

"The Art of Communication by Gesture" aka - Conducting

Geoffrey Brand

My first perplexity about the conducting "thing" was when, as a student conductor who had spent an inordinate amount of time considering and practising HOW to beat various rhythmic patterns, ensuring that a clear first of the bar downward beat was followed by lateral movements in agreed directions and so on, I gravitated to the next stage, as it were, and began playing in professional orchestras with "professional" conductors. The perplexing thing was, they all did "it" - the beating thing and all else - in their own very different ways.

Playing in a professional orchestra provides a privileged opportunity to observe maestri or (in the interests of a better performance) sometimes to ignore them, as the case may be, from a paid grandstand seat with an uninterrupted view. And more; one is afforded the chance to experience, and take part in, the growth of a performance, through the preparation period right up to the performance.

Quite soon it became apparent that there were but a few -

sadly far fewer than expected or hoped for - who touched parts in the music which others could not reach, or perhaps were not even aware existed.

I have said that they all did "it" in their own way - and the effective ones were no exception to that - but what struck me most forcibly, and this has not changed over the years, was how relatively unimportant the actual beating patterns became in the business of getting the music and its message over. All those hours practising what to do with one's hands and along came somebody who seemed to ignore much of what one had been taught and yet was mightily effective in portraying the music's shapes, sounds, moods, feelings, atmospheres, and allowing time and space for the music to breathe and be heard - through gestures which encompassed the whole musical concept but were often very different from those recommended in the "prescribed" manner.

I began to observe - with eyes, ears and all else - and to analyse what it was that "the few" had in common. It seemed to be much more rewarding to concentrate on "the few" than to spend time contemplating on the shortcomings of "the many".

Over a long time I believe I have identified five abilities - elements might be a better word - which the effective conductor brings. These, not necessarily in the following order, are:

1. MOTIVATION - so that performers feel moved to want to perform;
2. KNOWLEDGE - of the music, in all its aspects, so that the presentation sounds authoritative
3. COMMUNICATION - the ability to convey that knowledge to others - performers and listeners alike in a musically intelligible manner.
4. ENERGY - the life-giving force necessary to convey, in whatever style or idiom, the music's "message";
5. INTEGRITY - artistic honesty and sincerity in pursuit of a true presentation of the composer's wishes.

Those, then, are my five elements - with no mention of TECHNIQUE. My perception is that whatever is meant by that much over-worked word is embodied in my elements. How does a conductor achieve a "successful" performance if he is devoid of technique?

Or turn the question round the other way; how often does one experience conductors who seem to possess "technique" yet fail to bring to the music those essential qualities necessary to achieve a "successful" performance?

(Geoffrey Brand will develop his five elements in future articles)

● *Geoffrey Brand is one of the leading figures in the band world. A professional trumpeter, he has played under the batons of most of the leading conductors of the mid-century. He is in constant world-wide demand as a conductor and clinician.*

HOWARTH of LONDON

Makers and Suppliers of Woodwind Instruments and Accessories

- * A large selection of student, intermediate, and professional instruments at **DISCOUNT** prices
- * Competitive rates for educational and band tenders
- * Attractive Rental/Buy scheme available
- * A comprehensive range of sheet music, including all Associated Board graded exam titles, duets, trios, chamber music
- * A constantly changing selection of second-hand instruments
- * Fast and reliable mail order service

0171 935 2407

50 Years of Experience and Advice Free of Charge



31-35 CHILTERN STREET LONDON W1M 1HG
TEL: 0171 935 2407 FAX: 0171 224 2564