Baroque Practice

Orchestral Playing, Baroque Style

or... Can Your Ensemble Play Without A Conductor?

by Ginna Watson

For a Baroque orchestra, playing without a conductor is the rule rather than the exception. Historically, orchestras were led by a keyboard or string player (usually the concertmaster) rather than by a conductor. This was due to the essentially two-part nature of Baroque music, which consists of a bass line and a melody line, with the inner voices filling in the texture. It worked best for the orchestra to be led by the "basso continuo" section, which included a keyboard (usually harpsichord or small organ) playing the bass line along with the cellos and basses, with a possible added bassoon. In addition to playing the bass line, the keyboard player would improvise a part based on accompanying chord charts or "figures" (leading to the term "figured bass"). This way the strong rhythm and harmonies of the continuo would drive the music and provide a foundation for the rest of the players to fit into. The keyboard leader would give the orchestra cues with hand gestures, but largely the orchestra would respond to the body language of the keyboardist, feeling the music together. Alternatively, the concertmaster acting as a leader would give upbeats and tempo changes with his or her bow, in the same way a modern first violinist of a string quartet cues the other players.

The major benefit of this conductorless method of leading the orchestra is that it transforms the group into a chamber ensemble, with each player taking responsibility for his or her line and feeling a sense of shared community. Players can communicate with each other instead of simply following the conductor's baton, and they can better come up with a "group interpretation" of the music that isn't just one person's idea.

Fine, you say, for a small chamber ensemble like a string quartet; but when it comes to a large ensemble like a thirty- to fifty-piece school orchestra, it would be impossible—the orchestra could never stay together!

Before condemning the idea, however, consider some possible ways to make it work. One of the double-edged swords of playing with a conductor is that, although he or she provides a steady beat for the orchestra (assuming we musicians all took at least one conducting class in college!), *the conductor is solely responsible for keeping the beat*. Of course, it would be great if every student was good at internalizing the conductor's beat, but unfortunately this isn't so. We've all seen and heard school orchestras that get away from the conductor, simply because everyone isn't feeling the beat. Perhaps school orchestra directors should take a lesson from their band counterparts and have every student tap the beat, and maybe more do today than previously. But with a conductor, it's too easy for individual players to give up responsibility.

So how to get every player to "share the beat"? One way is for everyone to start out as the "leader," perhaps first by all simultaneously beating the rhythm of their own part on their stand, and then by giving "cues" wherever and however they feel comfortable doing it—by nodding, stomping their feet, raising their bow, etc. This might seem very chaotic and a waste of precious time, but it would quickly give them a sense of what's needed to lead other players. Then each section can take turns leading the other sections (even the violas!), and after that, each player can lead the rest of the orchestra, perhaps just for a few measures.

Then, and only then, should the orchestra director take a turn, not as a conductor, but as a leader, using either their own instrument or even a piano (moved to the center of the room where it can't be ignored). That way, the players in the orchestra can see the director as one of themselves rather than as a remote person standing apart from them waving their arms about (which, when you think about it, isn't really the best way to feel or communicate a beat).

Of course, Suzuki ensembles already do this, with the group leader using their bow instead of a baton. But in that case, all the students are playing melody parts that they've already learned well individually. It's more difficult, but not by any means impossible, to do with four- or five-part music where most students don't have the melody. The trick again is for all the players to feel that that their parts are equally important and that they can all share the responsibility of communicating the music.

If this approach works well in rehearsal, perhaps the orchestra director can go a step further by having the orchestra perform one piece in a concert this way, psyching their students to share the responsibility for the rhythm and even for the musical interpretation. One could go back to the "everyone's a leader" exercise in rehearsal and have each section, then each student, try to get the others to play the piece musically the way they see it—with the potential for some fun voting contests and campaigning for the winning interpretation! Or, more peacefully, a shared concept that could be agreed on.

With any luck, 21st-century orchestras may start to resemble their 18th-century counterparts—minus the powdered wigs of course!

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