by John P. Graulty

Don't Watch Me!

Avoiding Podium-Centered Rehearsals

So many conductors regularly implore their ensembles to "watch me!" But do they really want to relieve their ensemble members of their equal—perhaps even greater—responsibility in the music-making process? I think not. One of the main objectives of rehearsal should be to encourage the ensemble members to become maximally engaged participants in the music-making process through increased self-awareness, thus freeing the conductor to focus on those responsibilities that are uniquely his or her own.

In my years of working with both student and professional ensembles at many different levels, I have found that ensemble members tend to approach the ensemble rehearsal process somewhat passively, thinking that it is primarily the conductor's responsibility to do the bulk of the listening, monitoring, and correcting. Perhaps this is because ensemble members have been trained from their earliest student experiences to focus on the conductor and to serve and respect the "maestro"—the "teacher"—the one we all must please, the "checker," the fixer of all problems, the judge and jury of musical "correctness." I was always dumbfounded when, even as a collegiate conductor, students would occasionally approach me asking to be excused from an upcoming rehearsal by saying, "I can't make rehearsal tomorrow, but I know my part," as if the primary reason for rehearsing was for the conductor to check in on individuals' abilities to execute their parts correctly and accurately. How do students have such a shallow understanding of the rehearsal process, and how is it they reduce sublimely beautiful ensemble music making down to mere part checking? They have come to understand, from years of podium-centered rehearsals, that ensemble music making is nothing more than delivering their part to the conductor for inspection and commentary.

In professional ensembles, too, although the relationship may be a bit different, the reality is often the same. Professionals believe the conductor (perhaps because he or she is paid more than the rest?) should shoulder the bulk of the responsibility for musical accuracy and quality. In fact, they often demand it. I can recall playing clarinet in a professional chamber orchestra with a colleague who enjoyed reminding the conductor regularly of his awesome responsibility. For example, when this particular player discovered an absolutely obvious note error in the part, rather than simply correcting it and moving on, the individual insisted on stopping the rehearsal and asking the conductor to correct the mistake, wasting valuable rehearsal time and annoying the conductor and several other ensemble colleagues.

Conductors also play a significant role in creating a podium-centered atmosphere by encouraging ensemble members to become overly reliant on them. Due in part to well-developed egos, a lack of confidence in the ability of the ensemble members who actually make the music, or simple naiveté, many conductors insist on placing themselves at the center of the music-making process all the time, correcting this, dictating that, controlling *everything!* In *The Creative Director: Alternative Rehearsal Tech-*

Rehearsals can be opportunities for partnerships between ensemble directors and musicians in which the players take more responsibility for the quality of the music that is performed.

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niques, clinician and conductor Edward Lisk describes how "the amount of time we spend before our organizations activates the *analytical-error detector mode* within us." He goes on to warn that "when we are consistently working with formula structure (eliminating errors), a tendency to stifle the students musical potential is possible."[1] Even from the audience member's vantage point, the conductor, located front and center, elevated on a podium, seems all-powerful. But as most honest conductors will readily admit, it is not really so. Conductors are *not* all-powerful. In fact, wielding all the power and control for the performance is, I dare say, not even a desirable end for either the ensemble or the conductor, from an aesthetic or practical standpoint.

Harvard Business School professor Robert Austin and theatre dramaturg Lee Devin, in *Artful Making: What Managers Need to Know about How Artists Work,* imply parallels between how theatre companies and music ensembles work. In the excerpt below, replace *actor* with *musician, play* with *music selection,* and *script* with *score:*

> Individual actor [musician] presentations, done in parallel, will be inconsistent with each other, based on different assumptions about how the play [music selection] will unfold. When the group members convene to try out what they've individually prepared, their efforts combine messily, providing ample evidence of the script's [score's] lack of controlling detail. But a primary purpose of the rehearsals is, of course, to coordinate.[2]
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> Devin and Austin explain that while the play's director (again, one could easily substitute *conductor* for *director*) serves a role in refining the coordination, in many instances, the actors (substitute *ensemble members*) play an equally important role, through frequent iteration (run-throughs), in coming up with the most workable solutions for pulling the individual roles together into a cohesive whole. It is not all top-down direction.[3]

So, how can conductors unburden themselves by shifting more of the responsibility for good ensemble music making back on the players, where it in reality already resides and truly belongs, especially if the ultimate goal is more effective, spontaneous, and convincing music making? The answer lies in how we rehearse and how we invite the ensemble members to engage in the music-making process. My conducting mentor, Frank Battisti, often proclaimed (as I am sure other great conductors past and present have) that rehearsal is where we come to learn each other's parts, not our own.[4] How true! But how might conductors, provided they have done all their homework in advance by thoroughly absorbing all aspects of the score and formulating an intimate knowledge of how the parts should fit together, encourage and help ensemble members become aware of other parts, of what is going on around them?

Build Partnerships with the Ensemble

When you as the conductor stop the rehearsal to address a challenge, before telling the ensemble why you are stopping, ask them if they know why you are stopping. Pamela Gearhart, retired conductor from Ithaca College, explains her use of questioning in rehearsals:

> Instead of telling, ask questions. This hits the old problem of "I can't play and listen too!" I say, "I am sorry, you have to do both." I may ask, for example, "What is out of tune in this chord? Why did I stop? What was wrong? Can you tell me who has a parallel line with you? Who has an answering phrase to you?" Or, "Can the third horn sing the viola part?" The brass plays and I say to the second violins, "Tell me, what did Borodin write dynamically for the brass?" All this makes them more active instead of passive.[5]

I often tell my ensemble members that if they are listening as attentively as I am, they should have a good idea why I am stopping before I tell them why. If they do not know, before blurting out an answer or corrective advice, try the section again, and ask the question, again. If they still do not know why—and they should know why if they are truly engaged in active listening—simply raise their aural awareness by offering a small clue as to what you are hearing, and try the passage again. "I try to have them involved with problem solving with whatever musical and technical problems that occur in the rehearsal. . . . Instead of just giving an answer I might go through a variety of appropriate things for the particular issue that always involves them," says conductor Larry Rachleff, at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music.[6] After all, is this not one of our primary objectives as a conductor, to guide the ensemble members' listening so that *they* can make subtle corrections in execution? Although this may seem like an inefficient and time-consuming process at first, the goal is to jar the ensemble members out of the passive rut of delivering their part to the front desk and waiting for an inspection and correction from the conductor.

Again, Rachleff reminds us, "The more we involve [ensemble members] in decision-making as we guide them, the longer the learning remains, and the more they can transfer it to other situations."[7] It also has much more impact, for example, if the percussion section hears from the trumpet section, rather than the conductor, that they seem a bit too heavy in a particular section. This kind of shared rehearsal process increases musical sensitivity among and between sections exponentially! In the end, if they begin listening to elements of balance, intonation, blend, articulation, phrasing, and rhythmic alignment as carefully as I do, the need to stop and "fix" problems will decrease—they will begin to hear and correct problems quickly—*on the fly.* A rehearsal process that progresses in this manner engages the ensemble members in a new kind of musical partnership in which many of the traditionally understood roles of the conductor fade away or, rather, are transferred back to the players. For example, players may rediscover that the conductor *establishes* tempo but does not *maintain* it—this is the ensemble's responsibility. Moreover, those responsibilities that are exclusively the conductor's, elements that cannot be determined democratically, such as pacing, phrasing, inflection, and large formal nuances, begin to emerge with greater clarity, both for the ensemble and the conductor. Perhaps most important, encouraging the players to become more active partners in the music-making process

increases their sense of ownership, pride, and responsibility in the uniquely wonderful act of ensemble music making—creating music with and between others.

This kind of attentive, responsible listening may be developed even during the tuning process in school ensembles. I have witnessed on many occasions directors going through the entire ensemble holding an electronic tuner in front of each player to correct intonation. Unfortunately, however, electronic tuners often encourage players to bypass the listening process entirely because they turn the process of tuning from an aural exercise into a visual one (is the needle straight up?). Unwittingly, directors are developing their players' sense of sight rather than their sense of hearing. Used this way, tuners are actually counter to establishing good intonation practices. Why not put the tuner away (after getting at least one player in the ensemble tuned to a standard pitch), and ask other players to comment on whether individual pitches sounded are higher or lower than the reference pitch? When other students in the ensemble know they might be called upon randomly to correct the pitch of another player, directors might be surprised at how much more quiet and attentive the rest of the ensemble becomes during the traditionally mundane and passive tuning process. Allow players the freedom to give the wrong answer. Austin and Devin write, "Willingness to work at risk is vital in artful making, in part because exploration is uncomfortable. Exploration requires a willingness to supply partial answers, to float trial balloons, to look goofy, and to get things 'wrong.'"[8] Any truthful professional player will readily admit that it is often difficult to discern whether he or she is sharp or flat to the prevailing pitch. Players know they are out of tune, but which way do they need to head to find consensus? If students seem confused about pitch matching, admit that it is sometimes difficult and encourage them to experiment by bending the pitch up and down until they find consensus. While this may seem time-consuming at first, training students to use their ears in adjusting intonation will have long-term benefits and will ultimately increase rehearsal efficiency.

Listen More than Talk!

From my experience as an ensemble member, I have come to believe that when conductors stop to talk about something they believe must be "fixed" (and music is never "broken" to begin with), most players lapse into what I call "*Peanuts* mode." They have been encouraged through years and years of routine rehearsal techniques to be so passively engaged that they hear the conductor speaking as Charlie Brown and his classmates in the classic *Peanuts* cartoon hear their teacher: "Wa-wa-wa-wa. Wa-wa-wa-Wa-wah!" They simply pretend to be engaged in what the conductor is telling them, wait for the "wa-wa" to end, and tune in to the critical instruction at the end of the diatribe indicating where in the music the conductor will resume rehearsing: "Wa-wa-wa-wa. Let's start at letter B." But what if the conductor did not immediately provide the answer? What if, instead of a correction, the conductor asked the players to identify the problem? I have tried it, and here is what happens. The ensemble members perk up, open up their ears, and start listening to what is going on around them and across the ensemble. They take more responsibility for how their contribution is mixing with the whole, because they know they may be called upon at any moment to assume the traditional role of the conductor and comment specifically on how well the process is going. In fact, I am amazed at some of the answers I hear back from a newly awakened ensemble. Sometimes they hear things I missed! As Larry Rachleff reminds us, "A conductor can fool himself by believing the conductor is the only person hearing what is happening in the rehearsal. They will be incorrect if they think that the kids cannot hear."[9]

Although the best seat in the house for hearing should be on the podium, it often is not, depending on the acoustic properties of the hall or the rehearsal space. When I conducted the Band of the United States Air Forces in Europe on tour, I recall arriving at wonderful concert halls, especially in England, where the stage had built-in risers that were sometimes quite high. At the sound check before the concert, I was always shocked and a bit humbled to hear things I had not heard in two full weeks of rehearsal back in our flat-floor, low-ceiling rehearsal hall in Germany. But that is reality. While conductors must make every attempt possible, they just cannot hear everything. I often remind my forty-piece ensemble that they have eighty ears to my two and to please use them.

Try Monk Rehearsals

A monk rehearsal, as the name suggests, is conducted entirely in silence, except for the music making, of course. The ensemble members and conductor take a vow of silence—no talking for the duration of the rehearsal. All musical communication must be transferred through gesture, and gesture alone. When I first tried this with an ensemble, I experienced an unexpected benefit right at the beginning of rehearsal. The students came into the rehearsal thinking they could not make any sound whatsoever, so the usual desensitizing racket that occurred before most rehearsals, with percussionists bashing away and trumpet players running unsuccessful tests of their high range, was missing. That rehearsal began from an atmosphere of unforgettable quiet anticipation bordering on a sort of sacred reverence—beautiful!

As educator Gerald Olson explains, "Most teachers talk too much; I try to talk little. If we talk too much, there's no need for them ever to look."[10] Monk rehearsals, perhaps more than any other technique, underscore the most important functions of the conductor while increasing the ensemble members' level of engagement in the music-making process. Neither the ensemble nor the conductor can rely on the normal rhythm of knowing that if something goes awry, they can simply stop and talk about it. Both quickly realize that this new reality demands a new kind of clarity and sensitivity that resides only in the interplay between sound and gesture. It is always amazing—and refreshing—to me and my players just how much can be accomplished—even corrected—without saying a word! When intonation problems arise, for example, my only recourse is to visually identify, in a general sort of way, where I hear the disagreement. The players then must zero in with their own ears and find out specifically where the discrepancy lies and find consen-

sus. The players learn that they must read the conductor's gestures carefully, and the conductor realizes that his or her gestures must be absolutely clear and intentional, because they both know that there will be no opportunity to discuss the problem. And what better way to build toward a spontaneous and exciting performance, where the conductor and ensemble must rely *solely* on the interplay between gesture and sound?

Oddly enough, one of the most difficult matters to address in monk rehearsals, from my experience, is the mundane task of indicating to the ensemble where to begin again. I keep a small dry-erase board on the podium if the charades-style technique of, say, tapping the top of my head to indicate that we are restarting at the top or pointing to my eye for letter *I* fails. But it is amazing how little I need to resort even to the dry-erase board. My players *love* monk rehearsals and often beg me to do more of them. They feel monk rehearsals are much more efficient and fun. I must agree. They help the ensemble and the conductor get right to the heart of what is most rewarding and satisfying about ensemble music making—how, with maximum engagement and sensitivity, musicians can partner to achieve beautiful musical gestures without uttering a word.

Some Broader Implications

If ensemble experiences in our education system are really about fostering and developing Bloom's highest-order thinking skills, including problem solving using multiple perspectives and inputs,[11] we as conductor-teachers must replace traditional podium-centered rehearsals with those that actively and regularly engage all members of our ensembles in deep listening and creative problem-solving behaviors. In an era where iPods and portable CD players have allowed human beings to hear extraordinarily high-quality music in a passive mode anytime, anywhere, while walking, jogging, washing dishes, reading, even working, the skill of actively and deeply engaging live music is fast becoming a lost art. Passive listening is replacing active listening. Is it any wonder that eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds are currently the least likely to attend live performances?[12] If I can hear the Berlin Philharmonic or the Backstreet Boys on my tiny iPod earphones anytime, anywhere, as mere accompaniment to other daily tasks, how will I develop the kind of active, acutely aware listening skills I need to be an effective ensemble participant? More important, how will I develop the broader skill of hearing and processing multiple sonic inputs with the sensitivity and awareness to make informed decisions about my place and role in the increasingly complex global society in which I live and function?

Music educator–conductors must fully understand and advocate for the intrinsic ways in which ensemble music making uniquely encourages the development of the following vitally important skills: higher-order synthesizing and problem solving, critical thinking, communal responsibility, and empathy.[13] At a time in America when our president is demanding more individual civic responsibility in addressing the fundamental challenges facing our society, we need to promote more democratic ensemble experiences that fully engage individual ensemble members. These core curricular experiences in our schools can go a long way toward countering the notion that ensembles are mere service providers for school ceremonial, social, and athletic functions. Attentive music making offers the kind of experiences that will help our students achieve their potentials in whatever they choose to do in life.

Notes

1. Edward Lisk, *The Creative Director: Alternative Rehearsal Techniques* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Meredith Music Publications, 1991), 112.
2. Robert Austin and Lee Devin, *Artful Making: What Managers Need to Know About How Artists Work* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2003), 36.
3. Ibid., chap. 3.
4. Battisti's personal reflection, shared with the author during a conducting lesson at the New England Conservatory.
5. Joseph L. Casey, *Teaching Techniques and Insights for Instrumental Music Educators* (Chicago: GIA, 1991), 155.
6. Ibid., 151.
7. Ibid., 151.
8. Austin and Devin, *Artful Making,* 117.
9. Casey, *Teaching Techniques,* 151.
10. Ibid., 130.
11. Harold Abeles, Charles Hoffer, and Robert Klotman, *Foundations of Music Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 201–2.
12. Julia Lowell and Laura Zakaras, *Cultivating Demand for the Arts: Arts Learning, Arts Engagement, and State Arts Policy* (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 3.
13. Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, and Arthur Brooks, *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts* (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2004), chaps. 4–5.