

The Conductor's Charisma: Behind the Myth

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“Conductors are born, not made. No amount of academic education can make a real conductor out of someone who is not born with the necessary qualities. But musical education and general culture are of inestimable value to the born conductor.”

Leopold Stokowski

“It is a pure, mystifying gift. ... Someone who has it will exude it, whether performing Mary Had a Little Lamb or Scarlatti, Mimi or Marguerite. Charisma is not earned with age; an artist is charismatic at 16 or 60. Rigorous training enhances and focuses it, but it cannot create it.”

Zachary Woolfe,
New York Times, 21 Aug 2011

The requirement that conductors have a quality that is supposedly inborn or bestowed upon only a few extraordinary individuals is an appealing myth, but can be problematic for those of us who would actually be conductors. Most of us had our early musical training as instrumentalists and/or singers, and whilst we may have been told that we were *talented*, we probably did not aspire to be *inspirational*. Organists may find the transition more natural – after all, choirmastery is a traditional part of the church musician’s job – but, for the rest of us, assuming the identity of conductor forces us either to face this mythology head-on or deliberately to evade it. One has the choice of claiming the powers and feeling arrogant or disclaiming them and feeling like an imposter.

However, when you start to explore the literature on conducting, you find that the concept of charisma features much more prominently in journalism and biography than in the material intended for conduc-

tors themselves. Indeed, you find conductors even expressing a degree of mistrust of charismatic behaviour, concerned that relying on force of personality distracts from the sheer quantity of hard work that is needed to be effective. It seems that charisma is more important to those observing musicians than to the musicians themselves.

If we look beyond the musicological hero-worship to the study of charisma as a sociological theme, we find a picture that makes more sense of our practical experiences. Sociologists see charisma as not merely a personal attribute, but also a characteristic set of societal connections, requiring, as Berenson and Giloi put it, ‘a relationship between a leader and his flock... at once psychological and sociological’ (*Constructing Charisma* p. 3).

In *The Social Structure of Charisma*, Raymond Bradley identifies a number of features of charismatic groups that have much in common with the qualities that make for an effective choral ensemble:

The Structure of Relationships

The structure of relationships is such that all members are linked with each other and with the leader. Compare this with Lewis Gordon’s diagram of relationships within a choir, with all singers connecting to each other and

to the conductor (fig. 1).

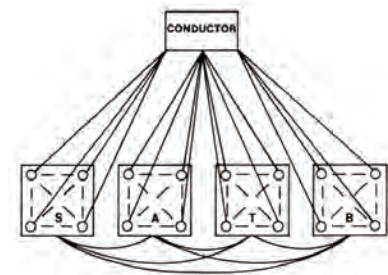


Figure 1: Lewis Gordon, *Choral Director's Rehearsal and Performance Guide*, p. 96

Communion

The group experiences **communion**, i.e. a sense of losing the self into the whole, which may be associated with feelings of love and/or euphoria. This merging is facilitated by rituals that de-emphasise individuality and promote identification with the group. Bruno Walter expresses it thus: ‘The principle of individualization melts in the fire of such mystic-musical union and nothing can be more real or experienced more securely than this mysterious act of unification between us, the work, and its creator’ (*Of Music and Music-Making*, p. 28).

Musicians more routinely refer to this merging effect as ‘ensemble’, with choral writers giving particular focus to the idea of ‘blend’. As Henry Cowards puts it: ‘When used collectively they [the voices] should be homogeneous; that is, each part

should sound like one, full, glorified voice, and not as an assortment of voices' (*Choral Technique and Interpretation*, p. 20).

These two aspects of charismatic groups are clearly linked. It is the comprehensiveness of bonds between members that permits the free flow of affection in communion. Bradley documents how cliques undermine communion; choral writers document how overly soloistic behaviour undermines blend. Mike Brewer reminds us at the outset of his chapter on blend that this is not just a musical/acoustical phenomenon, but an interpersonal one: 'It is important to remember that people sing in choirs to enjoy the companionship, the communal experience and the total sound.... Remember that a choir does not achieve real ensemble until every member feels valued.' (*Fine-Tune Your Choir*, p. 12).

Hierarchical Power

The emotional energy generated by communion is contained and directed by strong **hierarchical power structures**. The power of the leader is absolute and unquestioned. Or, as John Bertalot quotes RSCM director Lionel Dakers, 'The only voluntary factor about joining a voluntary choir is the voluntary act of joining. After

that, everything is compulsory.' (*How to be a Successful Choir Director*, p.19). This totalised authority that keeps the group experience under control is the reason we find it natural to vest the individual who provides the leadership with magical powers.

It is clear why our musical culture values the charismatic leadership of ensembles, as it is uniquely suited to galvanise that specialist form of teamwork required to co-ordinate large numbers of people into performing as one. But it is also clear that the experience of charisma emerges not just from the individuals to whom we attribute it, but also from the relationships within the groups they lead – relationships that our musical conventions actively foster.

So, why all the mythologising? Why do we continue to celebrate the special powers endowed to the chosen few if their powers are largely a result of a specific form of social relations? Well, to start with, the appeal is emotional, not intellectual. People treasure the extraordinary experience of communion, and the messianic resonances in our myths of charisma reassure us that those feelings are valid and meaningful.

Beyond that, the myths increase the likelihood that people will experience communion. Business management

uses the term 'romance of leadership disposition' to describe how people's chances of finding a leader inspirational will depend on the extent to which they believe in a romanticised ideal of natural leaders. The more we bring our critical faculties to bear, the less likely we are to experience communion, since one purpose of our critical faculties is to protect us from being sucked into a group feeling.

Understanding this takes the pressure off us as individual conductors. On one hand, recognition that our cultural stories about magical powers do not necessarily have to be taken literally relieves us from constantly having to question our own legitimacy. On the other, recognising that the myths serve a useful role in helping people seek out emotionally intense musical experiences allows us to work with, rather than against, these implicit belief systems to better serve the needs of our singers and audiences. ■

Dr Liz Garnett is the author of *Choral Conducting and the Construction of Meaning*. For more information on her research on charisma, see www.HelpingYouHarmonise.com