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In 2005 I completed a research project into the education of conductors. The following is an adaptation of the introduction to the thesis.

Conductors are born, not made.¹

At the same time that conservatories were starting to teach conducting, a new impediment to conductor training formed. The most brilliant of the day's conductors – Bülow, Nikisch, and soon Toscanini and Stokowski – were morphed into *Übermenschen*, or supermen. With this celebrity came the notion that conducting was a magical gift: a mind-set that is damaging to all conductors and has severely hampered conductor training.²

The twentieth century saw the notion of the 'academic' training of conductors – in this context meaning a university, college or conservatoire based curriculum – become a reality. Between 1905 and 1920, for example, conducting classes were established at the Paris Conservatoire, Vienna Hochschule and the Royal College of Music in London. It is now rare to find a conservatoire that does not offer some kind of postgraduate conducting course.

In addition to what may be termed 'formal' courses of study leading usually to a degree or diploma - 'a veritable license of conducting competence'³ – numerous intensive short courses ranging from summer-long programmes to master classes running for two or three days are available, offering participants an alternative to term-time studies or a supplement to them.

Writing in 1929, Hermann Scherchen commented that a standard textbook of conducting technique did not exist.⁴ Although Scherchen could be credited with providing exactly that, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century a number of seminal works appeared to the extent that the aspiring student conductor now has a wealth of literature from which to select.⁵

Yet despite the growth of academic programmes, master classes and literature, many would have you believe that Stokowski's view is the correct one: the success of a conductor depends on what they are born with, not their training. Even if his remark was prefixed with the words "Truly great..." is it not difficult to believe that even the most prodigious of natural talents would not benefit from a degree of formal training? On the whole, there are very few child prodigy conductors⁶ – few other professions could result in a fifty three year old being described as 'young'!⁷

This raises a number of questions in the context of how successful the various training programmes on offer actually are:

¹ Stokowski, Leopold, *Music For All of Us* (Simon and Schuster 1943), p217

² Farberman, Harold, *The Cambridge Companion to Conducting* (Cambridge University Press 2003), p252

³ Baker Lee, Alan, *Creating Conductors: An analysis of conducting pedagogy in American Higher Education* (DMA diss., Stanford University 1992), p22

⁴ Scherchen, Hermann, *Lehrbuch des Dirigierens* (Leipzig 1929; English Translation 1933), p4

⁵ See section d of the bibliography to the 'Conducting' entry in the New Grove Dictionary of Music for a fairly comprehensive list

⁶ Lorin Maazel comes to mind as a rare example of someone who began to conduct at an exceptionally young age. Even early starters such as Sir Simon Rattle did not come to public attention until an age at which many string and piano virtuosos are regarded as experienced

⁷ The Manchester Evening News on Mark Elder CBE following his appointment as Music Director of the Hallé in 2000

Is it simply the case that the most talented students succeed regardless of where, with whom, or indeed if, they study, or are there other factors?

- Few could argue that even the most prodigiously talented violinist or pianist needs to undergo a rigorous education even if it takes place at an early age. It would seem to be anachronistic that an arguably more complex discipline can be mastered purely on the basis of natural ability and minimal formal training.

If the most talented will succeed anyway, are there enough natural geniuses to go round?

- Ever increasing orchestral standards undoubtedly mean that the very best ensembles often do not need a good technique from a conductor and are willing to forgive its absence if musical insight and inspiration is there in abundance. Whilst this may be true at the very highest level, a clear and expressive technique which allows the conductor to rehearse efficiently without unnecessary recourse to talking is surely vital the further down the pecking order one goes.

Is the education system really failing to produce or is it human nature that the guy (or maybe even the occasional girl) at the front will always be the focus of the most pronounced criticism or debate?

- If one is to believe Norman Lebrecht in his entertaining book on conductors⁸, the influence of agents, record companies and the media is often what makes or breaks a conductor's career rather than ability. 'Where have all the conductors gone?' he asks. Farberman's quote raises provocative questions as to whether the way in which the industry operates is part of the problem.

Is it possible to teach a technique which enables a conductor to affect through gesture the sound of the orchestra?

- As Lebrecht states:

No-one has ever explained how one man with a physical flourish can elicit an exhilarating response from an orchestra while another, with precisely the same motions and timing, produces a dull, unexceptional sound.⁹

When one focuses on the content of what is being taught in the academic institutions, how relevant are factors such as the amount of time actually spent conducting; the quality of the orchestra or ensemble available for students to 'practise on'; the time spent with tutors; and whether the tutors are (or were) performing regularly in a professional context.

How relevant are geographical considerations in the context of the various so-called national or regional 'schools of conducting: are the courses in e.g., Germany, tailored to the career path there?

- Conducting is surely one of the most global of professions and it is common for successful conductors to have two or perhaps even three music directorships and a principal guest conductor post or two in various parts of the world. Yet the system of training conductors seem to vary significantly from country to country which leads one to question why a more consistent approach has not developed.

Is the conservatory / university sector sufficient or is conducting such a difficult job that further structured training or apprenticeships are required?

⁸ Lebrecht, Norman *The Maestro Myth* (Replica Books 1999)

⁹ Lebrecht, Norman *The Maestro Myth* (Replica Books 1999) p7

- It will be seen that the period spent studying varies enormously from place to place, even in some cases within the same country's educational system.

My research attempted to answer these questions. I began by summarising conducting training in some of the main centres of western music. Even those engaged in serious conducting studies seem to know only in vague terms the approaches to conducting adopted in different parts of the world. As there is no current literature that brings together this information, a significant part of the thesis is necessarily factual although as I progress through the different geographical areas more comparative commentary became possible.

Such an overview provided a wider context for a more detailed examination of two specific conducting programmes: Professor Ilya Musin's class at the St Petersburg Conservatory and Professor Jorma Panula's teaching at the Sibelius Academy, Helsinki. These were selected for more detailed investigation as, by virtue of the number of graduates of those classes who now have major careers, they are often held up as the most successful in the field. I considered the teaching methods of these two noted pedagogues and attempt to assess why they were so successful by comparison with methods employed elsewhere.

I also considered approaches to what has been termed 'Bridging the Gap'¹⁰ – the stage beyond university or conservatoire programmes but before significant professional work is being undertaken. Although it was clear that conducting programmes can in certain circumstances effectively train their students for work with professional orchestras, it is unlikely such programmes will become widespread. It was therefore necessary to address what structures are, or could be put, in place after the academic stage of training to assist in the transition from student and amateur conducting to professional work.

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¹⁰ Rosen, Jesse, *Bridging the Gap* (Symphony Magazine May/ June 2002)