

Tackling the Decibels

Timothy Reynish

We have a problem with the wind band, that of decibels.....in short we tend to play too loudly. This is in part due to our choice of repertoire, in part due to the noisiness of our modern age, in part due to sheer laziness and in part due to poor conducting.

Gunther Schuller sums it all up in his magnificent book, *The Compleat Conductor* (OUP):

'The abuse, and misuse, of dynamics is perhaps the most common evil in orchestral playing today, (especially in the United States) being either tolerated or generated by our conductors. This is particularly ironic, since the technical abilities of modern players are so high that no claim could ever be made that subtle control is beyond their capabilities. And to excuse this dynamic laziness by saying "it's more fun to play loud" or "it makes a bigger effect" or "it's more exciting" or - more philosophically resigned - "it's just human nature", is insufficient reason and just plain laziness, carelessness.' Schuller is talking about the great orchestras of the world; how much more important is it for us working with less than excellent wind bands to try to harness their dynamic exuberance?

At the 2003 WASBE Conference, Wayne Rapiet, co-principal oboe of the Philadelphia and Boston Symphony Orchestras for many years, said that as a young player he used to sit in on rehearsals by Stokowsky to try to analyse why the performances were so great. He reckoned that Stokowsky had an incredible control of the architecture of dynamics, with two or three major climatic moments in a concert. I personally remember playing for Ferdinand Leitner in Brahms Symphonies, with our dynamic range extended incredibly - so that a fortissimo at the end was so much louder than a fortissimo at any other time in the work.

It would be an excellent thing if someone in each band, possibly a flute player or alto clarinetist, sewed a sampler for the conductor outlining some of Richard Strauss's Ten 'Golden Rules':

4 Never look encouragingly at the brass, except with a short glance to give an important cue

6 If you think that the brass is not blowing hard enough, tone it down another shade or two

There were instruments which I never heard over the BASBWE weekend; harp and lower woodwind were generally inaudible. Admittedly, much of the music in the repertoire exploits a bright, brash, attacking sound-world, but it is essential that we take care of the balance of what is, in essence, a huge chamber ensemble made up of trios and quartets of instruments of widely differing colour and timbre

Max Rudolf puts it very clearly:

'In most halls, the sound level of trumpets and trombones is just right if the conductor barely hears them. The same is true for horns in piano passages, while they must often be encouraged to bring out a forte marcato. Woodwind soloists should hit the conductor's ears quite strongly to make sure that their sound carries into the auditorium. This, of course, must not be accomplished by forcing the tone, which would hurt the instrument's sound quality and intonation. The solution lies in having the accompanying instruments play more softly.'

Erich Leinsdorf in another of my bibles, *The Composer's Advocate*, makes two excellent points about dynamic levels:

'Composers often wrote one dynamic mark for the entire vertical scoring involved. They expected performers to adjust their instruments' relative strength according to the primary or secondary importance of their roles.'

A sustained note is always stronger than a moving voice

'There is one fundamental physical law that bears repetition, since so many musicians are unaware of it; a sustained note is always stronger than a moving voice. There is so much to be decided by the conductor who cares for a balanced performance that no amount of detail can possibly cover the permutations presented by such considerations as types of instruments (and players), size and acoustic of hall, seating arrangements, types of scoring...'

Pierre Boulez explains the process of decision making:

'There are times when respect for the musical text alone does not serve much purpose. You may have a secondary part written for a relatively weighty instrument, and a principal part written for a much lighter instrument. You have to change the

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dynamics. I have no qualm about doing that. As a fellow composer, I say to myself, "That's what he wanted to hear, but he didn't have enough experience to write down the exact dynamics." So I change them, that's all. The composer has written a certain number of instrumental lines and on the whole, he hasn't done so just to make a general amount of noise. He's composed those lines so that we can hear certain things, so that we can experience a certain hierarchy that's dependant on his writing. What I try to do is to bring out that hierarchy in a very precise way, even when it's difficult.'

You may be saying that all this is OK for playing Brahms or Bruckner, but does not really work in the wind band repertoire.

Walter Beeler, one of the great band trainers of the last century writes:

'Restraint is especially important in fast music; the spirit begins to suffer if played too loud. The audience tires, the players tire and it becomes a very determined piece. It's hard for a band to play with restraint because speed and excitement always tend to increase the volume. But if we rely on articulations, accents and rhythm (rather than volume) to bring about a condition of brightness, it will definitely be more musical.'

Von Bulow wrote:

'Diminuendo signifies forte, crescendo signifies piano.'

Gunther Schuller again:

'It is at that very highest level of performance that a wealth of interpretative choices and decisions become available at least to the really sensitive, intelligent and imaginative recreator. It is in this realm that there is not one *pp*, but many subtly different *pps*; not one *f* but many different kinds of *fs*, and not one slur but many different kinds of legatos etc. etc. The more basic point however is that it is *pp* not a *p* or an *mf*.'

Pierre Boulez said:

'For me an orchestra's lack of discipline is always reflected in a feeble dynamic range. . . Something I do very often. . . is to push the dynamic register to the absolute maximum until it reaches what I think are appropriate levels for a given work.'

Two anecdotes from past BASBWE Conferences which underline a concern I have about our approach to music making. A distinguished colleague in discussion talked about how monotonous the sound world was with the relentless loud music of the contemporary band. He needed strings, he needed small ensemble works to break up the programme and he suggested including transcriptions from earlier periods to change the pace.

Some time ago an equally distinguished colleague began a rehearsal of one of his works by telling us that bands play too loud, and requesting careful control of dynamics. The first time he stopped was to ask the saxophones to play louder in a passage – NOT to ask the rest of the band to play quieter.

I would respectfully take issue with both colleagues. To the latter, I would suggest that we should invariably ask the accompaniment to play quieter. I would go further, and propose that we consciously take down the general level. A great Russian conducting teacher used to say that "Forte is a characteristic". I have a couple of T-shirts which proclaim that "Forte is a Light Dynamic". If it is treated as such, then fortissimo and molto fortissimo can take their place as truly exciting points in the score, with one or two really roof-lifting climaxes per concert, not a dozen in each piece.

To the former, I would suggest that there is an incredibly rich vein of music available to us through which we can change the pace and vary the sound-world. Programme building is an Art, it was said more than once, and following one loud brilliant piece with another and another, each ushered along with increasingly enormous gestures, is no way to build a programme. I can remember hearing Duke Ellington on his last tour of UK, and the variety of pace and dynamic was exemplary, the programme was as carefully built as any by the Vienna Philharmonic or Chicago Symphony. We in the band world are only limited by our knowledge of what is available.

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5 Bushey Close, Old Barn Lane, Kenley CR8 5AU, UK. Tel: 020 8860 4766 fax: 020 8868 9273
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