

Conducting at Competition Festivals

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The task of adjudicating upon Choral and Orchestral performances at Competition Festivals is an extremely difficult and delicate one, because it is often quite impossible to state in public the real reasons for the deficiencies in the rendering of the test-pieces. An Adjudicator may make unfavourable criticisms upon the singing or playing he has listened to, and suggest remedies for the faults in a general way, but to put the whole blame for these faults upon the conductor, and to “lecture” him, however kindly, in the presence of his choir, would be a highly reprehensible proceeding.

Nevertheless in nine cases out of ten the conductor is entirely to blame for a poor performance, by reason of his too imperfect acquaintance with the elementary methods of communicating his ideas to those under him. If this were bluntly pointed out, however, he might lose prestige, and forfeit the confidence of his singers or players. Moreover, a great many conductors of amateur forces are professional musicians; their local reputations would suffer considerably from such criticisms, and the value of the Festival movement would be greatly lessened through the loss of many keen adherents if they were given cause for offence.

I have been invited by the editor of “*The Music Teacher*” to contribute a critical article on conducting at Festivals, and I welcome the opportunity of saying some pertinent things which leap to my mind – things which I should not dare to point out during the actual process of my adjudicating work but which often very much need emphasising.

Extravagance & Wasted Energy.

The most usual fault of conductors is that they conduct too much. They become a spectacle for the audience.

Dr. Adrian C. Boult once pointed out that “Very few conductors have reduced the science of what they do to the easiest and most skilful technical end.” This is very aptly put. Without expecting or desiring exhibitions of scientifically considered gestures at Competition Festivals it is not unreasonable to beseech conductors to think a little more about technique than they do. Just as in singing or playing we practise scales and exercises in order that we may be more ready to tackle technical difficulties when they occur in actual music, so in wielding a stick, or gesticulating with our arms, it is advisable to know the simplest and surest methods of obtaining what we want from those who are watching us.

When a conductor waves his arms about like the sails of windmill, or imitates the actions of a professional pugilist, he is wasting valuable energy. He is exhausting what he most needs to conserve. Nay more, he is in danger of checking the vitality of the music itself and substituting something which is merely a physical exhibition. To me it is often marvellous that performances are as good as they are when these methods are adopted. I can only surmise that really musical work has been done at the rehearsals, and that the performers, by sternly determining to take no notice of their conductor’s platform antics, have sufficient keenness to carry through their performance without disaster. In general it may be said that the more a conductor does with his arms, his body and (one must add) his legs, the less command he has in the

matter of interpretation, for excessive bodily energy, is bound to impede mental energy, and interpretation in conducting is almost entirely a matter of thought-transference.

How to Start.

Many quite musically felt performances are spoiled by indecisive beginnings. Some conductors are terribly nervous at starting, and this is, of course, a very natural failing. But it is obvious that a great deal depends upon creating the right atmosphere from the first sounds. When conducting it is extremely important to make up your mind as to the *tempo* before you begin to move at all. This is really a very simple process, and only involves imagining a few bars to yourself (not necessarily the first bars of the piece) before you give the actual signal for starting.

If a piece begins *fortissimo* do not imagine that a terrific movement is required. A violent downward beat is always vague, because nobody knows how far your arm is going to travel or when it is going to stop moving. A simple loop-movement of two or three inches, that finishes at the same spot at which it starts, is all that is required to start a choir or an orchestra with the most energetic *ff* tone. A few practical experiments at rehearsals will quickly prove this.

Control and Grouping.

The question as to whether to use a stick or not is matter for individual feeling. Personally I should be content with simple movements of the hands for the control of a small choir – but for a large choir or a massed performance I should always prefer to hold a stick. It is surprising how many conductors still look upon a stick as merely an instrument for beating time. Even in the most subtly phrased and delicate music they carve the air with rigid strokes which definitely contradict the character of the piece. The necessity for a supple wrist, too, is constantly overlooked.

In choral competitions the suitable grouping of the singers is, I think, especially important, particularly in the case of children and of adult choirs of limited size. An arrangement which places the choristers in stiff straight lines across the platform is nearly always unsatisfactory. A semi-circular grouping is preferable because it brings all the performers into closer touch with the conductor and with each other, and makes for more unity of tone and greater clearness in attack.

Above all the singers should stand naturally and any rigidity of posture should be discouraged. The obviously “well-drilled” choir seldom takes first place in a competition. There should be a sense of ease in the singing, even in the most precise music. If the test-piece is cheerful, smiling faces are not merely good to look at but positively contribute to the beauty of tone, and the suppleness of the phrasing, by ensuring relaxed muscles.

Memorising.

It is highly desirable for the conductor to memorise the music as far as possible, so that he can conduct with his eyes even more than with his hands or his stick. It has been wittily said that conductors are of two kinds: those who have the score in their head and those who have their head in the score! The latter kind often enjoy themselves very much – they fill in mentally what they are not really hearing – but they can never communicate what they are feeling to others, or compel the same kind of eager obedience that is granted to the man who knows the music beforehand and employs all his faculties in expressing ideas which are already clearly formulated. It is also an immense advantage if the choir has also memorised the music and can give the same attention to their director that he is able to give to them. Where such conditions are attained the tiniest movement, perhaps the mere raising of the eyebrows or pursing of the lips, are sufficient to indicate expressive points to those who are intently on the watch.

A conductor should never sing with his choir. At some Festivals this is penalised, but even if it is not expressly disallowed it is always undesirable and sometimes disastrous. I remember at least one very competent performance by a ladies' choir which was ruined by the conductor, who, in his enthusiasm, sang the melody an octave lower all the way through the piece!

The Conductor's Conference.

The art of conducting is in no sense a secret or mysterious one in which only a few can hope to excel. There are many roads to success, and the exploration of individual musicians may lead to a variety of possible methods, all of which may amply justify themselves by results. At the same time I would beg conductors to endeavour to learn from each other and not to be too proud to pick up ideas from the work even of those who are less gifted than themselves.

A few, but at present only a very few, Festivals arrange for a Conductors' Conference in the course of their proceedings. This is an admirable feature of great educational value. All the local conductors are encouraged to assemble together for a free discussion of their difficulties: the Adjudicators are invited to be present to answer questions and give advice if needed. Half-an-hour or forty minutes is sufficient time to allow for this, and the proceeding should be quite private and absolutely informal. I have known such meetings to be so successful that I can only hope that the idea will spread throughout the land and become a regular feature, at all events at every small country Festival. When all is said and done the chief point of the competitive movement in music is that those who participate should help each other, in order that the general standard of amateur performances should be raised. The more the spirit of mutual helpfulness enters into these gatherings, the better will be the results of the Festival movement. It is obvious that organised meetings of colleagues, and friendly rivals, for the purpose of comparing notes and seeking enlightenment on knotty points are bound to be fruitful of good.

Some Hints from Shakespeare.

Finally, musicians who direct others may be warned against a tendency to become too insular in their outlook upon music. I have often thought that there is a good deal in Hamlet's famous advice to the players which conductors, as well as actors, might well take to heart: "*Do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently.*" Even when the music is stormy and exciting "*you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.*" "Be not too tame neither, but *let your own discretion be your tutor.*"

These are great words of wide application, and I do not think I am stretching their meaning unduly in commending them to the acceptance of conductors who seek to interpret music at Competition Festivals.