

The fascination of orchestral playing

Real tonal harmony within the different string groups

The need for simultaneous playing

An opportunity for orchestras

1. structure and hierarchy

The orchestra is a fascinating instrument. In a large orchestra, the variety of sound possibilities is almost unlimited.

Unlike, let us say, an organ, it is not only the 'player', the conductor, who determines the result, but its interpretation is realised by as many as a 120 people. The majority of them, the strings, not only have to realise the conductor's ideas, but also have to do so in the same way, so that each group really plays 'only' one part and not several mixed together. Just as an organ pipe has one specific colour and not several ones.

Their roles are therefore very different.

The conductor makes music with his heart and his mind. He is the only one who produces no sound and at the same time the one who determines everything. It is his sound ideas, his tempi, his expression, his interpretation that must be realised by the orchestral musicians. The conductor is responsible for coordinating the different parts of the score. If the parts are performed according to his wishes, the music will sound as he imagines it.

Some parts are often played by individual musicians, such as the wind players. But even the solo wind players have to take care of more than just their own parts: they are also responsible for the performance of their entire group. The first oboist is also concerned with intonation and articulation in his section, adapted to the intonation and articulation of other voices, just like the first horn player or the first flutist. The degree of individuality is perhaps the greatest with the keyboard instruments, if there is a piano or a celesta, for example, or with the harp.

The percussionists must also work together as a group. It would be a bit excessive to talk about matching timbres here: percussion instruments are extremely different. But rhythm and volume must match.

With the strings, the utmost homogeneity is required. A conductor cannot achieve this. It can only be achieved by the musicians through a clear and binding distribution of authority and a very strong will. We need many skills. As with the solo wind players, the first concertmaster is also responsible for coordinating the entire string section. This relates in particular to performance technique, alignment of expressive possibilities and articulation. He determines how best to realise the conductor's ideas. As with a string quartet, he consults with the first leaders of the other string sections. Separately, the first concertmaster is also responsible for tuning the orchestra. He sometimes tunes and intervenes during rehearsals to optimise coordination between winds and strings.

When the concertmaster and the leader of the other string sections are doing their work, there is no more room for 'own interpretations' in the section. All other players 'only' have to worry about precisely following the instructions of their concertmaster or section leader to achieve a perfectly homogeneous sound within the section. The so-called deputy leaders should also refrain from active 'voice leadership' altogether. At least as long as the first concertmaster is present and

there is only one part to play in the section in question. On the contrary, too much 'involvement' would only confuse the group, just like multiple captains on a ship. If a part is temporarily divided part into several divisional groups, the deputy concertmaster plays the second part and, in consultation with the first concertmaster, leads the players of this second part. This leading function is transferred to the next deputy if the colleague sitting in front of him has a solo to play. It may even be necessary to leave group leadership up to a tutti player if all concert masters are playing solos.

2. leading and being led

The concertmaster plays according to the conductor's gestures and the agreements made with him. And he realises his ideas resolutely and also visually clearly. He gives impulses with his gestures and body language. That is all. It is the section colleagues who may or may not 'let themselves be led'... If 'it doesn't sound together', it is apparently not clear to the colleagues how and when to start playing. The leader can then gesticulate more clearly while playing. Or the tutti colleagues need to pay better attention....

And how does perfect ensemble playing work when a group that consists of 18 or 20 violinists?

3. true tonal harmony

Sending, transmitting and receiving impulses

In a small chamber orchestra, section rehearsals take place to achieve the homogeneity of, let us say, a four-member string group. The three tutti players adapt their playing technique in all dimensions to the concertmaster's technique: intonation, bowing technique with adjustment of bow length, bow speed, weight and point of contact on the string, spiccato spring height and, very importantly, a very small gradual gradation of volume. Fingerings are used that match but need not be the same within the section. And under certain circumstances, the tutti player would organise the fingerings differently in a solo piece. The harmonisation of playing settings takes place 'simultaneously', also called 'in real time'. This means that even in limited circumstances, the concertmaster can spontaneously change something and his colleagues have to follow him immediately. Even though the deputy section leaders in the larger tutti ensemble do not actually have a deputy function in the sense that, at most in absolutely rare cases, they have to compensate for the absence of the concertmaster due to illness, they have a very important function here: to pass on the impulses of the first concertmaster or section leader. If the first three colleagues behind the first section leader, as in a small chamber orchestra, adapt to the first concertmaster or first section leader in all the above-mentioned areas and 'reinforce' his impulses in their movements and intensity, then every tutti player, who has his place at the third desk or behind it, can easily find his 'liaison colleague' and, like him, take over the concertmaster's playing settings at the same time. This is necessary because not everyone can always see the first concertmaster. In any case, they cannot hear him if they sit further away than the second desk.

Of course, it is ideal if this simultaneity works at every desk. After all, each 'independent' desks creates confusion rather than homogeneity.

At the same time, the tutti players, like the deputy leaders, need to add a little dynamic gradation - if only to prevent any of them from inadvertently playing in the foreground. In trade jargon, this is called 'playing defensively', although this would actually mean, that the tutti player should adopt a wait-and-see attitude and not show too much initiative so as not to 'overwhelm' the concertmaster from behind. Things get really complicated when you consider that, in addition to the contact with the aforementioned 'liaison colleague', the individual tutti player must also maintain absolute simultaneity with his desk colleague, occasionally looking at the conductor's hands and, if necessary, also occasionally looking at the notes....

4. Simultaneity and rehearsals

From the above, it is clear, that there are very high demands on the ability to concentrate and that just being able to play the notes well is not nearly enough. Imagine: everyone comes to the rehearsal well prepared, can play all the notes and also knows approximately when and how.

For the conductor, the purpose of the rehearsal is to realise his ideas. He works through the pieces, announces his intentions and shows how he conducts everything. He 'practices' the weak points with his 'instrument', his orchestra and gives his interpretation the shape he wants.

The concert masters and section leaders practise realising the conductor's ideas. If necessary, they adjust techniques, change lines and look for the ideal coordination within their area of responsibility and competence.

And the assistant concert masters and tutti players?

They increasingly find ways to orientate themselves to their concertmaster/section leader in each run-through of the works, orientate themselves to other voices to check their rhythm, for example, or listen to a solo so as not to accompany it too loudly, all without losing contact within the section, of course.

Of course, simultaneous playing is not the only necessary tool. If thought through to the end, the result would be an 'echo orchestra'. It cannot be done without its own initiative. This is developed from rehearsal to rehearsal to create more space to adjust to spontaneous musical developments.

It is therefore important to bring this playing initiative to an appropriate level, adapted to the section leader and please never more than this section leader. The tutti players need to look less and less at the notes and can increasingly listen (to neighbour players and other voices) and watch (to their own group). For each passage, they will seek and find an ideal balance of concentration: part of their attention will be focused on the leader, part on their desk partner, part on overview and, as mentioned, an increasingly smaller part on the notes. The distribution will be further optimised over the course of rehearsals, focusing on 'spontaneous music-making'.

The conductor should be seen by the section member only in the corner of his eye. When in doubt, the orchestra member should always be with the concertmaster and other colleagues and not - as the only one in the group - with the conductor.... Of course, the conductor remains the most direct source of inspiration, but playing

independently without being in contact with the section leader will inevitably lead to a 'solo performance'.

In this way, group internal verbal instructions also become increasingly redundant: you see and hear what the concertmaster does and, how he does it. From your own experience, you can draw on a number of different techniques. In rehearsal, it becomes clear which ones you should use. No announcement is needed when everyone looks at their leader and colleague.

This working technique seems very complicated. However, for many, it is also just a matter of attitude and preparation. Colleagues with a lot of chamber music experience find it easier to watch others. Great technical reserves are also an advantage for the tutti player.

When used correctly, simultaneity and the right division of powers and responsibilities can result in a string section playing very homogeneously while remaining flexible. The concertmaster can easily carry his responsibilities with this support, and for the tutti colleagues the work is anything but boring or frustrating: they really have to use all their previously acquired soloing skills ... in the service of the section sound. And the conductor will be pleased to hear so much quality in the sound of the string sections. He will be better able to define his ideas when he hears a clearer sound result. The quality of musicianship will improve considerably.

That is truly fascinating about orchestral playing!

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