

Fascination orchestra playing

True sonic concurrence within individual string sections The need to play simultaneously An opportunity for orchestras

1. structure and hierarchy

The orchestra is a fascinating instrument. The variety of sound options in a large orchestra is almost unlimited. Differently from an organ, it is not the “player” alone, the conductor, who determines the sound, but there are up to 120 musicians involved, realising the interpretation of this conductor. The biggest part of them, the strings, must not only realise the ideas of the conductor but should do this in perfectly the same way, so that each section really plays one part at a time and not several different parts all at once. Just like an organ register, which usually has one particular sound colour and not more at the same time.

So the tasks of all participants are extremely different.

The conductor makes music with his heart and his brains. He is the only person, who does not produce any sound and at the same time he is the one, who determines everything. His ideas of the sound, his tempi, his expression, his interpretation have to be realised by the musicians. The conductor is responsible for the coordination of the score parts. So, if the score parts are performed the way, he would have done, the music will sound according to his interpretation.

The score parts are often played by single musicians, as for instance in the winds. But already the section leaders of the winds have more to be involved in as just their own part: they take responsibility for the performance of their whole section. The first oboe will be concerned also with the intonation and articulation within his section and according to the intonation of other parts, the same as the first horn or the first flute. The degree of individuality may be the highest at the keyboard instruments, if any harp, piano or celesta is part of the score. Also the percussionists must adapt to each other in their common responsibility. It would be a little bit exaggerated to speak of adjusting the sound colours: percussion instruments are very different. But rhythm and volume should match.

The biggest possible homogeneity is requested in the strings. It is not the conductor, who can achieve this. Only the musicians will be able to succeed by a clear and definite distribution of competences and a very strong intension. We assume, that all needed abilities are available.

Similar to the leaders of the winds, the first concertmaster is responsible for the coordination of the whole string section. This relates particularly to the performance technique, the adjustment of expression options, the articulation. He determines, how the ideas of the conductor can be realised the best way. Similar to the primarius of a string quartet he agrees with the leaders of other string sections. Independently

the concertmaster takes the responsibility for the orchestra tuning. He manages the tuning procedure and interferes sometimes in the rehearsal, in order to optimise the pitch between winds and strings.

When the concertmaster and the first leaders of other sections play, there is no place left for more leading. All other participants have to just and only consider, how to realise all solutions of their concertmaster and section leaders exactly, now in order to achieve a perfect homogenous sonic image in each string section. Even the so called deputy leaders should avoid active leading. At least, as long as the first concertmaster is there and if there is only one voice to perform in the part. On the contrary they would mix up the section in case of too much “engagement”, just like too many captains aboard.

If occasionally there is a division in the part, the deputy leader will play the second voice and leads, in coordination with the concertmaster, all players of this second voice. This function of leading is transferred to the next deputy leader, when the superior leaders have to play a solo. It can even occur, that the section leading will be left to a *tutti* player, when all leaders play solos.

2. To lead and to be lead

The concertmaster plays according to the gestures of the conductor and according to the solutions, agreed with him. And he realises his ideas resolutely and visually clearly. He gives impulses by his gestures and body language. And that would be all. It is up to the section colleagues to be lead or not. If a passage does not sound “together”, it is obviously not clear to the section members, when and how to play. The leader has the choice to gesticulate more clearly when playing. Or the section members must pay more attention...

And how it is possible to play together perfectly, if a section consists of 18 or 20 violinists?

3. true sonic concurrence about sending impulses, amplifying and receiving them

Section rehearsals take place in small chamber orchestras to achieve this homogeneity in, for example, a four-piece string group. Here, the three *tutti* players align all aspects of their playing with the techniques employed by the concertmaster: intonation, bowing technique and length of bow used, bow speed, pressure on and point of contact with the string, *spiccato* height, and, most importantly: a very slight gradual reduction in volume. Fingerings are chosen that are compatible with each other but need not be identical within the group. Sometimes, a *tutti* player may well have selected different fingerings if they were playing the same passages in a solo setting.

The alignment of all employed techniques takes place simultaneously, in real time. It means, that the concertmaster can afford to change his employed technique up to a limited degree and, that the colleagues have to follow him instantly.

Even though deputy section leaders in large *tutti* sections really have no true function as deputies in terms of filling in for the concertmaster, except in extremely rare cases of absence due to illness, they actually have a very important function here – passing

on the impetus of the first concertmaster or section leader. If the first three musicians behind the first section leader adapt their playing to that of the first concertmaster or first section leader in all the aforementioned areas, as in a small chamber orchestra, “amplifying” her or his impulses in their movements and intensity, every *tutti* player at third desk or behind can easily take these up from those before them in the chain and therefore also adopt the properties of the concertmaster’s playing. This is necessary, because not everybody is able to see the concertmaster. To hear him is completely impossible, when seated beyond the second desk.

The ideal is of course, if this simultaneous play works at every desk. Since each “independent” play provides more confusion than homogeneity.

At the same time, *tutti* players, as with the deputy section leaders before them, should make a small downward dynamic adjustment – simply to avoid playing their way into the foreground unintentionally. This is referred to as “playing defensively” in orchestra jargon, even though what this really means is that the *tutti* player should take an anticipatory stance, not showing too much initiative in their playing in order to avoid “running their concertmaster down from behind”. Matters become really complicated when one considers that, in addition to staying in contact with the colleague before them in the chain described above, each *tutti* player must play absolutely simultaneously with their desk partner, look at the hands of the conductor occasionally and, if necessary, glance at the music every now and then....

4. Simultaneous play and rehearsals

It is thus obvious that the requirements placed on a player’s ability to concentrate are great indeed, and that it is far from sufficient to merely be able to play the notes well.

Imagine: all players come well prepared to the rehearsal, are able to play all the notes, and know more or less when and how to play them.

For the conductor the aim of his rehearsal efforts is, to succeed in his ideas. He works through the compositions, announces his intentions and shows, how he conducts his interpretation. He “practices” on his “instrument” to eliminate the weak points and “welds” his interpretation into a unity.

The concertmaster and leaders work on realising the ideas of the conductor. Eventually they adapt their techniques, change bowings and search for the ideal tunings within the bounds of their responsibilities and competences.

How about deputy leaders and tutti-players ?

In each run through of the works they find more and more ways, to be guided by his or her concertmaster or section leader, they find orientation in other voices, for instance to control their rhythm, or they listen at a solo and take care, not to accompany this solo too loudly, everything without losing contact to the other section members, of course.

This simultaneous play is not the only necessary instrument. Consequently thought, by only using simultaneous play we would achieve an “echo orchestra”. It does not work without one’s own initiative. This is developing from rehearsal to rehearsal, in

order to provide more space for the concentration on spontaneous musical developments in the performance.

Therefore it is necessary to adjust this self initiative to an agreeable level, adapted to the section leader and, please never more than the section leader. The *tutti* players will have to watch the music less from time to time and will be able to listen better (neighbour colleagues and other voices) and to watch better (into their own section). For each passage they look for and will find an ideal adjustment of their concentration: a part of the attention will be for the section leader, a part for the stand partner, a part for an overview and an always smaller developing part for the music. The division will optimise in the course of the rehearsals, focussed on "spontaneous performing".

By the section members the conductor should be observed only in an eye angle. Because in case of doubt the section member should always be together with the concertmaster and the other colleagues and not – as the only one in the section – with the conductor... Of course the conductor is allways the most direct dealer of impulses, but independent action without contact to section and leader will lead to "a soloist performance" without fail.

In this way announcements within the section will be more and more superfluous: one sees and hears, what the concertmaster does and how he does it. From his own experience one can make use of a variety of different techniques. In the rehearsal it will get clear, which one to use. So there is no need for any announcement, if everybody looks at their colleagues and leaders.

This working technique seems to be quite complicated. Yet for many musicians it is a question of mentality and preparation. Colleagues with much chamber music experience will do easier to observe others. Large technical reserves are an advantage for *tutti* players as well.

Applied in the right way simultaneous play together with an accurate planning of the competences and responsibilities can lead to a really homogeneous play of the string section without getting inflexible.

At this degree of support the concertmaster can bare his responsibility without problems and for the section members the work is not at all boring or frustrating: They have to really apply all their soloist abilities, acquired during their studies... for the sake of the true sonic concurrence.

And the conductor will be delighted about so much quality in the strings sound. He will be able do definite his ideas better, when he becomes a clearer sound. The quality of performing will improve clearly.

That is really fascinating orchestra performing.

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