken written and story arts; the somatosensory-kineasthetic – mime and dance.

exaggerations are subliminal ways of keeping control, of not trusting singers (Durrant, 2003). This is a style of leadership revealed in gesture that suggests “I am in charge” as opposed to “I am facilitating”. Notwithstanding the need for conductors to take responsibility for rehearsing and performing, there are moments when conducting gestures get in the way of the aesthetic of the music. Again, this was validated by the research study. These over-exaggerated, controlling gestures and patterns, including exaggerated mouthing of words, are often ‘un-aesthetic’, as evidenced by general feedback the conductors gave to each other in the research study. For, if the conducting gesture is not gesturally aesthetic and in keeping with the expressive and aesthetic content of the music, then part of the aesthetic *gestalt* is destroyed for those being conducted and, ultimately, for those listening as well. The choral experience is aural certainly, but it is also visual. Beautiful sounds are promoted by beautiful gestures. Thurman (2000) refers to this as a ‘bodymind’⁴ connection, part of the theory on human compatible learning.

The impact of effective conducting gesture and communication on providing for aesthetic moments in music is revealed in the following account. A BBC Radio 3 series of programmes was devoted to the performances of the retired British mezzo-soprano Dame Janet Baker (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/performanceon3/pip/u2pkz/> retrieved 26 April, 2006). At one point in conversation, she recalled her experience of singing the role of Charlotte in Massenet’s *Werther* in 1977. The opera was being performed with the English National Opera at the London Coliseum with Sir Charles Mackerras conducting.

⁴ A term used to denote the interdependency of all processing parts of the human body, which has its basis in the neuro-psycho-biological sciences (Thurman & Welch, 2000; Durrant, 2003).

She talked of a moment of real ‘connection’ with the conductor and orchestra in one particular performance of the letter scene in Act Three. Unable to account for why on this particular occasion there was this particular ‘connection’, she simply referred to it as a moment of ‘extraordinary life quality’. This is but one moment that music can generate, symbolising all that is inexplicable in the human emotional world (Langer, 1957; Kivy, 1989). The emotional context of the opera’s drama, the composed music symbolising that emotion, the conductor’s interpretation of the music and the gestural and facial communication with the singers and orchestra all combined to create that aesthetic, special, poignant and memorable moment. Making special, lifting us out of the ordinary, the poignant moment, are all characteristics of musical encounter (Custodero, 2005) – in this case, a combination of musical interpretation and its communication through ‘beautiful’ gesture to enable ‘beautiful’ sounds to emerge.

Meaningful conducting - symbolic transformation

Attention to the musical score, be it a simple folk song or a more complex larger scale choral work, covers several types of knowing. There is a ‘knowing that’ – a cognitive awareness of the musical and technical aspects – a ‘knowing how’ – a kind of craft knowledge (Brown & McIntyre, 1993; Elbaz, 1983; Collingwood, 1938) that concerns the processes and contexts of the learners or singers in the encounter and how to deal with them. In addition, a ‘knowing-in-action’ (Schön, 1987) and ‘tacit knowing’ (Polanyi, 1983) suggests that we may know more than we can tell. Our understanding of musical concepts, as Barenboim suggested in his Reith lecture (see above), is a tacit

knowing, uncovering a series of meanings through ‘dwelling in’ the musical experience. There is nothing like the experience to uncover meanings and make sense of ourselves within the musical world (Dewey, 1934; Durrant, 2003). Scruton (1983) determines that musical understanding is gained through experience of music in all its sensations and evocations of feelings, not just through appreciation of its structures. He applies this even to music that is considered ‘absolute’ – that has no intended extra-musical meanings outside its own rhetoric (Pinker’s ‘enigma’). Langer puts forward the notion that performers and listeners do not actually experience feelings and emotions portrayed in a piece of music, but rather understand those feelings and emotions through previous encounters with similar emotions. The act of performance is a symbolic transformation, a gestured expression of hearing and final imagination of tone - a collaborative venture, in the case of choral performance, between the composer, conductor and singers. The conductor is symbolically engaged in this transformation of the composer’s imagination, ideas, rhythms and sonorities, which find embodiment in the performed music (Grey, 2006).

To illustrate this symbolic transformation within the collaborative venture: the requiem is a liturgical setting of a mass for the dead that has been set to music by many composers in the Western musical canon. Engaged in a performance of, say, the dynamic setting by Verdi, it is easy for conductors and singers to understand something of the emotions and feelings of those grieving for the loss of loved ones. Verdi wrote his *Requiem* in response to the death of his friend, the writer Manzoni, in order to represent vivid emotions – ‘feeling into form’ (Langer, 1957; Grey, 2006). However, conductors and singers do not

have to share those emotions directly in order to perform the music effectively and expressively; rather the conductor's role is to shape the music through gesture - symbolically transform - so that particular expressive character is understood by all those engaged in the experience. Many people engaged in a performance of Verdi's masterpiece will have some experience perhaps of grief, tragedy, hurt, and can connect with the expressive character presented through the lyrical melodies, chromatic harmonies, musical structures and indulgent orchestration. The conductor has the potential to make the event meaningful.

Conclusion

Evidence from the reported research study with school and student teachers confirms that communication and leadership skills are stronger when knowledge is secure. Musical knowledge in the context of choral conducting incorporates (i) a knowledge of choral repertoire appropriate for the singers; (ii) a knowledge of the voice, including some physiology in order to be able to promote healthy singing; (iii) a knowledge of the expressive intentions of the music through its text and musical structures; (iv) a technical knowledge which enables the conductor to hear and therefore to feed back to the singers, as appropriate, to enhance the musical and singing experience (Apfelstadt, 1997; Decker & Kirk, 1988; Durrant, 2003; Fuelberth, 2003) . The craft skill or knowledge is the practical application of the technical knowledge, the aural skills, the detection of errors and the general shaping – knowing when and how to deal and progress with the music. According to Collingwood (1938), skilled craftsmen use knowledge as the means necessary to realise a given end, it being the mastery of these means that is the

craftsmen's skill. Teachers and choral conductors have a range of appropriate knowledge to be able to realise their specific goals. In the rehearsal context, the mastery of the means is fundamental to competent and effective musical progression. However, while effective teachers and conductors will have the craft knowledge and will know how to proceed in order to attain technical goals, they will also have the vision to guide the rehearsal towards aesthetic goals (Durrant, 2003; Durrant & Varvarigou, 2008). The inextricable relationship between knowledge and vision with communication and leadership abilities ensures the efficacy of this process.

This discourse on the aesthetic dimension of choral conducting arises from my experience of being engaged in music education through: (i) conducting for most of my life; (ii) the initial training and professional development of music teachers and choral conductors; (iii) research; (iv) the concern to improve the singing experiences of those who commit themselves to the activity and (v) the desire to motivate and inspire those who are reluctant and less confident singers. It is my belief that the leader of these activities must have the communication, leadership and musical skills to make singing experience positive and effective vocally and aesthetically. Greater understanding of the conductor's role in this respect will enable greater understanding of the lives and loves of those who sing and those who listen.

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