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Music, Time, and Dance in Orchestral Performance: The Conductor as Shaman

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between music, time, and movement in those Western art music rituals within which orchestral performance occurs. It begins by reviewing some of the literature on the symphonic performance event itself, particularly the work of Christopher Small, who has written about this at length. It goes on to consider the nature of the conductor's gestures within these events, and argues that these can be construed as a form of dancing, and that the functional ambiguity of these gestures serves only to enhance their symbolic significance; their greater importance, in fact, is in connection with the creation of another world of time. Finally, the paper compares the work and gestures of conductors with shamanistic practice in other cultures, both in terms of the conductor's role within the concert hall and as a result of the images of them presented to us in various media.

Introduction

Conducting an orchestra is the most mysterious of musical vocations, demanding that a practitioner combine the attributes of coach, shaman, psychologist and traffic cop, all in quest of an elusive harmony.

Tim Page, *Washington Post*, 24 June 2001

Viewed objectively, the conductor appears a supremely authoritarian figure. He apparently controls the work of a large group of highly skilled musicians, directing when and how each should play, and enabling them to work together to realize the complex musical work inscribed by the composer in the score in front of him.¹ As Elias Canetti puts it, 'his hands decree and prohibit [. . .] and since, during the performance, nothing is supposed to exist except this work, for so long is the conductor ruler of the world.'² However, as orchestral musicians well know, to construe the interaction between themselves and the conductor as an unremitting master–servant relationship is to misunderstand both the social relations existing within an orchestra and the methods by which the ensemble operates effectively. In fact the conductor's gestures are functionally more ambiguous than they at first appear, and they form only one part of a series of gestures that enables the orchestra to perform efficiently.

I am grateful for the observations offered by the editors and my anonymous referee, from all of which this paper has undoubtedly benefited.

- 1 Perhaps in no other field of Western music making does the use of the masculine pronoun 'he' continue to be almost universally appropriate, and I have thus retained it throughout, notwithstanding the small number of female conductors endeavouring to challenge masculine domination of this field.
- 2 Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 460.

Yet all this has not prevented the conductor figure taking on somewhat heroic or mythical proportions in the eyes of many, at least over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as indicated by both the title and content of Norman Lebrecht's book *The Maestro Myth* (1991). And in this partial remove from the real world that we see ourselves as inhabiting, the conductor figure now shares something with the priest or, more particularly, the shaman – a mysterious, liminal individual who somehow connects us with another world and through whom we are able to communicate with the spirits we believe exist there.

Here I shall consider to what extent this parallel between conducting and shamanism holds true, and how we might rethink the role of the conductor in orchestral performance. In so doing, I draw extensively on the work of a number of writers whose roots are anthropological or ethnomusicological, in order to consider the work of conductors from a sociocultural perspective rather than a strictly musical one. While I do not regard this as an ethnographic study as such, I have also included a small number of interview quotations arising from fieldwork undertaken in the mid-1990s with musicians in London.³

I begin by reviewing some of the literature on the symphonic performance event itself, particularly the work of Christopher Small, who has written about this at length. I then consider the nature of the conductor's gestures within these events, and argue that these can be construed as a form of dancing, and that the functional ambiguity of these gestures serves only to enhance their symbolic significance; their greater importance, in fact, is in connection with the creation of another world of time within orchestral performance. Finally, I compare the work and gestures of conductors with shamanistic practice elsewhere, both in terms of their role within the concert hall and as a result of the images of them presented to us in various media.

Rereading Symphonic Performance

Relatively little scholarly work has been undertaken on Western art music from a perspective that may be seen as being in some way ethnomusicological.⁴ Within this small body of work, however, it has become commonplace to view the symphony orchestra concert as characterized by ritualizing patterns of behaviour. To describe such events as rituals per se may be to overstate the case, but if an orchestral concert is not perhaps *a* ritual it is certainly *of* ritual. It is not difficult to see the concert hall itself as a ritual space, in which the participants, distinguished by symbolic behaviour of various kinds – the use of costumes, prescribed seating arrangements, the purchase of tickets, the conventions surrounding the use of applause, and so forth – engage in the practice of music making according to the customs with which they have long been familiar and upon which they construe shared meanings. This Durkheimian interpretation of the event, in which such concerts are taken to represent

³ See Cottrell, *Professional Music-Making in London*.

⁴ Although it should be acknowledged that work by musicologists such as Gary Tomlinson ('Web of Culture' and *Music and Renaissance Magic*) or social historians such as Cyril Ehrlich (*The Music Profession in Britain*), to cite only two examples, does overlap with approaches taken by ethnomusicologists. For more on this see Cottrell, *Professional Music-Making*, 2–8.

a crystallization of values held dear by, particularly, the industrialized middle classes, has been advanced, for example, by Christopher Small and Bruno Nettl.⁵ While I have argued elsewhere for a slightly different interpretation,⁶ our various approaches do reveal certain commonalities.

Similarly, within these ritualized events, the composers whose works are being performed are frequently taken as something akin to mythical forefathers. Nettl describes the pantheon of 'Great Masters' to be found in the Music Building of his paradigmatic Heartland School of Music, the inhabitants of which are seen to be performing in the service of these masters;⁷ Small writes of summoning up 'the spirit of the dead composer [. . .] in order that those visions of sonic order which the composer imagined may be brought into being'.⁸ Even the great French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has taken a similar view, observing that 'the musical creator [i.e. the composer] is a being comparable to the gods'.⁹ And within this ritualistic summoning of the gods, the conductor figure is seen to be particularly powerful. Small, Nettl, and Michael Chanan all follow Adorno's lead in seeing the rise of the conductor figure as a sociomusical analogue of the capitalist foreman, who controls the workers' labour.¹⁰ Small, however, goes one stage further and suggests that not only is the conductor the controller of the musicians' endeavours, but also that he can be seen as 'the magus, the shaman', because of the supernatural powers with which he is endowed in the context of the concert ritual, and his importance in 'summoning up' the composer spirits.¹¹

Small's argument is founded upon a reading of the musical work itself as representing a conflict between order and disorder. He suggests that most tonal symphonic works (he concentrates largely on the 'Mozart to Mahler' period) contain a dialectic between life and death, in which the heroic struggle of an assumed protagonist is played out musically, with the audience sharing in the ultimate victory. Taking Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as an example, he writes that by the end of the work 'the protagonist has triumphed [. . .] The lengthy peroration that ends [. . .] the work assures us that the victory is final, that a new order has come into being [and] we, the listeners, can share the protagonist's triumph and take from it what we want in terms of vicarious glory and exhilaration' (175). For Small, this victory is represented by the triumphant return of the tonic in the final bars, vanquishing the doubts and conflicts represented by chromaticized development sections and inner movements in related keys. Furthermore, he asserts that 'the sound relations of a musical performance stand in metaphorical form for ideal human relationships as imagined by the participants' (129). Thus the symphonic work represents the idealization of human relationships, not ossified, but subject to renewal and recasting by those who come to the works at different times and contexts from those in which they were originally conceived. Of all the

5 Small, 'Performance as Ritual' and *Musicking*; Nettl, *Heartland Excursions*.

6 Cottrell, *Professional Music-Making*, 149–82.

7 Nettl, *Heartland Excursions*, 11–42.

8 Small, *Musicking*, 87.

9 Lévi-Strauss, *Raw and the Cooked*, 18.

10 Small, *Musicking*, 68–70; Nettl, *Heartland Excursions*, 35; Chanan, *Musica Practica*, 11–12; Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 104–17.

11 Small, *Musicking*, 87. (Page numbers for further references to this work will appear in the text.)

works in this period, Small asserts that only Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony (the 'Pathétique') fails to follow this model. Here, the *adagio lamentoso* heard in place of the customarily victorious final movement is seen as 'the destruction of the protagonist [...] the hero disappears into the depths and the darkness from which he emerged, and the symphony not so much ends as dies' (178–9). Now the metaphor of the shaman is applied to the composer rather than the conductor: 'Tchaikovsky [...] summoned up the power to descend like a shaman into the underworld and return with a terrible and wonderful vision [...] The shaman descends to the underworld to find a cure, not just for his or her own psychic wounds but for those of all the community' (180).

There is much to admire in Small's imaginative rereading of the symphonic work, but there are a few areas that I find troubling, not least his assertion that after the performance of a symphony 'a new order has come into being' (175), which sits uncomfortably with his general thesis that 'the dead culture heroes are summoned up in order to give reassurance that the relationships they encoded in musical sounds are abiding and permanent, that things are as they have been and will not change' (91). Small goes on to suggest that the relationships at the end of the performance are not the same as those at the beginning, because 'something has changed between the participants through the fact of having undergone the performance together. Who we are has changed, has evolved a little' (140). But I remain unpersuaded that the social order has been transformed, as Small avers, because of some rather indefinable changes in individual character. For Small, any such changes are metaphorically represented by the tonal relationships implicit in the musical language employed; but since the re-emergence of the tonic at the conclusion of a symphony asserts precisely the same tonal relations as existed at the beginning, it is again difficult to see quite what kind of new order has been created, metaphorical or otherwise. As I have argued elsewhere, any rearrangement of the social order is perhaps better identified through the differing quantities of symbolic capital accrued by the various participants in the performance event.¹² Small's approach seems rather too focused to account for the wide range of images provoked and experiences undergone in the concert halls of the twenty-first century, even if it provides an intriguing metaphor for the tonal music with which he is primarily concerned.

However, I am more sympathetic to the importance that Small attaches to the role of gesture in orchestral performance. He asserts that gestural language is superior to verbal language precisely because the former articulates feelings and understandings in ways that the latter cannot. In his own words: 'The languages of bodily posture, movement and gesture, of facial expression and of vocal intonation continue to perform functions in human life that words cannot, and where they function most specifically is in the articulation and exploration of relationships.'¹³ Although I am less concerned with the precise nature of relationships generated or alluded to within the concert ritual than is Small, I nevertheless wish to suggest that gestures in general, and those of the conductor in particular, have important roles to play in our experience of these types of musical performance event.

¹² See Cottrell, *Professional Music-Making*, 154.

¹³ Small, *Musicking*, 57.

In Small's analysis the conductor functions as a 'focus for the imagination of those who sit in the audience. His role is that of the powerful and dependable autocrat, who will lead the orchestra and the listeners safely through the tensions and conflicts of the symphonic work' (86). In Small's view, therefore, the conductor is something of a liminal figure, occupying a ritually dangerous space between the real world and an imaginary world in which, through the figure of an unseen hero, good usually triumphs over evil, all symbolically represented by the tonal relationships of conventional symphonic musical language. I shall have cause to re-examine the specific nature of the conductor's liminality below, but first I shall consider the gestural qualities of the conductor's contribution to the symphony orchestra concert, what these may or may not effect, and how they relate to the particular qualities of time engendered in musical performance.

To Dance Is Human, to Conduct Divine?

One of the more curious consequences of the development of the Western art music tradition has been its almost total severance of the relationship between music and body movement, particularly dance. As Shove and Repp note, the emphasis on complex compositional techniques and the primacy afforded to the musical score have all served to disrupt the link between music and the human body, leading instead to a concentration on 'the structural rather than the kinematic properties of music'.¹⁴ Participation in Western art music making is thus seen as a cerebral or intellectual pursuit rather than a physical one. For contemporary audiences at orchestral concerts, anything but the merest flexing of finger or toe is normally taken as inappropriate behaviour within the ritualistic setting of the concert hall, and almost the only physical movements the audience members will make between taking their seats and leaving them will be to contribute to the applause expected at particular moments during the event. Among the musicians, certain movements inevitably occur as a result of the physical demands made by playing their instruments; but even here any additional or unnecessary gestures are usually eschewed, since they interfere with the delicate system of sightlines and micro-movements through which orchestral musicians infer much of the information they need in order to operate effectively (of which more below). As one musician put it:

People who move about a tremendous amount when they play can be upsetting in a string section . . . It's just a distraction, (laughs) it's a distraction if you see somebody thrashing around, and you're trying to just concentrate on being very precise, following the beat carefully, just doing the job, in an ordinary non-fussy sort of way. Yes, that I find annoying. It's something I have to concentrate like mad on disregarding.¹⁵

¹⁴ Shove and Repp, 'Musical Motion and Performance', 64.

¹⁵ This and similar quotations below are taken from interviews conducted by the author with professional musicians who wish to remain anonymous.

Thus, of all those contributing to the performance of most repertory heard in the concert hall, only the conductor is allowed relatively unrestricted licence to respond physically to the music (although concerto soloists might also be expected to demonstrate some movement in performance, and may be criticized as ‘wooden’ or ‘inexpressive’ if such movement is lacking).

As Western art music practice has become increasingly identified with the industrial middle classes in a variety of cultures across the globe, notably many in east Asia, so the same behaviour patterns have been preserved.¹⁶ Yet this static musical environment makes Western art music unusual among the world’s musical traditions; indeed, as Small also observes,¹⁷ there are certain global traditions where if nobody is dancing then no music making is taking place. Generally, therefore, physical engagement with musical sound is an important part of human music making, and thus the various relationships between music and the body have formed a significant component of the work of several ethnomusicologists. This is particularly true in the case of John Blacking, whose work with the Venda people of South Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s led him to develop a keen interest in the relationship between music and human movement. While this interest in the body and culture surfaces in a number of Blacking’s works, it is most clearly evident in his editorship of a book titled *The Anthropology of the Body*. In his editorial preface Blacking observes that the conference from which the book arose set out in part to consider ‘the interface between body and society, the ways in which the physical organism constrains and inspires patterns of social interaction’.¹⁸ Although he did not mean it in this way, one might whimsically observe that it would be difficult to find a more succinct definition of the role and behaviour of a conductor in front of a symphony orchestra than that of ‘a physical organism who both constrains and inspires patterns of social interaction’. Conductors of orchestras fulfil particularly significant roles, but whatever the ultimate consequences of their actions, the non-verbal gestures they employ during a performance are clearly intentional, patterned, and intended to communicate something, at least in general terms, to the musicians who are notionally charged with acting upon them.

Seeing conductors’ gestures in this way resonates intriguingly with some of Judith Lynne Hanna’s observations in her contribution to *The Anthropology of the Body*. In her chapter ‘To Dance Is Human’¹⁹ she outlines what she describes as an ‘operating definition’ of dance, in which dance is construed as (1) human behaviour composed, from the dancer’s perspective, of (2) purposeful, (3) intentionally rhythmical, and (4) culturally patterned sequences of (5a) non-verbal body movement and gesture that are (5b) not ordinary motor activities, (5c) the motion having inherent and ‘aesthetic’ value.²⁰

16 There are a number of reasons why this might be so, one being that the members of those middle classes – teachers, solicitors, middle management, etc. – tend to lead working lives that place greater emphasis on cerebral activities than the physical labour that often characterizes the work of those further down the social hierarchy; these values are therefore, perhaps, projected on to those musical traditions with which such members prefer to align themselves.

17 Small, *Musicking*, 9.

18 Blacking, *Anthropology of the Body*, p. v.

19 Later expanded into a book of the same name.

20 Hanna, ‘To Dance Is Human’, 212.

The question 'what is dance?' is as problematic as the question 'what is music?', the answers in both cases being culturally variable and subject to negotiation. Hanna's proposed taxonomy is useful, but does not entirely solve the problem. Is military marching, for example, such as Trooping the Colour on Horse Guards Parade, London, to be considered as dance under Hanna's definition? Apparently serving little military purpose, it ostensibly fulfils all of the suggested criteria, including that of having inherent and aesthetic value; yet I suspect many, and probably Hanna herself, would not describe it as dance *per se*. Furthermore, from this perspective the actions and gestures of orchestral conductors might also reasonably be described as dance. Their work is obviously purposeful, intentionally rhythmic, and culturally patterned, and comprises non-verbal movements that are not ordinary motor activities. Only at the last hurdle, when the question of inherent aesthetic value arises, does it perhaps fail to fulfil Hanna's criteria completely. And as she points out,²¹ her set constitutes sufficiency, that is, all of the criteria must be fulfilled in order for a particular pattern of actions or gestures to be described as dance. Yet it is very tempting to describe the more obviously theatrical conductors, the Rattles or the Bernsteins, with their flamboyant body movements and dramatic facial expressions, as being in part motivated by the idea of 'putting on a show'. Moreover, while they would probably deny such motivation, it seems at least equally plausible that this 'show' is a significant component of their identity, given the personality cults that tend to build up around certain conductors. Conducting, then, is not perhaps *a* dance as such, but it might be described as being *of* dance, only tenuously related to our Western conceptions of dance, but related nonetheless, at least from the perspective offered by Hanna.

The specific nature of conductors' non-verbal gestures and their efficacy or effect on the musicians at whom they are directed is a complex and intriguing area. Musicians will often argue that very few conductors actually impact significantly upon the way the orchestra performs, and that there are many conductors who are simply responding to what the musicians do, rather than being responsible for directing them in any meaningful way. The antipathy that often exists between orchestral musicians and conductors is well documented, and clearly demonstrates that the working relationship between the two is not as straightforward as the visual evidence – the one directing the other – would suggest. Christopher Warren-Green, a former leader of London's Philharmonia Orchestra, has observed that 'what [the conductor] should really be is an enabler. He should allow all [the] musicians to give of their best. There are very few who can do that. There are some, but there are very few'.²² The renowned violinist Carl Flesch notes in his memoirs that 'there is no profession which an impostor could enter more easily', nor one which offers better opportunities for 'false representation';²³ and the flautist James Galway, erstwhile principal flute in the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, cuttingly remarks that 'too many of these guys are masters of the brilliant wave'.²⁴ In a similar vein Hans Keller, having identified conducting as one of his

21 Hanna, 'To Dance Is Human', 212.

22 From *The Phil*, Channel 4 TV documentary, broadcast 24 January 1999.

23 Flesch, *Memoirs*, 271–2.

24 Cited in Lebrecht, *Maestro Myth*, 2.

‘phoney professions’,²⁵ writes that ‘the conductor’s existence is, essentially, superfluous, and you have to attain a high degree of musical stupidity in order to find watching the beat, or the conductor’s inane face for that matter, easier for the purpose of knowing when and how to play than simply listening to the music’.²⁶

Yet Keller’s polemicism obscures a number of issues. It is certainly true that a musician in an orchestra does not rely entirely on the gestures of the conductor to determine when to play. But to suggest that ‘simply listening to the music’ would suffice downplays considerably the significance not only of the conductor’s ‘dancing’, but also of the close physical proximity of the other musicians (as well as being of little help in starting a piece). It is my contention that these are important issues, in fact, and that together they create a special world of time which is at the heart of competent orchestral performance, and which is important for all those involved in the performance event – musicians and audience alike.

A World-out-of-Time

Music’s ability to manipulate our perception of time was a recurring theme in John Blacking’s work. In his critical response to Rodney Needham’s article on ‘Percussion and Transition’ (1967), for example, he writes that ‘music’s special world of *virtual time* has the power to awaken “the other mind”, to transport us away from the world of culturally regulated, *actual time*’.²⁷ Blacking’s argument is buttressed by a quote from Stravinsky, who suggests that the sole purpose of music is to establish some coordination ‘between man and time’.²⁸ The same theme is later taken up in *The Anthropology of the Body*, where Blacking again argues that music has the power to create a world-out-of-time – ‘a world of virtual time’, as Blacking himself puts it, ‘in which things are no longer subject to time and space’.²⁹

Blacking’s ideas on the nature of time in musical performance, and in particular his conceptual duality between real time and virtual time, would appear to owe something to Alfred Schutz, a theorist whose work perhaps underpins Blacking’s own more often than is made explicit.³⁰ In his influential paper ‘Making Music Together’, Schutz writes that ‘a piece of music may be defined – very roughly and tentatively indeed – as a meaningful arrangement of tones in inner time. It is the occurrence in inner time [...] which is the very form of existence of music’.³¹ Furthermore, it is what he describes as the ‘pluridimensionality of time’ that is felt by those who make music together; that is, they experience simultaneously both outer time – the ‘real’ time within which the music is performed – and inner time – a different quality of perception provoked by their mutual involvement in the musical performance. Schutz observes that:

25 An epithet he also attaches to musicology (Keller, *Criticism*, 22).

26 Keller, *Criticism*, 22.

27 Blacking, ‘Percussion and Transition’, 314 (original emphasis).

28 Blacking, ‘Percussion and Transition’, 314.

29 Blacking, *Anthropology of the Body*, 6.

30 For further discussion on the often unattributed importance of Schutz in Blacking’s thinking see Byron, ‘Ethnomusicology of John Blacking’, 20.

31 Schutz, ‘Making Music Together’, 113; originally published in 1951 in *Social Research* 18, pp. 76–97.

Both [performers] share not only the inner *durée* in which the content of the music played actualizes itself; each, simultaneously, shares in vivid present the Other's stream of consciousness in immediacy. This is possible because making music together occurs in a true face-to-face relationship – inasmuch as the participants are sharing not only a section of time but also a sector of space [. . .] Making music together is an event in outer time, presupposing also a face-to-face relationship, that is, a community of space, and it is this dimension which unifies the fluxes of inner time and warrants their synchronization into a vivid present.³²

Schutz describes this sharing of a 'community of space', and the heightened sensitivity to the behaviour of others that it provokes, as a 'mutual tuning-in relationship'.³³

Schutz's (and Blacking's) ideas on the pluridimensionality of time would seem to be particularly evidenced by one of the more unusual features of orchestral music making, one that provides a concrete example of the special nature of time engendered within an orchestral concert, as well as some insight into the ambiguous relationship between conductors and musicians. In many orchestras, despite careful preparation and the fact that the whole orchestra is watching avidly for a conductor's downbeat, what actually happens when that downbeat arrives is precisely nothing. The conductor will give an initial upbeat to prepare the orchestra, but when the baton reaches the bottom of its descent, at the point where he actually lays down the beat, often nothing happens at all. This may seem strange to those who have not experienced it, and it is equally disconcerting for musicians unused to this characteristic who go and play in an orchestra where it is prevalent.³⁴ What in fact occurs is that the orchestra plays some time after the beat has been given, and yet still (usually) completely together. This time lag can be quite discernible and can be seen from close examination of many televised concerts.³⁵ The discrepancy between what the conductor conceives and what the orchestra construes was alluded to in an early series of articles about conducting published in the *Musical Times*, where William Wallace observed that 'objectively the beat concerns the orchestra: subjectively it is personal to the conductor'.³⁶

This anomaly between the conductor's gestural beat and the musical beat as played by the orchestra will often continue for long passages of music. While the difference between the two may remain broadly consistent in strongly metric pieces, it can vary noticeably in rubato passages (those with a less clearly defined pulse). Furthermore, this time differential feels even more significant when experienced *in situ* than it appears when observing it from the outside (via a televised relay, for example). Again, this comes back to music's world of virtual time, which appears to elongate such moments in performance, rather like that speck of time

32 Schutz, 'Making Music Together', 117–18.

33 Schutz, 'Making Music Together', 108.

34 Robert L. Ripley ('The Orchestra Speaks', 79) gives an anecdotal account of encountering precisely this problem in his first rehearsal with George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra.

35 One way to experience this is to turn the volume off when the camera is focusing on the conductor. Counting out loud where the beat appears to be laid down and then turning the volume back up will often reveal a discrepancy, particularly in slower tempos.

36 Wallace, 'Conductors and Conducting', 1082.

between a piece of music finishing and the applause beginning, which always feels longer in context than is actually the case.³⁷

The disparity between the conductor's gestures and the orchestra's response is itself indicative of the particular world-out-of-time engendered within orchestral performance, and the special relationship that may be said to exist between the players and the conductor. While both parties may find it difficult to articulate quite why or how this happens, and notwithstanding the antipathy that may arise between the two, they do appear to be aware of particular transformations that occur in the concert hall during orchestral performance. Sir Simon Rattle, who was asked in a television documentary to explain how a conductor and orchestra work together, observed that 'a lot is done in single words, a lot is done by gesture, and a lot is done simply by . . . whatever this weird thing is that happens between conductors and orchestras'.³⁸ A cellist working in a major London orchestra expressed a similar view in respect of one particular conductor, noting that 'it only takes this man to lift his hands and the orchestra produces for him a sound that it produces for no one else. I can't explain how or why it happens'.³⁹ Nor is this somewhat awestruck view of orchestral practice confined only to the musicians themselves. Robert Faulkner, in a paper focusing on the interaction between conductor and orchestra, also observes that 'from the moment a conductor steps on the podium a special world is in the process of being constructed'.⁴⁰

Such views would have intrigued Blacking, who on several occasions stated explicitly his belief in music's ability to work in ways that did not readily lend themselves to observation and analysis: 'People do things with music and music can do things to people. But in both cases [. . .] what happens to them is possible only through some kind of resonance which has not been, and cannot easily be, proved.'⁴¹ For Blacking, such behaviour was simply an extension of certain innate human traits found in many communal situations, but which in certain – and particularly Western – contexts had become less significant as spoken and written language became increasingly important. In *How Musical Is Man?* he suggests that radio and television are 'no more than extensions and props to man's inborn powers of [. . .] telepathy [. . .] and clairvoyance',⁴² and elsewhere he observes that 'telepathy and bodily empathy [. . .] are not paranormal but normal, although they are often suppressed or allowed to atrophy in cultures in which excessive importance is attached to verbal communication'.⁴³ Leaving aside the somewhat contentious issue of telepathy, Blacking's concept of 'bodily empathy' in *The Anthropology of the Body*⁴⁴ was significant enough for him to repeat his explanation of it elsewhere a decade later:

'Waves' of feeling are generated in the body and between bodies, not unlike fits of sneezing or hiccoughs, and discrete sequences of tempos and patterns of

37 For more on this important moment in the orchestral ritual see Cottrell, *Professional Music-Making*, 157–8.

38 'The South Bank Show', London Weekend Television, 25 June 2000.

39 Danziger, *The Orchestra*, 176–7.

40 Faulkner, 'Orchestra Interaction', 149.

41 Blacking, *Commonsense View*, 30–1.

42 Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?*, 113–14.

43 Blacking, *Anthropology of the Body*, 10.

44 Blacking, *Anthropology of the Body*, 14.

movement can be discerned, analogous to the ebb and flow of a piece of music. Obviously, the forms that the movements take are much affected by their cultural framework; but at the same time a general pattern of interaction and movement can emerge, which, though often related to cultural experience, is shaped from within the body and monitored by patterns of energy flow that transcend people's conscious attempts to manipulate the situation.⁴⁵

Thus the term 'bodily empathy' conveys a sense of unconscious physical mutuality, of bodies autonomously working 'in harmony', as it were.

Blacking's use of this term was prescient; indeed, as Clayton, Sager, and Will point out,⁴⁶ his notion of bodily empathy foreshadowed more recent studies on the effect of entrainment in music (entrainment might be conceived, for present purposes, as a form of synchrony between bodies in motion).⁴⁷ Importantly, it appears that the process of entrainment may have a significant social dimension that goes beyond simple biomechanical alignment (a notable strand of Blacking's argument also), since it encourages individuals to 'lock in' to various stimuli – such as musical sound – in certain culturally predetermined ways. Clayton, Sager, and Will assert that entrainment appears to be 'one of the fundamental processes providing an intimate connection between individuals, others, and the world around them'.⁴⁸ One example of such cultural patterning would be the amount of deviance that might be allowed in terms of the exactitude of synchronization expected at a given moment. Although in musical performance – particularly in symphony orchestras – it may appear that all musicians are playing exactly together, in fact there are likely to be minute differences in what are perceived as synchronous events. The degree of inexactitude permitted in different environments before such discrepancies are perceived as wrong or inappropriate is likely to be culturally construed; understanding the range of tolerance allowed could thus inform our appreciation of performance practice in these various contexts. This particular aspect of entrainment has much in common with Charles Keil's notion of 'participatory discrepancies', whereby he suggests that minor deviations between musicians performing together are both inherent and essential characteristics of human music making. As Keil engagingly puts it, 'music, to be personally involving and socially valuable, must be "out of time" and "out of tune"'.⁴⁹

While entrainment theory and Keil's 'participatory discrepancies' are primarily concerned with very subtle differences between performers, they are both suggesting that musicians engaged in collaborative performance conceive time in slightly different ways. I am observing that a similar process occurs – albeit perhaps on a rather larger scale – between

45 Blacking, *Commonsense View*, 75.

46 M. Clayton, Sager, and Will, 'In Time with the Music', 19–20.

47 Needless to say, a proper definition of 'entrainment' would be rather more exact than this. Clayton, Sager, and Will suggest that entrainment describes 'a process whereby two rhythmic processes interact with each other in such a way that they adjust towards and eventually 'lock in' to a common phase and/or periodicity' ('In Time with the Music', 2).

48 Clayton and others, 'In Time with the Music', 16.

49 Keil, 'Participatory Discrepancies', 96. See also Keil, 'Motion and Feeling' and 'Theory of Participatory Discrepancies'.

conductors and the orchestras nominally charged with following them. The orchestra continues to play together because their shared participation in the musical event generates unconscious ‘waves of feeling’ that enable them to function as a unit. Although the conductor may provide some generalized cues, his role is ambiguous since the musicians do not rely on him entirely to coordinate the ensemble; and the apparent delay between his gestural beat and the musical pulse arises from, and is accommodated within, the social experience of collective musical performance.

Orchestral players are themselves conscious of this difference between the conductor’s beat and their own performance, suggesting that such behaviour arises from both the conscious acknowledgement of this difference and the partly subconscious strategies they necessarily employ to function efficiently. Certainly, players and conductors are both aware of the possibility of changing the orchestra’s response to the conductor’s gestures, indicating that some element of conscious control can be invoked. An experienced string player in the London Symphony Orchestra offered the following assessment of the process:

There are some orchestras who famously play behind the beat. And usually, I think the Vienna [Philharmonic Orchestra] or something like that, I don’t know how many seconds time delay they have, but they’ve always done it and that’s the way they play, and they won’t change . . . I mean there are certain feels to placing the beat, which Colin Davies might do, for instance, where you actually sink into the beat, and there is a slight delay there . . . the orchestra will agree as one that that is where it happens, and that’s the feel – the placing of the beat.

The same player also made the point that the type of repertoire being performed can also affect the manner in which the orchestra responds to the conductor. Pieces demanding higher levels of rhythmic cohesion – particularly contemporary pieces – made the process more difficult, and required the orchestra to adhere more closely to the conductor’s gesture:

Obviously you’ll get an orchestra like the Vienna, which is a fabulous orchestra, great musicians, makes a marvellous sound, but they have a very traditional way of playing. They play the great classical pieces, great Viennese and German music marvellously, in the way that people believe maybe it should be played. They will play it in their way. But frequently there are conductors saying they try to play *Rite of Spring* in that way, or they can’t, they can’t do it, they can’t react as fast . . . And I know that they’re not particularly good at twentieth-century music. I mean they can play it, but it takes a long time to rehearse it.

To return briefly to entrainment: Clayton, Sager and Will note that studying the processes of entrainment in detail may reveal something of the power relationships inhering in a musical performance, since it may be possible to deduce who is entraining to whom and under what circumstances.⁵⁰ It should be noted that this disparity between the conductor’s gestural beat and the beat as construed by the orchestra may on occasion arise out of the

⁵⁰ Clayton and others, ‘In Time with the Music’, 21 n. 25.

degree of respect afforded the former by the latter. One musician observed that 'my old teacher explained to me once that the time lag was longer for the least respected conductors. Essentially, the orchestra was ignoring them'. Another musician offered some insight into how the orchestra copes in such situations:

If you're not following the conductor you must be following somebody else, so I suppose theoretically you might be watching the front of the section in the strings . . . So the string principals will be following the leader, the leader places the beat, and then there would be a slight delay, I would think, in response. But I think it's probably a delay in . . . yeah, it's seconds isn't it, sometimes. But that's how it's together.

But the same musician also acknowledged that some conductors attempted to assert their authority by obliging the orchestra to follow them more closely, remarking that 'if a conductor says, for God's sake play with the beat, then the orchestra will play with the beat'.

Similar perspectives on this issue are offered by research in the field of music psychology, and particularly that undertaken on those physical movements that are an intrinsic element of musical performance. While much of this work has concentrated on the expressive gestures of solo performers and what these might represent, a few studies have demonstrated the importance of such gestures for co-performer cooperation in musical ensembles. These have shown that 'physical proximity has a crucial role to play in the co-ordination of the music', and that 'when performers could not see one another, their performances were less co-ordinated in terms of both timing and dynamics'.⁵¹ A. M. H. Clayton has also demonstrated the significance of visual feedback in performance,⁵² and Yarbrough the importance of eye contact and facial and bodily expressions between conductors and student choirs.⁵³ In a more recent study of a piano duo, Williamon and Davidson note that 'visual communication, in the form of physical gestures and explicit attempts to make eye-contact, served as another vehicle for sharing ideas'.⁵⁴

All of this would appear to illuminate differently the question of how orchestras play together, as well as providing further dimensions to Schutz's ideas on tuning in and Blacking's notion of bodily empathy or entrainment. They suggest that musicians, as part of their heightened awareness within the performance event, are both consciously and/or intuitively aware of a variety of gestures that they use to determine their own contributions. The studies cited have mainly concentrated on small ensembles, but extending their findings through observation and my own experience, and in keeping with the various remarks by orchestral players quoted above, I suggest that within the context of orchestral performance such gestures would include: the bow and body movements of the leaders of each string section, and particularly the leader of the orchestra; the breathing patterns and minute instrumental gestures of the leader of any wind or brass section; a fractional movement of an instrument or

51 Davidson, 'Social in Musical Performance', 221.

52 See A. M. H. Clayton, 'Coordination between Players'.

53 See Yarbrough, 'Effect of Magnitude'.

54 Williamon and Davidson, 'Exploring Co-performer Coordination', 59.

body part in any other nearby colleague, and so forth. While such movements may be barely perceptible to an audience, or lost within the overall theatre of the occasion, they are highly significant for those musicians charged with recreating musical artworks to the degrees of exactitude commonly expected in the Western art music tradition.

However, the significance of such gestural communication within the orchestra serves only to reinforce the symbolic nature of the conductor's work, while de-emphasizing its operational importance. The conductor's contributions to the performance are clearly only one part of a diverse collection of non-verbal behaviour patterns that are essential for the smooth and accurate functioning of this group of musicians, making his role particularly ambiguous. He is symbolically responsible for directing the orchestra and, depending on the degree of respect afforded to him by the musicians, he may control the musical proceedings to some extent. But his gestures are only part of what makes the performance possible, and it is because the musicians have a heightened awareness of other, less obvious gestures that they are able to work together so intensely and with such a high degree of precision.

Schutz's emphasis on what he describes as the 'face-to-face relationship' is also intriguingly apposite here. In an orchestral concert relatively little eye contact is possible between the musicians during the performance, largely because of the semi-circular layout that has as its focal point the conductor's rostrum. Eye contact with the conductor, however, is both prevalent and, as is evident from the studies cited above, crucial to the proper functioning of the ensemble. However, given that a full symphony orchestra may constitute eighty players or more, the conductor can catch the gaze only of certain key performers at any given time, and there may be many musicians, particularly in the middle of the large string sections, who do not make direct eye contact with the conductor at all during the performance. Since the conductor's gestures are in any case only tenuously related to exactly when the orchestra plays – and in many circumstances it can manage perfectly well without him – I suggest that the more important consequences of his work lie in relation to the world of inner time. It is through his dance-like gestures that he contributes to the synchronization of inner time, mediating between the performers and providing a substitute for the direct eye contact that they themselves are unable to make. Thus the conductor's 'dancing', the eye contact he makes with the musicians, and the often minute gestures inherent in musical performance, all act as confirmation and reinforcement of what Schutz describes as those 'fluxes of inner time'; these non-verbal gestures stimulate and synchronize the mutual experience of music making in this shared 'community of space'.

But for successful completion of the orchestral rite, the audience must also 'tune in' or become entrained to this other world of time. Because their participation in the event is more passive than that of the performers, they rely extensively on the musical sounds emanating from the stage, together with their perception of the physical gestures of the performers. Since the conductor has his back to the audience for much of the time, the ambiguity of his gesticulations takes on heightened significance, allowing the audience considerable licence in the meanings they may construe upon his movements. For the audience, therefore, the conductor's actions are obviously even more symbolic and less functional than for the musicians, and offer opportunities for a rather different reading of his role.

The Conductor as Shaman

Returning to the ritual aspects of the orchestral concert, it is not difficult to see the conductor as a figure in some way analogous to the priest or shaman of a religious ritual. Shamanism in particular provides some interesting parallels in the present context, because shamans in many cultures rely upon dance as an important component of their work.

The word 'shaman' appears to have emanated from the tungus-speaking people of Siberia, although the practice of shamanism may be found in many regions across the globe, from central Asia through to northern and western Europe, American Indian communities, and so forth.⁵⁵ Mircea Eliade suggests that the shaman is 'the great master of ecstasy', and that through attaining this ecstatic state a shaman is able to come into contact with the sacred order of the cosmos.⁵⁶ Quite what the nature of that contact might be, however, is a matter for debate, and there is much tension in the anthropological literature between those who see shamans as being – or believing themselves to be – in control of spirits, and those who see shamans as themselves controlled, at least on occasion, by spirits.⁵⁷ Essentially, however, the shaman is an appointed intermediary who establishes contact with the supernatural world by means of ecstatic experience. This contact may be undertaken for purposes of healing or therapy, divination or the quest for expert knowledge.⁵⁸

Several scholars have argued, however, that to concentrate only on the figure of the shaman is to miss the significance of the social and psychosocial contexts that allow the shaman to operate effectively. Specifically, Porterfield asserts that to comprehend the efficacy of the shaman's work in a particular context it is necessary to understand the nature of the symbols employed. She writes that 'the shaman helps his patrons appreciate symbols that address, interpret, and contribute to the resolution of their most pressing problems and conflicts'.⁵⁹ In particular, the shaman does this by using his or her own body as 'the locus of symbol production', and thus the symbolic representation of those problems the shaman is engaged to address is played out through his or her own body; the shaman's body becomes the temporary repository of individual or societal maladies projected on to it. Porterfield repeats Evans-Pritchard's observation (based on the latter's work among the Azande of Africa) that the shaman's body is centrally involved in his production of symbols: 'A witch-doctor does not only divine with his lips, but with his whole body. He dances the questions that are put to him'.

In order for these bodily symbols to achieve their full significance they must be performed. Whereas the primary symbols of stories and prayers are the spoken words – albeit words that may themselves be effective only when performed in the proper contexts – the primary

55 For a more extensive discussion of the etymological roots of the word see Harvey, 'General Introduction', 1–3. Rouget (*Music and Trance*, 126) cites Lot-Falck's observation that the word derives from the root *sam-*, which 'contains the idea of dance and leap on the one hand, trouble and agitation on the other'.

56 Eliade, *Shamanism*, 4–5.

57 Harvey, 'General Introduction', 9.

58 This brief sketch of shamanic roles and practices does little justice to the wide range of literature that exists on the subject. Overviews are provided, for example, by Eliade, *Shamanism*; Halifax, *Shamanic Voices*; Drury, *Shaman and the Magician*; and Harvey, *Shamanism*. For a specific appraisal of the role of music in trance and possession see Rouget, *Music and Trance*.

59 Porterfield, 'Shamanism', 726.

symbols of the shamanic performance are the visible movements of the shaman's body, which can thus be made explicit solely through the act of performance. Such performances may involve considerable pain (or at least, expressions of pain) on the part of the shaman. Porterfield describes a photograph of a shaman that shows 'a face contorted in pain with open eyes rolled back in the head. The face in this photograph testifies to the gruelling physical ordeal that was part of the shaman's embodiment of this spirit'.⁶⁰

It is intriguing to consider how much of this shamanic practice maps onto the role and behaviour of a conductor working with an orchestra. It would probably be overstating the case to assert that the conductor fully achieves the ecstatic state of trance or possession in the manner frequently attributed to shamans, although those more passionate performers may be said to generate a 'controlled ecstasy' of a general kind. But as Gordon MacLellan – himself a shaman – points out, modern shamans, particularly those working in urban contexts, do not necessarily conform to what he describes as the 'all fall down and twitch convincingly' school of magic: "'Trance" is achieved when the shaman is conscious of, talking to and operating in all the relevant worlds of his reality at the same time'.⁶¹

MacLellan's multiple worlds of reality resonate intriguingly with Schutz's pluridimensionality of time, and while all the participants in the orchestral rite may be said to be simultaneously engaged in two worlds of time, it is perhaps the conductor who is most deeply immersed in the musical world-out-of-time and who may most accurately be described as being 'lost' in the musical performance itself. A musician working in London's Philharmonia Orchestra once observed to me that during the applause after one particular performance the renowned conductor had to ask the leader of the orchestra which individual musicians had played well and should thus be given their own ovation; he had himself been so wrapped up in the music that the specific details of the performance had passed him by. My own rather more humble involvement in this area also suggests to me that there is a sense in which a conductor experiences the event rather differently from those around him, being at the centre of the music making, engaging with the details of it, yet at the same time tuned in to the larger soundscape in a qualitatively different fashion; this perhaps stems from the conductor's need to make sense of the overall structure of the work, not just its moment-by-moment unfolding.

The conductor's central role in the performance event itself is, of course, self-evident. Although certain ritualizing practices characterize the orchestral concert prior to the performance itself – the division of audience and performers into separate groups, their assembly in their own antechambers, the change into particular costumes for the performers, etc. – it is when the conductor enters the auditorium that the rite reaches its most crucial stage. After the customary acknowledgements of the various parties, it is the raising of the baton that signals the beginning of that journey into the other world of time that the conductor seeks to guide us through, and it is the lowering of the baton that indicates its end. The baton is the most obvious symbol of the conductor's power and control of the event, but

60 Porterfield, 'Shamanism', 726–7.

61 MacLellan, 'Dancing on the Edge', 367.

it is also significant as a marker of the boundaries pertaining to the musical world-out-of-time, and this significance is understood by all who take part in the rite.

Recalling Canetti's description of him as the 'ruler of the world' for the duration of the concert, we are reminded that the conductor is now the most powerful person in the hall. Not only does he control the unfolding of the concert ritual itself, but he is also seen as the controller of the musicians, an authoritarian figure to whom they must apparently submit – notwithstanding the ambiguity of this perspective noted above. His power is further reinforced through our perception that it is he who, in Small's words, 'summons up the spirit of the dead composer'. Invested in him, therefore, is also the authority of interpretation, an understanding that, as controller of the performance forces and shaper of the overall sound (shaping that is, of course, kinetically represented by his hand and body movements), he enables the recreation of the composer's intentions on our behalf.⁶² It is surely no coincidence that the rise of the conductor as an authoritarian figure over the course of the nineteenth century was accompanied by changes in the practice of concert rituals that in many respects appear to have been designed to enhance further his authority and mystique: the dimming of auditorium lights to focus attention on the stage in which he occupies a central position; the introduction of the baton as an explicit symbol of his authority; the change of position from standing within or to the side of the orchestra, often facing the audience, to one who takes centre stage but – tellingly – turns his back on the audience, so that the manner in which he works is partially obscured from the audience's gaze.⁶³ And it is the later nineteenth-century romantic style of Western art music, with its inherent temporal flexibility, which most easily accommodates that discrepancy between the conductor's gestural beat and the beat as construed by the orchestra, and which thus most clearly suggests to the audience that there are mysterious forces at work in this most fundamental component of the rite.

In slow pieces there may be a distinct interval, often charged with tension, between the dying away of the musical sound and the conductor finally relaxing his body and lowering the baton, after which the audience too can relax. It is at points such as these that Blacking's notion of bodily empathy can be particularly identified within the concert hall as a whole, moments that generate 'waves of feeling' that may transcend individual consciousness but contribute nonetheless to the individual and collective experience of the event. In the short breaks that normally occur between movements of a larger work we are caught up once more in the world of real time, a change often accompanied by very real-world gestures of coughing and fidgeting, before the raising of the baton indicates that we are to be transported once more. The final lowering of the baton is all the more significant in those non-tonal works where the audience feels unsure that the piece has actually finished. At such times, which arise perhaps because of compositional ambiguity deliberately intended by the composer or simply because the audience is less able to depend on the conventional tonal relationships employed elsewhere, the audience members are even more reliant on the

62 On this point see also Cook, *Music*, 25.

63 For more on the changing placement of the conductor see Siepmann, 'History of Direction', 118; and Scholes, *Mirror of Music*, 374–5.

symbolic work of the conductor's gestures in aiding their participation in this other world of time.

During the performance the conductor's dancing forms the central part of his neo-shamanic role. Through this dance particular musical spirits may be said to be embodied in those 'purposeful, intentionally rhythmical and culturally patterned sequences' he produces. This dancer's body symbolically represents the tensions and resolutions of the music, his gestures arising not only from the functional necessity of cueing particular instruments, but also as an expressive response to, or in anticipation of, the musical gestures themselves. On to this dancing figure the audience projects not, perhaps, the individual or societal maladies that Porterfield identifies as characteristic of true shamanic rituals, but imagined responses evoked by the musical sound. Although the audience's engagement with the performance is largely cerebral, each listener empathizes with the physical stresses of the conductor's dance. As Rouget puts it in his cross-cultural analysis of music and trance, 'the identification experienced by the individual with the god he embodies takes place through dance and because of it. It is also through dance that this identification is made manifest in the eyes of others'.⁶⁴ Following Small's reading of the event, it is the conductor himself who now embodies the struggles of the heroic protagonist, his passionate engagement with the demands of the music played out for the audience to see. Adorno similarly sees the conductor as 'the imago⁶⁵ of power, visibly embodied in his prominent figure and striking gestures', gestures that, he observes, are those of the 'medicine-man'.⁶⁶

There is, however, one profound sense in which the conductor is not a true shaman: he does not provide any music himself, he only dances. More normally, according to Rouget, the shaman provides his or her own music to induce the necessary trance state, and in this sense the conductor is a *faux* shaman, sharing more perhaps with those who are possessed than with shamans per se, since he relies upon others to produce the music for him. Rouget suggests that 'the possessed person is never the musicant of his own trance, the shaman always is'.⁶⁷ But the situation is not clear-cut in the case of the orchestra conductor. Rouget later makes the following distinction between the two roles, suggesting that 'in possession the subject goes into trance because he changes identity; in shamanism he goes into trance because he changes worlds'.⁶⁸ While I do not claim that the conductor achieves a true state of ecstatic trance, the notion that he changes worlds within the context of the orchestral rite is certainly consonant with the arguments I have outlined above.

While our perceptions of the neo-shamanic role played by conductors are constructed largely within the ritual contexts in which these conductors operate, they are further reinforced through the images of such figures with which we are presented in concert programmes, on CD covers, and in other advertising, and some consideration of these images will underline the points made previously.

64 Rouget, *Music and Trance*, 118.

65 In psychology, an idealized picture of oneself or others.

66 Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 104–5.

67 Rouget, *Music and Trance*, 126.

68 Rouget, *Music and Trance*, 132.



Figure 1 Arturo Toscanini. Photo: Lebrecht Music & Arts Photo Library, by permission.

In some of these images it is as if the conductors themselves take on the appearance of imagined spirits, all but disembodied, with only their most salient features evident. Principal among these is the highly symbolic baton – itself possibly related subliminally to the wizard’s wand in the collective mind of the audience – and the hands that are so prominent in the performance of the dance. The face is also important, since through it we register our impressions of the musical spirits controlled by or possessing the shaman (see Figures 1 and 2). Such images, emphasizing the ethereal darkness within which we imagine the conductor operates, strongly suggest him to be a liminal, disembodied, almost ghost-like figure, a figure, in fact, who may very well be caught between this world and another.



Figure 2 Mitsuko Uchida. Photo: Sisi Burn/ArenaPAL, by permission.

In other images, however, the self-evident corporality of the conductor demonstrates something of the strenuous demands placed upon him as he dances. While the English word ‘dancing’ will for many bring with it associations of light-hearted pleasure, the conductor’s execution of his task may lead to facial expressions and postures that could be read as conveying quite different meanings (see Figures 3–5). These images, ostensibly of passion perhaps but equally valid if taken as grimaces of pain, suggest the physical discomfort experienced by the shaman as he plays out the musical tensions that he takes symbolically into his body. The sweating brow and tousled hair remind us that this is hard physical work,



Figure 3 Simon Rattle. Photo: Clive Barda/ArenaPAL, by permission.



Figure 4 Valery Gergiev Photo: Clive Barda/ArenaPAL, by permission.

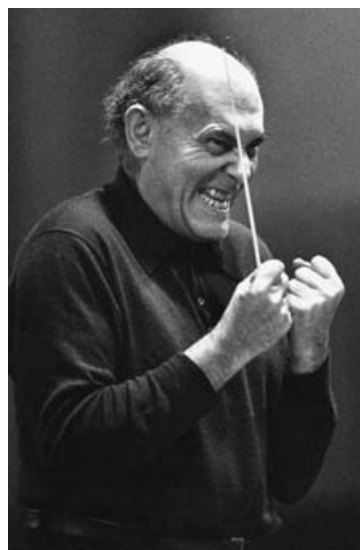


Figure 5 Sir Georg Solti. Photo Clive Barda/ArenaPAL, by permission.

‘the gruelling physical ordeal’ that Porterfield has identified elsewhere and to which the shaman must submit himself in the service of the ritual event.

Of all those participating in the event it is this presiding figure who is most keenly aware of its solemnity and quasi-religious significance. Like other shamans, not only do conductors rely on music and dance for the efficacy of their performance, they must also occasionally offer what may seem like prayers, or at least supplication, to the musical spirits they entertain (see Figure 6). Through such gestures the conductor marks out the sanctity of the event, affirming the creation of a ritual space wherein communication with the musical spirits may be established. And as Rouget observes, dance is ‘above all, communication – with oneself and with others’.⁶⁹



Figure 6 Carlo Maria Giulini Photo: Samuels/ArenaPAL, by permission.

⁶⁹ Rouget, *Music and Trance*, 117.

Conclusion

One is reminded of the old joke about the lady at a concert who asks the expert in the next seat please to let her know as soon as Nikisch starts spellbinding.⁷⁰

While the relationship between music and ritual in other traditions is often both explicit and acknowledged, we have too frequently overlooked the ritualizing practices that characterize our Western traditions, most particularly the highly stylized behaviours underpinning the paradigmatic symphony orchestra concert of the Western art music tradition. Yet the patterns of behaviour these events contain, the costumes, customs, and conventions that characterize them, are strongly suggestive of ritual practices elsewhere; and the belief system that scaffolds them, our perceptions of ‘the Great Masters’ which, as Small avers, are ‘rehearsed every time their music is played before a paying audience in a concert hall’,⁷¹ provides further evidence of their ritual nature. In such events are sedimented the residues of practices which we readily identify in other contexts but which, perhaps because of our emphasis on scientific rationalism and the power of technology, we mistakenly believe to have atrophied in our own traditions.

Within these events the conductor plays the most important symbolic role. He serves to a considerable degree as a focus of attention for both the audience and, naturally, the orchestra. For the former he is a shamanic figure upon whom they may project their imagined responses to the musical sound and with whom they empathize bodily in the physical exertions arising from his work. The musicians, who appear to be slavishly following the conductor’s directions, in fact have a more ambiguous relationship with him, yet one that is still predicated in performance on ‘this weird thing’, as Simon Rattle puts it, that is generated between conductors and orchestras.

The conductor’s most significant contribution is as a controller of time, not only in the narrative sense of the unfolding of real time within which the performance event itself occurs, but most profoundly in the sense of controlling the creation of another world of time – what Schutz describes as the world of inner time. Our entry into this other world and our experiences therein are dependent on the passage of the music, certainly, and our entrainment to it; but they are also dependent on our perception of the conductor’s dancing – a series of patterned and coordinated gestures that are symbolically significant but functionally ambiguous. The conductor embodies the musical argument, working it out through his dance and thus becoming, as Porterfield asserts, ‘the locus of symbol production’. These gestures help transport us to a world of virtual time, one that is both provoked and accompanied by specially chosen music appropriate for the rite.⁷² The conductor is thus a quintessentially liminal figure, and this liminality is reinforced by the images with which we are presented of him in various media. It is the neo-shamanic powers with which he appears to be endowed that allow him to occupy this ritually dangerous space between two different worlds; not, as Small would have it, between the real world and an imaginary world of heroic

⁷⁰ Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 105.

⁷¹ Small, ‘Performance as Ritual’, 19.

⁷² See also Bywater in this issue.

derring-do implied by symphonic tonal relations, but between two worlds of time: real time, and the world of virtual time engendered in the symphony orchestra concert. Our engagement with this other world of time characterizes our participation in the performance event; and, ultimately, we are dependent upon the dancing skills of our chosen shaman to conduct us through this other world of time in order that we may experience it both safely and satisfactorily.

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