

Conducting from the Viola Chair

When I lived in Santa Cruz, I had the honor of conducting some of the best musicians in the San Jose area; for about a year and a half, I was Associate Conductor of a professional chamber orchestra in the San Francisco suburbs. This was a group, which, in previous years, had been contracted and directed, by a saxophone player. The guy was a very interesting, intelligent man who played very good jazz saxophone, and who was possessed of many high-level aesthetic sensitivities; moreover, he was a genius at getting grant money, and I will be eternally grateful to him for providing me with the opportunity to lead such fine musicians in six or seven concerts paid for with an \$18,000 grant. Unfortunately the sax player was the second worst conductor in the world (there is ALWAYS somebody better, there is ALWAYS somebody worse).

We fell in with each other after he heard me conduct a performance of Beethoven's 1st Symphony with a community orchestra I put together right after I came to town. He was very impressed with the sound I was able to get out of the many amateur players, plus a few local professionals who liked working with me. He was a very good-hearted guy, and wanted to do me a favor: so we decided on an arrangement whereby, in arranging for chamber orchestra performances, I would contract the string players, and he would contract the winds. We then shared the podium for each concert. He usually conducted about two-thirds of the program, while I played viola; then I got to conduct two or three pieces, usually WHILE playing the viola. My contributions often included original compositions of mine and of a few other local composers. The recordings I got from this experience are crowning achievements in my other wise undistinguished conducting career.

From a political point of view, the orchestra was a great success: new orchestral music was being presented in performances by excellent musicians, the best players in the area got to play together and make money together in the intimacy of a chamber music setting, and I was blessed with the most potent professional conducting experience of my life: local soloists got to perform concertos backed by a good group, and Santa Cruz audiences

got to hear some very excellent performances on some of the best stages in the area. It was a good deal.

The problem was that, as a conductor, the sax player totally sucked. As we went deeper into our season, it became abundantly apparent, to all the musicians, who was the driving force behind the orchestra—me. Although, as usual, many of the musicians didn't like me, they all respected my musicianship and my leadership, and basically hated it when Sax Man was the conductor; he had the quite amazing ability to make excellent musicians actually sound worse--by giving false or contradictory signals, bringing no interpretation whatever to the music, and using HOURS of rehearsal time just to practice his conducting moves, while the rest of us sat around waiting for him to get it together. The worst thing about his conducting was simply that he was unclear, so that any sort of unison passage, where we really needed a strong leader, often came out garbled and weak. Parenthetically: there is a European conducting trick that orchestras learn to do, whereby the conductor gives a big downbeat and the whole orchestra plays just a split second AFTER; with sax man, he had a tendency to wait for the orchestra to play and THEN conduct. Now, pro musicians are trained to watch and respond to a conductor's movements automatically, so when their eyes are constantly being assaulted by contradictions between what they are seeing and what they are hearing, it can be very demoralizing, not to mention sloppy. We had to do something—the group was too good to achieve below our potential.

I came up with this very interesting solution. The string set-up I preferred placed the violas on the outside, the celli in the center, such that my principal viola chair was on the extreme stage-left edge of the orchestra. With a little clever maneuvering, I managed to place my seat so it was actually 6 inches or so BEHIND Sax Man, putting me outside his line of sight. Therefore, I could conduct the orchestra with my viola without him ever knowing. I arranged a little triangle of power between me and the second violin section leader to my right, and the concertmaster in front of me, again, behind Sax Man, which took care of leading the strings; of course, the winds, usually on risers, could see me very well from their elevated position, so when it came to important accents, cues, or tempo changes, I was able to lead the group with my body movement, while they surreptitiously ignored Sax Man.

This is a good story because it shows how a good situation can be created out of a bad situation, by simply taking responsibility. Orchestra members often act like privates in the army, complaining and fussing about unacceptable conditions without ever doing anything about them. The fact is, there are many more bad conductors than good conductors, and if the musicians just accept bad leadership without attempting to compensate, they are just contributing to the problem, and have only themselves to blame for the mediocre outcome. The most famous example of this is the Philadelphia Orchestra, a group which, during the '50s and '60s was legendary for their fantastic string section. That orchestra made a number of tremendous recordings under the leadership of Eugene Ormandy, who was, unfortunately, almost as bad a conductor as Sax Man. It is obvious to the discerning ear, that it is the concertmaster of the Philadelphia Orchestra who is actually leading the group. Ormandy's recordings with other orchestras are not nearly of the same quality as his recordings with Philadelphia, and this is no accident.

Indeed, taking responsibility is the name of the game. I have many excellent students who have difficulty dealing with the small town, small-minded musicianship of local public school music directors, after having worked with me. I sympathize with their situation, and appreciate their preference of me, but I do not approve of students giving up the opportunity to play music with other kids, just because they can see that their teacher is not as good as I am (there is ALWAYS somebody worse, there is ALWAYS somebody better). I continually stress that music can always be a positive thing if the players draw on his/her inner resources, and does not accept the limitations imposed on him/her by circumstance. Music constantly draws the best out of ourselves, and we must never stop demanding the best of ourselves, even if no one else around us is doing so. If we are willing to make a good example, others will follow, and the worst conductor in the world cannot keep us from playing good music, and rediscovering, every time, our highest perceptible spiritual identity.