

RESEARCH PAPER

Choral Conducting Competences: Perceptions and Priorities

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Abstract

Choral conducting is a complex and multi-faceted leader role. Leading music is a particular kind of leadership by the prominence of gestural communication, and it is a ubiquitous phenomenon across a variety of social settings, musical genres, and ensemble types. Despite the variety, colloquial writing as well as academic research implicitly assumes that there is a common underlying competence base. Most research on conducting looks at some particular aspect, such as gestures, error correction, or rehearsing approach. What is largely wanting, is an overall view of how the competence elements come together and their relative importance. This paper is an exploratory study of 17 competence elements, viewed by conductors in the context of their own practice. The study is based on a survey of 294 choral conductors across [country], with a wide spread in terms of formal education, experience and working situation.

The study supports previous research by how the role of conducting gesture takes a seemingly contradictory position; emblematic of the role, but still scores low in terms of importance. The views on gestural skills vary more with contextual factors than other competence elements. The two contextual factors that explain most variation for several competence elements are the length of the conductor's experience and the level (amateur - professional) of the conductor's choirs. Conductor's view on the importance of each competence element is closely related to own competence level for the same element. This suggests that the prominence, with which competence elements are given a conducting practice, is highly adaptable, as conductors cope with the situation at hand. Conductors recognize education's contribution across the various competences, but a degree in conducting primarily explains differences in gestural skills. Otherwise, practice seems equally important.

1. Introduction

Coming to grips with conducting

This paper explores choral conductors' views on the various competences involved in the role, in terms of their relative importance, self-perceived level of proficiency, and formal education's contribution to this proficiency. We use the notion of 'competence' in the present study to denote the wide range of skills, abilities, predispositions, and knowledge that come into play when enacting choral leadership (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). The conductor is one of the most iconic leader figures—everyone recognizes it when they see one, but few understand exactly what goes on or what it takes to fill it. Coming to grips with the conductor is not only a colloquial challenge, academic research also struggles to delineate the phenomenon and position it in terms of scholarly discipline and research tradition.

The choir is a varied and multi-faceted ensemble type, ranging from the community choir to the professional vocal group, it involves adults as well as children, and different musical genres. While this variety of settings may call for different conceptions of choral leadership, there is also clearly common ground, evidenced by how an individual conductor's work-life spans widely different ensemble types. Within a single ensemble situation, the conductor faces competing demands (Hunt, Stelluto, & Hooijberg, 2004) and balancing acts (Jansson, 2015). These needs translate into functions that have been headlined as artist, craftsman, mentor and manager (Jansson, 2018). The conductor as artist is the one who creates meaning from the musical material and establishes an idea of the sounding music. The craftsman moulds the sound towards this idea, by correcting errors, blending voices, shaping timbre, and unifying expression. The conductor mobilises, guides, and enthuses singers to come forward with their individual contributions, by understanding and responding to their needs – an act of mentoring. The conductor is also the one who organises the preparation process, which often includes a host of extra-musical issues – a managerial function.

These functions call for an array of skills and behaviours, which are rich research domains in themselves. Conducting might be understood in terms of such widely different subject matters as the semiotics of musical gestures (Billingham &

Chamberlain, 2001; D'Ausilio et al., 2012; Garnett, 2009; Godøy & Leman, 2010; Sandberg-Jurström, 2009), relational aspects of music-making (Atik, 1994; Michael J. Bonshor, 2017; Green, 2005; Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009; Schiavio & Høffding, 2015), and the perception of choral sound (Daugherty, 1999; Daugherty, Manternach, & Brunkan, 2013; Ternström, 1991, 1994, 2003).

The conductor as musical *leader* might be understood in light of leadership theory, a vast academic field in its own right and even a subset of the wider field of organisation studies. However, the intersection between leadership and musicianship is ontologically ambiguous. On one hand, conducting may be considered as a specific instance of leadership, which allows the application of general leadership theory in the music domain (Apfelstadt, 1997; Armstrong & Armstrong, 1996; Bush, 2011; Davidson, 1995; Dobson & Gaunt, 2015; Goodstein, 1987; Linstead & Höpfl, 2000; Wis, 2002, 2007). Conversely, conducting may be seen as an aesthetic practice that contains certain 'leaderly features', in which case aesthetics inform leadership, rather than the other way around (Bathurst & Ladkin, 2012; Emiliani & Michael, 2013; Koivunen & Wennes, 2011; Ladkin, 2008; Mintzberg, 1998; Pearce et al., 2016; Saku, John, & Virpi, 2007; Sutherland & Jelinek, 2015). A special case of the latter view is the pervasive use of jazz as a way to understand leading and following (Hatch, 1999; Weick, 1998; Williamson, 2013). The coordination and dynamics of a music ensemble extend far beyond what can be understood in terms of conductor signalling (Garnett, 2009), and would favour a view on leadership that aligns with the partnership view held by relational constructionism, where an entitative view of leadership is dethroned (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Hosking & Shamir, 2012). When done well, musical leadership 'disappears' in the act, ensemble roles blur, and the deepened intersubjectivity among participants is much more refined than what can be captured in terms of simple cause and effect relationships (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Bathurst & Ladkin, 2012; Jansson, 2015). At the same time, the conductor remains conspicuously present and does make a difference, which makes it impossible to not retain great interest in the leader entity (Durrant, 2003; Lebrecht, 1992).

The scholarly discipline that traditionally has taken the strongest ownership of choral conducting is undoubtedly educational sciences. The great majority of research on choral conducting is done within an educational frame (Geisler, 2010), in US high-school and college settings in particular (Cox, 1989; Grimland, 2005; Gumm, 1993; Scott,

1996; Skadsem, 1997; Yarbrough & Madsen, 1998). The intersection between musicianship and teaching is also experienced by most musicians, when they engage in tutoring and guiding the less experienced—in a master-apprentice relationship. It is particularly pertinent for the conductor role, given the analogy between rehearsing and teaching (Price & Byo, 2002).

The multi-disciplinary nature of choral conducting is helpful in as far as it outlines a wide spectrum of relevant competences. It is also indicative of a heterogeneous practice whose boundaries are difficult to draw, and where competences form an open-ended set. Hence, to discuss competences without some integrative framework is difficult. Varvarigou and Durrant (2011) has proposed one such framework, which brings together various theories of effective teaching and learning choral conducting. The framework situates conducting education based on six parameters; learners, tutors, music repertoire and choir, process, and learning outcomes. The present study focuses on the outcomes—what conductors need to master. The other elements of the framework we consider as contextual factors.

The conductor gestalt

Given that choral conducting, despite its diversity, must be viewed as a continuous practice field, we will not define the conductor role by including or excluding certain practices. Instead, we understand the role and the implied competences by how it is practiced and nurtured within what we would call a Western choral culture. The various scholarly disciplines offer insight into specific aspects of choral conducting, but naturally tend to leave other facets of the role unattended to. Conducting remains an inherently integral phenomenon, and partial views tend to leave little room for the ‘gestalt conductor’, or how it all comes together (Durrant 2003, 65). The impact of a conductor does not come from any single act, behaviour or skill in isolation, but from a whole person engaging in the music-making process. A conductor's overall capability (and impact) therefore arises from an agglomeration of elements that combine in different ways, depending on the situation at hand. In any given situation, the conductor faces a number of choices and demands that may be too many and too complex to be consistently and fully met (Hunt et al., 2004). However, being able to meet all the demands or tick all boxes in the competence set is not a prerequisite for overall

meaningful leadership. Leadership is inherently an imperfect process, while still being effective—plausibility is more central than precision for the ensemble's sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 1998). Previous research found that choral singers recognize the multiple concerns conductors face and express a high degree of 'forgiveness' for lack of certain competences, provided that the integrity and coherence of the conductor is intact (Jansson, 2015). When we in the present study have chosen to investigate the various competence *elements*, given the integral nature of conductor effectiveness, this may seem like a paradox. However, it is exactly because of the integrity of the role that the interplay between the various competences becomes crucial. By investigating the elements (diverse and heterogeneous in nature as they are) and how they matter in conductors' professional practice, we aspire to shed light on overall mastery of the role and what constitutes it.

Research on choral conducting tends to either deal with the specifics of a select set of competences with little regard for the whole (Bell, 2002; Black, 2014; Brunner, 1996; Cox, 1989; Dunn, 1997; Floyd & Bradley, 2006; Fuelberth, 2003; Grimland, 2005; Skadsem, 1997; Stambaugh, 2016; Ternström & Sundberg, 1988; Veronesi, 2014), or, conversely, the overall style or profile of the conductor, without explicit link to all the underlying competences (Apfelstadt, 2009; Armstrong & Armstrong, 1996; Butt, 2010; Faulkner, 1973; Fowler & Swan, 1987; Guise, 2001; Johansson, 2015; Patman, 1987; Wis, 2002). A select few approach the middle ground (Durrant, 2009; Emmons & Chase, 2006; Gumm, 2012), addressing specifics within a holistic frame, a tradition with which the present study aligns.

Research questions

This study attempts to bridge two opposing perspectives on choral leadership mastery—constituted by its underlying competence elements versus understood as aggregate impact of the conductor gestalt. We are interested in how conductors assess the various competences when facing the demands of their working situations, in terms of relative importance and self-perceived level of proficiency. Furthermore, we ask to what degree formal education has contributed to their current level. Although most competences are applicable across contexts, the answers may be contingent on an array of contextual factors. We therefore also ask which factors (among readily available

background data) might explain variations in perceptions and priorities. Given the scarce existing quantitative research, the study must be viewed as explorative, rather than bringing closure to the issues.

2. Theory

Taxonomies of competences

The notion of 'competence', despite its colloquial ease of use, is a rather fuzzy concept, and its scholarly use is inconsistent for different domains, cultures, and countries. Its typologies includes widely different features—cognitive, functional, social, and even meta-competences, such as adaptability and the ability to learn to learn (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). It may extend as far as to include traits, motives, and values. Having 'competence' refers to the capacity to perform, which might be a matter of degree. A 'competence' may also refer to single elements of such overall capacity. In the context of choral conducting, we let 'competence' denote an element in the comprehensive set of abilities that the individual may draw on to master the engagement with the ensemble and the music. It comprises different types of knowledge (*savoir*), applied to constitute a doing-skill (*savoir-faire*), behaviours and ways of being (*savoir-être*) (Campion et al., 2011; Le Deist & Winterton, 2005, p. 37; Nordhaug, 1993).

Previous research has found that superior performance requires extensive and complex domain specific competence (Ericsson & Lehmann, 1996; Goodall, Kahn, & Oswald, 2011). While task proficiency requires skills related to that particular task, research also indicate that some skills are highly transferable across tasks or domains. For example, interpersonal skills are presumably useful for most jobs, not least related to leadership. Taken together this span from the particular to the general are reflected in generic taxonomies such as the widely accepted distinction between technical, interpersonal and conceptual competences (Campion, Cheraskin, & Stevens, 1994; Jeou-Shyan, Hsuan, Chih-Hsing, Lin, & Chang-Yen, 2011; Sonntag & Schäfer-Rausser, 1993; Yukl, 2013). While this taxonomy is useful as a point of departure, we need to pay attention to how musical leadership differs from other leadership domains. First, the subject matter (music) pervades every competence element, not only the technical. Moreover, the conceptual (or philosophical) is not constrained to the cerebral—as an

aesthetic domain it encompasses the sensory, interpretive and embodied, where meaning is created on multiple levels.

Competence can be acquired through different routes (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005; Nordhaug, 1993), where professional or vocational education may or may not be the entry point. Research shows that competences are developed as much through work and life experience (Felstead et al., 2005). This is certainly the case for choral conducting, where formal education is a fairly recent phenomenon and has not been commonly available.

The choral conductor competence model

The multi-disciplinary nature of choral conducting suggests that the choral conductor competence set is a composite of knowledge, skills and predispositions that might appear as odds and ends, with lack of unity in terms of taxonomy. This could be solved by sticking to one well-established discipline. However, the stringency that a well-established discipline might offer is easily offset by failing to account for some critical facet of the role. A leadership model (for example, Wis (2007)) leaves little room for the artistic and aesthetic features. A gestural model, although holistic and comprehensive (for example, Gumm (2012)), disregards competences that require verbal communication. Jansson (2014) models the encounter between the ensemble and the conductor, as perceived by the singers, but the model does not come in the form of competences. Using a teaching model (for example, Cox (1989)) diminishes the artistic and performative competences. In order to retain the integrity of the role, when investigating conducting competences, we need a holistic competence model for the choral conductor on its own terms.

In its simplest form, the notion of 'model' means a categorisation of all the various elements that contribute to mastering the role and the functions of the choral conductor. Durrant (2003, 2005) provides an explicit competence view in his depiction of the 'super model conductor', a model that is incorporated in Varvarigou and Durrant (2011) framework for discussing conducting education curricula. Durrant's model is elaborated and amended by Jansson (2018). Here, conductor competences comprise (1) the musical-technical, (2) the situational-relational, and (3) the conductor's existential

foundation. We used the 17 elements of this three-layered model (shown in Table 1) as the basis for the survey questions in the present study.

Musical-technical competences comprise score proficiency, repertoire knowledge, aural/error detection skills, gestural vocabulary, vocal technique, language skills and choir acoustics. These competences can largely be acquired outside the ensemble situation. Their relevance and relative importance will unavoidably vary, depending on the situation. As the most conspicuous feature, conducting gestures serve multiple purposes, from basic synchronisation to unifying expression, also including the enhancement of singers' bodily preparation and the support of a voice-friendly posture (Durrant, 2003; Fuelberth, 2003; Gumm, 2012).

Situational-relational competences comprise overall rehearsal organisation and the host of possible interventions the conductor may do in any given rehearsing moment and during performance. Also included is the ability to provide timely and appropriate guidance to ensemble members – mentorship. Because the choir is a 'living instrument', the conductor also needs to facilitate a spacing and placement of singers that supports both the intended sound as well as promotes singers' security and ability to contribute (Michael J. Bonshor, 2016). An overarching competence, which permeates choral leadership on multiple levels, is the ability to balance control with empowerment. This applies to every interactive moment, from correcting errors or letting singers self-improve to the choice of gestures and signals during performance.

The third competence layer concerns the conductor's existential foundation, which is partly about the *quality* of the commitment with which the conductor comes to the ensemble situation and partly about the *potency* of that commitment. The quality is characterised by presence, devotion, and sincerity. The potency is characterised by authority and aesthetic will-power. While the elements of the existential foundation may seem rather elusive, they are in fact easily recognized and appreciated by choral singers,

and notably, when lacking, the value of other competences are undermined (Jansson, 2013).

3. Method

The research questions are posed with the conductor's experience in mind. The perspective on competence is therefore subjective and situated. The 17 competence elements contained in the model discussed in the theory section are heterogeneous with regard to conceptual richness. *Vocal technique* is more well-defined than *rehearsal organisation*. *Score proficiency* is quite narrow, while *rehearsal interventions* is more open-ended. Initially, we designed a survey with three competence variants (statements) for each element, to accommodate various guises they might appear in. However, we deemed that the sheer length of the survey would be detrimental to the response rate and limited the survey to one item per competence element. Consequently, the most complex items were given a simpler appearance than the substance of the underlying competence element. The most striking example is *control/empowerment*, which is the most permanent balancing act a conductor does, at multiple levels, during rehearsal as well as in concert. In the survey, this item was represented by one specific (although pervasive) capability; knowing when to intervene and when to let singers in peace to self-improve and self-guide.

Table 1: Competence elements and corresponding survey items.

	COMPETENCY ELEMENT	SURVEY ITEM
1.1	Repertoire knowledge	Repertoire overview and knowledge of music styles/genres
1.2	Score proficiency	Score overview and score understanding
1.3	Error detection/aural skills	Error detection/aural skills
1.4	Gestural skills	Gestural skills
1.5	Vocal technique	Vocal technique
1.6	Language skills	Language skills
1.7	Choir acoustics	Choir acoustics (how tones are shaped and voices sound)
2.1	Rehearsal organisation	Organise and manage the rehearsing process
2.2	Rehearsal interventions	Provide an effective learning approach for a given piece of music
2.3	Mentorship	Be able to give singers specific feedback and guidance
2.4	Control/empowerment	Know when to stop/correct and when to let the singers self-improve
2.5	Staging/spacing	Place singers and voice groups and stage the choir in the room
3.1	Presence	Presence and concentration in the face of the ensemble
3.2	Sincerity	Face the ensemble with sincerity and honesty
3.3	Devotion	Approach the music and the ensemble with devotion and passion
3.4	Aesthetic will	Have a clear idea of the how the music should sound
3.5	Authority	Act with authority and self-confidence

The survey asked the following questions:

Q1: How important is each of these competences in your own conducting practice?

Q2: Indicate to what degree you agree with the following statement: 'I am comfortable with my own competence level'.

Q3: Indicate to what degree you agree with the following statement: 'My conductor education prepared me well for what I need in my conducting jobs'.

For Q1, respondents rated each item from 1 (less important) to 5 (indispensable). The scale used for Q2 and Q3 was 'fully disagree' (1), 'somewhat disagree', 'uncertain', 'somewhat agree', 'fully agree' (5). For each question, the various items were presented to respondents in arbitrary order. The competence items were not numbered and no classification in terms of musical-technical, situational-relational, and existential was suggested. These three layers arise from qualitative research (Durrant, 2003; Gumm, 2012; Jansson, 2018; Ladkin, 2008; Nielsen, 2009). They provide some order to the taxonomy and are conceptually relevant, but are not central for the research questions.

Sample

Given the exploratory nature of the present study, largely driven by the scarce existing research, we chose to collect data from a broad sample of conductors. A large part of the choral conductor population was reached by e-mail invitation from the various choral associations and the Federation of Choral Conductors in Norway. The web-based survey was open for respondents for five weeks in November and December 2017. The number of responses was 294, out of approximately 1850 potential e-mail recipients (16%).

The respondents provided basic background data related to education, experience and working situation. The sample provides a slight overweight of female conductors (58%). The great majority (74%) has an academic degree in music (performing, teaching or musicology), nearly evenly divided between master and bachelor degrees. On the other hand, the majority (64%) does not have an academic degree specifically in choral conducting. However, there are large grey-zones here, because it is difficult to distinguish between a music education with a major element of embedded choral conducting and a choral conducting education containing generic music subjects. Conductors without academic degrees may also have taken extensive stand-alone university conducting courses. In general, choral conductors are frequent participants in training organised by choral associations, including full-week courses (22%), week-end courses (49%), and masterclasses with experienced conductors (32%).

70% of the conductors lead adult choirs and 33% lead children or youth choirs. 51% work with amateur choirs, whereas 42% work with advanced amateur choirs. 7% work with professional or semi-professional choirs.

The number of years of conducting experience (tenure) ranges from 1 to 57 years where the median is 22 years. Conducting work accounts for a share of annual income

that ranges from zero to 100%, where the median is 20 %. Although this parameter is only a proxy for the working situation, it indicates that one in ten could be labelled a full-time conductor (income share above 70%) and three in ten could be labelled a part-time professional (income share 25-70%). The remaining probably conducts one choir as a complement to another main job.

4. Results

Ranking of competence items

Table 2 displays mean scores for each competence element with regard to importance, own competence level, and education's contribution to this competence. Elements are ranked by mean importance score from highest to lowest. Respondents rated each element on a scale from 1 to 5. Table 2 indicates that all model elements are relevant, where even the lowest importance mean score is as high as 3.6 (for *language skills*). The top-ranking element (*presence*) was given a mean score of 4.8, where most conductors (77 %) in our sample gave this element the highest score (5). The highest mean score for competence was 4.6 (for *sincerity* and *presence*), where the majority of conductors (over 60 %) in our sample gave these elements the highest score (5).

We observe an overall pattern where elements related to the conductor's existential foundation (layer 3) obtain high competence scores whereas musical-technical elements generally are ranked lower. A similar score pattern is observed for importance. For both importance and competence, five of the top seven elements belong to the existential category. At the other end, all but one of the bottom eight elements belong to the musical-technical category (layer 1). Furthermore, the overall correlation between the means for importance and competence is .87, indicating that on average assessments of importance and of competence are highly related.

In contrast, the assessment of education's contribution is generally lower and is to a lesser degree related to importance and competence, with an overall correlation between the means of .38 and .33. The scores for education's contribution to the current competence are lower (one is equal) than for the competence level itself, an indication of the trivial insight that experience and practice accounts for the difference. Education contributes most to current competence for *gestural skills*, *error detection/aural skills*,

score proficiency, and *aesthetic will*. For each competence element, there is more variation in education's contribution than for importance and competence (higher standard deviation).

Table 2: Assessment of competence elements, means and standard deviations (scale 1-5), ranked by importance.

COMPETENCY ELEMENT	Importance in Current Practice		r_1	Competence Level		r_2	Education's Contribution	
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD		Mean	SD
3.1 Presence	4.8	.49	.25	4.6	.65	.32	3.6	1.17
3.5 Authority	4.7	.55	.39	4.5	.71	.51	3.6	1.12
3.2 Sincerity	4.6	.63	.27	4.6	.62	.34	3.4	1.18
1.3 Error detection/aural skills	4.5	.67	.30	4.4	.78	.42	3.8	1.09
2.1 Rehearsal organisation	4.5	.66	.30	4.3	.73	.37	3.4	1.22
3.4 Aesthetic will	4.5	.65	.51	4.4	.74	.20	3.7	1.11
3.3 Devotion	4.4	.74	.45	4.5	.70	.40	3.5	1.16
2.3 Mentorship	4.2	.83	.34	4.2	.83	.22	3.3	1.17
2.4 Control/empowerment	4.2	.73	.45	4.1	.83	.34	3.2	1.18
1.5 Vocal technique	4.1	.84	.49	3.9	1.12	.36	3.5	1.21
2.2 Rehearsal interventions	4.1	.80	.44	4.1	.84	.33	3.4	1.18
1.2 Score proficiency	4.0	.98	.39	4.1	.88	.38	3.8	1.08
1.1 Repertoire knowledge	3.9	.88	.40	4.0	.92	.15	3.3	1.10
1.7 Choir acoustics	3.9	.96	.49	3.8	.94	.17	3.3	1.14
2.5 Staging/spacing	3.8	.90	.49	3.8	.98	.17	2.9	1.17
1.4 Gestural skills	3.6	.98	.39	3.9	.92	.29	3.9	1.05
1.6 Language skills	3.6	.99	.18	4.1	.93	.24	2.8	1.19

SD=standard deviation. r_1 =Pearson correlation coefficient for importance and competence level items, all significantly different from zero at $p < .001$.

r_2 = Pearson correlation coefficient for education's contribution and competence level items, all significantly different from zero at $p < .001$, except 1.1, 1.7 and 2.5 at $p < .01$.

N=294.

Selection of competence elements for further analysis

We selected five of the seventeen competence elements for further analysis: *aesthetic will*, *aural skills/error detection*, *rehearsal organisation*, *gestural skills*, and *control/empowerment*. The first three are top ranking elements in terms of importance and competence in Table 2 (alongside the entire group of existential elements). *Gestural skills*, while being the most visual emblem of choral leadership, appear strikingly low in Table 2, which unavoidably calls for further scrutiny. *Control/empowerment* is an ever-present balancing act in enacting choral leadership, hence, it is of particular interest to explore its position in the skill set. In combination, these five elements encompass the key *functions* of the choral leader; having an idea of the sound, organising the preparation process, correcting the intermediate sounding result, embodying the idea in

concert, and in the process knowing when to hold tight and when to let lose. The chosen five elements cover all three layers, acknowledging that the layers appear with a certain distinctiveness in Table 2. Because of the covariation between importance and competence, we focus on competence in the following.

Bivariate analyses

Table 3 compares means for selected competence elements (respondents' assessment of own level and of education's contribution) with regard to type of degree in conducting (master, bachelor, other). Analysis of variance reveals that *gestural skills and control/empowerment* varies with education at the 5% level of significance. Education's contribution to current competence level varies significantly for all elements. Variance accounted for (η^2) is mostly small for competence level but medium for education's contribution. Conductors with a degree in conducting tend to report higher scores than conductors without.

Table 3: Competence and education's contribution by level of conductor education; means and significance of difference.

COMPETENCE LEVEL	Master	Bachelor	Other	Total	<i>p</i>	Variance explained ^a
1.3 Error detection/aural skills	4.5	4.4	4.2	4.4	.032	.02
1.4 Gestural skills	4.0	4.0	3.7	3.9	.103	.02
2.1 Rehearsal organisation	4.4	4.4	4.1	4.3	.029	.02
2.4 Control/empowerment	4.2	4.2	3.9	4.1	.017	.03
3.4 Aesthetic will	4.4	4.4	4.3	4.4	.539	.00
EDUCATION'S CONTRIBUTION						
1.3 Error detection/aural skills	3.9	3.9	3.5	3.8	.017	.03
1.4 Gestural skills	4.1	3.9	3.6	3.9	.005	.04
2.1 Rehearsal organisation	3.5	3.6	3.2	3.4	.109	.02
2.4 Control/empowerment	3.3	3.3	3.1	3.2	.457	.01
3.4 Aesthetic will	3.9	3.6	3.6	3.7	.070	.02
N	113	104	77	294		

^aEta-squared (η^2) is a measure of variance accounted for and corresponds to R^2 in regressions analysis. *p*-values based on F-test (analysis of variance)

Table 4 compares means for selected competence elements with regard to the level of choir the conductors work with (professional/advanced amateur versus amateur). The table also reports significance of differences based on the t-test. For competence level,

all differences are significant at the 5 % level. Conductors of advanced level choirs consistently report a higher level of proficiency for these elements. For education's contribution to current competence level, only two elements are significant at the 5 % level; *control/empowerment* and *error detection/aural skills*. Up to a moderate 6 % of variance in item response is accounted for. Cohen's *d* for significant differences ranges from small (.25) to medium (.49), which suggests that at least some of the reported differences are of substantial importance (Cohen, 1992).

Table 4: Competence and education's contribution by level of choir, means and significance of difference.

COMPETENCE LEVEL	Professional/ Advanced	Amateur	Total	<i>p</i>	Variance explained ^a	Cohen's <i>d</i> ^b
1.3 Error detection/aural skills	4.49	4.27	4.38	.012	.02	.29
1.4 Gestural skills	4.15	3.69	3.91	< .001	.06	.49
2.1 Rehearsal organisation	4.44	4.23	4.33	.011	.02	.30
2.4 Control/empowerment	4.24	3.96	4.10	.003	.03	.34
3.4 Aesthetic will	4.54	4.20	4.37	< .001	.05	.46
EDUCATION'S CONTRIBUTION						
1.3 Error detection/aural skills	3.90	3.63	3.76	.035	.02	.25
1.4 Gestural skills	4.04	3.75	3.89	.018	.02	.27
2.1 Rehearsal organisation	3.49	3.41	3.45	.544	.00	.07
2.4 Control/empowerment	3.28	3.21	3.25	.604	.00	.06
3.4 Aesthetic will	3.80	3.62	3.71	.167	.01	.16
N	144	150	294			

^aEta-squared (η^2) is a measure of variance accounted for and corresponds to R^2 in regressions analysis.

^bCohen's *d* is a measure of effect size (difference between means divided by the standard deviation).

p-values from independent samples *t*-test for difference between means

Regression analyses

Table 5 reports results of regression analyses with regard to five chosen competence elements (*error detection/aural skills, gestural skills, rehearsal organisation, control empowerment, aesthetic will*), based on seven independent variables.

Table 5: Regression analyses with regard to respondent self-assessed competence for selected competence elements, standardized coefficients (*b*).

	1.3 Error Detection/ Aural Skills		1.4 Gestural Skills		2.1 Rehearsal Organisation		2.4 Control/ Empowerment		3.4 Aesthetic Will	
	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>
Professional/advanced ^d	.11	.086	.19	.002	.13	.047	.10	.125	.19	.003
Masterclasses with experienced conductors ^d	-.05	.446	-.11	.066	-.07	.248	-.04	.549	-.01	.925
Male ^d	.03	.677	-.10	.082	-.06	.337	-.07	.234	.06	.283
Income from conducting (% of total)	.10	.105	.10	.077	.06	.303	.16	.008	.04	.519
Tenure as conductor (years)	.02	.706	.24	< .001	.10	.110	.17	.004	.11	.061
Degree in conducting ^d	.08	.226	.15	.014	.07	.287	.10	.121	.04	.490
<i>R</i> ²	.04		.17		.05		.10		.08	

^dDummy variables.
N=294.

The seven independent variables explain to a limited degree the variation in *error detection/aural skills* and *rehearsal organisation* competences with a R^2 of .04 and .05. Conversely, the model explains to a larger degree *gestural skills* ($R^2 = .17$) with the strongest significant findings for level of choir, tenure, and a degree in conducting. *Control/empowerment* competence is primarily explained by tenure and share of income from conducting, in other words experience. *Aesthetic will* is primarily explained by level of choir and tenure. Looking horizontally across the table, two factors exhibit little impact on competence level across the selected competences; gender and having participated in masterclasses. Also, academic degrees in conducting explain little, although it does have significant effect on *gestural skills*. Choir level and tenure appear to be those two factors that most influence several competence elements.

5. Discussion

The competence model is fairly exhaustive, as no element appears out of scope and no added competences are suggested in the qualitative comments in the questionnaire. The layered format of the model reflects different existential spheres suggested by previous research (Durrant, 2003; Jansson, 2014, 2015; Ladkin, 2008). Qualitative research has

found that the existential features are prominent in the encounter between conductor and ensemble (Jansson, 2015), and this is supported quantitatively by our results.

The results show moderate to marginal differences in views on competence between the various parts of the conductor population, despite the broad range of conductor practices in the sample. For example, competence on *error detection/aural skills* does not vary significantly by *any* of the seven contextual factors, and *rehearsal organisation* is only contingent on the level of the choir. This means that the choral conductor skill set does indeed exhibit certain universal features. It is a non-trivial finding that all the competence elements are recognized and valued across the entire sample. Further discussion is organised around three main themes - how conductors *shape* their practice, and hence construct their view on competence, their development *trajectories*, and the elusive role of *gestural skills*.

Competence, meaning, and identity

A certain competence might be viewed as very important where own competence is wanting. Conversely, conductors may be really good at something which is not crucial for the role. The rationale for asking separate questions about the importance of competences and self-perceived competence level was the possibility that they are indeed separate constructs. Our results, however, show that there is a high degree of overlap between the two. Co-variation suggests that the two issues are not independent, which we believe arise from their subjective nature. The notion of importance is only partially external to the individual conductor, because how a certain skill appears for the conductor is simultaneously acted upon. The conductor hears an error and deems it important to correct it. Alternatively, the conductor is not aware of an error, and unavoidably deals with other matters. When making sense of the musical organisation, we extract some cues out of an abundance of possible cues, and the meaning-making process is perceptive and enactive at the same time (Weick, 1995). The conductor is attending to what can be acted upon, hence the distinction between mastery and importance tends to blur. The practice is adapted to the conductor's mix and level of competence. Shaping the practice both involves what happens on the ground and how conductors make sense of any discrepancy between competence requirements and actual proficiency. When the discrepancy between the two becomes too obvious, a

cognitive dissonance may occur, which requires resolution (Festinger, 1957; Perlovsky, 2013; Perlovsky, Cabanac, Bonniot-Cabanac, & Cabanac, 2013). With the impetus for resolution, a conductor cannot consistently endure *not* mastering competences that he or she considers to be important.

Several mechanisms for coping with cognitive dissonance may be mobilised, such as affirming the significance of another skill that is mastered well, or even a wholesale shift of meaning framework (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012), that is, the conductor modifies his or her subjective internal 'competence model'. It could even be argued that the ability to reframe one's view of what matters most, based on own competence, in itself enhances mastery of the situation. The notion of self-efficacy refers to one's belief in the ability to perform to the demands of a given situation, and is a key element of leadership competence (Bandura, 1977; Caldwell & Hayes, 2016). In this way, self-efficacy is closely related to the leader's concept of self and identity. According to this line of reasoning, when conductors respond to questions about competence, they are portraying varying angles on their identity as choral leaders, where the understanding of self is a picture of own capability that is blended and resolved with regard to what matters to them. The strongest single-element correlation between importance and competence level is found for *aesthetic will* (.51), which is intimately associated with the self as artist. Conversely, the weakest correlation is found for *language skills* (.18), which is more of an auxiliary utility. A reasonable explanation, then, is that a conductor's rating of the various competence elements is neither importance nor capability in a strict sense, but rather the *prominence* that the competences takes when enacting choral leadership, and in how the conductor makes sense of his or her professional practice.

Choral conductor development trajectories

It is somewhat surprising that formal conductor education explains so little of conductors' overall views on competence. The multitude of ways conductors acquire their capability and shape their practice inevitably blurs the role of education. From the qualitative comments, we find six different points of departure for a choral conductor career, which are quite distinct, but also might appear in combinations; (1) the professional instrumentalist, (2) the professional singer, (3) the church musician, (4) the music educator, (5) the musicologist¹, and not least (6) the apprentice choral singer. On top of these, a host of combinations (and not least timing) of formal conductor

education, informal training, and choir jobs shape the winding roads of conductor competence.

On the level of bivariate analysis, academic degrees in conducting matter: Respondents with a degree believe that education contributes to their current competence level for all five elements that were investigated. However, when bringing more factors into the picture in the regression analyses, the two factors that stand out in explaining several competence elements (Table 5) are choir level and tenure, each presenting a certain 'magnitude' of development opportunity. A similar notion of 'quantity' of exposure seems to come into play with regards to *control/empowerment*, where tenure and share of income are significant. The ability to balance control and letting go, indicative of an overarching artistic reflexivity, seem to come from exposure and maturity. Conversely, the regression analyses also shows surprisingly little variation from degree in conducting as well as masterclasses. While the value of conductor education is appreciated, it is practice that shapes the perception of own competence. Tying back to the close linkage between importance and competence, practice is also the arena where the individual conductors reconcile their various strengths and weaknesses in the context of the ensemble at hand. Organising rehearsals and correcting errors are unavoidably situated, which suggests that both the seasoned professional and the novice amateur find ways to be effective, although in widely different ways.

The elusive importance of conducting gestures

Conducting gestures, often simplistically referred to as beat patterns, is what visually distinguishes the conductor from other ensemble members. Counterintuitively however, it may not necessarily be a defining feature of choral leadership. Respondents ranked *gestural skills* strikingly low in importance. It is easy to imagine the choral leader who rehearses a piece of music with an amateur choir without using hand movements, instead using the piano, vocal demonstration and verbal instruction. Also, the professional choir will in many situations be able to perform complex music reasonably well without a conductor, or be able to neglect a conductor with disruptive gestural signals. There are many frequently occurring situations where *other* features than gestures become more salient, and such situations seem to be top of mind when the respondents reflect on the role of gestures.

The results concurs with previous research. While a certain gestural proficiency clearly is useful, conducting gesture may not be a determining factor for the conductor's effectiveness (Durrant, 1994). The survey data arise from the full array of ensemble situations and phases in the musical process, where *gestural skills* fade in and out of focus. While this may be true for other competence elements as well, the situational role of gestures may vary more than, for example, *error detecton/aural skills*. Despite gesture's visual prominence, it still is *one* of the mediating tools in the conductor's multi-modal communication (Bygdéus, 2015; Sandberg-Jurström, 2009; Silvey & Major, 2014), and it is not unequivocally the most effective (Skadsem, 1997). What is more, given the great variety of conducting styles, including those of legendary conductors, the gestural conventions of conducting are not as self-evident as is commonly assumed and few gestures can be seen as emblems with consistent meanings (Benge & Zorn, 1996; Luck & Nte, 2008; Luck & Sloboda, 2008; Scott, 1996; Wöllner & Auhagen, 2008). The factors that impact *gestural skills* in addition to degree in conducting are choir level and tenure, which suggests that conductors develop their capability by facing the demands of the music over time.

Despite all the situations where gestures are peripheral in the encounter between conductor and choir, the opposite is also the case: the conductor's gestures may energise and lift the amateur choir in concert, and the conductor with rich gestural communication may enable very efficient rehearsing with the professional choir. The troubling observation, is that the importance of conducting gestures seem to oscillate between two end points; paramount and of marginal importance. In terms of research, this means that context is far more granular (micro level) than is captured by the rough background categories (macro level) in the present study.

6. Concluding remarks, limitations of study, and suggestions for further research

The 17 competence elements seem exhaustive in capturing what constitutes choral conducting mastery. The three competence layers, which have previously been found phenomenologically distinct, also exhibit quantitative differences, most clearly by the salience of existential factors. The elusive role of conducting gesture, found in previous

research, is confirmed in the present study. However, the 'magnitude' of exposure to conducting gesture clearly contributes to self-perceived mastery.

Differences in views on competences can be explained by contextual factors only to a limited degree. The two factors that matter most across competence elements is level of choir and years of experience. The views on *error correction/aural skills* do not vary with any of the contextual variables, and *rehearsal organisation* varies only with level of choir. This illustrates how conductors, with whatever profile or competence they have, adapt to and make sense of the situation in which they find themselves. In other words, overall conductor competence is also an enactive phenomenon, as single competence elements are promoted and demoted in the process of shaping an effective conductor.

The moderate or marginal differences across contexts suggest that repeating or expanding the survey to a different or wider conductor population should be expected to produce similar results. With regard to validity, we may ask to what degree the perceptions of the survey items are indicative of the overall mastery of the role. We view the findings as directionally valid within the chosen exploratory frame. However, real ensemble situations are always specific situations. When immersed in an actual music-making moment, with a continuous choice of interventions, the prominence of each competence is rather fluid. When engaged with an ensemble, the conductor moves some competences to the foreground and others to the back, thus shifting the model we try to measure. The least obvious limitation, but perhaps the most difficult to cope with, is that there is no clear line between what belongs to conductor competences and what falls outside. This may not primarily be a methodological problem, but rather an inherent fuzziness of the choral conducting phenomenon—while the choral conductor role is quite distinct in terms of its functions, its boundaries are highly situated.

The question of generality is primarily related to the sampling. Given the range of distribution channels for the survey, it is clear that the responses cover a broad field of conducting practices. This is also supported by the range of contexts in which the respondent's find themselves. Our results can then be taken as quite general across choral conducting practices. However, we may assume that choral leaders who are peripheral practitioners (such as the choral singer who temporarily fills a conductor vacancy) have responded to a lesser degree than conductors with a clear professional identity. This effect is probably reinforced by the rather frightening experience of filling

out a survey that lists 17 competence elements that could alienate any respondent, let alone the uneducated amateur volunteer. In short, the data may be somewhat biased towards a sample of choral leaders who are regular practitioners, have a certain courage to face the questions, and an interest in expressing their views. At first sight, this bias might be considered a methodological weakness, or at least a threat to generality. However, tying back to the open-ended nature of the competence set, it simply means that the findings are valid for the 'core' of the practice, which is what we in the first place are interested in. In other words, what appears as a problem of generality, is effectively reflecting ontological ambiguity.

Continued research into the contingencies of conductor competences, seeking precise prescriptions, should be paralleled by qualitative research with a holistic view of the conductor gestalt. We also need to study the universality and situatedness of conductor competences. It would, for example, be interesting to see to what degree the view on competences varies across countries, musical cultures, and for various phases in the artistic process. Uncovering universality of conductor competences would be a token of truly common ground. Uncovering situatedness would be equally valuable, as it would inform the development of conductor education and support different learning trajectories. Finally, the dominant research approach over the last decades has been to address the nature and impact of single competences. It allows the investigation of specific mechanisms and relationships. However, such work would benefit greatly from being positioned more clearly with regard to an overall model and the explicit situatedness of various types of conducting practices.

7. References

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¹ Musicology is used in a wide sense, which includes performative and pedagogic research and practice.