

C. Barber, *Musings 2009*

PART IV

Muy mas Machaut

So...how does one go about such an installation? How do you teach someone to make a valid aesthetic judgment, and how do you assess a student's ability to do so? On a practical level, where do you put it within the curriculum? Ideally, it would hold a central place in music education at all levels (K-post graduate). Realistically, colleges and universities have to lead the way and teach aspiring educators how to embed it into their work.

In post-secondary education, aesthetic judgments are either tacitly expressed through the teacher's choice of material to use in the classroom, or actively stated in applied settings (lessons, rehearsals, and performances). However, such better/worse thinking is entirely on the part of the faculty. Students are left to assume that Machaut must be important since he appears on their exams, and the ability to construct a fugue must be an important life skill for practicing musicians since a chunk of their semester grade depends on it. Stravinsky must be an important guy since he takes up so much rehearsal time, and evidently Mozart's keyboard music is not meant to be played as if you're wearing mittens.

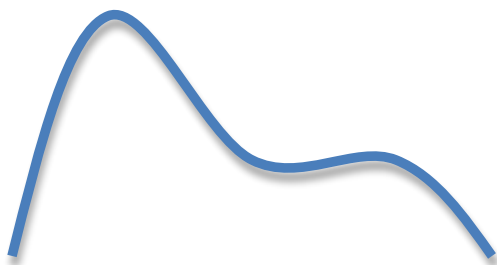
College faculty tend to be like professional chefs: what happens in the kitchen stays in the kitchen. Don't ask, don't tell, just eat what you're served and pay no attention to the strange absence of cats in the neighborhood. It's actually not a bad modus operandi if you're teaching people to eat, but in the arts we're ostensibly teaching people to cook – and teaching people to teach other people how to cook. We need to adopt the breezy, unselfconscious approach of Julia Child. If the pot roast accidentally hits the floor don't go to commercial. Just pick it up, wipe it off, and douse it in a nice cabernet while discussing the importance of marbling. Any cook knows the most essential lesson is how to choose the best ingredients. Choice based on judgment of quality – this tomato is better, that tomato is worse. Machaut is to Jacob Senleches as filet mignon is to cube steak, and that pair of mittens might come in handy as you're analyzing Stravinsky's harmonic proclivities (a little of the cabernet wouldn't hurt either).

Opening the kitchen door is merely the first step. For the sake of forward momentum, let's assume that our faculty is hip to transparency and able to blend some back story (the why behind the what and the how) into existing course content. But aesthetic judgment is a use it or lose it proposition. Where in the curriculum might students be called upon to make aesthetic judgments and expected to cope with the consequences in artistic terms? That trapeze act happens in the applied tent of our musical circus. Typically, composers as well as instrumental and vocal performers gain confidence by working over a net: their teacher's watchful eyes and ears. If the phrasing is unconvincing, or the voice leading is awkward, the teacher is ready, willing, and able to come to the rescue. Hundreds of years of tradition support this cycle. Not all turn out to be Jascha Heifetz or Aaron Copland, but at least none suffer the fate of Karl Wallenda (metaphorically speaking).

But teaching collegiate instrumental and vocal performers to make aesthetic judgments isn't the issue. That system works and is the commonly accepted model. We know how to get individual performers from here:



to here:



And, in spite of cultural fads and governmental edicts, we even know how to make the equivalent progress with aspiring teachers (irrespective of subject area). The approach is actually quite similar, and inexperienced educators gain confidence in practice teaching situations. When the lesson on set theory causes the first grade general music class to erupt in an Orff instrument fueled atonal bacchanal, the supervising teacher is there to set things right with a quick round of *Hokey Pokey*.

In both cases (teaching and applied performance), the goal is clear and progress is measured easily. Even the uninitiated can perceive the difference between skill and ineptitude, if not subtler shades of expertise. The problem lies in the confluence of the two: where teaching and performing merge. It is in those brackish waters where we find conducting and music education. The two are often confused for siblings, although they are at best second cousins once removed. Nevertheless, they share certain hereditary traits that wreak havoc in academia.

In his article "Educating Musically" (*The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, 2002), Wayne Bowman writes,

Ironically, school-based music education often eludes close scrutiny on such grounds precisely because of the preponderantly technical orientation of modern schools, and their pathetically narrow vision of human purposes. It is relatively easy to demonstrate, after all, that music students are developing concrete skills and understandings, and that we are therefore 'adding value' just like the 'other' disciplinary areas. However, to return to the main point, this fails to address the larger concern of what kind of value is being added, or whether that value is educationally positive or negative. It fails to distinguish education from training, or to distinguish musical instruction with educational intent from musical instruction whose impact extends no further than training.

Since its introduction into the public schools in 19th century New England, music has been a practical matter. Music education in the United States is technical training, for all intents and purposes, in spite of the noble rhetoric of many of its advocates. One look at the National Standards for Music Education will confirm this assertion. In order to safeguard music's place in the curriculum, educators have had to adopt and defend a practical stance. In "Toward Better Music Classes" (*The Instrumentalist*, June 2004), Charles Groeling asserts:

Speakers [at the College of Education, New York University] said that most arts instructors (regardless of their medium) restrict testing to a narrow portion of the subject and think only in terms of measurable outcomes to the exclusion of the interpretive and sensory aspects of a particular subject.

We've been here before – in Part II, to be precise. Rather than run that course again, let's follow the track that leads toward conducting. There may be some useful insight on that branch of the family tree.

The foundation of the pragmatic v. artistic conundrum as it relates to conducting can be seen in the development of the conductor's role in performance. The journey from utterly practical ensemble manager to quasi-mystical creative authority is surprisingly recent in historical terms.

Origin of the Specious

According to the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*:

- Ancient history: Conducting finds its origins in the use of hands to indicate melodic motion (chironomy). This was a technique not only of early Egyptian and Sumerian conductors, dating from c. 2800 BCE, but also early conductors of Gregorian chant. In addition to accounting for melody, conductors have historically been responsible for the beat or pulse of music. This was sometimes indicated by audible downward motions of the foot (known as choreutes).
- 15th and 16th centuries: The beat or pulse was shown with an upward and downward hand motion called the tactus. Up until this point in history, no distinction had been made between strong and weak beats.
- 17th century: The beat or pulse was now shown with the use of the hand, a rolled-up sheet of paper, or wooden stick to produce slightly audible strong and weak beats. At the end of the 17th century, the first violinist replaces the organist as conductor as art music becomes increasingly secularized. Lully may have been one of the first to assume this role and, at the same time, to introduce the traditional motions for beating time which are explained by M. de Saint Lambert (*Les Principes du clavecin*, 1702) and M.P. de Montéclair (*Nouvelle Méthode pour apprendre la musique*, 1709).

- 18th century: Not infrequently there were two conductors, one at the keyboard and one as first violin. According to Apel, the last great violinist-conductor was F. Habeneck (1781-1849).
- 19th century: Conductors, rather than sitting at the harpsichord, singing within a choral ensemble, or playing violin, became more independent and authoritative. These conductors stood in front of the group and used a baton. Most were composers (Spontini, Spohr, Weber, Mendelssohn). The first professional conductor was O. Nicolai (1810-1849) in Vienna, followed by Hans von Bülow (1830-1894), Ernst von Schuch (1846-1914), Arthur Nikisch (1855-1922), Weingartner (1863-1942), Toscanini (1867-1957), Monteux (1875-1964), Walter (1876-1962), Furtwängler (1886-1954).

This chronology clearly illustrates the evolution of the practice of conducting, but it only begins to imply the ascendance of the conductor's status from ensemble-member-time-keeper to artistic-commander-in-chief. To fully appreciate this transformation, one must understand that the modern Western concept of genius was formed by German thinkers of the late 18th century (Hegel, our pal Kant, and Schiller) and enhanced by a century of Romanticism. During the same period of time, the role of the conductor began to develop as a viable, independent and ultimately supreme musical art form. The 19th century conductor also enjoyed a certain "value added" because he either was the composer or was closely acquainted with the composer. By the time the early 20th century rolled around, the conductor had assumed Olympian standing among artistic geniuses because, unlike poets, painters, authors or sculptors, the conductor is purportedly endowed with the power to control other artists, and he claims the exclusive right and almost priestly ability to "interpret" the works of composer-geniuses.

As the view of the conductor moved from practical to mystical, conducting pedagogy followed a paradoxically contrary path from none, or the mere recognition of naturally endowed talent/genius, to doctoral degree programs and institutionally installed technique.

The 20th century phenomenon of teaching conducting has several origins. In addressing a parallel phenomenon in literature, Tom Grimes provides an apt summary of one (*The Workshop: Seven Decades of the Iowa Writers' Workshop*, 1999):

Not unexpectedly, critical idolatry of Art, the artist, and the aesthetic soon brought about a demystifying reaction, something along the lines of stock market correction for geniuses. In tandem with this spirit, oddly enough, the creative writing workshop [...and the conducting workshop] was born.

20th century cultural trends definitely resulted in the devaluing of the concept of artistic genius, and a larger segment of the population came to see music and the arts as a viable career path.

Another origin of conducting pedagogy was purely practical. With the widespread introduction of instrumental ensembles into the public schools there had to be a way of rapidly training large numbers of people to lead them. Burgeoning music teacher training programs needed instructional materials, and conducting texts (and ultimately symposia) were the result.

Here is what NASM has to say about conducting study as it relates to any bachelors degree in music:

Knowledge and skills sufficient to work as a leader and in collaboration on matters of musical interpretation. Rehearsal and conducting skills are required as appropriate to the particular music concentration.

For aspiring music educators, there's more:

Conducting and Musical Leadership. The prospective music teacher must be a competent conductor, able to create accurate and musically expressive performances with various types of performing groups and in general classroom situations. Instruction in conducting includes score reading and the integration of analysis, style, performance practices, instrumentation, and conducting techniques. Laboratory experiences that give the student opportunities to apply rehearsal techniques and procedures are essential. Prospective teachers in programs with less focus on the preparation of ensemble conductors must acquire conducting and musical leadership skills sufficient to teach effectively in their area(s) of specialization.

“Area of specialization” refers to choral, instrumental, or general music education if I’m reading the handbook correctly. So the role of the conductor is, allegedly, to create accurate and musically expressive performances. Then it stands to reason that the prime directive of a music educator is largely devoted to this, given the energy and specificity of the language. I don’t agree, as anyone who has read Parts II and III will know.

I am rapidly coming to the conclusion that the key is to determine what distinguishes conducting from “musical leadership.” Is conducting the only form of musical leadership? NASM seems to think so. I disagree. In fact, I would go so far as to say that conducting is a highly specialized form of musical leadership so arcane as to be of little use in a normal classroom setting. It is the more universal form of musical leadership that is necessary, and sorely lacking in the undergraduate population. I’m speaking of musicianship – the ability to interact on a purely musical, artistic level with other performers (the ability to be a musician, not just play one on TV).

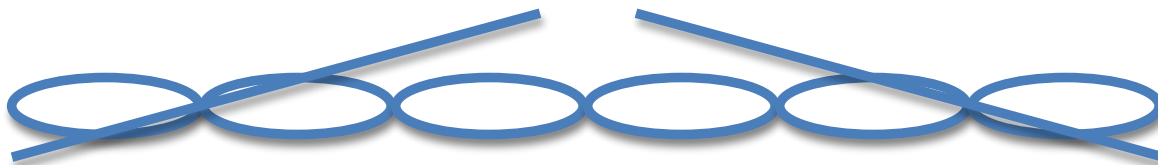
In that light, a single basic conducting course would satisfy NASM and leave room for an advanced musical leadership course in lieu of advanced conducting. But no...the NASM Handbook includes this little gem later on:¹

Institutions should provide opportunities for advanced undergraduate study in such areas as conducting, composition, and analysis.

¹ As an aside, in *Appendix 1.C, Standards and Guidelines for the Education and Training of Orchestral Conductors*, NASM drops this bomb: “These standards and guidelines are applicable to programs with specific published objectives for training professional orchestral conductors. Standards applied to generic choral and instrumental conducting programs are found in the Standards for Accreditation.” Professional v. generic – how offensive is that? Wow...

Interestingly, none of the BME students are expected to take the advanced courses in composition and analysis, but they are all required to take advanced conducting.

Be that as it may, what would a musical leadership class look like? And how do you embed this material in a conducting class when the expectation is floor-door-window-ceiling and this is the long established tradition:



Inoculation

Evidently there's something magical about conducting that seduces even highly skillful educators to insinuate it into everything. It's like a virus. Strangely, although music educators are all infected, most don't show any outward manifestation (i.e. they are lousy conductors). Why? Because they don't know what conducting is.

-- Once again, insert *Influencing Sound* (aka GUT) here --

If music educators could be made to understand what conducting is (or at least what it isn't), then the proportions of the typical BME program could change to accommodate the teaching content that is so sadly lacking. We're not creating music educators, we're creating band and choral directors – notice I did not say conductors. We're teaching our students how to administer school-based arts organizations, right down to fund raising, advocacy and audience development. And, like any arts organization, the prime directive isn't the musical development of its members; it's self-perpetuation. Make the audience happy so you have enough revenue to fund another season. The CSO doesn't do what it does because Beethoven needs the royalties. In fact, they tend to eschew the living composers that actually do need them. (I sense digression coming on...).

Back on track: Advanced Conducting doesn't fit the larger structure of our BME program because it teaches what conducting truly is. That's what the toxic "extra" material is – the core content of the course. Although I'm surprised to be writing it, teaching conducting in its true form is outside the boundaries of music education as it currently exists. Conducting is about musicianship (with a heavy dose of imagination and improvisation), and music education isn't. That will no doubt offend the music educators who believe they are dealing in creativity. There is nothing creative about the typical school band or choir program, in large part because you can't measure creativity. And most music educators I know would freely admit that they don't deal in artistry (that's for the pros). But conducting – real conducting – is quite possibly the most artistically intense subcategory of music.

I have learned quite recently that even professional performers have an oddly limited view of what it means to be a conductor. While trying to sort out an issue in the graduate conducting program related to applied lessons, I polled the faculty for their thoughts. Here's a transcript of the e-conversation. Different colors represent different faculty and are consistent from question to question. None of the following represents my own point of view (I just asked the questions).

- At what level should a conducting major be expected to perform/participate in his/her secondary applied area?

I don't know what standards are set for these students in the studios; but I can tell you that administratively they would register for applied music at the 8-- level. This level is reserved for graduate students who were majors on a particular instrument as undergraduates, but are now pursuing a different major (conducting, for example) as graduate students. Thus Cliff would register for MUAP 810 for one credit hour per semester and should receive a 30-minute lesson per week.

I think the Woodwind Specialist degree requirement could apply here: Junior level, which would also suggest that they would be the equivalent to a student who has passed their UDQE here at UNL

I think it's going to be very difficult to define a required standard of proficiency for graduate students in conducting; I'm sure that it's not unusual that many of them are not coming to us immediately after finishing their previous degree, so it's conceivable that they may be severely out-of-practice on their primary instruments.

One standard that might apply here would be one that is parallel to the degree in multiple woodwinds. These students are required to study their primary instrument and achieve a proficiency equivalent to that of a junior on their secondary instruments. In the case of conducting students, they could study conducting as their primary "instrument" and then we could require them to achieve junior-level proficiency on their instrument.

Of course, that standard alone is pretty difficult to define, and frankly, this would be the absolute minimum in my view. Ideally, conducting students would demonstrate an even higher degree of musicianship than that.

I think that we are getting graduate level conductors coming from all different stages of their careers--some farther removed from playing than others--so we have to be careful to not make the performance level so onerous that it will discourage graduate students in conducting from applying to UNL.

Related questions:

1. Conducting majors register for 1-credit lessons, 1/2 hour a week. Should they be required to participate fully in studio classes? (FYI: in the past, different studios have had different practices, from no participation beyond lessons to full participation).

Whatever is decided here should be "across the board" for all 8-- students, in my opinion.

My thought is that only horn MAJORS are required to take part in weekly studio class.

No, they should not. I've always invited those students to participate, but not require them to. I see their lessons as a secondary area--almost like a "minor" for the undergraduates since conducting is their primary focus.

MY EXPECTATIONS HAVE BEEN THAT THEY DO PARTICIPATE.

I personally don't think that conducting students should be required to take applied lessons. Most of the studios are too full to accommodate them and they wind up studying with a GTA. That being said, I don't think that studio class should be a requirement either. I certainly don't require it.

2. Should conducting students be required to pass juries on their secondary instrument? Might they be exempt during the semester of their conducting recital? (FYI: in the past, different studios have had different practices, from no jury requirement at all, to occasional jury examination, to full participation).

Again, we should be consistent among 8-- level students, not just conducting students.

I don't require anyone taking a 1/2-hour lesson to do a jury. I have encouraged them to do so if they are making great strides, or if they want to do one (which has actually happened!).

All students taking lessons should have to do a jury; I may have been one of those who didn't require a jury in the past, but I would prefer they actually do one. This would be their final exam for the semester of lessons, so I don't see how one could justify exempting them just because they are performing their conducting recital. Does that mean they don't practice during that time or take any other classes? (playing devil's advocate here...not intending you to answer that.)

Conducting students should absolutely have to play a jury if they are taking lessons. I don't consider this too much of a burden on a conducting student, because if they can't perform on an instrument as well as our undergraduate music ed majors who have passed the UDQE, do they really have any business conducting?

MY EXPECTATIONS HAVE BEEN THAT THEY PASS JURIES WITH SIMILAR REQUIREMENTS AS MY UNDERGRADUATE MINUS ALL OF THE SCALE REQUIREMENTS. I THINK, BASED ON MY CURRENT CONDUCTING STUDENT, THAT I HAVE SOMETHING TO HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE.

Absolutely not. They are here for a conducting degree. To expect that level of maintenance on their instrument means daily practice time that they likely don't have.

3. Should conducting students be expected to perform at a junior level of proficiency (equivalent of a 3rd year undergraduate)? If they don't, might there be a remedial option to bring them up to speed (similar to the aural skills issue discussed in faculty meeting today)? Or if they don't, should they not be admitted as a conducting major at all?

I think a junior level of proficiency is fair. I'm not really in favor of a remedial option, especially for graduate students. I guess my approach would be if they don't play well enough, even though they are conducting majors, then they aren't admitted into the program. I can foresee that this could become an issue when we get a superstar conductor who hasn't touched their instrument in 3 years.

I don't know of any remedial option that would work. Other than to allow a conducting major to take lessons with a GTA rather than the professor, I don't see a way around this. It's sometimes very challenging to teach some of these students who just aren't "doing the time" or making the effort; at least if they were allowed to be given to a GTA, then the GTA would gain some valuable teaching experience and then everyone would be happy. (As I'm not sure that the conducting student would feel slighted if they were to study with a GTA rather than the major professor -- some of them might rejoice in that if they just would rather not put in the time on their instrument. But, I doubt we could get around this. I'm certainly willing to teach someone who is interested in working. Chris and Brian both had good attitudes, so I enjoyed my lessons with them.

Frankly, I'm not terribly concerned about making the requirements of the conducting degree too stringent. If students are discouraged from applying to UNL because they know that they can't live up to the basic musicianship requirements (proficiency on an instrument) of our program, I'm not sure we really would want them here anyway. It's not unheard of to require conducting students to demonstrate their proficiency in their audition to the program (I had to do it at my conducting auditions.....), but I don't believe that the applied faculty would have to be involved in that audition.

DON'T KNOW HOW FAIR THIS IS TO EXPECT ANYTHING EXCEPT A COMMITMENT AND WORK TOWARD PROGRESS.

I think that a conducting student should have every opportunity to perform, but should not have an applied instrument requirement. A trombonist pursuing an MM or DMA does not have a conducting component to their degree (even though they will likely do some conducting at the collegiate level) so it doesn't make sense to stretch the conductors in the direction of having an applied lesson component. If they wish to do it, then they may. It shouldn't be a requirement.

You may or may not be surprised to note that the most "hard line" voice (we'll call him Prof. Green) is the only one who holds a degree in conducting (from Northwestern, as it happens), although that is not his current area of specialization. FYI: Profs. Red, CAPS, and Purple also hold degrees from Northwestern, all in applied performance. Thus, what surprises me is how weak the general tenor of the commentary is. These are really talented musicians who will tear apart a lousy conductor if they have to play for him, yet their expectations of the musicianship of student conductors are pathetic. Perhaps realistic is a more accurate term. Prof. Green's commentary about audition standards is laudable, but we would have literally no students in the band conducting program if I required any degree of instrumental proficiency. For good or ill, I have taken the stance that it's better to take weak but willing students and make them a little better than to stand austere by waiting for the chosen few. When a strong candidate arrives, he gets a work out. In the meantime, I feel obligated to earn my paycheck by actually teaching. There is also significant pressure from the administration to maintain a population of graduate students – especially DMA. I don't agree with this policy, and believe that university overpopulation is a huge problem in the U.S. Yes, I am an elitist, but that's beside the point. How many professional pianists, or DMA conductors, or music theorists do we really need?

And the winner is...

It amazes me that excellent musicians can believe that you can be a good conductor without being able to demonstrate your musicianship sonically. What's the line about Strauss? He was a great conductor, even though there was no visible proof? I'll buy that since you can hear Strauss' greatness in any of his scores. But to suggest you're a great musician even though you can't prove it without the help of great performers? Sure...and I've got some land in Florida I'd like to sell. It's like Charlie McCarthy winning a Grammy for best solo vocal album.

Perhaps it is because conducting is (erroneously) not associated with musicianship that music educators hold it in such high esteem. Wow that sounds mean – I don't intend it to be. What I'm suggesting is that virtually nothing in the music education curriculum has to do with musicianship – it's all about techniques, or skills, or concepts, or philosophies. Actually being a musician isn't the goal. Someone once pointed out to me how cool it would have been to be Michelangelo's teacher. My response was: wouldn't it be cooler to actually be Michelangelo? That's how I feel about contemporary music education. We're trying hard to teach people to teach Michelangelo (that's why music isn't really for everyone – remember Skid Row?), rather than helping aspiring educators become the equivalent of Michelangelo as teachers.

But that would take way too much time, and we have a shortage of teachers. Besides, if you move the teacher training elements of the BME to graduate school, the School of Music won't be able to pay its bills (not enough FTE – the BME program is the bread and butter of any undergraduate music institution). It's not about art, or education, it's about self-perpetuation. Administrators of school-based arts organizations creating the next generation of school-based arts organizations. Soylent Green is people, who eat Soylent Green. Where's Rod Serling when you need him?

Here we are pushing against the Washington Monument again. How do we break the cycle? Is it possible to start a chain reaction by adjusting UNL's Advanced Conducting course? Archimedes would say yes – but our BME students wouldn't know that because that content is part of the general education courses they don't take. Socrates said, "Let him who would move the world first move himself." I'll take that as a yes also. The Greeks are with us; now all we need are the UNL Music Education Department, the UNL School of Music, the Nebraska Department of Education, NASM, and MENC.

The Music Education Department can't move far because their reputation relies on job placement (not job success, just job placement). Job placement is dependent upon school districts around the state that take their marching orders from the Nebraska Department of Education. School districts are looking for prospective teachers that match a long established profile, hence a high degree of rigidity. That profile is perpetuated by NASM in the form of accreditation standards the School of Music must meet, so the School has considerable incentive to avoid rocking the boat. The Nebraska Department of Education, as well as the University of Nebraska, look to the State and Federal Governments for funding, and rely on the goodwill of taxpayers to exist. Taxpayers are a notoriously conservative lot, so no wiggle room there.

That leaves MENC. In Archimedes model, MENC is the lever and the Advanced Conducting class is the place to stand to move the world of music education. But MENC's modus operandi looks more like a shotgun blast than leverage. And what would their incentive be to change? What incentive for anyone to change? Socrates didn't tell us that. That's where I'm stuck. I can

change (have changed) my tiny piece of the puzzle, but if the big picture doesn't change, all I have is a little puzzle piece that doesn't fit anywhere.

Advanced Conducting is a piece of a puzzle that hasn't been made yet. It's like having a windshield wiper without a car. When you tell people how cool it is, they just look at you like you're nuts. When you show them the owner's manual (*Influencing Sound*), they yawn and walk away muttering something about filling the tank with gas as the extent of their automotive prowess. Who needs the manual? That's what mechanics are for. Just teach me how to drive the thing. But the thing doesn't exist yet. In the meantime, they're driving an Edsel in the slow lane with their blinker perpetually on.