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MANAGING A COMPANY LIKE AN ORCHESTRA

by

Michel Podolak

Conductor and choirmaster

Corporate consultant

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Report by Sophie Jacolin

Translation by Rachel Marlin

Overview

Sometimes a company manager is likened to the conductor of an orchestra, a person capable of creating harmony from a heterogeneous group, blending them into a common unit while making the most of their individual talents. Over a number of years, companies have ventured into the art world on the basis that renewed approaches may help to solve problems, ease tensions and make working teams stronger. Michel Podolak suggests that by studying a few fundamental principles of how orchestras work, we may understand corporate practices better. This includes a clear musical score which is not questioned by the conductor ; unconditional respect and attention from the musicians ; and the need to anticipate situations constantly. However, such comparisons have their limitations, and therefore each company must assess its own unique characteristics.

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TALK : Michel Podolak

I am a conductor and choirmaster. As well as my artistic career, for nearly twenty years I have been a corporate consultant and give motivational talks to companies about teamwork, management and leadership from my unique view as a conductor. My aim is not to give the impression that the orchestra is a model organisation, or to teach anyone any lessons, but simply to highlight the parallel between the two worlds and to prompt reactions which may be useful to companies and hence the way in which I make music.

A few years ago, I created a vocal ensemble called 'Les Voix en mouvement' which was part of William Mesguich's show 'Il était une fois la création du monde' in the autumn of 2009 at the Bouffes-Parisiens Theatre. This brought together various artists ranging from opera singers, to percussionist story-tellers, comedians, slam poets, and so on. The idea was to stage something varied, and to use entertainment as a means of convincing people that different values can co-exist.

We are currently involved in two projects. The first, 'Opera in piccolo', has eight to twelve singers who act out events which can take place in an opera choir. This play will initially be tested in companies and afterwards, I hope, will be presented to a wider audience. The second show should be ready at the beginning of 2012 : it will make reference to three historical periods including the renaissance, and allude to globalisation, humanism, progress and creative synthesis which were prevalent in these periods. Companies are actively involved : to finance this project, I started one of the first endowment funds for live shows. This is a new concept which comes somewhere between a foundation and an association even though all the members of our fund are private. This summarises my activities as a choirmaster.

In terms of my activities as a conductor, I do not have any fixed tenure with a particular orchestra. I am a guest conductor. As a result, each time I am invited to conduct, I have to establish a relationship with a new team of musicians, assert my authority, transmit my perception of the musical work, and conduct the orchestra in an excellent performance.

This talk tells of my experiences, and I hope will serve as a basis for wider thinking about management, regardless of whether the unity concerned is an orchestra, a company or any sort of group. A certain number of rules are common to all these organisations.

The conductor : a clear, long-term vision

How does a conductor, especially a guest conductor, establish his authority with an orchestra ? I recently recorded Maurice Ravel's 'Ma mère L'Oye' with the Szeged Symphony Orchestra in Hungary. Unfortunately I do not speak Hungarian. Once the musicians had briefly introduced themselves, we immediately started work. From the moment I raised my baton, a relationship was established with the orchestra. What was it like ? Why did the musicians decide to follow me ? The musician Franz Strauss liked to remind conductors '*Do not forget that from the minute you step up to the podium, we know whether it will be you or us who will be the boss*'. It is a power struggle. For the conductor, a relationship of trust with the musicians is at stake, and in doing this he establishes his authority. Several qualities are essential to achieve this. One must have a perfectly clear vision of what one asks of one's team.

Capturing the work and making choices

Usually a group is understanding when it comes together to achieve a defined objective : in the case of an orchestra, the aim is to play as well as possible. This aim is essential : the conductor can only unite and lead musicians if he has a precise vision. This requires a considerable amount of preparatory work on his part to capture the work, understand its complexities and nuances, and to choose the interpretation that he will ask the musicians to execute.

To build this vision, there are various stages for the conductor. The basis for his work is the musical score which represents the transcription of the composer's thoughts. He must start by interpreting the score and making an analysis which transforms this written information into music which he can hear in his head. It is a purely technical talent. During this first phase, the conductor acquaints himself with the so-called 'specifications'. Some scores, such as those written by Jean-Sebastian Bach, are generally quite simple to read (when one has been trained in harmony and counterpoint) and do not have many instructions. This raises the question of how Baroque music should be interpreted. Other pieces, such as Igor Stravinsky's 'The Rite of Spring', are extremely complex from a formal, rhythmic and melodic point of view. They really require technical analysis and comprehension of the score.

The next stage involves giving meaning to the score in order to create an artistic work. The conductor should make it his own and put his stamp on it because there is scope for interpretation. For example, when Mozart wrote 'molto allegro' ('very quickly'), should one take the speed as that of a galloping horse (the fastest thing at that time), or should one adopt more modern references? When, at the beginning of his Second Symphony, Gustav Mahler wrote that it was to be played 'with a majestic expression', what did that mean when it was written at the end of the 19th century, and how should it be interpreted today? It is the conductor's job to make his own interpretation. To do so, he has to call upon his power, or even his duty, of imagination, which he can supplement with his experience of other arts, his knowledge of the composer's life, the comparison between different orchestras, and so on. Under no circumstances should he limit himself to the concise guidelines of the composer. Maurice Ravel, when he said 'I do not ask people to interpret my music, I only ask that they play it', was wrong about the reality of interpretation. He went back on his word, as an anecdote, told by my mentor Manuel Rosenthal, shows. At the beginning of the 1930s, Rosenthal conducted Ravel's 'Bolero' in the presence of the composer. At the end of the rehearsal, Ravel asked him to play a little more slowly for the concert performance the next day. Manuel Rosenthal did as the composer asked. After the concert, Ravel said to him 'You were right; it was better yesterday.' We always have a margin of freedom, even with the most precise of scores. We should trust our intuition, which is a consequence of our imagination.

Despite the current state of research and analysis, we still cannot master everything. It is out of the question to suggest several possible interpretations to musicians. Well-considered choices need to be made and adopted. Under such conditions, an orchestra can follow this lead because the musicians know they will not be wasting their time, and that the conditions in place are conducive for perfection.

Anticipating and controlling time

The conductor has constantly to anticipate. When he conducts, he has to listen to what is not only being played at that very moment, but also to prepare for what is to come. One of my teachers taught me this in a remarkable fashion: I had barely started to lift my arm to start conducting when he stopped me. I told him that I had not yet done anything. It was precisely for this reason that he was telling me off, and added, 'How can the musicians possibly know where they are going when you do not know yourself?' The conductor must always be ahead of his musicians. This varies from country to country. French orchestras are very reactive: the group responds very quickly to the conductor's movements. German orchestras take a little extra time to react.

In addition to anticipation, the conductor must manage time. In the middle of the 1960s, the filmmaker Henri-Georges Clouzot filmed Herbert von Karajan during his rehearsals and concerts. This footage was a captivating account of the life of an orchestra. At the beginning of a session, which should only have lasted two-and-a-half hours, Karajan announced the order of the day. 'This is the last rehearsal before tomorrow's recording,' he said, 'and I would like to practise the passages which I think are particularly important for the general ambiance of the piece.' In the little time that remained, he chose to work assiduously on the first bars of the piece in order to establish the requirements he thought were necessary for the

entire piece. I was still surprised during this sequence to see the maestro giving the musicians contradictory instructions, and subsequently going back on himself. This mistake cannot be attributed to doubts about the interpretation of the music as Karajan knew exactly what he wanted. At the same time, one notices that he is a preoccupied – he furtively looks at his watch – which leads him to make gestures which are too abrupt and do not interpret his intentions correctly. This reveals the importance of good time management.

Orchestra rehearsals begin and finish on time. This is the rule. An outside observer may be shocked to see musicians stop in the middle of a phrase simply because time is up. However, this guarantees that during a specified time period, musicians can only concentrate on the music, without making telephone calls or checking their emails. Allow me to make a comparison with the corporate world where meetings rarely start on time, where those taking part are often preoccupied with their lap-tops, and where some people leave the room to answer important telephone calls. In such situations, those involved are not concentrating enough to discuss a given question. The logic of hyper-reactivity, which currently prevails, leads us to react instantly and to take incisive decisions. This is contrary to the management method which I see for the orchestra, which requires meticulous preparation, vision and anticipation, which results in an ability to influence the group.

Imposing confidence, respect and making people listen

Imagine that I ask you to form a choir right now. I am sure that some of you think you are not capable, that you sing off key and do not have a musical ear. Out of fear, habit, or as a simple reflex, we often lack confidence in our abilities. It is the conductor's responsibility, in an orchestra or a choir, to restore the confidence that every member should have in himself and that he should feel for other members. This is acquired by listening to people with respect. Naturally I include the conductor in these principles. At the end of my corporate talks, managers often say to me 'I hope they understood'. However, their subordinates also come to see me and say that they hope their managers have been listening properly and have understood !

Having outlined the role of the conductor, let me discuss the musicians.

The orchestra : diversity and interdependence

An orchestra is characterised above all by a diversity of instruments and personalities. How do musicians go one better than this and produce unity and harmony ?

All the roles are linked

The fundamental rule of musicians is to listen to each other, and especially to listen to the other instruments interpreting everything which encompasses the work. This was one of Karajan's obsessions : he knew that he could only achieve a complete result in this way. The conductor has the responsibility of reminding the musicians to listen to each other, even those whose role in the orchestra may be regarded as less important. Those who play the theme, in other words, the main melody, which structures the work and gives it its identity, cannot ignore the basses or the accompaniment, which are less noticeable. There are unrewarding roles in the orchestra : in Ravel's Bolero, the double basses play a very repetitive bass for seventeen minutes, with a very monotonous, basic rhythm. However, if it is not played correctly, the whole structure would fall apart. A crescendo which is played too early, for example, would quicken the pace for the entire orchestra and the overall result would be distorted. Musicians who play accompanying instruments (such as the triangle, a group of violins continuously playing, a group of brass instruments playing a few notes) are also 'in the background', but they still ensure an essential link between the melody and the bass. In Richard Wagner's famous 'Ride of the Valkyries', it is the accompaniment played by the strings which consists of incessant 'sweeps' which are difficult and tiring to play, and which give the work its frenzied nature. And despite all this, one does not perhaps notice the theme – two simple arpeggios – which stay in the memory.

Again I cannot help making a parallel with companies in order to emphasise the importance of the so-called 'annex' functions and how their failure or malfunction may harm the group, and damage confidence in a department or a product.

Artistry does not exist !

All the sections of the orchestra contribute equally in importance to create the perfect rendition of the musical piece. The same is true for those who take part in the production of the event, such as technicians, usherettes, those in charge of ticket sales, publicity, and so on. All are subject to the same principles of organisation, and these principles should be strictly adhered to in order to satisfy the 'necessity for a result', so that a service of the highest possible quality may be given at a certain date and time. This can only take place because of a working method called 'reverse planning' : each person should know precisely what he has to do, and when he must play so that all the pieces fit together perfectly. However, each person must also respect those around him and trust their abilities to carry out their roles. There is an amusing anecdote about this delicate intertwining of responsibilities which may descend into a power struggle. In the 1990s at the Strasbourg Opera, where usually at the end of Puccini's opera 'Tosca' the soprano throws herself from the top of the tower of the Saint-Ange castle and lands on a mattress backstage, the audience were surprised to see her bounce back up ! The diva had been obnoxious to the technicians and they had taken their revenge by replacing the mattress with a trampoline. This incident shows that even though the technicians were 'backstage', they were equally important for the smooth running of the show. At the Paris Opera, about 130 professions work together on large-scale projects. This requires a huge amount of organisation which may be complex ! The planning is determined by the managing director and the production director who co-ordinate the orchestra, the choirs, the dancers, the technical teams, and so on. Time is not wasted. The costumes have to be ready at a precise time for the dress rehearsal and not any later so that the dancers can get used to them and perform in the best conditions. In other words, the artistry belongs to the fantasy world. The artistic environment is much stricter than certain clichés would have one believe.

DISCUSSION

How does a conductor's authority develop and grow ?

Question : *Why does the way an orchestra sounds vary depending on its conductor ?*

Michel Podolak : It is really hard to explain. It is probably due to the sensibility and the personal touch which each conductor brings to the orchestra. A percussionist from Berlin's Philharmonic Orchestra in the 1950s claimed that he heard the sound of the orchestra change radically during a rehearsal and develop into a wonderful sound. This was solely because the famous conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler had just come into the concert hall.

Q. : *Not all musicians become conductors. How do musicians react to one of their own taking power ?*

M. P. : A good musician does not necessarily make a good conductor. It is a totally different job. Authority develops for the most part with experience. Furthermore, the context may influence the emergence of new conductors. In the 1980s, there was no place for young conductors, especially in France. They had to find other activities. In any case, from the age of twenty, I worked with amateur musicians. This experience taught me a great deal about how a group works, the way in which the arrival or the departure of musicians can invigorate or destabilise an orchestra, and the danger of getting into a routine.

Q. : *Can the orchestra disregard the conductor, especially a guest conductor ?*

M. P. : The rule, agreed by everyone, is that the orchestra is managed by a conductor. The role of the conductor is therefore not open to question. It remains to be seen what sort of relationship the musicians decide to have with the conductor. A principal (permanent) conductor has time to carry out in-depth work with the musicians, but a guest conductor can also create a close bond with the orchestra despite a shorter period of time. France is one of the unusual countries where musicians are able to put an end to the rapport they have with their conductor, and even to be publicly at war with him. Extremely talented principal conductors have been known to end their contract early because they have been rejected by the orchestra for various reasons such as a clash of artistic cultures, use of techniques which the musicians were not used to, and so on. In German- and English-speaking countries as well as in Italy, when musicians do not appreciate a conductor, they ignore him. The group becomes introverted. In the 1990s, during a contemporary music concert conducted by a guest conductor who had not conducted very well on tour, he could not find his place in the score and leaned over to ask a musician where they were. The musician answered 'Helsinki, Finland'. The musicians had decided to reject him. The orchestra can function on its own if it is at odds with the conductor. Georges Prêtre told me that when he began his conducting career, he was invited to Vienna by Karajan to conduct a Richard Strauss opera. At the end of the only rehearsal, the orchestra had not had enough time to practise the last fifteen minutes of the opera. Seeing the conductor's dismayed reaction to this event, the first violin soloist reassured him, saying 'You have done your work brilliantly but we know the piece. When we get to the part which we have not practised, leave it to us.' During the concert, when they reached the place where the rehearsal had ended, the sound of the orchestra changed : the group functioned independently. This shows that the orchestra can declare its independence vis-à-vis the conductor, but that the conductor may also leave his mark in a more lasting way. It is a delicate balance.

Q. : *Does the conductor let his musicians make suggestions or allow them to express their feelings ?*

M. P. : One might think that musicians value their freedom of interpretation. In fact, they prefer being led by a conductor who knows exactly what he wants of them. Otherwise, they get the feeling that they are wasting their time. Naturally, some conductors are more

authoritarian than others. Pierre Boulez, a composer but also a remarkable conductor, gives musicians a great deal of freedom in rehearsals, but within certain, well-defined limits. He is tactful with those whose interpretation he does not share by suggesting changes in certain places in the score, and thereby finds common ground. This is possible because he has limitless clarity, and knows how to make the most complex works simple. Such qualities are appreciated by musicians throughout the world. However, on the other hand, Pierre Boulez will not tolerate any wrong notes.

Q. : *Does a conductor apologise when he makes a mistake ?*

M. P. : First of all he has to realise that he has made a mistake ! Daniel Barenboim thinks that one should recognise one's mistakes provided there are not too many of them. In so doing, one gains the respect of one's musicians. Musicians know that they can make mistakes, just like the conductor. Nevertheless, this is a recent development : twenty years ago, the conductor was deemed to be untouchable, and had a reputation of being incapable of making mistakes.

Q. : *Have you noticed if the ways of conducting an orchestra have changed over the past few years ?*

M. P. : A new style of conductors has emerged. The most striking example is probably the El Sistema movement created in Venezuela nearly thirty years ago by José Antonio Abreu, a conductor, teacher and businessman who created musical ensembles to help young people to leave the slums, misery and violence behind them. Today, there are 250,000 people who belong to this movement, and they play music, ranging from beginners' orchestras to the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel. This young, 28-year-old conductor, who grew up in the slums, is developing a new way of conducting. His orchestra generates an amazing amount of energy. He was able to put a Viennese audience – which has a reputation for being rather conservative – into a trance ! Technically speaking, the result is perhaps not as perfect as other prestigious orchestras such as the Vienna and Berlin Philharmonics, but the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra emphasises other values, especially the pleasure of playing.

Over twenty years, the rapport between musicians and the conductor's authority has changed considerably. Musicians no longer accept the authoritarianism which used to exist. They want to concentrate on what is essential and make music together, regardless of the conductor's ego.

Also, since the end of the 1980s, musical training has undergone changes in France due to Marc-Olivier Dupin, who was director of the Paris Conservatory at the time, and who created new programmes and broke new ground. This kind of dynamic action continues, and conductors ought to take this into account. The standardisation of European degrees and the arrival on the market of young, foreign musicians with new expectations regarding conductors are forcing us to question ourselves constantly.

A company is not quite the same as an orchestra

Q. : *Company organisation is as subtle as that of an orchestra even if the two worlds cannot be closely compared. The company should make manufacturers who struggle with their resources, retailers who are faced with difficult customers, and financiers who sell promises all work together. This requires a certain amount of skill which is similar to that which you have outlined, but is slightly different. In particular, I think that the company is different from the orchestra with regards to time management and mistakes. The conductor manages the musicians who in a way 'pay' immediately. They get to work straightaway and any wrong notes are detected straightaway. In companies, projects are devised to be more long-term ; mistakes are made but tolerated and smoothed out in the annual results. Consequently, management and sanctions take forms which would not be suitable in an orchestral environment.*

M. P. : I wanted to outline a few general principles which can cast light on both the orchestra and companies, but the comparison necessarily has its limitations. As you say, the company focuses on the long-term, with annual projections, whereas the orchestra only has a few days to prepare for its performance. Time is very limited. This is why there is so much pressure during the time the orchestra is playing : each member must give his best at a given moment in time. As well as this, punishment for playing a wrong note is immediate : everybody can hear it (in particular the conductor and the other musicians). From this point of view, the rules of the game regarding the orchestra are perhaps closer to those in a sports team rather than a company. Another important difference is that some conductors rely on feelings to conduct a piece of music, whereas this is not the fundamental driving force in a company.

Q. : *Why as a conductor are you interested in the corporate world ?*

M. P. : I once met a consultant who was also a musician and specialist in personal development who realised that strong parallels could be drawn between these two worlds. When I started out in 1991, I knew nothing about companies and I just talked to people about my profession. Since then, the number of talks I give has increased, and I have branched out into various fields such as technology, sport, banking, insurance, heavy industry, and so on. I never come to talk without first meeting the human resources director or the head of communications. I familiarise myself with the culture of the organisation. I make sure that I always keep my position as an artist, a 'crazy man', without adapting myself too much to what other people say. If I did, I would risk losing my freedom of speech.

Listening to these professionals, I realise that companies are faced with the same problem : how can one live, work and be competitive ? Over the past ten years, companies have become more exacting in their requirements. They are specifically interested in team cohesion and leadership. With the onset of the economic crisis, other subjects have come to light, such as trust. I tackle these subjects in the way I would manage an orchestra or a choir. Choirs especially are very good examples since they require those taking part to listen carefully and they rely on trust and respect in order to break down barriers and alleviate fears. In return, these talks have taught me a great deal about companies and have given me more self-confidence.

Q. : *The principles which you highlight are often absent in companies where there are numerous cases which lack rigueur, vision, time and people who listen. How do people react to your talks ?*

M. P. : People often say that things do not happen like this in 'real life'. But in what other sort of life do they think that orchestras develop ? The world of musicians is extremely demanding professionally. People often tell me that, unlike in an orchestra, employees do not have a clear 'score' to play. I think that the company 'score' could be written at least on one subject : the common objective. Regardless of whether one is a researcher, a scientist, a salesman or in the administration department, the end result is the same. 'Why are we all here ?' I ask managers this question and tell them to answer the question in front of their co-workers. It is not annual profits which employees dream about, but the pleasure of taking part in a group adventure and of doing something of which they are proud. I am surprised to see that this dimension is so often forgotten in companies. I realise that the position of intermediary management is particularly delicate at the moment because it lacks a 'score', and may appear to be improvised. I advise people in companies to write things down despite all the tiny, internal 'scores' which can urge co-workers towards a goal however small it may be. When I work with small groups, like management committees, I like to quote well-known conductors in order to stimulate discussion. Karajan said 'the art of management is to know when to put down the baton so as not to embarrass the musicians.' It is the role of managers to get what they want. I also show them videos of conductors during master classes, rehearsals and concerts and we analyse them. My idea is not to divide the two worlds, but to establish a collaboration. Companies, and the methods they use, have a great deal to bring to artists. For

example, I am inspired by corporate techniques and techniques used by consultants as a means of understanding and assessing my concerts, taking into account all elements involved (such as the audience, the concert hall, and so on). Another area for collaboration is the endowment fund 'Les Amis des artistes en mouvement' which I created, and is composed solely of professionals from companies.

Presentation of the speaker :

Michel Podolak : professional conductor, corporate speaker, creates bridges between the corporate and the art world using his two areas of expertise. His aim, thanks to music (the arts), is to overcome hostility and opposition by changing the way in which we perceive things and to call upon confidence, an ability to listen to people, and our feelings in order to construct a more human future.
www.mpodolak.com

Translation by Rachel Marlin (rjmarlin@gmail.com)