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What Does a Conductor Do?

A critic decides to find out—by stepping up to the podium himself.

By [Justin Davidson](#) Published Dec 26, 2011



(Photo: Gjon Mili, Time Life Pictures/Getty Images)

I'm standing on a podium, with an enameled wand cocked between my fingers and sweat dampening the small of my back. Ranks of young musicians eye me skeptically. They know I don't belong here, but they're waiting for me to pretend I do. I raise my arm in the oppressive silence and let it drop. Miraculously, Mozart's overture to *Don Giovanni* explodes in front of me, ragged but recognizable, violently thrilling. This feels like an anxiety dream, but it's actually an attempt to answer a question that the great conductor Riccardo Muti asked on receiving an award last year: "What is it,

really, I do?"

I have been wondering what, exactly, a conductor does since around 1980, when I led a JVC boom box in a phenomenal performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony in my bedroom. I was bewitched by the music—the poignant plod of the second movement, the crazed gallop of the fourth—and fascinated by the sorcery. In college, I took a conducting course, presided over a few performances of my own compositions, and led the pit orchestra for a modern-dance program. Those crumbs of experience left me in awe of the constellation of skills and talents required of a conductor—and also made me somewhat skeptical that waving a stick creates a coherent interpretation.

Ever since big ensembles became the basis of orchestral music, about 200 years ago, doubt has dogged the guy on the podium. Audiences wonder whether he (or, increasingly, she) has any effect; players are sure they could do better; and even conductors occasionally feel superfluous. "I'm in a bastard profession, a dishonest profession," agonized Dimitri Mitropoulos, who led the New York Philharmonic in the fifties. "The others make all the music, and I get the salary and the credit." Call it the Maestro Paradox: The person responsible for the totality of sound produces none.

My guides through this mystery are Alan Gilbert, the music director of the New York

Philharmonic, and James Ross, who with Gilbert runs the Juilliard School's conducting program. I'll be leading a student orchestra in a half-hour rehearsal of Mozart's six-minute overture to *Don Giovanni*. Throughout the fall, I drop in on Gilbert and Ross's course, in which four students take private lessons and meet for seminars, attend Philharmonic rehearsals, and conduct the school's lab orchestra in weekly two-and-a-half-hour sessions.

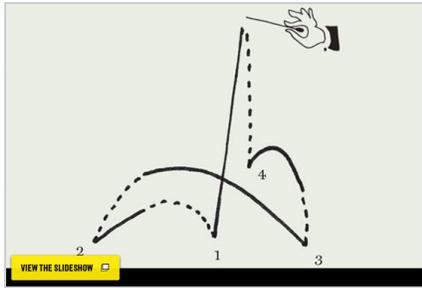
Pianists can work through their failures in solitude; conductors live each one in public. As the students take turns on the podium, Gilbert prowls the room, giving cues from the sidelines—"You're not showing that pizzicato!"—or sneaking up and grabbing a proto-maestro's wrist. Ross stays behind the violins and lobs little flares of wisdom: "A lot of great conductors are shy, even though you wouldn't know that from how they handle large groups of people. That shyness can actually help in intimate music. You have to let people see what's inside you, even if you don't do that in the rest of your life."

I'm not a naturally demonstrative person, so I find this idea both consoling and counterintuitive. Not only am I letting the musicians in on my own inner life, I'm also asking them to express it for me. The idea of conducting as a kind of emotional ventriloquism helps deal with one especially thorny bit of the Maestro Paradox: Leadership requires confidence that is difficult to acquire and impossible to fake. Orchestras are psychic X-ray machines. They judge a new chief within minutes, and once scorn sets in, forget it. I'm going to have to project the sense that I am entitled to be there, and first, I must convince myself.

"Knowing the score"—the expression implies mastery, but it doesn't suggest the sustained and solitary study that's required to achieve it. There are a few miles of roadway that I have driven often enough to navigate them faultlessly in my mind: I know every pothole, every deer crossing. A conductor needs similarly detailed recall of an enormous musical terrain. In the weeks I spend fussing over just my six minutes of Mozart, Gilbert conducts Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melisande*; symphonies by Mahler, Brahms, Dvorák, and Beethoven; and assorted pieces by Webern, Bruch, Berg, Bach, Corigliano, Dutilleux, Haydn, Sibelius, Wagner, Janáček, and Mozart—dozens of hours, millions of notes, pieces he has performed for years and pieces he's never seen before. During one session, Gilbert demonstrates for a percussionist how to get the right sound on the triangle, corrects a bowing in the violin part, sings the bassoon line, and points out a subtle harmonic shift—all without glancing at the score. "I haven't looked at this piece in five years," he says, "but it's still in there somewhere." If the entire symphonic tradition were incinerated, a team of conductors could write it all out again.

Conducting 101

So where do I start? Ross gently advises me against trying to meet the standards of Lorin Maazel, legendary for his freakish memory and for terrifying apprentices with



pop quizzes: *Second movement, bar 123, what's the second bassoon doing?* Instead, he suggests I study the overture, take apart the structure, and feel the rhythms until I can sing the whole thing through by heart. Ross warns me to avoid recordings: If you could learn to lead by following, I'd be

an expert.

I've chosen the *Don Giovanni* overture because it distills almost everything I adore in music: darkness, humor, violent emotions elegantly expressed, the subtle play of human interactions. In the opera, virtually every conversation is an argument. The Don bickers with his complaining servant Leporello, fends off the grasping Donna Elvira, humiliates the peasant Masetto, and seduces the young bride Zerlina. Mozart weaves this banter into the overture, developing a rhetoric of interruptions and contradictions. After the slow introduction, the violins unfurl a gently swelling theme, made piquant by syncopations. The phrase breaks off in mid-thought and skitters impishly back down for a couple of measures before being interrupted by a fanfare full of bravado. Mozart, the showbiz professional, has introduced three moods, personalities, and styles in eight bars, all with seamless charm. How to translate this into movement? Will I just wind up exaggerating the contrasts with silly pantomime?

My first task is choosing a tempo. This is not as easy as it seems. A beat is a negotiable unit, now infinitesimally shorter, now noticeably stretched. A tempo has to be strong and elastic, steady but not mechanical. In one session, Gilbert stops a student just a second or two into Tchaikovsky's *Manfred* Symphony Overture. "I didn't feel that you had the tempo in your system before you began," he says. "Your hand shouldn't make the tempo; it should *reveal* the tempo."

Haunted by that admonition, I run through the overture at different speeds in my head, hoping it will seep into my body. The introduction is marked "Andante," which means "walking," so I try synchronizing the music with my step while I'm out with the dog in Riverside Park. When I get to the next, very fast section, though, the most logical way to negotiate the jump is to quadruple the pulse, so a lively Andante means a frantic Molto Allegro. I try it much slower, and the Molto Allegro is comfortable and relaxed, but the introduction has grown lugubrious. A few more adjustments and it's right. I spend the next few days absorbing the beat. My family becomes accustomed to seeing my arm start twitching at the dinner table.

Next I have to figure out what I should be doing with my hands. The overture opens with a thunderous D-minor chord, magnificently rich, thickly orchestrated, and propelled by rolling timpani and slow syncopations in the violins. This clap of moral judgment returns in the final act, accompanied this time by a trio of blaring trombones. That first chord is so full of subtleties that my arm begins to feel as

clumsy as a lead pipe. At my slow tempo, every beat is another chance to fall flat.

In the second measure, most of the orchestra cuts off the ringing D-minor chord on the second beat, so I pluck silence out of the air with my left hand and give a separate cutoff with my right for cellos and basses, which keep rumbling for an extra beat. This takes practice, but after a while, I think I've got those first two measures down.

Then I meet Gilbert for a private lesson.

He positions me near the door of his office in Avery Fisher Hall and sits at the piano so he can bang and hum his way through the overture. He tells me the *Molto Allegro*'s fine, but the *Andante*'s too plodding for my beat to stay steady. One friendly question—"Does it feel comfortable?"—vaporizes all my honed reasoning. As for that second measure, Gilbert politely deems my elaborate two-handed solution too fancy. "Just beat clearly and they'll take care of it," he advises.

That's a useful though not universal commandment: **Do Less**. The *Maestro Paradox* leaves insecure conductors constantly justifying their presence: They gesticulate, point, urge, and cajole, like a castaway signaling a distant ship. Most have watched videos of Leonard Bernstein, whose style was athletic, extroverted, and dangerous to imitate. Ross tells one student not to lean toward the players, because they feel hectored. "The sound is all around and behind you. You have to gather it from there." Ross asks him to set aside the baton, close his eyes, and turn his back to the orchestra so that he'll listen more and insist less. "We feel guilty if we don't bring all this energy," he says. "But we have to realize the emotional life of the music is going to be there, no matter what's going on inside us."



The author's big moment, with Gilbert (in scarf) coaching and observing.

One day, there's a heightened buzz in the rehearsal room: Bernard Haitink, the great Dutch conductor, is paying a visit. In the middle of Brahms's *Academic Festival Overture*, Haitink politely taps an overzealous student on the shoulder and borrows his baton. Then he starts the piece again, doing almost nothing but flicking the stick's tip millimetrically. The effect is of

hushed delight, until his left hand describes a single upward sweep, releasing a ferocious forte. Haitink smiles and returns the baton. "The musicians are very busy with playing," he says. "You should not distract them!"

As I get deeper into the score, I focus on one crucial but difficult aspect of the job: preparing a moment before it arrives. Gilbert urges his students to stop living in the moment; giving a *Get ready!* cue just one beat ahead of a *Now!* creates a little shiver of panic. A conductor has to be simultaneously ahead of the music and with it,

experiencing and expecting at the same time—manufacturing an extended déjà vu. When Gilbert works, you can see the pulse thrumming through his body, *diggadiggadiggadigga*, yet he also projects a commanding serenity. He crooks a finger at the timpanist to alert him of an impending event, flicks it a beat before the entrance, and then drops it in exactly the slot where it belongs. The musicians find the ease and clarity of these minimal motions reassuring. A good conductor is a parent who's always ready and always right.

One section of the *Don Giovanni* overture that both beguiles and worries me begins at measure 157: I think of it as the *No, really* passage. After a dramatic silence, the strings thud down a B-flat scale, like a heavy tread on a staircase, haloed by a motionless chord in the winds and brass. The phrase sounds like the windup to a serious discussion, but it's cut off by an outburst of twittering violins. Dour thud and insouciant chirp alternate again—and again, and again, six times in all, in progressively more agonized harmonies. *No, really. No, really!* My gestures need to convey at once the repetitive sameness and the escalating urgency.

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“when we don’t know what the hell the guy on the podium is
doing.”

Staring at my hands like a toddler who's just discovered his thumbs, I try making big strokes, energetically wagging my fingers, spreading my arms. It all feels ridiculous. Surely thinking so obsessively about gesture can be counterproductive. Gilbert tells me about a crisis he went through as a student when a teacher focused so relentlessly on the precision of his gestures that he froze. “I doubted every single move, and I felt maybe I wasn't cut out to be a conductor. It's helpful to have a great technique, but there are conductors who have a vision of the music so powerful that you can feel it right through their technique. The limiting factor shouldn't be your physical capacity but your imagination.” In the concert hall, I have seen conductors who look like they're hugging pillows or digging up sod, making moves that appear barely related to the score, getting magnificent results. (I have also seen leaders of crystalline precision make dull and brittle music.)

I ask Jerry Grossman, principal cellist of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, how he responds to a conductor with murky body language. “It's amazing how beautifully we play when we don't know what the hell the guy on the podium is doing,” Grossman answers. “We're all listening so nervously!” Not quite reassured, I set the *No, really* passage aside, hoping that I'll find a spontaneous way to communicate what's in my inner ear.

When the day arrives, I wake up thinking of the potential for a disaster. A mushy downbeat will provoke a clamor of staggered bleats. Counting a four-beat measure in three will make a performance implode. Balking at a tempo change will sow mass confusion. But I remind myself that, so long as the basics remain in place, even an

oblivious beat-keeper can make music happen, especially if the orchestra knows the work well. An experienced musician is a repository of musical data and sagacity. Stranded orchestra members will look to the concertmaster for a cue, and the principal cellist can inject missing energy. “So are you ready for your New York Philharmonic debut?” a friend has asked me. In a way, the answer is yes—because an orchestra at that level will simply ignore an incompetent conductor and go its own way. A high-caliber student group like Juilliard’s will be a truer measure of what I can, or can’t, do.

At least I can keep one of Gilbert’s mantras in mind: “Assume good will. The orchestra wants to play wonderfully for you. If you hear the perfect performance in your head, then you can just conduct along, and you’re creating the conditions for that to happen.” This ideal of collegiality is fairly new. Conductors in the first half of the twentieth century often berated orchestras, sometimes singling out musicians for public humiliation—unthinkable today, as players are unionized pros with a measure of control over which conductors get invited back. The modern maestro tries to at least simulate humility. Mine is totally unfeigned.

Lifting the baton feels a little like getting ready to push off from the top of a ski slope, in that I’ll move in the right direction whatever I do, and also because fear will cause disaster. Neither fact is comforting. My downbeat is stiff, and the great D-minor wobbles accordingly. Gilbert has me speed up the tempo slightly, give more zip to the upbeat, and plunge more decisively into the downbeat. Okay, now it’s hanging together. I try a third time, and I focus on the sound. I turn my left palm upward as if to hold an imaginary grapefruit and try to feel the baton cutting through some viscous medium, meeting resistance. Suddenly, the big chords acquire a rounded glow. Cellos and basses toll like a great bell, and the violins echo their answer on the offbeats. I have seen conductors shape music with their hands like clay, and now I’m doing it. It is a powerfully addictive feeling.

I make plenty of flubs: I scramble the beat, forget a cue, confuse the players once or twice. The Juilliard students respond with sensitivity and respect, and a desire to play as beautifully as I will let them. By the time we get to the *Molto Allegro*, I know what I want, and I get some of it, at least: the theme light and yeasty, the fanfare graceful and not too loud. But I can feel myself working too hard, threshing the air, and the tempo starts to drag. Gilbert takes the baton and has me rest my hand lightly on his forearm, so that I can feel the music as he does. “It doesn’t take any energy to keep the music going, but it takes a lot of energy to slow it down, and that’s what you’re giving it.” I try again. My shoulders relax, my back straightens, my elbows pull in toward my ribs, and I can feel, more than hear, the music go weightlessly scudding along.

Soon, we’re galloping toward the *No, really* passage. I punch the forte, but not too hard, and hush the piano, keeping the energy confined to the wrist. And somehow, as we pivot into G minor, my body knows how to convey the brooding darkness and

catch the shadows that shift at each harmonic change until we get to the bruised wonder of a diminished seventh. At my shoulder, I hear Gilbert mutter a slightly startled “Good.” Later, he murmurs words I wish I could frame: “You have talent.” *Where were you 25 years ago?* Actually, since we were in some of the same college classes, I know exactly where he was: wrapping his gifts in expertise, laboriously acquiring his right to his honorific.

In Italian, the word *maestro* also means teacher. As we power toward the final cadence and I exchange glance after glance with the young musicians, it occurs to me that they are bombarding me with unspoken questions and it’s my job to convey answers. *That’s* what a conductor does: mold an interpretation by filtering the thousands of decisions packed into every minute of symphonic music. The clarinetist inclined to add a little gleam to a brief solo by slowing down slightly, the tuba player preparing for a fortissimo blast after twenty minutes of nothing—each will look to the podium for a split-second shot of guidance, and the conductor who meets those fleeting inquiries with clarity and assurance will get a more nuanced performance. My efforts haven’t made me a good conductor, or even a mediocre one, but they have given me the glimmerings of competence—an intoxicating taste of what it might feel like to realize the fantasy of my boom-box days.