Possible Mental Models for the Conductor to Support the Ensemble Playing of the Orchestra[1]

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Abstract

The paper attempts to identify tools to enable the conductor to prevent problems in ensemble playing (keeping performers together). The purpose is to derive systematic mental models, the implementation of which would enable the conductor to prevent or reduce musical losses in the typical problematic situations that inevitably arise during performance.

The author analyses passages from some of the musical works he conducted at the Estonian National Opera at the time of his doctoral studies (Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, 2007–2011). The aim is to identify, from individual cases which led to success or failure, certain more general principles. Through the analysis of typical situations mental models are derived, and their implementation in practical conducting is described. The passages analysed come mainly from orchestrally accompanied recitative. This choice, based primarily on the fact that stage music and especially such passages clearly highlight problems of ensemble, also highlights the desire to connect theoretical research with practical problems experienced while conducting. The methodological model is based on the work of conductor and psychologist Georgy Yerzhemsky, additionally supplemented by the opinions of many other conductors.

While working as a conductor at the Estonian National Opera, I came into close contact with ensemble playing problems that occurred during performance situations (individual players' different feeling of metre, accidental mistakes, acoustic problems inherent to stage music etc.), which often result in appreciable losses in the ensemble of the orchestra as a whole. When thinking about what had happened after the event, I often felt that if I had acted differently in the same situation, I would have been able to prevent or minimise the musical loss. When problems arise during a performance, the conductor must work through a large amount of information in a very short space of time and react by taking action. For example, in the case of a soloist's mistake, the conductor has many choices – to try to follow the soloist with the orchestral accompaniment and bring him or her "back" to it later (for example with the next entrance), or to concentrate on keeping the orchestral part together, presuming that the soloist, realising his or her mistake, will reintegrate with the accompaniment independently. At such critical moments, the orchestra is also waiting for clear instructions from the conductor as to how to proceed, whether this be to "skip" a few beats and follow the soloist, or to continue steadily to perform the accompanying part as written, thus ensuring the consistency of the musical progression. I have repeatedly experienced that in such situations the basis for effective action lies in the conductor's thinking. Though every performance of a work is of course unique, I am often aware of the basic similarity of apparently different situations. Success in various "crisis situations" during which, despite unexpected events (an accidental mistake by a soloist, for example), I managed to avoid greater musical losses led me to search for similarities in the means I used which had proved effective. It was this desire to identify from individual cases certain more general principles for taking more effective action in problematic situ-

[1] The article is based on my doctoral thesis (in Music) *Three possible mental models for the conductor to support the ensemble playing of the orchestra* (in Estonian), defended at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre in 2011 (supervisor Professor Toomas Siitan), https://www.ema.edu.ee/vaitekirjad/doktor/Mihhail_Gerts.pdf.