

The Art of Communication by Gesture - Part 3

by Geoffrey Brand

At whatever level one performs the amount of time spent in rehearsal is considerably more than that spent in performance; there are those who even maintain that every performance is a rehearsal for the next one

One has seen conductors who 'perform' at rehearsals and others who 'rehearse' at performances. I have met conductors who look forward to rehearsals rather than performances. To each his own.

Some years ago I was fortunate enough to find a copy of a splendid book (sadly out-of-print) called *Choral Technique and Interpretation* by Henry Coward who for many years was conductor of the choral society, Sheffield Choral Union. Writing on 'How to conduct rehearsals' Coward suggests:

"In the main there are three methods of taking rehearsals:

1. The Conventional Generalising;
2. The Critical (or hypercritical) - Particularising;
3. The Compartmental Specialising.

"The Conventional Generalising Method ... consists of going through the music time after time until the general outline of it is mastered, and the spirit of the composition fully grasped by the performers"

The Critical Particularising Method consists in striving for perfection in each detail but goes on to warn "strangely enough this method, as carried out by some conductors, produces disastrous results - by exciting irritation instead of giving illumination, and thus killing all pleasure in the rehearsals"

"The little known and little practised Compartmental Specialising Method consists in taking some special point or topic, and concentrating all attention on it, and, for the time being, ignoring everything else"

Coward is careful to make the point that "the Conventional Generalising Method ... is the one to be followed chiefly as the foundation of all rehearsals" Plenty to ponder there. My own approach is to treat rehearsals as workshops where the aim is to produce an end product in the best possible condition for delivery as a 'performance'.

To this end, the more one takes to a rehearsal, the more one is likely

to achieve. The aim is to know what one wants to hear and to know how to achieve it. Fine words, until one climbs on to the rostrum and sounds from everywhere come surging forth which you, as conductor, are expected to control and influence in the best interests of the music. Cometh the moment of truth! Amidst that mass of sounds are the ingredients which need to be moulded into a presentable whole.

As a galvanising process I have found it helpful to list what one is listening for, and therefore 'wants to hear' in order to achieve a good performance. I call them "Aurally Perceivable Beneficial Elements in a Good Performance"; here they are, my starter for ten:

1. Accurate presentation of the written sounds in terms of placement, pitch, duration.
2. Good ensemble - musical tidiness, "togetherness"
3. Rhythmic accuracy - pleasing, co-ordinated movement
4. Well-tuned and blended sound
5. Expressive response - regard for the nature of the music
6. Balanced musical proportions ensuring details presented with due musical significance
7. Suitable shaping, spacing, structural sense.
8. Stylistic awareness - historically; aesthetically.
9. Well chosen tempi - speeds which allow the music to sound intelligible and well
10. Sense of Performance - portraying understanding through presentation, so that the sum of the parts becomes the whole

Every one of these calls for aural recognition and, truly, without the ability to unravel what is going on it is difficult to conceive how one can start to mould it. We live - as conductors - by our aural abilities and all else: the understanding, the communicating, the enthusing, the energising will not compensate if this most basic of a musician's requirements is absent.

Now there's a thought to leave you with!

Geoffrey Brand



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