Masterworks #4: The Role of the Conductor, OR – Can Someone Please Explain What a Conductor Does, Really?

Did orchestras always have conductors?

The short answer is no, at least not as we know it today. But having someone in a position of “musical authority” dates as far back as the Middle Ages, when hand gestures were used by the ‘leader’ to help shape the music. In church, the leader often held a large stick (a staff) to signify his role, and as music became more rhythmically driven, the stick was moved up and down to mark the beat.

By the 17th century, the choirmaster commonly held a rolled up sheaf of paper as an early baton, often tapping on something to make the beat audible. Some leaders resorted to pounding the large stick on the floor, but surely the racket must have been deafening – or at least disruptive to the audience. And potentially dangerous to the conductor: in 1687, while vigorously conducting with a large staff, Jean-Baptiste Lully stabbed himself in the foot and ultimately died from the resulting infection.

Instrumental music of the Baroque era (1600 – 1750) generally relied on a member of the ensemble to act as conductor. The first violinist (or concert master) invariably acted as the leader. With pieces that had a “basso continuo” part, it was also common to conduct from the harpsichord. Opera sometimes had two conductors: the musician at the keyboard (in charge of the singers) and the principal violinist (who led the orchestra).

As ensembles grew larger and spread out, it was apparent that hand gestures and tapping sounds were inadequate. By the early 1800’s, a dedicated conductor was the norm, and the baton (easier to see than bare hands or rolled up paper) became more common. The earliest conductors included Carl Maria von Weber, Felix Mendelssohn, Hector Berlioz and Richard Wagner, all of whom were also composers. It is said that Mendelssohn was the first conductor to use a wooden baton to keep time.

Wagner, considered the forerunner of the modern conductor, wrote extensively on the ‘art’ of conducting and believed that the conductor was the supreme figure, responsible for the interpretation of the music, and not merely to act as a human metronome. Wagner emphasized the idea of melody, giving the conductor the freedom to adjust tempo, dynamics and determine phrasing for expressive effect.

Today, conductors communicate their artistic vision and directions to the musicians during the performance. The primary responsibility of the conductor is setting the tempo, controlling changes to the tempo, managing changes in dynamics (loud vs. soft), cueing (accurately and clearly indicating when a particular musician or section should begin playing) and shaping the other musical elements of the piece including articulation and phrasing.

Given the strong tradition regarding the relationship between the symphony and the modern conductor, “conductorless ensembles” exist, but are still less common. Some of the most famous of these include...
The Prague Chamber Orchestra (founded in 1951), The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, founded by cellist Julian Fifer in 1972, the Australian Chamber Orchestra (founded in 1975 by cellist John Painter), The New Century Chamber Orchestra (based in San Francisco, founded in 1992) and the East Coast Chamber Orchestra (begun in 2001.) In Orpheus, the musicians manage the artistic direction of the ensemble, the full ensemble makes repertoire suggestions, and different performers assume the role of leader/musician.iii

And for Fun: Can you identify these famous 20th and 21st Century Conductors?
(Hint: Answers are at the bottom of this edition of Prelude!)

Please join the Hartford Symphony Orchestra for Battle of the Batons, our Fourth Masterworks of the season, on January 21 – 24, 2016, and enjoy the novel experience of observing three finalists audition for the role of HSO’s new Assistant Conductor.

Love what you hear and want a closer connection with the HSO? Remember that as a donor you are entitled to special benefits and unparalleled access to insider events. For a full list of donor benefits and giving levels, please visit our website at http://www.hartfordsymphony.org/individual-support/giving-levels/

---

i New World Encyclopedia
iii Ben Proudfoot, “Conducting As An Art”
v New World Encyclopedia
Curious about what you will be hearing on the concert program, or want to hear more? Coleman Casey, HSO’s dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers the following recommendations for recordings of selections featured on our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

Bottesini’s Double Bass Concerto No. 2 is a rarity in the concert hall, but who better to perform it than Edgar Meyer (the leading player of (and contemporary composer for) this instrument. (SONY)

Camille Saint-Saëns’ Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso is a staple of all great violinists’ repertoire, but Kyung Wha Chung’s recording with Charles Dutoit and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra stands out for its combination of technical finish and emotive fantasy, also stunningly recorded. (DECCA)

Otto Klemperer reigns supreme in the interpretation of Mozart’s Magic Flute with the New Philharmonia Orchestra. (EMI)

After almost fifty years, there is no greater recording of Debussy’s Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun with Herbert von Karajan and the incomparable Berlin Philharmonic. (DG)

Sir Georg Solti’s memorably energetic and beautifully recorded version of Borodin’s Polovtsian Dance with the London Symphony Orchestra is spine-tingling. (DECCA)

Regrettably, there is no recording of Sejourné’s Concerto for Vibraphone and Strings.

And for our Upcoming February Concert - LOVE NOTES – We’re Sweetening the Deal . . . .

You can score big points with your sweetheart when you pre-order a box of delectable Munson’s chocolates and have them ready for “pick up” when you attend the HSO’s Love Notes concert. We will set aside a beautifully-wrapped box with four mouth-watering chocolate truffles, along with a note card for your personalization.

The cost for the treat is $10.00 and this offer is available in advance sales only, for pick-up on the date of the performance you plan to attend. To pre-order your special Valentine’s Gift, please contact our box office at 860-987-5900. The first and last names of all purchasers will be taken along with the date of the performance you are attending. When you arrive for the performance, your order will be ready for pick-up when you present your ‘Chocolate’ ticket at the HSO Information Table, located inside the Belding Lobby as you enter from the box office.

As these are special treats created especially for the HSO, orders must be received on or before February 1st to be ready in time for our Love Notes Concert.

Love Notes with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra runs for four performances; February 11 at 7:30 p.m., February 12 and 13 at 8 p.m. and February 14 at 2 p.m. When calling to pre-order your special box of chocolate, be sure to specify the concert you will be attending.

Join us for music, and romance, and chocolates!

ANSWERS TO CONDUCTOR QUIZ:

A) Marin Alsop (Baltimore Symphony Orchestra)
B) Andris Nelsons (Boston Symphony Orchestra)
C) Leonard Bernstein (died 1990)
D) Gustavo Dudamel (L.A. Philharmonic Orchestra)
E) James Levine (Metropolitan Opera Orchestra)
F) Lorin Maazel (died 2014)
G) Seiji Ozawa (former conductor, Boston Symphony)
H) Riccardo Muti (Chicago Symphony Orchestra)
I) Sir George Solti (former conductor, Chicago Symphony)
J) Leopold Stokowski (died 1977)
K) Arturo Toscanini (died 1957)