

# Choral singers' perceptions of musical leadership

By Dag Jansson

## What is conducting?

This chapter is about musical leadership and specifically the role of the choral conductor. The conductor role is familiar to anyone who has been singing in a school choir or have been the audience of live or televised concerts. The role is prominent in concert programmes and associated with ensembles whenever they are profiled or critiqued. The presence of a conductor is largely taken for granted by the layman as well as the scholar, as self-evident as the presence of musicians and singers. The purpose of this chapter is to look through this veil of self-evidence by reflecting on what conducting *is*, why we *need* it and what makes it *work*. Contrary to most writing on conducting and conductors, this chapter will take the choral singer's viewpoint, describing how musical leadership is perceived and experienced by those whom conducting is intended to impact.

The conductor role, as we know it today, is a product of romanticism in the 19th century, although musical leadership is a much older and wider notion (Schonberg [1967], Galkin [1988]). The shapers of modern day conducting, Wagner (1869) and Berlioz (1843) — famous conductors of their time—were also those who started to write about it, a tradition that continued into the 20th century. The early writers on choral conducting were Kurt Tomas (1935) and Pavel Chesnokov (1940). These represent the 'maestro writing' tradition: the great master sharing his own experience and ideas. Maestro writing as it evolved, stayed within an intentional and a prescriptive perspective, whether it concentrated on technical skills or took a broader view of the role. Most writing was in the form of handbooks, some even denoted as such in the title, aiming at supporting the training and development of conductors.<sup>1</sup> Scientific research on conducting is a more recent phenomenon, and three important observations can be

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the important sources on choral conducting (ordered by publication year) include: Lewis (1945), Ehmann (1949), Inghelbrecht (1949), Åhlen (1949), Uggla (1979), Lindeman (1957), Stanton (1971), Holst (1973), Ericsson and colleagues (1974), Gordon (1977), Kaplan (1985), Dahl (2002), Emmons and Chase (2006), Jordan (2009). Lewis (1945) and Inghelbrecht (1949) deal with orchestral as well as choral conducting. Important sources on orchestral conducting in the maestro writing tradition include Boult (1949) and Malko (1950).

made on conducting research from the last few decades: (1) it is predominantly U.S. based, (2) it is pedagogy-oriented (mostly in a high school and college setting) and (3) with few exceptions, it takes a 'reductionist' view, isolating some particular angle, which is investigated by a quantitative approach. Recent European research takes a more holistic view, recognising that musical experience also involves meaning making, and is therefore approached more qualitatively. While still having conductor training or conducting practice in mind, some of this research pays significant attention to the philosophical foundations of the conductor role<sup>2</sup>. Others draw on the parallels with general leadership, although to varying degrees assuming that leading art is not necessarily the same as leading anything else<sup>3</sup>.

The maestro writing tradition clearly shows that conductors at the outset took ownership of the notion of musical leadership. Following conductors' definitional powers, *how to do it* becomes the prevalent perspective. As outsiders to the profession take interest in the conducting phenomenon, it becomes the study object of the social sciences, ranging from the complex organisation of symphony orchestras<sup>4</sup> to the effects on health and well-being of the community choir<sup>5</sup>, and the natural sciences (especially neurology and cognition)<sup>6</sup>. There is however little research that asks fundamental questions about what conducting *is* and how we may understand it. Conducting gesture is the most visible aspect of the role, to the extent that it is an iconic feature familiar to everyone, but it is clearly only one out of many features. Durrant (1994) pinpoints that research is inconclusive when it comes to determining the importance of conducting gesture versus other features. Moreover, the applicability of the various features of conducting (like rehearsing style, gestural repertoire, voice teaching and so on) across different contexts is not well understood.

Conductors can no longer claim full ownership of the phenomenon, as pedagogues, sociologists and cognitive scientists engage with it. Who engages with conducting has strong bearing upon research perspective and approach, and consequently what knowledge can be generated and which aspect of reality that we are able to see. Maestro writing inevitably attends to the *intended reality*, as it oriented towards what needs to be done to achieve certain results. The social and natural sciences are able to explain the structures that exist and the processes that take place within and outside the ensemble organisations—an *observed reality*.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Fowler and Swan (1987), Durrant (2003), Koivunen (2003), Durrant (2009), Garnett (2009), Koivunen and Wennes (2011).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Goldstein (1987), Allen (1988), Davidson (1995), Armstrong and Armstrong (1996), Guise (2001), Butke (2006), Wis (2007), Springborg (2010), Woodward and Funk (2010), Ladkin and Taylor (2010).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Schonberg (1967), Lebrecht (1997), Mintzberg (1998), Koivunen (2003).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Bengtsson and Laxvik (1982), Ruud (1997), Durrant (2005), Langston and Barrett (2008), Balsnes (2009), Parker (2009).

<sup>6</sup> See for example Godøy and Leman (2010).

The most striking about conducting literature, in my judgement, has been the absence of the *impact view*, specifically the singer experience as a source of insight into how conducting works. The focus of this chapter is to let the voices of the singers be heard, in this context their verbally expressed experience with conducting and conductors. It is the choral singers who are allowed to frame conducting and it is their *perceived reality* that is described. The singer experience is conceptualised into three models of how choral singers encounter conductors and conducting: (1) the legitimacy model, (2) the enactment model, and (3) the notion of elusive perfection. The description underlying the models is the result of a recent study of choral singer experience in Norway.<sup>7</sup> Although the interviewees all are musically educated and acting as professional or semi-professional choral singers, the findings are probably valid beyond the researched sample, although to varying degrees. This chapter should offer a starting point for conductors and researchers in terms of how we may think and talk about the conducting phenomenon.

As we begin to investigate what conducting is, a number of questions arise concerning what domain we are in and where its boundaries are. There is something slippery about the whole notion, at the same time being familiar and a mystery. This might be said of leadership in general as well—in fact, leadership is an even slipperier concept, though a pervasive one. The media, is obsessed with leadership and leaders, attributing otherwise collective achievements and triumphs to whomever is in charge, whether in business, politics or music. Conducting's relationship to leadership is evident simply for etymological reasons—*conducere* is the Latin verb to *lead with*—but the nature of that relationship is far from clear. Some scholars simply state that conductors by definition are leaders (Price and Bryo [2002], Wis [2007]). But what does it mean that a conductor leads the music, or the ensemble? And is conducting simply a specific realisation of a general notion of leadership, or, conversely, is leadership merely one aspect of the conductor's role? Furthermore, what is the relationship

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<sup>7</sup> The project aims at understanding musical leadership through the lived experience of the choral singer, as expressed in conversation. The study was based on a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990). I interviewed 22 singers, 10 male and 12 female in four cities across Norway. They have college or university degrees in music/musicology with extensive exposure to different conductors, for some of them very many conductors. Together, the singers have been exposed on a regular basis to more than 30 of the most prominent conductors currently operating in Norway. In addition, more than half of the singers have experience with a number of project conductors, including foreign guest conductors. Each interview took place in the form of a free flowing dialogue about conducting and conductors, departing from one common question: What is great musical leadership, and what's going on when you experience it? I deliberately abstained from definitions—of leadership and conducting—at the outset of this work, developing the themes and categories by how the interviewed singers talked about their experiences. The reflection level and expressivity of the interviewed singers was so strong that I found it fully possible to interpret the interviews largely using their own words and concepts. The three models presented in this chapter is a result of the interview analysis. However, as commented in the text, they partly build on, are inspired by and complement the writings of Ladkin (2008), Nielsen (2012), Weick (1995) and Durrant (2003).

between conducting and teaching? Should the conductor be seen as a leader or a teacher, or both? Is it even possible that all of these questions miss the point—that the conductor is in fact nothing more than a co-musician, an ensemble member alongside singers and instrumentalists, a non-sound-producing musician with some special tasks, a specialist like everyone else in the ensemble? This chapter will not offer an answer to all these questions. Still, the choral singer viewpoint does offer important insight into the conducting phenomenon, its legitimacy, its various facets and boundaries.

## The phenomenology of conducting impact

When studying the impact of conducting and conductors, we could in principle *observe* how singers are affected. We could assess how we as listeners are *affected* by the sounding music. We could potentially *explain* the impact by some structural theory from the social or natural sciences. But even a whole host of such studies would not produce a comprehensive picture of the conducting phenomenon. The effect of choral leadership will necessarily have to go through those who are directly involved in the leadership act and who create meaning from it: the singers. One avenue to understanding how conducting impacts singers is through their perceptions, their lived experience, made available through verbal dialogue. This knowledge angle lends itself naturally to phenomenology as a philosophical platform. Although phenomenology is a rather heterogeneous movement that still lacks a unifying definition of the term (Zahavi, 2007:122), three important cornerstones remains in place. Phenomenology's first cornerstone is that the prime source of knowledge about the world emerges from the first-person perspective. Every phenomenon is an appearance of something to someone—that is, it is perceptually revealed as opposed to objectively given. The locus of conducting's impact, of course, is the singer/musician. This is where leadership behaviour is transformed into musical consequence. The second cornerstone is the immediacy of the phenomenon, which can only be understood by how it appears. In this regard, then, it is the appearance of conducting (and the conductor) that represents the reality, not the structures behind or around it. For the singer, it does not matter what lies behind the conductor's leadership—his or her training, particular style or intentions. It is how the leadership is perceived that creates the impact: perception is reality. The corporeal, pre-lingual nature of human gestures reinforces the immediacy of the conducting phenomenon. This is not to reject that we are also affected by aspects of leadership outside the immediate present moment, like prior knowledge about the conductor's stylistic preferences, reputation, and public image. Of

course it is true that the conducting phenomenon could be investigated primarily via social structures and processes, but an inquiry devoted to what musical leadership *is* and how it *works* must start with what it means for the individual singer in the musicking situation.

The third cornerstone is that phenomenological analysis involves an investigation of the various appearances of an object. Given the richness and multivalence of conducting, its study must reckon with a multitude of appearances—not only situations, music genres, ensemble types and competencies but also, at the micro level, breathing, hand movements, musical phrasing, error correction and so on. Phenomenological thinking copes well with—even favours—complexity and richness over simplicity and unity. The notion of ambiguity is not a problem either, but an inherent characteristic of the phenomenon itself, and it is therefore a research principle and research topic in its own right. The methodological principle of creative variation even uses changing appearances and a lack of unity as a means of uncovering the essential features of the phenomenon. When the same conductor is described by one singer as pompous and by another as sincere, they are together introducing a tension that may in fact characterise the conductor role.

In sum, the three epistemological cornerstones of phenomenology suit the inquiry into how singers perceive conductors and conducting and how we may understand this encounter. The singers' life world is revealed through human consciousness, to which the primary access is human conversation. In fact, the qualitative interview as a methodology is to a large extent based on and shaped by phenomenological thinking.<sup>8</sup> Through this type of interview, qualitative descriptions of the person's life world and interpretations of its meaning are captured—seeking to find the non-trivial in a familiar practice. The interview welcomes the interviewee's own experience, seeking precise descriptions and key significances while suspending the researcher's prior knowledge. With the premise that a pure description is not possible, that interpretation always comes into play, hermeneutic-phenomenology (van Manen, 1995) offers a practical approach to investigate conducting as lived experience.

## **Legitimising the conductor role as 'sensemaking'**

We are accustomed to seeing the choral leader in front of the performing choir. Even those who have never sung or played in an ensemble are familiar with the role, to the extent that they easily would be able to mimic the visual appearance of a conductor's posture and movements. The conductor has become an highly recognisable, almost iconic figure. At the

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Kvale's interview model [Kvale, 2001:40])

same time, outsiders may ask questions about what conductors really do and why this figure is needed. The conductor role is at the same time familiar and enigmatic. Choral singers, of course, have at least experienced the practical doings of their conductor, from organising rehearsals to synchronising the start of a musical piece during a performance. Most singers will probably also have experienced how the conductor has inspired or demotivated their own singing contribution and affected the choir's musical expression. To varying degrees, choral singers have reflected systematically on why they want someone to lead the music and the music event. Choirs also sing without a conductor, more so in certain musical styles and for smaller ensembles. Still, all choral singers will at least have experienced fragments of singing without a conductor, whether a conductor steps out of the role for a moment in the rehearsing process or as a stage experiment. Although the question of *why we need a conductor* may not be top of mind for every choral singer, singers certainly are able to reflect on the question and provide insight into the *legitimacy* of the role.

The legitimacy of the conductor role (*the why*) is of course a broad theme that will entail different connotations across all the various imaginable and unimaginable choir types and music situations. Often, the legitimacy of the role is defined in administrative terms, by how it is regulated by statutes, employment contracts and so on. Choral leadership may even be a secondary role, embedded in some other activity like primary school teaching and social work. However, *the why* must be rooted in a more fundamental experience of the musicking act, by what contribution the conductor may bring to the music and the ensemble. Despite all the attractive features of direct communication between the choir members when there is no conductor, choral singers experience five distinct reasons for why they want a conductor to lead, for which the overarching theme is *making sense* of and from the music event. The five dimensions of sense-making that the singers identify are (1) conceiving significance (the musical idea), (2) mobilising singers, (3) staging sound, (4) managing the setting and (5) shaping the overall music event. These dimensions are depicted as the *legitimacy model* in figure 1.

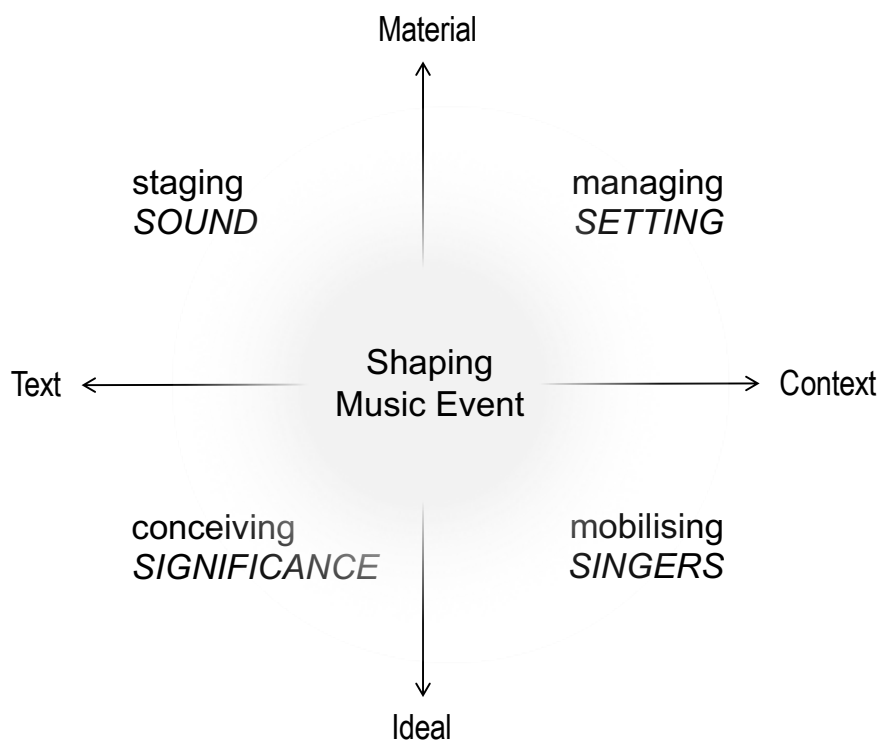


Figure 1: The 'legitimacy model' of choral leadership.

### ***Conceiving significance***

The lower left area of the map represents textual meaning—creating the musical idea. The singers expect the conductor to understand the music, discover a purpose within unfamiliar material, act as an excavator of hidden meaning, and be a mediator or spokesperson between the composer and the singers. When singers talk about the musical idea, they are referring to the music as material (as opposed to context) and associate it directly with musical will and musical intention. The musical idea is therefore perceived as something distinctly non-material that exists before the sounding music, then later coexists with it and is adapted by it. A cornerstone of the conductor role is therefore bringing to light the significance latent in the music material. The musical idea is the conductor's conception of the music, but creating musical meaning is not an isolated affair but an act of alignment. This conception process involves understanding and reconceptualising composer ideas as well as later associations based in performance and reception history. One singer exemplifies how significance underpins the sounding music as well as the link with the ensemble:

I consider the conductor to be a leader, an interpreter of music on paper, who tries to recreate his or her interpretation of the music—with the instrument available, of course. And then be able to show it. It is one thing to understand the music that you [the conductor] see on paper, but you also need to be able to express it through your own body language and instructions that make the others understand the music, or the perception of the music, and be able to execute it.

Conductors must align their ideas these past ideas, even when they deliberately choose to break with tradition. Conductors must also align with the ensemble, because the conductor may not be the only one with a musical idea. Every singer represents a possible idea, even if it is largely unarticulated, with which the conductor must negotiate, gesturally or verbally.

### ***Staging sound***

The upper left area of the model, the sounding music, represents the manifestation of the musical idea in the form of vibrating sound waves that are audible to those present. But sound is not only material manifestation of the musical idea but also the manifestation of the ensemble's capabilities, will and effort. The sounding music draws its meaning from the music material (text) as well as the ensemble (context). Or more precisely, while the sounding music is a material manifestation of the musical idea, the latent meaning of the score comes to life as the choir engages with it in the musicking act. The singers see the conductor as well positioned, in terms of physical location as well as role and responsibilities, to stage the sounding music. Staging sound also encompasses error detection and correction over the course of the rehearsing process. The conductor is able to hear what comes out, balance the sound, amplify singer contributions and ensure that the intended expressivity actually carries over to the audience. He or she stages the ensemble as well as the music, in fact, acting as a sound director—*mettur-en-son* or *klangregisseur*—in the manner of the theatrical director. This dialogue exemplifies the sound directing aspect of the conductor role:

A little unique for choirs, perhaps, compared to instrumental ensembles is that what is perceived as a lot here is perceived as very little out there. You think you sing distinctly, but you don't sing distinctly. You think you are exaggerating that phrasing, but you aren't.

*Does that mean that the conductor functions as some sort of amplifier? Amplifier of effects?*

Yes, absolutely.

Furthermore, the choral leader not only stages the concert sound, as an event specific manifestation, but also the ensemble's sound representing a lasting, potentially longterm feature of musical leadership.



## ***Mobilising singers***

The primary source of meaning outside of the music material itself is the ensemble—the singers produce every sound and every expressive detail. How they think and feel, what drives them or holds them back, and what commitment and understanding they bring to the musicking situation all affect the sounding music. What we hear, in short, reflects the meaning singers infuse into the musicking situation. The interviewees recognise the way in which great leadership can unleash their efforts, focus their energy and liberate their expressiveness. Poor or absent leadership, conversely, tends to result in music that is lifeless and dull. Singers want to be mobilised and yearn for what good leadership can do to their vocal contribution. They have a zest for it, which the conductor may reinforce or destroy. The word *zest* is chosen to denote something that is more active than inspiration and more pleasurable than enthusiasm. If ‘significance’ denotes meaning associated with the music material, then ‘mobilised singers’ denotes meaning arising from the interpersonal experience between singers and between the individual singer and the conductor. The conductor may mobilise singers in a number of ways, from the display of devotion to achieving the proper balance between control and empowerment, from deep musical knowledge to its corresponding embodiment. A conductor’s impact upon the singers in this respect may represent the pivotal point where the legitimacy of the role itself—the legitimacy *by design*—becomes legitimacy *earned* for the individual conductor. One description of such a situation highlights many of the facets of great musical leadership:

That is a blissful situation. The music is in focus, and the conductor knows exactly what he or she needs to do to make it work. The conductor listens; he hears where to put his finger and fix things. And he unites the ensemble to sound like one choir and pulls everyone to share one thought, so that all concentrate on one thing. Oh, this is life! It could in fact be just two bars, or getting a passage right that you have worked on for a long time, or you hear that it all comes together, or you master everything better than before. Someone who is able to use movements so that as a singer breathe correctly, who has movements and gestures that make me just flow with the music, who is able to show it in a physical way, so that as a singer I may sing freely. In those moments, I am a happy singer.

This singer exemplifies the three corners of the legitimacy model outlined in the preceding sections. The conductor has a musical idea, is well integrated with the choir (listens and knows what interventions to make), is able to liberate her as a singer and stages a unified sound. Her statement also exemplifies the sensemaking aspect of the experience by the momentary sensation—the split second where it all comes together and deep meaning is created.

### ***Managing setting***

The upper right area represents the material context of the music event—denoted as the *setting*. There are managerial aspects of the conducting role—that is, activities that are not limited to musical leadership but apply in some fashion to all forms of leadership. In terms of conducting, such activities might include a range of near-music activities such as singer auditioning, contract negotiation with external soloists and instrumentalists and tour planning, as well as non-music activities such as ensemble funding and marketing. In some ensemble types, and for certain organisational constructs, it is easy to imagine that managerial structures are non-distinguishable from the musicking organisation itself (the opera choir and the opera orchestra would probably represent such cases). For some choral conductors, the setting may be beyond their influence. Iszatt-White (2011) argues that context has traditionally (and wrongly) been seen as external to leadership work, whereas leadership would be better understood as ‘mutual elaboration’, according to ‘the inseparability of action and context which this entails’ (2011:132). Whatever the given conductor’s degree of control over the setting, he or she cannot disregard how the setting influences the other sensemaking dimensions or disregard it in his or her leadership scope.

### ***Shaping the music event***

The fifth legitimacy theme is about unifying the ensemble’s efforts. Choral singers find that the conductor does make a difference. Conductors are in a position to influence the music, and their minute cues may have substantial effects on the musical flow. The (effective) conductor unifies the ensemble, both concentrating and amplifying individual expression. Once singers accept the conductor, he or she has the power to shape the music right at the meeting point of significance, sound, singers and setting. The setting, encompassing venue, acoustics and repertoire and so on, determines the constraints within which singers may realise their musicality according to the conductor’s musical idea, and make salient the significance of the music. In turn, singers are willing to abandon their own musical ideas when the conductor convincingly proposes a different idea. Singers are voluntarily letting themselves be disciplined, in fact, conductors may mobilise a yearning to be caught by and be subject to the musical flow. Henri Bergson (1910:7) points out that music may ‘suspend the normal flow of our sensations and ideas’. This effect is contingent on the invitation (and conviction) of the conductor and while the efforts of the singers produce the sound, the conductor stages the sound as collective and unified expression. This role is facilitated by the fact that the

conductor listens while everyone else must sing, so he or she can control and reconceive meaning during the continuous relay between original musical idea and sounding manifestation. This involves a delicate balancing act between providing central control and empowering singers to sing freely.

Each of the four corners of the legitimacy model represents aspects of meaning in and from the music event. In the absence of a conductor, meaning would also be created. When singers allow for and favour a conductor role, it is because they see its contribution to be unique in two ways: (1) it is more *effective* to have a single, designated leader, and (2) it is more *efficient* to have a single, designated leader.

Effective means that the impact is greater, for example being in the best position to hear the balanced sound, to correct and amplify the music, whether it is diction, phrasing or timbre, ensuring that the individual singer efforts get out there, beyond the stage front. Although smaller ensembles can sing well without a conductor, the singers experience that singing without conductor usually leads to a duller and edgeless sound.

Efficient means that energy or time is saved. An example of being more efficient is to have one leader taking care of the rehearsal process, both in terms of how to manage time, but also in terms of aesthetic judgement. Even in the performing situation, the conductor provides efficiency. When the singers know that the conductor keeps an overview and guides critical details, the conductor unburdens the singers, allowing them to focus. They don't need to sense absolutely everything all the time. Instead, they can pay more attention to their own vocal technique, bodily preparedness, tone production and musical expression. The combined effectiveness-efficiency advantage is what allows the fifth element of the legitimacy model—the conductor as the overall *shaper* of the music event.

## **Enacting choral leadership**

Singers find the conductor role meaningful because it provides unique contributions to the music event. Choral singers describe their encounter with conductors as a rich experience, encompassing a host of themes, ranging from the most tangible aspects of rehearsing and performing to how the conductor exposes his/her involvement with the music and the ensemble. When everything works at its best, singers experience a deep intersubjectivity where time is standing still and roles are transcended. This section will discuss what constitutes the enactment of choral leadership.

The various themes that describe the encounter between conductor and ensemble arise from conversations about personal experiences. The phenomenology of conducting impact is about understanding these experiences. Singers provide different entry points to their experience, a named conductor, a particular rehearsal, a peak performing moment or some recurring irritation over a certain conductor behaviour. The enactment of choral leadership may be understood as a layered phenomenon. A conceptualisation is visualised by the enactment model in figure 2. The three levels are inspired by Donna Ladkin's (2008) notions of mastery, congruence, and purposefulness. Her simple, yet powerful model of 'leading beautifully' was developed from a case study of multi-artist Bobby McFerrin.<sup>9</sup> The enactment model also bears resemblance with Frede Nielsen's (2012) model of musical meaning, a stratified spherical model with the most tangible aspects of music in the outer strata and the most personal and existential aspects in its core. The enactment model and Colin Durrant's (2003) 'super-model conductor' also have many themes in common. The difference is the viewing angle, Durrant's model is a comprehensive set of 'must master' attributes of a conductor, whereas the enactment model captures how these attributes are perceived by the choral singers and made meaningful in the musicking act. Naturally, these two perspectives have significant overlaps.

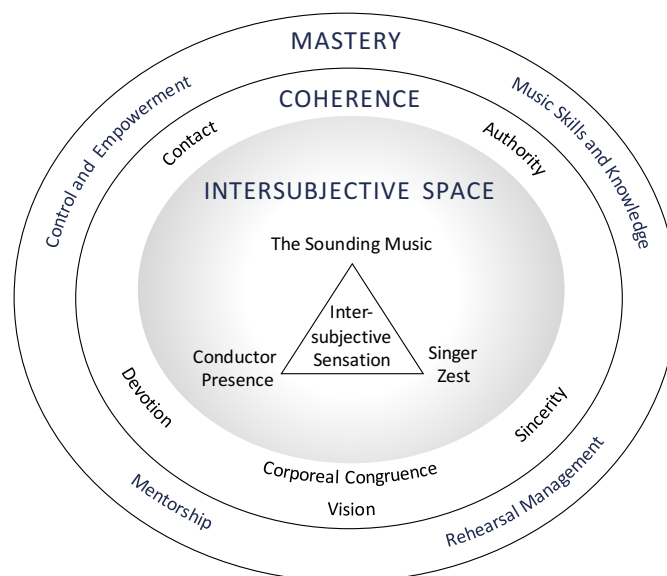


Figure 2: An 'enactment model' of choral leadership

<sup>9</sup> The innermost layer in the enactment model is denoted 'intersubjective space', rather than 'purposefulness' in Ladkin's model. This is not meant as a proposed change of Ladkin's model, rather an elaboration that arises from the fact that purpose and meaning is a complex web of relationships between singers and conductor, and that meaning is created and mediated intersubjectively within the ensemble. The middle layer in the enactment model is denoted 'coherence' rather than 'congruence' in Ladkin's model. This is not meant as a distinction between the two terms, but to reserve 'corporeal congruence' as a subset of 'coherence', the way in which the various facets of 'coherence' come together as bodily manifestation.

## **Mastery**

Mastery is about those skills and competences the conductor comes to the choral situation with. They become visible through how they are applied. In fact, singers don't experience conductor skills and competences as discrete elements but by how they come into play in the conductor act and the conductor-being in its entirety. Whereas the sum of skills and competences reside as 'latent' with the conductor, mastery manifests itself in the present moment where they are put into use. Very importantly, leading beautifully not only requires knowing what to do, but also blending the various interventions, applying them in the right quantity/strength and choosing the appropriate timing. In Ladkin's words, mastery is about form as well as measure, drawing on Plato's notion of beauty (2008:34).

There are four main themes in the mastery level. *Control and empowerment* and *mentorship* are about how the conductor integrates with the ensemble – blending control, delegation, help and demands. This applies to the rehearsing situation as well as performance. Control/empowerment is a general leadership theme but must also be considered an element of mastery that is strongly tied to the unique features of conducting, as it relies on understanding a music flow, its cues and its gestural possibilities. In the performing situation, singers expect the conductor to be in control, while not controlling the singers excessively, thereby inhibiting their ability to sing freely and come forward with their own musicality and expressivity. One singer statement exemplifies the value of unobtrusive leadership:

The conductor has a way of communicating with the singers that is kind of relaxing; you feel that you get the space to be with the music, that it is not too micro-managed, perhaps.

Empowerment may also imply relinquishing control to the point where some ambiguity and 'risk' is created in the performing situation, thereby mobilising singers to assume responsibility and be on the edge. Empowerment in the rehearsing situation is more on the practical level, for example by how instruction is mixed with self-learning.

*Mentorship* involves the notions of control/empowerment by how the conductor guides singers when rehearsing and performing. But mentorship is a wider and deeper engagement in the development of singers, by assessing what they need and responding to these needs. Good mentoring is seeing singers exactly where they are, understanding what intervention will make them progress and the timing of it. The two main levers are help and demand and the appropriate application of each requires situational mastery. Singers perceive help that is not needed to be condescending (for example vocal instruction of skilled singers) and demands to be demotivating where competence is wanting (for example fixing a difficult

pitch problem). Mentorship requires a certain generosity on the part of the conductor, letting singer needs take precedence and avoid unnecessary lecturing as well as futile expectations.

*Rehearsal management* shares its characteristics with most other types of projects. The rehearsing project is a goal oriented endeavour as any activity set being means to an end. Musical rehearsing involves time constraints, schedules, milestones, unexpected events and corrective action as for any other subject matter domain. However, rehearsing as an artistic process may also deviate significantly from a non-artistic process. The most efficient process may not necessarily lead to the most impactful performance. Clear goals may also be counter-productive to an exciting end result. The absence of ambiguity and crisis may bring premature closure to the musical idea. Having said this, choral singers largely appreciate the predictable rehearsing project as well as the single well-run rehearsal.

*Music skills and knowledge* contain many of the features that are unique for a music project. The sub-themes include:

- Repertoire knowledge
- Score analysis
- Language
- Aural skills and error detection
- Voice technique
- Gestural skills

Music skills and knowledge may be what is most explicitly taught at music academies and they are hard to imagine without. Still, they are very far from being sufficient—they may not even be the determining factor. While there are examples of conductors whom singers appreciate even when mastery is wanting, there is no question that singers prefer a conductor who comes to the musicking situation with a high degree of mastery. Music skills and knowledge is the mastery element that is most specifically related to the music domain, but only gestural skills are specifically related to conducting. The other capability elements are somewhat more generic and are relevant outside the music domain. However, choral leadership mastery is about the situational *application* of capabilities, which goes well beyond the *possession* of capabilities.

The placement of mastery as the outer layer of the model illustrates that these themes are the most outward and worldly features of musical leadership. They are also concrete and tangible, in that that they are part of university curricula, objects of conducting master classes, and foci of research projects. While there is no question about the value of the distinct conductor competences that constitute the mastery level, choral singers describe a depth of experience that cannot be understood only in terms of mastery. The musical leadership for

which singers yearn can only be fully grasped via a deeper view of its enactment—by the access to the intersubjective space of musical sensemaking that it enables. The mystique and magic commonly associated with great conducting is less of a mystery and more about the difficulty of articulating what goes on in the musicking moment. At its best, musical leadership simply exploits the possibilities latent in the intersubjective sensation to which the conductor and the ensemble commit, and which the conductor has a unique and particular responsibility to enable.

### **Coherence**

The coherence layer is about the integrity of the conductor as human being and includes contact, devotion, sincerity, authority, vision and will. *Contact* is perceived momentarily by how the conductor meets and engages with the choir. Contact goes beyond the visual, it is also experienced as a willingness on the part of the conductor to *be with* the choir in the musical flow. Contact involves a delicate balance between distance and intimacy. When singers expect the conductor to be *sincere*, it means that there are no false motives or hidden agendas. It requires a certain vulnerability, where the conductor is exposed with whatever faults and weaknesses. Choral singers give of themselves and make themselves vulnerable in order to make great music, and they can only open up if there is reciprocity. A related and slightly overlapping theme is *devotion*, which is about the depth of commitment on the part of the conductor. It appears as passion for the music, but also as faithfulness and generosity towards choral singers—devotion involves a lasting quality of the engagement. *Authority* manifests itself in a number of ways, by competence, vision, will, and a type of forcefulness—there is no question about who is in charge. However, authority also seems to remain intact when conductors demonstrate humility or even make mistakes. There is an important distinction between having authority and being authoritarian, the latter perceived as conductor being centred on the self rather than the cause—the music. Conceiving the musical idea is one of the elements that legitimises the conductor role. Enacting the idea comes through how the conductor is able to communicate the vision and exercise the will to make it happen. Musical *vision and will* therefore seems to be a pair that is very tightly coupled, perhaps more so than in other leadership domains.

The coherence themes are very important for singers—they can be showstoppers or gate openers, as they unlock or shut the gates to the innermost layer. The interviewed singers give examples of high calibre conductors who have not succeeded because of their lack of sincerity or questions about their authority. Conversely, they also give examples of a

conductor, famous for his poor gestural and communicative skills, but where his devotion and passion is so compelling that he is nevertheless effective.

Because the gate openers are largely nonverbal perceptions, they must be understood as embodied phenomena, which, in order to be valid, require corporeal congruence. This congruence derives from conductor signals that are delivered in different modes (speech, posture, breath, hand movement, eye contact) but that contain the same message (or at least do not contradict one another). With some allowance for vision and authority, the gate openers are generally ways of being that are unrelated to competences. It is therefore possible to open gates when competence is lacking; conversely, gates may be shut even for the highly competent conductor. However, what the conductor does is inseparable from how he or she is being it. For example, devotion is exposed through how a conductor rehearses a certain piece of music. A lack of sincerity is exposed through how a conductor abuses his or her mentoring task. How a conductor technically solves certain gestural challenges may reveal weak authority or lack of contact with the singers. The conductor is continuously and visibly present, fully open for all of the perceptual powers of the singers. Singers talk about what conductors do, their descriptions are filled with perceptions of how conductor tasks are enacted, which is inseparable from the conductor's embodied being.

The embodied nature of musical leadership makes gesture (in a broad sense) both a skill set (that is included in the mastery category) and a way of being through which the other gate openers are experienced visually. A variant of this duality also appears in Durrant's concept of three types of conducting gesture—literal, expressive and supporting (Durrant, 2003:147). Literal gestures are indexical in that they indicate pulse, location and direction in the musical flow. Expressive gestures suggest the character and nuances of the music, and they are emotive, in that they seek to elicit a corresponding vocal response on the part of the singers. Supporting gestures are intended to help singers breathe and sustain phrases. They enable favourable bodily conditions via a 'mirroring' effect<sup>10</sup>. The conductor's gestural skill set matters, including posture, point of gravity, intense presence and friendly eye contact. These qualities go beyond mere skilled mastery and blend with coherence themes like devotion, authority and will.

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<sup>10</sup> The mirroring effect was understood by the major discovery of mirror neurons (Winerman, 2005). Mirror neurons represent a coupling between our sensory and motoric apparatus, so that a singer's body is engaged when conducting gesture is perceived.



### ***Intersubjective space***

The innermost layer is denoted intersubjective space. This is the common room of musicking. This is where the present moment is experienced, where the *sounding music* becomes past and the music flow is anticipated. This space is where *intersubjective sensation* takes place and meaning is created and shared. Singers expect a strong *conductor presence* to enable and open this space, while recognising that it is maintained and nurtured by everyone present. Singers describe a yearning for this space. This is the holy grail for choral singers, rare and precious—a room where admittance is not guaranteed, and whose existence cannot be taken for granted. The room for musicking is a fragile and ephemeral construction, and access to it is enabled or disabled by the outer layers of the model. In the intersubjective space where musicking experience happens, distinct roles seem to vanish, boundaries between singers and conductor become blurred, and the leadership role is transcended. Singers refer to this space in different ways, but their descriptions involve a certain simultaneity of meaning and shared anticipation of the continued musical flow. The singers' intersubjective experience is expressed in a number of ways, as fused lives, seeing without eye contact, and understanding at the same time. These are 'lived examples' of intersubjectivity, as described by Holgersen (2006) and Zahavi (2003). The space metaphor is suggested by a number of word images: confines in which there is security; a substance in which you are immersed; the music as an inside as opposed to the trivialities outside; an enclosure you can fall out of and get back into; and a proximity that prevents you from disappearing or withdrawing from one another.

Intersubjective space is still experienced as a state of mind, of course and Garnett (2009:197) uses the phrase *common house of being* to denote a communal state of consciousness and the thought processes in which collective identities are formed, adding, 'inhabitation is therefore the means by which the subjective becomes intersubjective' (ibid.). The intersubjective space enables the ensemble to deviate from the planned flow without losing control, acting as if it were one body. Such collective virtuosity has also been found in a study of peak performances in symphony orchestras (Marotto, Roos and Victor, 2007). The same three components were found to constitute the experience; the leader, the ensemble and the music, in situations of collective virtuosity denoted charismatic leader, empowered ensemble and ennobling task. As with choral singers' experience with intersubjective space, moments of collective virtuosity cannot be predicted. The components are merely catalysts of an emergent phenomenon that may or may not materialize.

Sensemaking is more enactive than just understanding—it is the continuous relay of responding to new cues and understanding previous responses. When Weick (1995:8) speaks about sensemaking as creation, it follows that sensemaking in a choir is co-creation, since the stream of cues is collectively produced by conductor and ensemble. Although the conductor may not necessarily make the same sense out of the musical flow as the singers, he or she is nevertheless affected by the actual sounding music. In the performing situation, the conductor must rely on a limited scope of gestural cues only, each of which is loaded with meaning beyond the gesture itself. The singers make sense of the conducting gestures as the cues invoke their own memories. This applies even in the case of prima vista singing, because sightreading in every present moment involves anticipating the music flow, and once it has been read, musical meaning becomes memory that is then ready to be moderated by conducting cues.

As the conductor is conveying musical meaning in real time, he or she is making sense by providing direction. The conductor is also simultaneously part of the collective sensing of the musical flow. The duality of sensemaking has an etymological parallel in the Latin root of sense and is also expressed by Weick as he points out that sensemaking is both enactive and retrospective. When Holgersen (2006), in his exploration of musical intersubjectivity, draws on Husserl's distinction between operational intentionality and act-intentionality, this may likewise evoke the dual nature of sensemaking. Operational intentionality makes sense by understanding where the musical flow is in any given moment, whereas act-intentionality gives sense by directing the continued flow. In a choral ensemble, the conductor is a sensemaker, creating sense by giving direction and also creating the intersubjective space where everyone may sense the musical flow, upon which renewed direction may be given. This is not to say that the conductor is the only 'sensible' person in the midst of bewilderment and ignorance. Everyone in the choir is making sense of the music, and of what they do, but sensemaking is a dedicated function of the conductor's position. The conductor has a particular responsibility to give sense to the ensemble and, as importantly, to sense what the ensemble does.

## **Elusive perfection: Balancing singer needs**

It has been pointed out that research is inconclusive when it comes to determining the importance of conducting gesture in relation to other features, as well as the interplay between these features. Interviews with choral singers confirm that it is very difficult to pin down a

conductor profile or practice that is universally best, or even good. Perfect choral leadership is simply a slippery notion. We might understand this in light of a series of balancing acts and tradeoffs that the conductor continuously has to make.

The enactment model described in the previous section is about *the how*. The choral singer experiences the musical leader as an integral phenomenon. For this reason, it is difficult to deconstruct the role and investigate singular themes. It is equally difficult to make claims about what great musical leadership is, as singers articulate widely different experiences and conflicting views. However, what could be misconstrued as an inconsistent picture of what good musical leadership is, should instead be viewed as a consistent picture of balancing acts, where conductors have to continuously make choices and trade between interventions. The relationships between the various model themes in figure 2 seem to be ephemeral, which can be attributed to the abundance of meaning-making possibilities they represent. The perfect musical leadership is an elusive phenomenon, not only because many of the preferences are situational but also because many of the things conductors are and do involve continuous choices and constant rebalancing, which affects the singers in turn. Some of the most prominent examples include the following:

**Control versus empowerment.** The conductor faces this balance in the rehearsing process as well as the performance. When to relinquish and when to take command is never predestined as such but is a judgement of the musical moment. Sensing as perception and sensegiving as a directive are both at the heart of such judgements. The notions of pacing and leading are different sides of the same coin.

**Knowing versus searching.** The general expectation is that the conductor comes to the musicking situation with a musical idea and a rehearsal plan. However, singers also expect the conductor to be adaptable, in terms of (1) reconciling the musical idea to the given ensemble and situation, and (2) adjusting the rehearsal plan in accordance with the actual progress made and the triumphs and difficulties encountered.

**Working details versus the whole.** The most prominent conductor choice in the rehearsing situation is when to solve specific problems and when to let the ensemble self-correct via the uninterrupted run-through. In a sense, this represents a special case of the control–empowerment balance, in terms of who is made responsible for getting it right.

**Demanding versus helping.** This balancing act is explicitly captured by the mentoring theme, which is also closely related to control–empowerment, since it deals with deciding what to bring to the ensemble member—specific help, clear expectation of self-improvement or maybe a blunt ‘wake-up call’.

**Telling versus showing.** Talk can interfere with singers' own musicking and sometimes involve distracting or counterproductive content. At the same time, speech is invaluable for conveying contextual meaning and succinctly addressing specific and detailed problems. This balancing act is closely linked to working with details versus the whole.

**Being versus doing.** Doing, of course, is inseparable from being. On the other hand, conductors may also impact singers through their perceived devotion, an unarticulated but assumed intention, or the empowerment derived from a moment of gestural ambiguity. Action is not the sole instrument of influence.

**The pompous versus the meek.** Singers expect authority and will power but also modesty and sincerity. None of these things are necessarily in conflict, but too much egocentricity, for example, is usually off-putting, whereas too little may undermine authority.

What is particularly noteworthy about these various balancing acts is that there are no stable balancing points. The perfect blend of actions or behaviours in one moment may not be perfect the next moment. In fact, the choice of one mode immediately invites its opposite. After spending a good portion of a rehearsal working through minute details, singers will long for a run-through of the whole piece. Even a conductor who is extremely effective at showing gesturally what he or she wants may sacrifice some impact if thoughts are never communicated verbally. Singers do appreciate a well-prepared conductor who always knows what the end result should sound like, but the complete absence of experimentation, no possibility for deviation or no risk of failure, can lead to singer complacency.

This apparent lack of stability and precision is captured by Weick's notion of *plausibility* as a characteristic of sensemaking. A conductor intervention does not work because it is universally correct but because it is sufficiently meaningful in a given moment. This calls for great caution when we attempt to prescribe what good conducting is. Correctness is not the key point, but what makes sense here and now. The elusiveness of conductor 'perfection' and the scope of meaningful realisations of musical leadership underscore the fact that art is ultimately an open-ended process that does not seek unambiguous expression or final closure in terms of understanding. In fact, this may be the point where conducting departs from the adjoining arenas of leadership in general and teaching in particular. The conductor-as-artist is a neglected perspective in literature on choirs and conducting, which favours strictly pedagogical aspects instead. When the interviewed singers acknowledge, accept and even enjoy the imperfections of these conductor profiles, it is not only because they are generous in spirit but also because those imperfections are inextricable parts of an artistic process and an artful means of leading music. There is a limit

to how far we can take the parallel between organisational leadership in general and musical leadership. Despite all of the outwardly set goals of a musical ensemble, from performance quality to financial control, musicking is stuck (and blessed) with being its own reward. Musicking may be a means to another end but nevertheless remains a unique avenue to experience (*Erlebnis*) and insight (*Erkenntnis*). The interviewed singers certainly recognise the importance of mastery. But in the end, it is the intersubjective space that the conductor is able to open up that matters most of all, and they have experienced that even imperfect conductors can enable perfect experiences.

## **What should singer perceptions mean for conductors?**

The history of conducting is dominated by what conductors think about their own practice. Conducting is an art and a craft, knowledge therefore tends to be experience based. After all, conductors are exploring what works and what doesn't in every encounter with a choir. A certain level of reflection is therefore inevitably embedded in every conducting practice. However, the scope of reflection may not be as wide as it could. Reflecting merely on own practice may not take into account the full richness of the role and the power of its impact. The role calls for a certain humility with regard to what it takes to fill it, both by questioning what the role is for and by recognising that it matters how singers experience it. The point of departure should be that the value of musical leadership derives from its impact, not from what is intended, how the conductor is trained nor what some administrator decides. Although choral singers provide a multitude of experiences with conductors they value highly, the stories being told also indicate widely varying levels of self-awareness on the part of the conductors themselves. In my judgement, a key implication for conducting practice is the recognition that, though the role provides an inherent legitimacy, this legitimacy must be substantiated through the way in which the role is enacted. Understanding the impact of one's own practice, however, is difficult in the absence of conscious verbal exchange. In many ways, being a conductor is lonely, because the role stands apart from the rest of the ensemble and demands a different distance-intimacy blend than that among the singers. The models described in this chapter will hopefully help to nurture a professional exchange around conducting practice and philosophy.

Another key implication of choral singers' perceptions is the conscious and explicit recognition of elusive perfection—that the conductor continuously faces balancing acts that require good situational judgement as well as the ability to choose among and adapt the

various approaches and interventions. Few 'best practices' are universally and permanently effective. As a complex, personal and situational phenomenon, great musical leadership would seem to demand significant self-insight. The short version of the singers' expectations towards the conductor could be paraphrased as follows: Know the music, know the ensemble, know yourself!

Many of the insights outlined in this chapter may be imbedded in the teachings and practices of various schools of conducting education, although not necessarily visible as curriculum. Four topics are worth reflecting on, independently of school of training or level of teaching. First, viewing conducting as an extension of playing an instrument is too narrow. Music students are naturally obsessed with playing their instruments and dismiss auxiliary subjects that might interfere with this. But conducting as 'playing' encompasses a host of auxiliary concerns, including all of the musical leadership themes that are covered in the enactment model. Second, the previous point touches upon the question of core versus supporting curriculum in conductor education. I would advocate for a broadening of the core curriculum beyond what most educators presently apply. Third, more challenging is the degree to which elements of the conductor curriculum should be taught as stand-alone subjects or as integral parts of the act of musical leadership. Based on the findings of this project, the holistic nature of effective musical leadership advocates for the integration of the various features into real musicking situations. The trick, however, would be to make the real ensemble situation accommodate all the various features, in terms of instruction, practising, coaching, and self-reflection. Lastly, it seems as if conductors could benefit from more systematic and explicit sharing of experience, making use of multiple sources of feedback and reflection beyond tutor feedback and occasional peer chats. The conducted ensemble (and probably also fellow conductors) is an underutilised asset when it comes to reflecting on the impact of a conductor-in-training. Two obvious themes for such feedback include rehearsal organisation and the match between conductor interventions and singer needs. As a summary remark, the importance of the choral singer viewpoint should be reiterated: the singer view is an immediate access to knowledge about conducting impact, it is unavoidable since impact is unimaginable without singer perceptions, and it is the least attended to in conducting research. Luckily, for research purposes as well as conductors' self-development, the singer perspective is also easily accessible.

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