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with enlightened leaders  
from the worlds of  
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and high culture

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*Ettore Bugatti*



*Leadership  
through  
Reflection:*

A conductor's  
perspective  
on the role of choice

In our modern society the act of leading has become increasingly separate from the understanding of where to lead. There is a fashion, from politics to the arts, to have leaders with great charisma and the talent to inspire, who attract large followings, but with little idea of where to lead them.

Historically great leaders have been judged on their achievements, and leadership has been a means to an end. Thinking of great conductors of the past their achievements were the final musical outcome, the depth and interest of which resulted from lifetimes of experience. As Confucius said “By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest”

I want to explore how one can make choices as a leader through reflection. As modern conductors and leaders get younger they need ways to make choices with depth so as to be judged on their achievements.

As a leader the first stage of making any choice is to build a fundamental understanding of what you are dealing with. In musical terms this means working out exactly which marks the composer made, what they meant to the composer and why they wrote them.

When I was researching and performing Debussy's opera *Pelleas et Melisande* using a modern score I found it very hard to understand Debussy's tempo markings. Debussy not only wrote tempo markings as commands (fast, slow, faster, slower) but also as vague instructions (not too Fast, Don't drag, not too slow).



ZWEITE SYMPHONIE  
von  
ROBERT SCHUMANN.  
Op. 61.  
Seiner Majestät dem König von Schweden und Norwegen Oskar I. gewidmet.

(100) 4  
Serie 4, No 2.

Schumann's Werke.  
Composit 1842, auf 1846.

Sostenuto assai. *J. = 76.*

Flauti.  
Oboi.  
Clarinetti in B.  
Fagotti.  
Corni in C.  
Trombe in C.  
Trombone Alto e Tenore.  
Trombone Basso.  
Timpani in C. G.  
Violino I.  
Violino II.  
Viola.  
Violoncello.  
Contrabasso.

Sostenuto assai.

R. S. 2.

Angegraben 1887.

Having explored the parameters of the decision, and having an understanding as full as possible of what is being asked by a specific score, a conductor's job is then to translate the score into sound. As with any text translation the choices involved must consider the roles and relationships within the piece but also the much wider context.

To look at the process of building these choices let's look at the opening phrase of Schumann's 2<sup>nd</sup> Symphony (1m20s long). Schumann's score is a set of instructions, primarily who plays, which notes they play, and when they play. It also contains performance markings about 'how' these are to be played, however in this specific phrase there are very few: one dynamic mark, one tempo mark, two types of phrasing and two types of musical gestures.

I spent time studying Debussy's handwritten manuscript given to the Opera Comique where it was used by the conductor for the premier and subsequent performances. Originally the score had a set of positive tempo commands, but after each performance Debussy added more and more instructions in different coloured pencils. In the modern score however all the markings looked the same. The knowledge of when the vague instructions were added led me to a different pacing structure of the whole opera. My discoveries were confirmed on hearing the recording made by Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht who had known Debussy personally, and had reached a similar conclusion.





However Schumann's piano and vocal music is filled with strong and varied characterisation. These variations are magnified in the recordings of pianists who studied with Schumann's wife. In passages of similar music these performers use flexible tempo, balancing of chords and phrasing to create variety, driven by a high level of sensitivity to the notes and harmonies more than performance markings. Even in his writings Schumann created the characters Eusebius and Florestan to highlight the different facets of his own personality.

Whilst Schumann only wrote a few performance instructions, he characterises each musical gesture through his choice of notes. The main characterisation of the harmonies of the opening is that almost none (only 5 out of 84) of the chords are played in root position (where the key note is the lowest in the chord and hence the most stable combination of a chord). They are all in unstable inversions, which adds an unusual and enigmatic quality to the opening.

Trying to better understand this opening musical gesture in its wider cultural context I turned to the nocturnal painting of Carl Blechen and Johan Christian Dahl, more so to Caspar David Friedrich whose landscapes are predominant and figures shrouded and faceless. In literature settings in fog, clouds, and darkness are characteristic of the romantic age (think of Shelly's Frankenstein or Byron's Manfred – both of which Schumann knew). Most relevant is a passage by Schumann's favourite author, Jean Paul. In his novel Titan there is a description of a son returning home to an Italian Island and purposefully blindfolding himself at night so he cannot see the approach to the Island

heightening his expectation of the moment when standing atop a hill in daylight he takes his blindfold off and "the gates of the new heaven flew open".

After all this research, I knew how I wanted to translate the score and which details to work on to create the final result:

- Brass and strings balance equally creating ambiguity of foreground/background
- Lower Brass play colouring the sound more than higher instruments to create darker sound.
- Basses and Celli more foreground than violins to accentuate the ambiguous chord positions.
- Strings change colour of vibrato depending on harmony.
- Flexible tempo to highlight harmonic changes.  
i.e. at 46 secs slowing down and changing colour to have a more relaxed character.

These choices and their realisations are on a micro scale but they are representative of the day-to-day decisions leaders make, and it is in the detail of choices that can create change. When leaders of all walks of life take care over their choices then they can create real and lasting solutions.

*About the author:*

*Jonathan Berman, who was described as "the charismatic British master of the baton", is an award winning Symphony and Opera conductor who works in the USA and Europe. Future performances take him to to Aldeburgh, Riga, Basel, Berlin, Ankara, London and Hong Kong.*

*For the full bio visit:*

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